

Tonight!

Luke

By Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

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Bible Text: Luke 12:13-21

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First Presbyterian Church

1324 Marion St
Columbia, SC 29201

Website: www.firstprescolumbia.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/fpccolumbia

Our gracious heavenly Father, we praise you for your goodness to us in Jesus Christ that you have given him to us, your Son, your only Son, the Son whom you love to be our Savior by his death upon the cross for our sins and his resurrection from the dead to be our Lord and master. We thank you that he has promised to be with us and we pray that we may be conscious of his nearness and the power of his Word. We pray, Lord Jesus Christ, that you will speak to all of us, but also to each of us and that, as your sheep, we may hear your voice and in faith and repentance follow you. But most of all we pray that the consciousness of your presence will reassure us whether we be in joy or in sorrow, in darkness or in light that you are an all sufficient Savior. You are all we need and the only one in whom we can find lasting satisfaction. And so we pray to you, Lord Jesus Christ. Send your Holy Spirit upon us in the ministry of your Word that we may hear your voice. We pray this in your name. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now as we continue reading in Luke's gospel and as we read on in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, we are in a section in Luke's gospel in which the Lord Jesus is taking every opportunity to teach his followers and the crowds about what it means to be his disciple. And he has been speaking about the costliness of that, the danger of fear, of persecution and suffering. Now we come to what seems to be an unusual intermission in Luke's gospel chapter 12 and verse 13 through verse 21. You will find the passage in the pew Bible page 871 and for our children with their Bibles it is on page 1279. Luke's gospel chapter 12 verse 13. Let us read God's Word.

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear

down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”¹

Every preacher who has an ounce of intelligence knows that there are some of his listeners thinking about something else while he is preaching. My favorite story in David Calhoun’s history of our church is that Sunday afternoon, a warm, summer, Sunday afternoon in the 19th century, no air conditioning, the Columbian humidity oppressing people, the temperature high and Benjamin Morgan Palmer, then the minister, wondering if it really was to the spiritual value of the congregation that they kept on having this service. And as he thought that he noticed one of the parishioners had nodded off. And, as people do as they nod off—not that any of us have ever experienced this—he began to sway a little and Palmer, who could multitask began to calculate how long it would be before this man’s forehead hit the back of the pew in front of him, which it did. And the man on a hot Sunday afternoon leapt to his feet in the middle of the sermon and shouted, “Fire, fire, fire!”

David Calhoun glossed over the answer to the million dollar question: Was the man back of the evening service or was he ever back in church again?

There is some consolation for preachers in this passage of Scripture. As our Lord Jesus Christ, truly the great preacher, was preaching, there was at least one individual in the congregation who was thinking about something entirely different. And as very occasionally happens—have experienced this—caught up in what he was thinking about, I suspect what happened was this. He lost his sense of propriety.

Jesus was speaking about the seriousness of being a Christian disciple. He was speaking about the possibility of being persecuted, being hauled before the authorities in fear and trembling and he was promising his disciples that the Spirit would help them to speak and suddenly this man who has heard nothing that Jesus has said cries out to Jesus, “Jesus, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance properly.”

And all the way through Jesus’ preaching he has been thinking about the equivalent of the Sunday dinner or how long it is going to be before he has got enough money in the bank to retire or where they are going to choose the next cruise. And Jesus has been speaking about eternal things. And this man interjects about the comparative trivialities of life that have become so important to him. He hasn’t heard a word Jesus has said.

And Jesus does two things, you notice. First of all he really rebukes this man. Yes, Jesus did that kind of thing. He rebukes this man and then he turns this moment, diverts the moment away from the individual to make it a teaching moment for anyone who would be his disciple. He issues, therefore, a warning. The man shouts out in the crowd and

¹ Luke 12:13-21.

Jesus rebukes him in verse 14. But then you notice he says to all of them, he makes it a teaching moment for all of them and he issues a word of warning to them and then he presses this home with a dramatic parable or illustration to get right under their skin so that the point will be fixed in their consciences and they will not point the finger at this man, but sense that God is pointing his finger at them and saying, “No, while you judge this man, are you, in fact, in precisely the same spiritual condition?”

The warning he issues is, of course, a warning to guard ourselves against covetousness. And it is interesting the language Jesus uses, isn't it, in verse 15.

“Take care, and be on your guard.”²

What is the message? The message is this. Covetousness does not voluntarily depart from the human heart. That is the point. You need to be on your guard against it. You need to assemble defenses against covetousness, because of all the temptations in the world, Jesus seems to be saying, covetousness is the one to which most of us most easily are prey.

And he wants to teach us that nothing in this world, nor everything in this world can ever satisfy the eternity shaped needs of the human heart.

Sometimes we say to our children, don't we, when they say, “I want this and I want this and I want this,” and eventually, perhaps in a little exasperation, we say to them, “I want never get.” But, you see, that is not just true of our children. The thing about I want, I want, I want, if what the focus of our gaze is upon is anything in this world, then Jesus is saying that can never satisfy us, because we are not made to be satisfied by anything that is in this world. It is actually a very simple thing. If we are made for eternity, if we are made for fellowship with God then nothing less than fellowship with God through Jesus Christ is going to bring us that sense of at last I have found what satisfies the human heart. And God has made us this way deliberately.

Do you remember how the author of Ecclesiastes puts it? He says, “God has deliberately placed a burden upon men.” What is that burden? He has set eternity in our hearts. And so if we seek to satisfy hearts made for eternity by anything made in time, I want never ever, ever get.

I am fascinated in the New Testament by the way in which I believe Saul of Tarsus was actually arrested by God's commandment not to covet. I find this absolutely intriguing in Romans chapter seven. He says, “The law of God, you shall not covet, touched my conscience and I realized I was spiritually dead. I died. I thought I was alive, but then that came and I died.” And what he began to discover, of course, he talks about this in his letter to the Philippians, doesn't he? He began to discover that so long as he lives for anything other than Jesus Christ, he lived for something less than Jesus Christ and he could never be satisfied with it.

² Luke 12:15.

And so he says in Philippians four, “Now that Jesus Christ has become my Lord and my Savior I discover whether I have a lot or whether I have a little, whether I abound or whether I am abased, I have learned to be content, because my heart is full of the one for whom my heart was created.”

And so, says Jesus, “Be on you guard against anything less than Jesus Christ,” because everything you could ever obtain minus Jesus Christ leaves an impoverished, restless human being. Whereas either the richest among us or the poorest among us can find deep, lasting satisfaction of forgiveness and new life and fellowship with God in Jesus Christ.

And so he turns this moment—it must have been an extremely embarrassing moment for this man—but he turns this moment into a marvelous teaching opportunity to press upon all who were listening to him a warning not to be, not to seek satisfaction in that which cannot satisfy. I tried the broken cisterns, Lord, but, ah, the waters failed. And do you remember how the poet goes on? They mocked me as I wailed.

But then Jesus presses this point home marvelously, doesn't he, in the parable. There is a warning and there is a parable, the story of the rich, rich man. And he was a farmer or perhaps, more realistically, he was a businessman, not just a farmer. He wasn't what we Scots would call a crafter. He didn't farm in order to feed his family. He farmed for profit. And he was, apparently, a rich man, verse 16. The land, and it doesn't just mean his little craft. It means the territory of a rich man produced plentifully. And Jesus weaves into this story three particular features about this man that, I think, are worth nothing this morning.

The first is the most obvious one: the success he enjoyed. He was already a rich man when the story began. Do you notice this? The story doesn't say there was a poor man who had a bumper crop. It says there was a rich man who had a bumper crop. So this is the story of how the rich get richer. It doesn't say anything about the poor getting poorer, but this is a story about the rich man getting even richer. And he has a bumper crop.

And Jesus slides in here—I think this is what he is saying here, suggesting here—he slides a lovely touch in here, because he had observed rich men getting richer and the lovely touch is this. This businessman had more success than he had ability. This rich businessman had more success than he had ability.

Your wife ever say to you or do you husbands ever say to your wife: How is it that so and so has made a fortune and you got better grades in college? You are far more able, far shrewder than he is or than she is and they seem to have made an amazing success of life.

Now how do I know that? Because the man's forward planning had been absolutely disastrous. He has this bumper crop. The fields are full and he is standing there saying in the autumn, autumn when the fields are full... that is not the time to start thinking about barns. And he suddenly says, “What am I going to do with this bumper crop?”

And you notice he doesn't just say, "Do you know, I think I will expand a barn or two here." He is into an entire new barn system. Pull them down. Build bigger ones.

This man's success has gone way beyond any ability he ever had. We might say he was living the American dream before anyone had dreamt about the American dream. And he wants to enjoy that dream fully. I am going to store it all up, not just my crops, but my goods, he says, and then you can almost see him preening himself as Mrs. Barnhouse—let's call him Mr. Barnhouse—is strutting around the house saying, "This is absolutely amazing. My dear, where shall we go next? My dear, you know, it is a bit chilly out here in the winter time. Let's build a house beside a golf course in Florida. We can become snow birds... And, do you know, it would be nice to have a little place in Spain." And he is making all his plans because he has been so wonderfully successful. Who wouldn't envy him?

This is a passage for any husband whose wife says, "How is it he managed to retire when he was 50 and you are 60 and you are still going at it?"

Things are not what they seem to be. He was fabulously successful and yet the second thing Jesus displays here is that the success he enjoyed was coupled with an appalling short sightedness that he displayed. I don't mean that he was successful beyond the level of his actual ability. It was this. Everyone in this crowd now, most of us, I think, see this. But we are not a rural community. We are not an agricultural community and so it is just possible we might miss this. Everybody in this crowd knew where this man's success came from. God. Didn't it? This man was not the rain maker. This man was not the sun shiner. This man had plowed his fields and scattered and then he was incapable of doing anything about the crop. It was God who had given him this glorious success, an abundant crop that his barns couldn't contain so that he could go off and start designing new barns. And as he looks in the mirror... Do you notice he is looking in the mirror in verse 17 and 18? He thinks to himself while he is shaving one morning, he thinks to himself. Do you notice that in verses 17 and 18 this man makes nine or 10 references to the source of all his blessings? Look at it.

'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'³

The tragic thing about this man is that he is spiritually short sighted. He is so short sighted he thinks he did it himself. And everybody who is listening to the story, everybody who is looking in, whether they are looking in jealously or sadly they are all thinking this man isn't getting it. Actually in a way it is like the man who shouted out in the crowd. He hasn't got it. He has not got the message that Jesus is sending. He reminds me so much of that figure in the second part of *Pilgrim's Progress* who is raking about in the muck with his rake and he is too short sighted to see there is somebody

³ Luke 12:17-20.

standing in front of him with a crown of gold to place on his head. But he is insistent that he will find it himself.

When this man's obituary, Mr. Barnhouse's obituary appeared in the *Jerusalem Times* there wasn't a single reference to God in the entire obituary, because, as the Old Testament would say about him, God was not in his thoughts. He was so... this is the thing about being spiritually so short sighted. You think you can see everything there is. And you are seeing only yourself.

But then there is this third little element that Jesus puts in here. There is the success this man had, the short sightedness he manifested and then, of course, this story ends with the shock he received.

I wonder if Psalm 73 was ever read in the synagogue. I am sure this man went to the synagogue. And I am sure Psalm 73 by Asaph was read, the psalm in which... I don't know whether Mrs. Asaph had been getting on to him that day, but he was thinking about how it was that he had sought to be so faithful to the Lord. He was the music director in the Jerusalem temple, incidentally.

I don't know, maybe Mrs. Asaph was saying, "You know, when you were doing your undergraduate work, don't you remember Benjamin so and so and Jacob so and so? You got better grades. You have ended up as the music director. These guys are making a fortune. Look at Benjamin Barnhouse."

And he tells us how he... actually it seemed to stick in his mind. By why is it that people who never give God any thought seem to prosper? People like me have their backs to the wall.

And then he says he went into the temple and something happened. Maybe something literally happened in the temple. I wouldn't be surprised. But somehow or another in the sense of God he found in the temple he said, "I saw their end and when I saw the end of the story, I realize neither the beginning or the middle of the story was actually the real plot in the story."

And that is what we see with this man's life. He didn't realize that while he was drawing blueprints for new barns, God in heaven was writing his obituary notice. And he {} the technology to foresee the day before what would be in the *Jerusalem Times* he would have turned to his wife and said, "How can it be that I am not listed here under the Bs?" And maybe if she had the same foresight she could have said to her husband, "Just look a little further down the page through the Cs and the Ds and the Es and come to the Fs and you will notice there is somebody listed there called Mr. Fool."

Read his obituary notice. Tragically yesterday having just completed the blueprints for his new barn system and at the end of the most profitable year in Barnhouse Incorporated, of as yet unknown causes, Mr. Barnhouse passed into eternity and stood before God spiritually bankrupt and a spiritual pauper. He leaves behind his controlling interest in

Barnhouse Incorporated. And everything in which he had trusted now means absolutely nothing.

And if Mr. Barnhouse had any say I am sure he would not have written that obituary, but I am sure that the verses at the end of the obituary notice would not have included Psalm 23 nor would they have included amazing grace that saved a wretch like me.

My friend Alistair Begg with whom I spent a couple of days during this last week was telling me that the second most popular song used at memorial services outside of believing communities in the United States as they carry out caskets is *I Did it My Way*.

And the sad obituary for this man as he appears before the judgment seat of God and says, "I did it my way" will be "I know, you fool. This night your soul is required of you."

Actually Jesus teaches here the greatest single mistake a businessman can ever make. Do you know what it is? Forward planning, actually, in a way, it is. The single biggest mistake any businessman in this world can ever make is to postpone getting right with God in Jesus Christ, because that is the single biggest mistake any of us could make. And Mr. Barnhouse made it.

Do you know that story—some of you, I am sure, do—about the junior devils who were having their final exam before a senior devil and the great question was: What are you going to say to human beings? What will you whisper into their minds to divert them from faith in Jesus Christ? And the first said, "I plan, sir, to tell them there is no God."

And the devil master said, "The will not believe you. Their work tells them that every single human being, no matter how he disguises it, knows there is a God."

And so the second one came in and he said, "So, we have heard one answer. What is your answer?"

He said, "I am going to tell them there is no judgment."

And the senior devil said, "We have tried that many a time, but we know that we can never silence the guilty consciences that remind them, that break into their settled lives to disturb them and tell them that there is a judgment. It won't work."

And the third junior devil came in and the master devil said to him, "Have you got a better plan than tell there is no God or tell them there is no judgment?"

And this one said, "Sir, I plan to tell them there is no hurry."

"That," the master said, "will work."

No hurry. You realized that you needed to be right with God several services ago, several passages in Scripture ago, several communion services ago, several years ago. And actually it is more difficult today because then you said, “There is no hurry.”

When I was a very young minister—I think I was probably 24 or 25—I was leading a young mission team and a boy from another part of Scotland asked if he could join us. He was a carrot top, as you would say, a red head, a great fellow. We came to love him. He went into the butcher shop in the little town in which he lived one day and he discovered himself, to his astonishment, with an amazing opportunity to be a Christian witness. They were discussing, rather in a lively fashion—and people in Scotland don’t often do this in public places—they were discussing how to get to heaven and they were disagreeing with one another in the butcher shop.

And one of the people in the shop turned to my friend Jimmy Hanratty. “Jimmy,” they said. “You know if you died tonight you would go to heaven, don’t you. Tell us how you know this.”

And Jimmy had an opportunity to talk about his faith in Jesus Christ and the wonder of being satisfied in Jesus Christ. I know that story, because I heard it at Jimmy’s funeral service three days later. He did die that night, but he had become, as Paul says, wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Speaking about Mr. Barnhouse, it was Donald Grey Barnhouse of 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia who seems to have first thought up the question. If you were to stand before God tonight and he were to say to you, “Why should I let you into my heaven?” what would you say? You were the great barn builder in the history of mankind. That is not what Jimmy said. What Jimmy said was, “Because I have trusted in your Son, the Lord Jesus to be my Savior and I have found not only satisfaction for time, but satisfaction for all eternity in him.”

Whether it is tonight or whatever night I want to stand with Jimmy Hanratty the night my soul is required of me. Don’t you? I hope so. I really hope so. And so, as we come to this table, let us come trusting in Jesus Christ with all our hearts knowing that in him we will find eternal satisfaction.

Our heavenly Father, you have long held out to us a crown of gold in Jesus Christ. We thank you for the discovery of the lasting joy, the peace with God, the removal of the burden, a sense of fresh purpose, the awareness that we have a home in heaven that Jesus Christ gives to all who trust in him. And we pray, as we come to this table hungering and thirsting for the presence of the Lord Jesus, for the righteousness of Jesus to clothe our guilty souls, for the Spirit of the Lord Jesus to draw us into sweet and gracious fellowship with him, we pray that you would meet with us and that we may sense long before we are in heaven that heaven has come down and your grace and glory has filled our souls. So hear us, we pray, for Jesus our Savior’s sake. Amen.