

RICH TOWARDS GOD

Luke 12v13-21.

What to do with a £7 million windfall.

This week city financiers and private investors have been searching for a safe haven for their funds. Most of us simply look on and speculate what it might be like to have savings at all. One young woman began the week without any thought of such things; she was working as a part time waitress for £4.75 an hour and looking forward to starting university. But she ended the week wondering where she could put £7 million.

18 year old Ianthe Fullager from Cumbria won this huge sum on a Euro Millions draw and celebrated with baked beans on toast. She won't need a student loan now. She won't need to find another part-time job between terms. With her new found fortune she plans to buy a new car, invest in her favourite rock band, to donate to some children's charities, to take care of her family and, after university, set up her own law practice.

What would you do in her place? Most of us would help those in our family who are struggling. You would pay off your mortgage and anything else you owed. And of course, you would tithe the £7 million to county church!

It has proved notoriously difficult for people who have come into a fortune to get it right; there are so many pressures on you straight away.

- Some become suspicious of everyone & turn into Scrooge-like misers
- Some flaunt it! They "spend, spend, spend" on extravagant vacations, and expensive toys; they upgrade their lifestyle and then sink into debt.
- Others do their best to invest wisely and to make a difference to other people's lives as well as their own

Miss Fullager's main worry this week was where *to put* the money considering the current economic climate. *The Times* came up with some suggestions for where she could put her cash. No mention was made of hiding it under the mattress. They said the safest way of protecting savings is to divide it into £35,000 chunks (going up to £50,000 this next week) and distribute it among British banks, but she is out of luck. She would need 200 banks to absorb her fortune and Britain only has 164.

The parable of the rich fool

Jesus told a parable about someone looking for the safest place to store a large windfall. In Luke chapter 12 a man comes asking Jesus for a rabbinic pronouncement on a financial conflict between himself and his older brother.

v13,14: Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" What is behind Jesus' reply? First, He is not interested in passing judgment on legal cases. Second, this man is not

asking for arbitration, he is looking for Jesus to back him. Third, Jesus is not interested in dividing people; He wants to reconcile them.

v15: Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Even if this man gets his way it will not meet his deepest needs. Material things cannot do this. Greed has an insatiable appetite. It is never satisfied. If he gets this he will still want more.

And Jesus seems to be saying something else here. This man has lost his way. His identity is tied up with what he owns rather than who he is. For many people today it is the same. Their sense of worth is measured by what they possess, where they live and how big their house is, or by their car, what career they have, what designer labels they wear, where they shop.

v16,17: And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' The man is already wealthy and suddenly he finds even more wealth coming his way. But notice that the man is talking his good fortune over *with himself!* This is unheard of in the Middle East where the slightest transaction or smallest decision is talked over at great length with others in the community. This man has no one to talk to. He sounds like Gollum in 'The Lord of the Rings' captivated by his "*precious*". This man trusts no one and no one is close to him. Perhaps he has alienated his neighbours by his greedy approach to life.

v18,19: "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, (literally 'my soul') "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." ' He is still talking to himself! And his signature tune should be "It's all about me!" My crop, my barn, my grain, my goods, my soul! My luxurious retirement! What a pitiful speech. It betrays a sickness of the heart. He thinks his riches will meet the needs of his whole being – his soul. This is his formula for life. But what is God's verdict on this?

v20: "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This man has invested his whole being in things that will have to be left behind. And now his time is up! "Your soul is required of you." This expression was used for the return of a loan. Everything we have is on loan. It is not ours at all! Everything is from God. How we live and how we use what God has given us is crucial.

v21: "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God." This is the key statement. And now Jesus is not just talking to the man who wants his inheritance or referring to the character in the story. He is addressing everyone, including you and me.

Whether you have a £7 million windfall or not, the wisest investment you can make is to be rich towards God.

What does it mean to be “rich towards God”?

John Wesley understood Jesus’ words about being rich towards God in terms of *“faith and love and good works.”* When you forgive someone – you are being rich towards God. You are using the riches of God’s forgiveness given to you as He intended. When you act in love to others - you are being rich towards God. You are using the riches of God’s love to you as He intended. When you make some personal sacrifice for others – you are being rich towards God. You are using the riches of God’s sacrifice of Himself for you as He intended.

But Jesus words do, undoubtedly, have a specific application to material riches. He is saying that instead of using our assets to enrich ourselves we can put them to work to enrich God. *We can make God rich!* But what does this mean? How can we make God rich? Surely He has everything. All the riches of the universe are already His!

To be rich towards God means you treasure Him above all else. *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* (Matthew 6v21) Money is a chief rival to God for your affection. So, *when you have more than you need, be rich towards God rather than allow it to steal your affection from Him.*

The Bible gives us plenty of practical pointers showing how we can be rich towards God with our money – even when we don’t have a vast fortune. Each one will demonstrate that He is your chief treasure. And each means you are investing / sowing into God’s Kingdom. You are not only being rich towards God, you are also storing up for yourself treasure in heaven.

- Giving to God’s work first: e.g. tithing (Proverbs 3v9,10)
- Giving to God consistently through your local church (1 Cor. 16v1-3)
- Giving anonymously (Matthew 61-4)
- Giving sacrificially (Mark 12v41-44; 2 Corinthians 8v1-4)
- Remembering the poor (Galatians 2v10)
- Lending without interest (Leviticus 25v 35-38)
- Giving without expectation of return. (Luke 6v33)
- Supporting specific missions (Luke 8v1-3)
- Responding to major crisis. (2 Corinthians 8 & 9)
- By funding some great pioneer enterprise. (Philippians 4v15 -17)

Real radicals hold nothing back. Let me give you two outrageous examples. Both put me to shame.

William Carey pioneered the gospel in India. He served there for 30 years without a break. In October 1795 he received a packet of letters from England. One of them was critical of him for *“engaging in affairs of trade”* instead of devoting himself to full time missionary work. He was hurt and angry. If he had not worked his family would have starved because his support from England was so slow and small and sporadic. Carey wrote back.

"I only say that after my family's obtaining a bare allowance, my whole income, and some months, much more, goes for the purposes of the gospel, in supporting persons to assist in the translation of the Bible, write copies, teach school, and the like ... I mention this to show that the love of money has not prompted me to pursue the plan that I have engaged in. I am indeed poor, and shall always be so till the Bible is published in Bengali and Hindusthani, and the people lack no further instruction." (John Piper 'What Jesus Demands from the World' IVP. 2007 p288)

Another pioneer missionary C.T. Studd, came into a large inheritance at the age of 25. On January 13th 1887 he sat down and wrote out four cheques giving his inheritance away. His biographer comments: *"As coolly and deliberately as a business man invests in some gilt edged securities, as being both safe and yielding good interest, C.T invested in the Bank of Heaven!"* (Norman Grubb: 'C.T. Studd. Cricketer and Pioneer' Lutterworth Press1933) He wrote out cheques to D.L. Moody to set up a Training School; to George Muller for his orphanage and missionary work; to George Holland who worked among the poor in Whitechapel; to the Salvation Army for their work in India (they were able to send out 50 workers to India with the money) and to Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission. He kept back a sum which he presented to the girl he was to marry. But she gave him a flea in his ear and said he should give it all away. So instead, he gave it to General Booth of the Salvation Army, for evangelistic literature. C.T. Studd put his wealth to work for God. This was being rich towards God.

Welcome once again to the topsy-turvy kingdom of heaven where God stands the values and wisdom of the world on its head. The safest way to save is to give away and the best way to keep wealth is to lose it by being rich towards God.

John Wilthew. October 2008

Discussion Questions. Read Luke 12v12-21.

1. What would you do with a £7 million windfall? Be as honest as you can!
2. The life and identity of the man in Jesus parable was totally wrapped up in his prosperity and possessions. If someone really wanted to understand who you are what would they need to take account of?
3. What difference should it make to consider that everything we have is on loan from God? Does this shape your attitude to things you possess? If so, how?
4. John Wesley understood Jesus' words about being rich towards God in terms of "*faith and love and good works.*" What do you think he meant? Can you think of some examples?
5. If money is a chief rival to God for our affections, what other major rivals are there? What have been the chief rivals for your affection over the years?
6. Investing in God's Kingdom is one way of being rich towards God and demonstrating that He is our chief treasure. The Bible gives is plenty of practical pointers showing how we can do this. How many of John's list of 10 can recall – and can you think of others to add.
7. Consider C.T. Studd writing cheques and giving away his fortune:
 - What different perspectives might there be on such an action?
 - What do *you* think of it?
 - What do you think God's perspective was?