

**CHURCH IMPROVEMENT: BUILDING A CHURCH
THAT HONORS GOD AND LOVES PEOPLE
THROUGH GIVING FOR ETERNITY
Luke 12:13-21 & 32-34**

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Do you agree or disagree with this statement: "You can tell more about a person's true spiritual condition by looking at the ledger of his checkbook than by any other single thing?" Why or why not?

Based upon Jesus' statement to Zacchaeus in Luke 19:9-10 & to the disciples in Luke 12:34, would he agree or disagree with this statement?

Jesus would agree with this statement. What you do with your money is an infallible indicator as to the condition of your soul. How you handle money and possessions reveals what your heart truly trusts and loves, regardless of what you say. We see this clearly revealed in the case of the tax-collector, named Zacchaeus. Jesus knew with absolute certainty that Zacchaeus had been born again by the Holy Spirit and was one of God's elect because of his cheerful willingness to give away half of his possessions and to repay all that he had stolen by a factor of four, which, in the case of a tax-collector would have been a considerable amount of money. Zacchaeus' joyful generosity proved that he was trusting in Christ as his Savior and Lord alone.

Throughout the pages of the Bible a consistent characteristic of God's people is generosity. Whether rich or poor, God's people do not hoard their resources but use them to provide not only for their own needs but also for the needs of others. This is what has marked the church of Jesus Christ throughout the centuries. In Luke 12 we are going to discover some of the reasons as to why it is that Christians do not hoard but cheerfully give away their money and possessions to meet the needs of others.

STUDY

1. Based on Luke 12:1-12, describe what is happening when the man asks his question of Jesus in v. 13.

Jesus is in the midst of a lecture to his disciples. A huge crowd of people surrounds them. Luke tells us in v. 1 of this chapter that there are so many people who have come out to see Jesus that they are in danger of trampling one another. It is like a rock concert or a soccer match in a European stadium. The crowds are pressing in upon Jesus. However, he is not talking to the crowds but to his disciples, warning them about the dangers of pretending to be religious in order to please the crowds or of being afraid to talk about him because of the hostility of the crowds. While Jesus is in the midst of this very serious discussion with his disciples, a man in the crowd shoulders his way up to the inner circle and demands that Jesus tell his brother to share with him their father's inheritance.

2. What is the problem that this man wants Jesus' help in resolving? If this man were your close friend, how would you feel about the justice of his request? What exactly does he want from Jesus?

This man's father has died and the oldest brother, as the executor of the estate has refused to give to the younger brother his share of the inheritance. We aren't told how the older brother has prevented the younger brother from getting his share of the money, but he has. This is unfair, right? All the children are to share in the inheritance, not just one. Most likely the older brother is in the audience and the younger brother is seeking to humiliate the older brother in public and to get the endorsement of a highly respected religious teacher for his position. This is a carefully and cunningly crafted attempt by the younger brother to force the older brother to accede to his demands. Can't you just imagine the conversations and arguments that have raged between these two brothers since their father's death? The older son believes he is right to hold the family farm together and the younger son believes he is in the right to have his share of the estate to do with as he pleases. Each accuses the other of injustice and dishonoring their father.

3. How does Jesus respond to this man's request? How would you characterize his tone? What does he say is actually going on in both of the brothers?

Jesus immediately sees through both the younger brother's demand and the older brother's unwillingness to give into the younger brothers demand. He says two things. First, he is indignant that this younger brother would attempt to drag him into the matter. This younger brother was not living in submission to Christ but yet he wants Christ to act authoritatively on his behalf. Like us, he's only interested in using God and his authority to get what he wants. He expects Jesus/God to be interested in what he is interested in. He is not coming to Jesus expressing interest in what Jesus is interested in. The second thing he tells them and us is that their argument merely exposes what their hearts truly love and what they truly love is not God. They are both full of greed and believe that life is about having money and what money can buy. Each brother is consumed with getting what belongs to him because they are convinced that having money is the most necessary thing in the world. This conflict is not about justice but about greed.

4. Does Jesus' response surprise or offend you at all? Why or why not?

5. Jesus then tells a parable to illustrate what he means by v. 15. Summarize the story in your own words. If the story stopped at v. 18, how would we, or at least most Americans, feel about what happened to this man and what he did?

Jesus tells the story of a farmer who experienced the fulfillment of the American Dream. He gets an early retirement with a huge portfolio of blue chip stocks. He wins the lottery through a bumper crop. He has enough to last him for many years to come and so he is plans on relaxing and enjoying all the pleasures that this life affords to those who don't have to work and yet have plenty of money to support their lifestyle. He has what most Americans dream of attaining. He doesn't have to work for a living and can spend all his time golfing, fishing, shopping, taking care of his yard, visiting his grandchildren, going on an annual cruise, traveling to foreign countries, eating out every night

at fine restaurants, etc. He has the dream retirement package. He is young and healthy and he has plenty of money to last him for a long time to come. We would not call this man a fool. We would call him fortunate. We would want to be in the same position as he. Our financial planners would commend him for his wise planning and careful preservation of capital so he can live off the interest and not use up his principal. What happened to this man is what most Americans dream for themselves.

6. Why does God call this man a fool in v. 20?

There are several reasons that this rich man was a fool. First, in v. 16 Jesus says that the rich man's field produced a good crop. Then the rich man asks himself, "What shall I do with my crops?" The point is that the crops were given to him. They are not his crops. He didn't produce them, the ground did. As we saw a couple of weeks ago God is the one who causes the grass to grow. The first mistake fools make is not recognizing that all that we have comes from God and is owned by God. He only asks himself what he should do with this unexpected bounty. He does not ask God what God wants him to do with the prosperity that God has given to him. The second mistake he makes is assuming that all that he has is for his own enjoyment. He not only gives no thought to what God might want but he gives no thought to the needs of his neighbors. Third, he shows that for him, life consists of enjoying the pleasures of not working and then eating and drinking and making himself happy with the amusements of this life. For him life is not about God. He acts as though he runs the world, not God. Fourth he forgets that he is mortal. He lives as if he is in control of life and death and he acts as though he is not going to die. He forgets he can't take it with him. There are no U-Hauls behind hearses. Fifth, he forgets that when he dies, he must answer to God for how he lived. In other words, he does not remember that what he does here will reverberate throughout all of eternity. Because he is not rich towards God in this life he will live in poverty in the next life, i.e. in hell. Fools don't go to heaven. They go to hell.

7. According to Proverbs 21:20 and 6:6-8, how are we to view "storing up" present abundance for the future?

The Bible commends saving for known future need. Proverbs 21:20 says, “In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has.” Proverbs 6:6-8 says, “Go to the ant, you sluggard, consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in the summer and gathers its food at harvest.” Ants have enough sense to store up provision in a time of abundance in order to prepare for a known time of scarcity. Sending kids to college is expensive, so saving is wise. Your car will wear out, so saving for a car is wise. There is going to come a day when we will not be able to earn the same level of income as we can during our middle life. It is right to prepare for that day. We must not presume upon others to care for us.

8. According to v. 21 his problem is that he “was not rich towards God.” What does that mean? What ought the “rich fool” to have done when his fields produced a bumper crop?

The way to not be called a fool by God is not to save nothing for the future. Rather it is to be rich towards God. This means at least three things. First, I acknowledge that all I have comes from God and is owned by God. I don’t treat the things I have as mine for my own private use but as God’s. He gives me all that I have to provide for my needs and my families needs and to use for the advancement of his kingdom and the welfare of my neighbor. Second, with my regular income and with any extra money I receive the first thing I do is not ask what luxury item I can now afford but rather I go to God and ask him what he would have me do with this money he has given me. The foolishness of the rich farmer is seen in his talking to himself, not God. He only thinks of what would please him, not what would please God or his neighbor. Third, I always remember that this life is temporary and all these pleasures are fleeting. I am going to enter eternity one day and I must live in light of what will matter in eternity, not this fleeting life. What does not matter in eternity is how much stuff you accumulate now, therefore we dare not make the accumulation of money and things and spending our time in leisure the goal of life.

9. What do you imagine your “retirement” years to look like? Are you saving money? How are you doing at being “rich towards God?”

Christians do not hoard money or things but joyfully and generously give because we don’t want God to call us a fool.

10. What are we not to be afraid of as Jesus commands in v. 32?

He commands us not to be afraid that we will not have enough to sustain our physical life. We are not to be afraid that if we give away our money that we will not have enough to care for our and our families needs.

11. What does Jesus calling us “little flock” communicate about who we are and what is not the reason to not be afraid?

The point is that we have as much power over our lives as a flock of newborn lambs has over their lives. When we act as though we are capable of securing our future we are acting like little lambs boldly tripping about in a forest full of wolves and lions. We are weak, dependent creatures. In a moment, all that we have saved and accumulated can be taken from us or we can be taken from it. Most of us are a car crash, or an economic downturn or serious illness away from financial ruin. The reason to not fear is not because of our wise financial planning or our ability to work hard.

12. Why should we not fear?

The reason to not fear is because our Father in heaven was delighted to give to us the kingdom. There are three things that this simple statement tells us. First, God gave the kingdom to us; we didn’t earn entry into the kingdom of God. To belong to God’s kingdom is a free gift purchased for us through the work of another. Our being given this gift cost the eternal Son of God humiliation and death. It makes as much sense for God to give us his kingdom as it would for the U.S. to put Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants in charge of Homeland Security. Osama bin Laden should be executed not put in charge of Homeland Security. He is only able to give us the kingdom because of what Jesus Christ has done. The second thing I want you to notice it was his delight to do so. This word “delight” is used for how God the Father feels about God the Son. God’s motive for giving us the kingdom was his delight in us, that same delight he feels for his eternal

son. *He does not give us the kingdom reluctantly, but with great delight. The third thing to notice is that God has given us his kingdom. Jesus is arguing from the greater to the lesser. If God has given us the best thing in the universe, membership in the kingdom of God, then how will he not give us everything we need that is of infinitely lesser value?*

13. Has knowing that the Father was delighted to give you the kingdom ever helped you to not worry about money or to give money away that you thought you couldn't afford to give away?

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14. What are the reasons Jesus gives for not being afraid but giving away your possessions and money in vv. 33-34?

Jesus is appealing to your desire to be happy in these two verses. He is appealing to your desire to have a secure future that eliminates all worry and fear. You are going to live forever and you want to be forever happy, don't you? You want a purse that will last for eternity and an investment that will never be exhausted. You want to have enough principal saved so that you can live off the interest forever, right? Jesus is not saying you can buy your way into heaven. What he is saying, as is clear in v. 34, is that the evidence that your heart is fixed upon heaven, that you believe that Christ is your Savior and Lord, is when you sell your possessions and give to the poor. This is what faith always does. The rich fool did not sell his possessions and give to the poor but hoarded them because he did not believe that receiving the kingdom of God was any big deal. He believed that a comfortable life on earth was way better than eternal life with God in his kingdom. He was living by faith in the promise of a life of leisure. We are to live by faith in the infinite value of receiving the kingdom of God by the grace of God in Christ. The way you are rich towards God, the way you demonstrate that you are living for an eternal kingdom is by giving away your wealth in the present. This shows where your heart is. You show you have faith in Christ and are looking forward to living with him forever when you sell your possessions and give your money away to care for the needs of others.

He is not telling us to have pity on the poor or to feel guilty about having so much. He is telling us to put our money somewhere where it will return an eternal benefit. He is telling us to put our money in a place where it cannot be touched by thieves, recessions or natural disasters. We are always on the hunt for how we can invest more money in heavenly causes so that we can have the largest portfolio possible when we arrive in heaven.

15. How many of our possessions are we to sell? How much of our income are we to give away? See Leviticus 27:30, Luke 19:8, 1 Corinthians 16:2, 2 Corinthians 8:1-4, 9:6-7.

Jesus is not commanding that we sell all our possessions, though God has called some to do so in the history of the church. Zacchaeus sold half his possessions and Jesus said this was evidence that his heart was fixed upon heaven. All of my possessions belong to the Lord and so I must ask him how much he wants me to give away. We are to give in proportion to our income and according to what we have decided in our heart. American Christians gave more away, as a percent of income, during the Great Depression than we do today. Randy Alcorn in his book makes a strong case that giving the tithe, 10% of our income, to God's work of spreading the gospel and caring for the poor ought to be the minimum beginning point for Christians. However, only 1 in 8 "born again" Christians in the U.S. gave 10% or more of their income in 2000. The average amount of income given by American Christians is 2.5%. I don't have time to get into whether or not God commands us to give 10%, but regardless of what you think about the tithe, 2.5% is surely not in keeping with what Jesus is saying here. It is difficult to go from giving nothing to giving 10% but all of us ought to be increasing the level of our giving to at least that level always remembering that all of our income and all of our possessions belong to the Lord. We are to never give in such a way that communicates that we've given God his share and now we are free to do what we want with the other 90%.

16. Are you giving away as much as the Lord wants you to give away? How do you treat what you don't give away?

Christians do not hoard money or things but joyfully and generously give because we are living for maximum, eternal pleasure.