

LUKE 12:13-21
THE STORY OF GIVING

Headline: “New York Deli Worker Wins \$1 Million in Lottery, Again.” Her name was Valerie Wilson, and a few years ago she won a second 1-million dollar prize in one of the seemingly millions of lottery games. Her words? “The first time I couldn’t believe it. This time I said, ‘God’s on my side.’”

Is that true? Was God on her side, so that she would win a million dollars for a second time? Is God now on her side, now that she has won a million dollars for a second time? What “side” does God take on issues of getting and giving?

We return today to the third of five scenes in the story of our God, our world, and our lives. The first scene was the wonderful scene of creation. The second scene was the woeful scene of the fall. Now in the third scene, we are meeting Jesus as he meets people and reveals the glory of his redemption.

Do you remember what redemption is? Redemption is rescue from the guilt and power of sin, and rescue to the freedom of a new life for God. Jesus has come to do this for his people. With his redemption, we realize God is on our side forever. Yet with his redemption, we are called to live in a new way today.

This is the day we celebrate our birth as a nation. As we have already done, we give thanks to God for the blessings we enjoy in this part of our world. Yet we live in a culture that pursues games like the lottery, and we are part of a people who believe that because we are good at getting, God is on our side. Maybe you think that way. But what does Jesus say? Let’s find out as we read a story of getting, and discover our story of giving.

This episode is A STORY OF GETTING. Jesus is with a crowd, and a man in the crowd says, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” In the law of Moses, there were rules for how inheritances would be divided when older relatives died. But sometimes an issue would arise that was not covered or clear in the law, so the people would come to the rabbis and ask for a ruling. This man believes he is receiving less than what he deserves, so he comes to Jesus as a teacher, and he wants Jesus to make a judgment in his favor.

Jesus brushes off the man’s request. He makes it clear that he has not come to judge how to divide an inheritance. But while he brushes off the request, he does not brush off the man. He offers him a truth, a tale, and another truth.

He starts with *A TRUTH*. Jesus says, “Watch out! Be on guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

* What is greed? Let’s describe it this way: it is the god of getting. It is where we devote ourselves to getting and gaining more and more and more. We can be greedy for fame or power or sex or many other things. But here, Jesus is talking about the greed of getting and gaining more and more money, and more and more possessions. Enough is never enough, and I will give myself to getting more and more. I live to get and I get to live.

* So why does Jesus say to “watch out,” and “be on guard”? Jesus knows greed is an aggressive god. It was true then, and it is true now, especially as we live in a consumer culture that is driven by people who live to get and get to live. You cannot see, smell, taste, touch or hear greed. But it is like the carbon monoxide that can silently and invisibly enter your home and kill you. It is everywhere in the air of the culture we breathe, so just as we buy carbon monoxide detectors, we have to watch out and be on guard against greed.

* Then what is Jesus saying when he says our life does not “consist” in our “abundance” of possessions? He is saying, your life is not found in what you get. Your joy is not secured through what you gain. You may believe it is. You may act like it is. You may pursue the fake blessing of getting, and you may succeed in this pursuit. But it will never satisfy you. It will not meet the needs of your heart. If you live to get and get to live, you will never get enough, and you will never truly live.

What might Jesus say to Valerie Wilson? He might say, “Valerie, you can get two or three or five or ten

or a hundred million dollar prizes, and it will never be enough to give you the true longing of your heart, and the true life you seek. You never get enough of the god of getting.”

Then Jesus tells *A TALE*. This is a parable. This is not a story about a particular person or a particular situation. This is a story with universal features, designed to illustrate a universal truth. As with many parables, the details are pretty simple.

* There is a man, and he is a rich man. He is not barely and bravely scratching out a modest living from the produce of the land. He is not living paycheck to paycheck. He has already been doing well, and now he is doing better. Harvest time has come, and he has a good crop.

* His crop is so good, that he cannot store it in his barns. What should he do? Sell it to people who need to buy it? Give it away? If he builds bigger barns, he can store it all for himself. He can sit back, put his feet up, and settle in front of his big-screen, HD TV with a bag of chips and the beverage of his choice for as long as he wants.

What is the problem? In his heart, he is all for himself, and not for God. Some students of this parable have counted how often he says, “I.” He never says anything about God. He is living to get, and he is getting to live. He cares not a bit for the God who gave him all of this.

How does God respond to this? God calls him a fool, because while he believes he has many years left to enjoy what he has gained, he has but hours before a night when his life will be taken from him. Then what will it all be worth? Then what gain will he have from all of his getting? Someone else will have all that he counts as his.

So after a truth and a tale, Jesus finishes with *ANOTHER TRUTH* - a truth that captures what this man needs to hear in his story, and what we need to hear in our stories: “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”

We read this and we wonder, is Jesus against all storing? Should farmers not have barns? Should we not have savings accounts and retirement accounts? Should we not even have homes that have storage closets? In Proverbs 6, the writer tells the lazy man to be like the ant, who “stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.” Storing can be wise.

But recall the whole sentence: we do have a way of being very good at being generous with ourselves, and very lousy at being generous with God. This man is rich toward himself and poor toward the God who made him rich. He gives God nothing - no praise, no thanks, and no gift. It is all for himself, and not for God.

As always, Jesus is driving right to the heart of our hearts - right to the heart of what is most important to us. Yet heart issues reveal themselves in the way we live. I can say all I want, “I like God. I love God. I am rich toward God.” But when it comes to my possessions, when it gets down to the way I live my life every day, it is easy to get for me, and hard to give to God. That is the story of this man. Is that your story? Is that my story?

I want to help you answer that question by turning the camera away from that man, to us as men, women and children. Jesus’ words are not just about a story of getting. They are about OUR STORY OF GIVING. With this truth, this tale, and this second truth, Jesus is calling this man to a different story, and he is calling us to a different story. He is not commanding a specific action, but he is commending a fundamental and radical change of heart and life.

Jesus does that, you know. He never leaves us where we are. He always directs us to where he wants us to be. In the image of the Narnia stories, he is not a tame lion. He is ferocious in his desire to change the stories of people like you and me. As we write the story of our lives every day, will our story be a story of getting, or a story of giving?

We begin a journey into that story, when we remember *GOD’S RICHES TO US*. Do we see this here? Yes - as we read the words that follow these words. Jesus turns to his disciples and he talks to them about how we worry about getting. Instead, he says, we should realize that because of the riches of God’s grace to us, God is our Father, and he has given us a place in his kingdom. He has ushered us into a new reality, a new culture, a

new way of seeing and living, all because of his riches to us in Jesus.

Jesus lives without sin. Jesus will die for sinners. Jesus will rise to defeat death. Jesus will reign over an everlasting kingdom that is filled with people who live in relationship with him and dwell within the glory of his kingdom. If you are a child of God through Jesus today, you are living a story of riches - the story of God's riches toward you.

Is that the story you are living? You say you like Jesus. You say you love Jesus. But is your story stirred and spurred and shaped by God's riches to you? Has the gospel of Jesus Christ truly captured your heart, or is it just a story that you have heard and liked? If you know how richly God has blessed you, you will live an amazingly different story than the man in this story, and a distinctly different story from the people living their stories around you.

With God's riches to us in our hearts, we think more and more of *OUR RICHES FOR GOD*. Know this for sure: our possessiveness makes him no poorer. We can live to get and get to live, and he will still have plenty. But he invites and commands his people to be rich toward him, in response to his riches toward us, as we live as citizens of his kingdom. How do we begin to write this kind of story? I offer four life-changing ideas.

First, we must have a loose hand about money and possessions. God made us with bodies, and we have needs that are met through money and possessions. As well, God does give us good things to enjoy, and part of life is enjoying what he provides. We trust God as he supplies what we need, and we thank God as he provides what we want.

But we must hold it all with a loose hand. That means we say to ourselves and to each other, "Life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions." Here is one example: I really like our house. I am the slowest decision-maker I know, but when we first entered that house over ten years ago, I knew within a minute that I wanted to buy that house. When the day comes that we leave that house, I will be sad, for it fits me well, and we have great memories there.

Yet I must always remember that my life is not in that house. Sooner or later, it will not be mine anymore. I must always say, "My life is not here! My heart is not here! Jesus is my life! Jesus is my heart!" Even if I lose that house tomorrow, I must say this.

I say this about my house. What possession might be too tight in your hand? A certain car? A certain piece of technology? A certain collection? Even just a general sense that you possess things that give you peace, comfort, and even status? Or maybe I am describing how you feel about money - no matter how little or much you have. Whatever it is, how tightly are you holding on to this? Do you worry about losing this? Your life is not there. Your life is in Jesus Christ. Hold that money and those possessions loosely.

Second, we must have a sensitive mind toward our culture of greed. Every day in this culture, we are bombarded with hundreds and even thousands of words and images that say, "You must have this!" You will often say, "I do not want this particular thing," but you are still breathing the air of a culture that consistently and creatively constructs a culture of discontent. I need a new this. I need a new that. I must have this. I must have that. I need this and must have that NOW. Really? Are you aware of how you are being shaped and molded by all of this? Are you sensitive to what those advertisers are trying to do in you, and do to you?

Sometimes when I am watching TV with our kids, they will react - positively or negatively - to a commercial. I will try to explain to them what the advertiser was trying to accomplish with the ad - even if they did not like the ad. Now, they are mature enough to do this themselves. We need this sensitivity. We need this awareness. We need to watch and be on guard, and we need to decide to say "No!" to the mind-shaping assaults of our culture.

We do this as we make a rule of no impulse buying, and as we make a habit of discussing major purchases with our spouses. We do this as we commit to paying off our credit cards every month, and as we spend less than our income. We do this as we content ourselves with the old, instead of always believing we must have the new. We do this so many ways. Are we?

Third, we must have a growing heart for the priority of the kingdom. Jesus knows we want to store up

things for ourselves, but not be rich toward God. This changes as we ask God to give us a vision for his kingdom. What is this? This is the ability to see in our hearts, that nothing is more important, valuable or lasting, than the work of God's kingdom, done first through the local church, then through all the places where God is rescuing people from the guilt and power of sin and freeing them to a new life in Jesus Christ.

The work of the government is not kingdom work. We pay our taxes, but that is not kingdom work. Even the general work of charity is not kingdom work. It may good, and there may be a time to contribute to it, but do-goodism is not kingdom work. The work of the kingdom is the work of God's people, bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed, into the hearts and lives of people of all nations - showing Jesus so that people may know Jesus and grow in Jesus.

Is your heart excited by this? In a culture where we are taxed by our government and we are guilted by charities, do God's riches toward you urge you to say, "I want to be part of your kingdom work"? It is a matter for soul-searching, heart-wrenching, life-questioning prayer.

Finally, we must have a joyful spirit of generosity and sacrifice. It is joyful, because it grows from our joy in God's riches to us. It is generous, because it sees kingdom participation as a privilege. It is sacrificial, because instead of getting to live and living to get, I give up some of my life here, for the sake of what I will get in the life to come. Instead of living a story of getting, I will live a story of giving.

Through the apostle Paul, Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Did Jesus really mean that? Or was he kidding? I believe he meant it, and I believe that the most life-changing, story-transforming, rock-my-world experience I can ever have, is to have this truth seep into my soul and ooze out of my life. When I live to get and get to live, I am truly poor, empty and wanting. When I live to give and give to live, I am truly rich, filled and satisfied, for I am living the story God designed for me and is now developing in me through his riches to me.

It is as simple as my joyful choice to give my energy to cleaning up after a church event. It is as profound as my joyful decision to give up something I do not need, so that I may share with a missionary in need. It is everything from the way I support the finances of the church to the way I open my home to minister to the people in my life. It is a thousand little and big daily habits of heart and life. I give and live generously, sacrificially, and joyfully. Do I? Do you?

Pastor and author Jerram Barrs fondly remembers his father-in-law, who loved to cultivate peach trees. His father-in-law would say, "Lord, these peaches are yours. These trees are yours and all the fruit they will ever bear. This orchard is yours. This farm is yours. I am yours. Thank you for your love to me in Jesus. Help me to serve you in all I do."

Valerie Wilson of New York, I do not know you, and I do not judge you. But I say this to you: God is against the foolishness of greed, and God is on the side of the joy of eternally blessed people, living to give eternal treasures. This is ours through Jesus, and we multiply the treasure and magnify the joy, when we hold our money and possessions loosely, when we guard our minds against our culture of greed, when we cultivate a heart for the priority of the kingdom, and when we rejoice in the privilege of generosity and sacrifice for the Savior who generously sacrificed himself for us.

Which story will you tell with your life? A story of getting? Or a story of giving?