

This parable seems straight forward at first reading—a caution to the rich that hoard their wealth
But why does Jesus give it as a response to a man that wants his share of the inheritance?

As a Rabbi, it would be common for someone to expect that Jesus would render a judgment on a matter
It's what Rabbis did—they were the legal experts of the day and often settled matters of dispute
They also delighted in the debate of the finer points of the law—a constant discussion
Jesus was considered a Rabbi in his day so coming to him to settle the dispute is normal

This man asks Jesus to tell his brother to divide the inheritance with him
In effect, he is demanding that his brother split the inheritance
Clearly his brother doesn't agree, so now he is appealing to Jesus to make it happen
"Jesus! Tell my brother that he is wrong and that he should give me my rightful inheritance!"

He doesn't come and say that he is quarrelling with his brother and ask Jesus to mediate
...with the hope of coming to a resolution that saves their relationship
Rather it is a demand for what he feels is rightfully his

One can assume that the father has already died and didn't divide the land/inheritance before he died
In our culture—the father died without a will and now it is up to the law to determine inheritance
The law of the times said the inheritance couldn't be divided unless the older brother agreed
Indignant, the younger son seeks a ruling that will force the older brother to divide the inheritance
He is crying out for justice in the division of the land

But Jesus is a reconciler—not a divider
Jesus brings people together rather than finalize the separations of people
Jesus is about unity
It isn't that Jesus doesn't care about justice—time and time again, Jesus sides with the oppressed
In fact, Jesus begins his ministry with an inaugural mission statement that is all about justice
"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke 4:18-19

To follow God is to work for justice in our society
However, to demand one's rights is to set ourselves up as judge and jury over those rights
Nowhere in Scripture does it say that we have rights
The US Declaration of Independence states: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*
The United States Constitution and Bill of Rights lay out rights—but not the Bible!
To follow God is to work for justice for everyone—in all places
When I begin to demand my rights, I cease to acknowledge the rights of the other
If justice only furthers my cause, it is not true justice

In our story today, the man that comes to Jesus, has already decided what justice will do
He has determined the outcome and is only looking for enforcement from the ruling rabbi
What will Jesus do?

Jesus responded by calling him, "Man"—language that hints at Jesus' displeasure

But he said unto him, Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you? Luke 12:14 RV

Jesus is a healer and a reconciler of people—setting people free

Out of the healing, people can work together to find way forward

Jesus then gave a general warning before proceeding with a teaching in the form of a parable

And he said unto them, Take heed, and keep yourselves from all covetousness: for [one's] life [consists] not in the abundance of the things which [one possesses]. Luke 12:15 RV [modernized]

This message isn't just for the rich—it's for all of us

For those who lack resources—it is so easy to get caught up in wanting what others have

We struggle with the injustice of an unequal world

It is so easy to slip into wanting what we don't have

For those who have resources—there is the insatiable desire for more

It never feels as if we arrive at enough or plenty—accountants always say more is needed

The truth is that the insecurity of “not enough” doesn't easily go away with more resources

What will happen as I retire or get close to the end of life—will I have enough?

It is this compulsion for more that Jesus is speaking to

And it applies to the “haves” and the “have nots”

Life is not found in the surpluses that those insatiable desires produce

You are looking in the wrong place

Then Jesus proceeds with the parable about surpluses

In true Hebrew understanding—God is the owner of all things and we are only his stewards

Life is on loan to us for a time—it is not ours, but simply a loan

Life is not a right, but a gift—on loan

We are given resources to sustain us as we live on this earth for a season

—they too are on loan—given to us to care for while we are here

Creation is ours to take care of for a season, until it is passed on to the next person

It is why it is so important that we take good care of our earth

The man in the parable forgot that life and possessions are on loan from God for a time

The man, a rich fool, is already rich and his land produces a bumper crop—a gift from God

What will he do with his surplus?

He talks to himself and ponders the question

This is odd as Middle Easterners are known for their long discussions in the community

Everyone is in everybody's business

He appears not to have any friends—and would be lonely, so he talks to himself

He has no place to store his surplus, so he decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones

And then he plans to “relax, eat, drink, and be merry”—this is his plan for the future

He has either forgotten or doesn't know that...

“The things that we cannot take away with us are not ours... Compassion alone follows us.”¹ “[The rich fool] did not realize that the bellies of the poor were much safer storerooms than his barns.”²

¹ The 4th century Latin theologian Ambrose

² Augustine of North Africa, a student of Ambrose

Suddenly, the voice of God breaks into the story—speaking off stage
'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' Luke 12:20 NRSV

Suddenly, the loan of his life was called in
This life that was not a right, but a gift on loan, ended suddenly
Now the question changes— “Who will acquire all of these possessions?”

Then Jesus returns to the conversation with the man who was concerned about his inheritance
Again, he shares a wisdom statement with him...

“So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”
Luke 12:21 NRSV

Indirectly, Jesus is saying, *“Supposing you win your fight over the inheritance—what then? Look beyond your earthly life. To whom will all of your inheritance one day belong?”*

Jesus asks this young man to look at the problem of economic justice differently
Rather than “I want what is mine!” and a demand to finalize the division between them
Jesus calls him... and us... to consider economic justice from God’s perspective

To consider the perspective of the One who really owns all of it
*Whether the inheritance is under my authority or that of my brother, both of us must recognize that all of it belongs to God. We are both responsible as stewards before God for our material possessions and for how we spend the days of our lives. Our wealth and our lives are on loan and both of us can destroy ourselves if we do not curb an innate insatiable desire for more.*³

Immediately, hereafter, Jesus turns to his disciples and speaks to them...

*“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. **For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**” Luke 12:22-34 NRSV*

(This message is based on Kenneth Bailey’s book, *“Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes,”* IVP Academic, An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, Chapter 23, *“The Parable of the Rich Fool”* pages 298-309.)

³ Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes,* page 307