

REAL PROSPERITY!

Luke 12:13–34

Dr. George O. Wood

“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?’ 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.’ 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.” 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, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” 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 is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.’ Then Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your

REAL PROSPERITY!

Luke 12:13–34

Father knows that you need them. But seek His kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:13-34, NIV).

My title for the message today is “Real Prosperity!” There’s a lot of talk in both secular and Christian circles today about prosperity. A local pastor wrote a book about the prosperity movement among Christians. It was a little critique of some of the emphases. He called the book *You Shall Know Them By Their Cadillacs*. When the book later got issued by a major publishing house, the title was changed to *Wall Street Gospel*. When Bill Wilson from New York was with us several weeks ago, he met on a Saturday night, with a group of the leaders of the church. He told this story from his own personal experience about being a speaker at a Jesus festival several years ago, where tens of thousands of people were gathered. He had finished the talk in his particular area and gone and sat on top of a car, where he had a view of two tents where meetings were in session. In one tent, Kenneth Copeland was speaking. In another tent, John Michael Talbot was speaking. Of course Kenneth Copeland emphasizes the good life and prosperity. And John Michael Talbot, wearing sort of a brown monk’s outfit emphasizes self-emptying and the simple life and giving up. Bill Wilson said he sat there in his car and watched. When the dismissal, at about the same time, was given in both of these tents, the people in John Michael Talbot’s tent, who had a lesson about giving up, were coming out of that tent and they were taking off their rings and watches and their jewelry and laying them down. The people from Kenneth Copeland’s tent were coming out and picking them up. I have no idea whether Bill was pulling our leg on that story or not.

REAL PROSPERITY!

Luke 12:13–34

But it does represent the polarities of opinions on prosperity that may be found in the body of Christ today.

In this Scripture which I have read this morning, Jesus is directing His remarks to two groups of people which are represented here today.

I. The first group of people is people concerned with material possessions.

That is the focus of verses 13–21. Then the second group that Jesus addresses are the people without material possessions (verses 22–34). Concerning those with money, Jesus tells us the story of the rich fool. And we would do this story injustice if we simply misunderstand it to think that Jesus is condemning all wealth. It is not a blanket condemnation of all wealth because we know in the Lord's own ministry He had followers who had substantial homes and incomes.

Among them, Mary and Martha and Lazarus and Joseph of Arimathea, and we know from both the Gospels and from Acts that there were persons in the Early Church with well appointed means. Had Jesus intended for all of His followers to sell out and live on faith, then there would be no believers left to support the people living on faith. The fact of the matter is that Jesus did not leave behind a company of holy paupers or holy beggars. He left behind a church that had the resources to continue to sustain outreach and the building of the kingdom. What is a surgical opinion for one person—"Sell all you have and give to the poor"—Jesus did not take as a blanket prescription for all (see Matthew 19:21).

His story of the rich fool is occasioned by the rudeness of an interrupter. An interrupter has been sitting in the meeting, waiting for a chance to ask Jesus a question that was on his mind. Jesus had been teaching about the kingdom and about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and about blasphemy against the Spirit and the need for the Spirit's presence as His disciples go out into the world. There is one person sitting there and not hearing a thing, because all he can think of

REAL PROSPERITY!

Luke 12:13–34

was the dominating interest of his life—how to get his brother to divide the father’s estate with him. It was, on the surface—at least it seemed—a legitimate grievance. But he was sitting there, not internalizing anything that Jesus was saying because he was caught up in his own pressing agenda.

I wonder how many times perhaps we have missed out on what God may have wanted to say to us at a particular moment in our life, because we let ourselves become preoccupied with some self-centered kind of thing.

So he interrupts Jesus when the moment comes, and he says to Him, “Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Someone has said that, when an inheritance is involved, 99 percent of the people become wolves. And I’m not at all sure if that is right. Jesus says, “Man...” You can tell that Jesus does not treat him gently. He says, “Man, who made Me a judge over you?” What Jesus is really saying is, “I am not like the other rabbis who settle disputes. I am not a magistrate. I don’t sit as a judge in a civil court and arbitrate property matters and inheritance matters.” Jesus sits in judgment on life in a different kind of way. He says to this man, because He reads his attitude, “Your problem is one of greed or you would have sat here and had a different response. I’ve been telling you about the kingdom of God and all you’re concerned about is the world right now. There is something more important in life than that which you are reaching for.” To illustrate His concern, He shares this story of the rich fool as a warning against greed. Because this man, like the rich fool, wanted things and he was not happy because his brother had things. He wanted to get some things from his brother.

The rich man was an economic success. But Jesus indicts him on two grounds. We should notice that Jesus does not condemn him for his wealth. But rather, for his perspective on life which

REAL PROSPERITY!

Luke 12:13–34

determined how he dealt with his wealth. The two things basically that come out of this story is an indictment of Jesus against the rich fool as he is called.

A. First of all, he never saw beyond himself. That's the point of the story. You can read it in the English or the Greek by the excessive use of personal pronouns in the language. In the Greek text, there are some twelve personal pronouns used in that short story. Eight times the man says "I." Four times he says, "my"—"my crops... my barns... my grain... my goods..." It had been his occupation in life to live by the motif of the bestseller of our day: *Looking Out for Number One*. And he had done that. He had thought it was perfectly natural that he should consume all of his wealth on himself. When he didn't know what to do with his excess, the only thing he could think of was how to bring more into him, even though he could not consume it all.

Someone said in this little poem: "Edith lived in a little world bounded on the north, south, east and west by Edith." And here is a man who lives in his little world bounded on the north, south, east and west by himself. He never saw things he should have been seeing. He never saw the need in having homes for battered wives and mothers. He never saw abused children. He never saw the struggle of a single mother trying to raise her children on a meager existence. He never saw the alien or the widow. He never saw a refugee. He never saw an orphan. He never saw a famine victim. He never saw a missionary need. He never sat down and said, how would God be using this wealth if God were living in my life? He never saw beyond himself. He had blinders on in a world that was in great need.

B. And he never saw beyond his world. Everything was oriented towards this life. So there came a day when God Himself pulls the cord on his life and says, "Tonight your life is required of you." Jesus, in His ministry, announced that a day of reward was coming, a day when we would stand before God and answer and receive either judgment or reward. The rich man acted as

REAL PROSPERITY!

Luke 12:13–34

though he did not know the term “deferred interest” or “deferred income.” There is a sense that we live life in a way in which we don’t take it all out now, but we give it away as an investment to others, to the work of God, to the kingdom of God. That not only refers to time and money. But that refers to the tenor of our life, because there are some people that are not wealthy at all but are very selfish.

Some children are very selfish. Their only concern is, “What am I going to wear? What is my schedule? What is on my agenda?” and they do not look maybe at the needs within their own house or the needs within their own family or other things that maybe would suggest that they’re living for something other than themselves.

So selfishness isn’t something limited to the physical wealth. Here is a man who didn’t live for anything more than just this life. I used the term “deferred income.” There is a sense, in serving Christ, that not everyday down here is payday. There are lots of things that we do because we’re Christians, that we do not see an immediate reward and immediately feel good on. We know that the Lord in that day will reward each one according to his work.

A few years ago, when IRAs first began to be advertised, I think the advertisements read something like, “If you invest \$2,000 a year for the next 35 years, they’d grow at an annual rate of 12 percent interest and you’ll be worth a million dollars.” All you’ve got to do is think “deferred income.” You don’t take anything out. You just keep putting it in. That’s exactly what Jesus did in His ministry. He kept putting it in. He didn’t take anything out—“Who, for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising its shame” (Hebrews 12:2). What is the reward now? He has sat down at the right hand of God.

REAL PROSPERITY!

Luke 12:13–34

The rich fool was a victim of his own short-sightedness, his inability to look at the next world that is coming. Because he was a victim of his own short-sightedness, what he had done wound up defeating him and ending him.

In his book *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen tells a story from India, which you'll recognize clearly as an apocryphal story. It illustrates short-sightedness. Four royal brothers each decided to master special abilities. So they took some time to learn some special ability. A long time passed and then they met each other and revealed what they had learned. The first brother said to the others that he had mastered a science. He said, "I can take a bone of some creature and I can create the flesh that goes with the bone." The second brother said, "I know how to form a creature's skin and hair if there is flesh on the bones." The third said, "I am able to create its limbs if I have the flesh and the skin and the hair and the bone." The fourth said, "I know how to give life to the creature, if its form is complete." So the four brothers went out into the jungle to test one another, to see if they were telling the truth. They found a bone. As fate would have it, they found a bone of a lion. The one brother added flesh to the bone. The second added hide and hair. The third added matching limbs. The fourth gave the lion life. And what they created ate them.

What this man—the rich fool in Luke 12—created ate him. There are some things that we create that eat us, that we start out thinking are for our good. More leisure time and the leisure time destroys the effectiveness of our service to Christ, unless we watch it and guard it. Our habits, our hobbies, our pursuit of income and wealth and things—which initially we think would be a benefit to us—can wind up destroying us.

REAL PROSPERITY!

Luke 12:13–34

We have the capacity to create what can devour. And the rich fool erred in that he did not look beyond his own life and he did not look beyond this world. He was, therefore, not rich toward God.

II. The second group of people to whom Jesus speaks are those who are without money, without material means.

Many times, the problem of the person without is, “How am I going to make it?” That’s no idle question. There are people in this body who lost their job and don’t know where next month’s rent or house payment is coming from or next week’s food. That’s a scary time. So it’s just as possible to be anxious about that today as it was then, even though we live in an upwardly mobile society. In addition, there are all kinds of things that we can be anxious about.

The Lord, therefore, gives us some helpful arguments against worry. Take this and use this as an antidote against worry. We don’t have the time to fully develop all these, but simply note that Jesus in speaking to people without saying to them “don’t worry that you don’t have.” He gives us seven reasons why we shouldn’t worry:

A. The first is the argument from the greater to the lesser—verse 23. If God’s given you life, won’t He also take care of your food and your clothing. He’s given you the greater—life itself. Will He not take care of the lesser—that which needs to keep it going?

B. Then the second thing that Jesus does is give an argument from the ravens who do not sow or reap or who do not store in barns. That doesn’t mean that we simply sit around and wait for someone to drop food in our mouth. It’s Jesus’ way of saying that, if God takes care of that aspect of creation which doesn’t sow or reap or store, will He not take care of you also who do sow and reap and store?

REAL PROSPERITY!

Luke 12:13–34

C. Then Jesus gives a third argument against worry, from the sense of futility. It's futile to worry. It accomplishes nothing. It doesn't add a cubit to your life span or possibly an alternate translation would be "to your stature." By worrying, you will not grow physically unless you put on a pair of high heels. That's the only way I know to grow by your own efforts. Or I guess you can grow outward, I'd hasten to say. But you can't grow upward. And you can't, by worrying, add anything to your life span. In fact, we know that worry takes away from our life span.

A French soldier in World War I carried with him this recipe for worry: "Of two things, one is certain—either you are at the front or you are behind the lines. If you are at the front; of two things, one is certain—either you are exposed to danger or you are in a safe place. If you are exposed to danger; of two things, one is certain—either you are wounded or you are not wounded. If you are wounded; of two things, one is certain—either you recover or you die. If you recover, there is no need to worry. If you die, you can't worry. So why worry?"

After the first service, someone handed me this little note: "Worry is like a rocking chair. It will give you something to do, but it won't get you anywhere. Futility."

D. Then fourth: the Lord says the argument of the flowers, the lilies of the field. Verses 27–28. Probably in Jesus' day, the lilies of the field were a reference to the scarlet anemones which grow by the millions on the hillside. They're there and then, quickly, the next day, they're gone. They're also referred to as grass. That's why Jesus talks about the grass of the field. In a non-wooded area, people gather those lilies or scarlet anemones and that which goes with it for fire—the dried grass would give warmth. Again the Lord is saying, "If I take care of something that lasts for so short a time and clothe it with such beauty, how much more will I care for you, who are far more precious to Me?" God will take care of you. God will clothe you.

REAL PROSPERITY!

Luke 12:13–34

I have a testimony of how God clothed me. Early in our life together—Jewel and I—we had both had independent incomes as singles and then got married. Our first child, Evangeline, came and suddenly, we were living on one income, whereas before we hadn't made it on two. That was quite an experience. I was the campus pastor at Evangel College and needed some clothes—some suits to wear. And I was down to one or two suits that were getting threadbare. I'd never put much stock in clothes anyway, but I needed something at that particular time. We prayed about it and wondered how it was going to happen, because we didn't have any money. On a Saturday, right across the street, a neighbor had a yard sale. There were a bunch of clothes hanging out there. In those days, I wore a size many times smaller than what I wear now. There were a bunch of suits, almost in new condition. It was an estate sale. The person who had had the clothes had worked in one of the most exclusive stores in town. Jewel got three suits for five bucks! May you find such deals like that!

E. Then, fifth, Jesus argues against worry on the basis of the pagans, people who don't know God who endlessly pursue material things. Not so with you.

F. Then He argues from priorities. Verse 31, "Seek first the kingdom and these things will be added to you." Not meaning that God is simply going to dump everything on you, but the things that Jesus has been talking about—enough to eat, enough to wear and shelter—He's going to take care of you.

G. Then, seventh, He argues from the Father's good intentions. He's going to give you the kingdom. His plans for you are good and He's not out to destroy you. That often happens to us when we're worrying. The problem becomes so big we don't see the solution and we think, therefore, that this is the thing that will do me in and the Lord is the entire time saying, "It is the

REAL PROSPERITY!

Luke 12:13–34

Father's pleasure to give you the kingdom." This is not going to do you in. This is not the end of it. There is more beyond this.

Jesus' bottom line on prosperity is the material world is winding down. It's the second law of thermodynamics. Everything material is dying. Jesus says it's either going to be subject to theft or subject to decay, but it's all going. And in light of the fact that everything material is going, don't let your life be wrapped up around the material, which will pass away.

I hesitate to share this story because some have already heard it. But it illustrates a person who made the wrong choices. The story is told of a man who left a considerable body of wealth to his children but he left in his will the instructions that he wanted to take some money with him. So he asked that, just before they closed the casket, each of his three sons come and put ten thousand dollars in his inner suit coat pocket. When the time came, before they closed the casket, the first son came. He had an envelope with ten thousand dollars in cash. He put it in the man's suit coat and walked away. The second son came. He had an envelope with ten thousand in cash. He put it in the suit coat pocket and walked away. The third son came. He seemed to stand there a while. It seemed like he was taking something out and putting something in. The other brothers suspected something was up. They went to him and said, "What were you doing? Were you taking something out of Dad's pocket? Did you put in your ten thousand dollars?" The son said, "Yes, I did. I gave him a check for \$30,000 and took the twenty thousand in cash as change." You really can't take it with you!

We have to ask, what's going to last forever? We're going to last forever. One of the magnificent things about Jesus' teaching is that it ennobles humanity by the teaching. He is saying that the things around your life are not what define you. It should not and, before God's eyes, cannot define your happiness or joy. The real you is not wrapped up in whether you drive a Porsche or a

REAL PROSPERITY!

Luke 12:13–34

VW. The real you is not whether you live in a palace or whether you live in a small utility apartment. The real you has nothing at all—in an eternal or moral or spiritual sense—to do with things. Things are only to be used. But you and I are permanent in Christ. Our real attention in life needs to be focused on the God who cares for us and the God who wants to beautify our world, independent of things, so that whether we have things or whether we don't, we can feel fulfilled. So we can feel like we're really living and feel like God really loves us and that things—when it comes right down to it—are only to be used for a time. But we are God's people forever. We're His people.

So Jesus tells us to step back and look at things from the light of eternity. I think of this as letting eternity be a lens through which we look. Let's imagine ourselves a hundred years from now. We will all be alive a hundred years from now, but we won't be alive in this form. I will not look like I look today. Thank the Lord! But we will be alive a hundred years from now. And if we know the Lord, have a relationship with the Lord, we will be alive in Him. We're going through that vantage point of eternity, we have that lens. We ought to use that lens now as though we were there to look back and measure our values and our priorities by the light of eternity. That's what Jesus is trying to get us to do in this story of the rich fool. Look at life from the vantage point of backing off a hundred years and measure the current moment and the priorities of your life by what's going to stand in God's presence.

Closing Prayer

Father, Paul said it, quoting the pagan poets, "In You we live and move and have our being." Lord, that's where we are today. Our identity is in You. Real prosperity comes in knowing You and living for You. Lord, in an audience this size, there are many friends with cares and worries of every kind. When we look at Your teaching, maybe our initial reaction is to say, "Teaching

REAL PROSPERITY!

Luke 12:13–34

against worry doesn't really help me. I'm still going to go out of here and worry." Lord, these are Your words. Wonderful words of life. It isn't as though we had a switch in our life and we could suddenly turn worry off. It's, instead, that You give us Your teaching, which is meant like seed to grow into us and grow up in us so that we can learn to handle the stresses of life through Your eyes and through the eyes of eternity. Thank You for giving us the kingdom. Maybe today someone here feels very hurt because they do not have sufficient money. Lord, You understand that. But there are riches, nevertheless, that each of us have in You. If we must be poor in things, let us never Lord be poor in relationships. Let us never be poor in thanksgiving. Let us never be poor in love. To those with excess, help us, Lord, to be challenged by the need which is everywhere around us, in Your world and in Your church. The need to lift up Your name, the need to serve others, the need to help the poor and the needy. Help us, Lord, to live as Your people, with Your kind of love that so loves the world that it gives. Thank You for coming. Thank You for ennobling our life with Your presence. In Jesus' name. Amen.