

Living an Incredible Life

Money - God's Incredible Resource

Luke 12:13-21, 32-34

April 27, 2008

In December of 2002 Jack Whitaker from Mount Hope, West Virginia hit the jackpot and won \$314 million. At the time it was the largest jackpot ever. Since then, he and his wife divorced, he's been involved in 460 legal actions, he lost all of friends, he's endured constant requests for money and although he used to attend church every week now he hardly ever goes. He says, "I wanted to be remembered as someone who helped a lot of people. I'm only going to be remembered as the lunatic that won the lottery."

Would winning the lottery make your life better or worse? You're probably thinking, "Hey, God, give me a chance." As the milkman Tevye prayed in *Fiddler on the Roof*, "If riches are a curse, may the Lord smite me with them!" Does money make you happier or not? Actually, here's a much better question to ask yourself: Is your money a force for good in the world or not? It's a crucial question. As a matter of fact most people usually can't guess Jesus' favorite teaching topic: money.

Why did Jesus spend so much time talking about money? Let me give you two reasons:

1. The wrong use of money leads to a distorted life. In others words, when we don't understand the right use of money, when you don't become channels of God's generosity, when we succumb to a greedy lifestyle, it distorts us, our relationship with God and our relationship with other people.
2. The right use of money leads to a liberated life. When we understand the place of money in our faith, when we choose to live as channels of God's generosity, when we live an open-handed and open-walleted life, it liberates us, opens our heart to God's love and allows us to become channels of his goodness to others.

So, Jesus seems to say over and over again: how will **you** live **your** life? Will money distort you or help liberate you? The choice is yours.

That's the point of the story you just heard. It's a brilliant story and Jesus, with his brilliant mind, seemed to make it up off the cuff. The context for this story actually begins back in verse 1 of this chapter. Jesus is talking about taking your faith in him so seriously that even if people try to kill you, you don't need to be afraid. It's a sobering and comforting passage of the Bible.

Then, right in the middle of this profound conversation about dying for your faith in Jesus, some guy raises his hand and says, "Hey, teacher, teacher, I got a good question for you." Wow, someone really understands the message of God's love; it's gripped him so much he's ready to sign up for a lifetime of following Jesus. Instead he launches into his family financial squabble. "Hey, teach, my dad just died and my brother is trying to cut me out the money that should come to me. Can you come over and beat up my

brother or at least lecture him or threaten him.” That’s basically what’s happening in verse 13. The man doesn’t want Jesus to mediate the situation; he just wants it his way and he wants Jesus to take his side. He says, “I’m the victim. I’m getting ripped off.”

Jesus doesn’t take the bait. He coolly responds with “Man” – our equivalent of “Hey, Bud” or “Yo, dude.” I’m not the judge of your family’ financial squabbles, Jesus says. And then he gives a very stern warning: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” “Watch out” was the Greek phrase that we could translate as “don’t get mugged” by greed. Don’t let it attack you. Jesus issues a strong warning against greed not because it’s worse than any other sin, but because it’s more subtle. How many times in your life have you asked someone, “Would you pray for me: I’m really struggling with the sin of greed.” Has that ever come up in your small group? We don’t see it in ourselves; we only see it in *really* greedy people - like pro athletes, say a pitcher who leaves his home team in a state with lots of lakes so he could move to New York.

Then Jesus drove the point home about greed by telling this story. A rich man gets even richer with a bumper crop, a windfall, a massive bonus, a lucky break in the Stock Market, a tax rebate from the federal government or one free gallon of gas and suddenly he’s loaded. It’s all a gift. Notice how the story begins: “The ground of a certain rich man.” What made him rich? It was a gift. But nevertheless, he ponders: “Hum ... This is a real problem. What shall I do with all my stuff?” So he ponders and ponders until he says, “I got it! I’ll build bigger barns, I’ll open a new account, I’ll take another vacation, and I’ll spend it on myself the little tribe of people that I like.”

Now assuming that he’s a good Jewish lad, he had to ignore a little voice in the back of his head. The little voice probably whispered something like, “This is God. All of this stuff is a gift. Be generous. Give some of it away. You’re just a channel and your whole life on loan from me as a gift.” And then God may have reminded him of the very first book of the Bible. When God called the first of the chosen people, he gave a promise, a pattern for how to live our lives. Let’s call the great flow of blessings. It goes like this:

*I will make you a great nation and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you;
and all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:2-3).*

Did you hear the wonderful promise? Let’s slow down and allow the words to sink into our hearts. I will bless you and I will make your name great. Wow, that’s incredible! Did you hear the calling and responsibility? You will be a blessing. All the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you. We get to be blessed by God **so that** we can be channels of his blessing to others. If the flow of blessings stops with us, we’ve just broken the blessing mandate that God has established. Money and stuff is meant to flow through us, not just stop with us.

This guy chooses to truncate the process and focus on himself. And then he continues, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat drink and be merry.”

Based on this picture of the rich fool, we can spot the characteristics of someone in the grip of greed. What will your life look like when you allow greed to mug you?

1. **Easy Happiness** – Does money buy happiness? Jesus’ story gives a surprising answer: Yes! Greed is good, Jesus says, at least for a while. Sin feels good; that’s one of the reasons why we do it. Can I promise you that a life of generosity always feels better than a life of hoarding and greed? No. Actually, this guy seems very happy. I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” Ah, this is the sweet life! Greed is good. It will come to a screeching halt, but we’ll get to that in a moment.
2. **A sense of entitlement** – He doesn’t see that life is a gift. Everything he has is a gift. Do you remember what I said about Abraham? God called him out of the blue and blessed him and enabled him to be a blessing to others. He didn’t deserve any of it. But in the Old Testament it was a very short step from “God has blessed us so richly” to “We deserve these blessings. We have a right to these blessings. We are entitled to this.” A few months ago I was reading a very fat magazine that came to our house called *Real Simple*. It’s real complicated wading through all these pages, but I like the ads and the very fine recipes. Here’s an ad that reads: “Things to do while you’re alive:” and then it lists 21 things that I should do before I die with little boxes so I can check them off. So there’s “Go to the Super Bowl ... Go to the Olympics ... Stay at a five-star hotel and upgrade your room ... Float along the Nile ... Climb Mount Olympus ... See the Northern Lights (Hey, I’m from MN so I’ve can check this one off) ... Fly across the Atlantic in a private jet ... Get a spa treatment that requires a team.” Now as I was reading this ad, my grandmother Louise – may her soul rest in peace! – peered over my shoulder and laughed hysterically. She grew up on a dirt farm in North Dakota and eked out a living for most of her life. She wouldn’t dream about doing one thing on this list, but she lived a wonderful life. Wow, times have changed! Now we all have our personal checklists of things that seem normal and required, the bare-bones minimum that life owes us. What used to be raging luxuries are now necessities. So now our expectation for what life and others and God owes us is exorbitant.
3. **Raging Me-ism** – Notice the personal pronouns in this passage – See verses 17-18 → I, I, my, I’ll, I, my, I, my, my. This guy is definitely not free. He’s a slave. And what’s his master? Himself. He has a lot of money. Who does he think about? Me (and maybe a few folks I really like). He makes even more money. Who does he think about? Me (and maybe a few folks I like). So he thinks he’s free, but he’s actually deeply chained to himself and his needs.

4. **Churning discontentment** – Whatever it is, it's not enough. How ever much he makes, it's not enough. More, more, more. Bigger, bigger, bigger. A few years ago the University of MI took a poll in which they asked people, "What is the one factor that would change your life for the better?" At the top of the list people gave this answer: "If I could just make more money." How much is enough? I don't know; I just need more. But when we get the more, we're still not content. We just want more and more and more. There's a verse in the New Testament that gives a picture of perfect contentment: (see 2 Corinthians 8:2) → "Out of the most sever trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity." We can make a formula for this approach to money:

Overflowing joy + extreme poverty = rich generosity

Greed distorts and twists all of that and makes a new formula for our lives:

Chronic discontent + unheard of affluence = giving disorder

5. **False security** – He says, "take life easy." Yea, you got it made in the shade. So he starts to coast. The delusion of greed is that it will last forever, but as fun as the run is, it always ends way too fast.

Where does greed lead? When we allow greed to mug our lives it leads to more trouble than we could ever imagine. One day we will have to stand before God and give an account of how God's blessings flowed through us. Was I a channel or did I hoard it? If you read the Bible from cover to cover you will find out that there are two things that make God very upset: worshipping false gods and ignoring poor people. Greed makes a god out of our money and greed blinds us to the needs of others around us. And so the party ends with God crashing into the guy's life in verse 20. The parable starts out by telling us that this was all a gift, a loan, but now the gig is up and his life is called back to the God who gave it.

Now who is the rich man in this parable? *Really rich people, I hope?* Based on statistics, the rich guy is us – or at least many of us here this morning. But here's the good news: Jesus is always offering us a better way. Jesus wants to set us free (see Galatians 5:1). Jesus wants to give you real freedom, deep freedom, permanent freedom. So Jesus offers us a better way to handle money. God wants to free us to live as channels of his generosity, to complete the cycle of blessing: we are blessed to bless others – and that certainly includes our finances.

How do we live an incredible life? We've been exploring that over the past few weeks. Last week we talked about using our spiritual gifts for God. How can we use our money to bring glory to God? Let me close with five ways to draw closer to God through the right use of money:

- Trust God – that sounds simple but that's the point of the larger context in Jesus' story. Chapter 12 is strewn with words about not being afraid. I don't know about you, but I live with a lot of fear. Fear is the power behind our

greed. How do we break free of fear and greed? The answer is the same: Trust your heavenly Father. See verse 32 – “It is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Jesus seems to say, “Do you see how good my heavenly Father is? It gives him good pleasure to take care of you.” Many of you did not have earthly fathers that literally delighted in this. It begins here. Jesus wants to open a door for you to enter a whole new relationship with the Father.

- Confess the sin of Greed – We’d like to think that it isn’t in us. But we live in a culture awash in greed. For most of us, it’s the air we breathe. Never enough. Go back through the list and see where greed has a grip on your heart.
- Honestly assess your giving – look at the chart on the back of this insert. Analyze where you are. Is God blessing you with more money? Find a way to give it away. Don’t be a fool; don’t hoard it; don’t just spend it on yourself and the little tribe of people you happen to like.
- Choose to live as a blessing to others. What does it mean to live in a world where I am utterly abnormal? A few years ago, I was waiting for my flight in Midway airport and by chance I picked up this magazine. I read the following quote ... “ .” It deeply moved me. What does it mean to be a blessing to others in a world with so much poverty and pain? I’m thankful that TVC has a long and rich tradition of giving so generously to world missions and to local needs around us. We always want to balance both. You see, God always works through a community. And God’s first, frontline community for changing lives and spreading the Gospel is the local church. We want to give you an opportunity to be a blessing to others.