

## Prayers

### To God

Lord God, I am grateful for all You have done for me. You have placed within me the inner strength to live the life of faith, and I am blessed to be able to face each challenge knowing that You are with me and I am not alone. I am Your child, precious and loved, and I have confidence You will always guide me and complete Your eternal purposes in me. Give me the courage to persist in faith to the end of my days, I pray: AMEN

### For myself

#### Pray about your daily work

*Sometimes, but not all the time, we should think carefully about whether the work we do is really what God wants of us. Today, check this out with the Lord; He may confirm that you are doing what is right, or He may have something new to say to you ...*

### For others

*Pray today for athletes and for those who are competing in the Olympic games, especially for the majority, whose dreams of winning cannot all be fulfilled. Pray that the whole games will benefit humanity across the world.*

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## Meditation

Hear these words the Lord has given you today:

Listen to my voice and live.

Salvation is my gift, from darkness into light;

Believe in me and live.

Redemption is my work, through Jesus, my Son;

Follow Him, and live.

Righteousness is the evidence of victory over evil;

Discern what is right and live.

Justification is the truth about sins forgiven;

Confess them all and live.

Sanctification is the pathway of growth in the Spirit;

Receive Him now and live

Holiness is love's perfection to which all can aspire;

Walk this way and live.

Glory is the mystery of my eternal presence;

## Bible Passage

### **Luke 12:13-21**

<sup>13</sup> Someone in the crowd spoke to Jesus,

*“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”*

<sup>14</sup> But He said to him,

*“Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over your claim?”*

<sup>15</sup> Jesus then said to them,

*“Take care! Watch out and be on your guard against all forms of covetousness; for life is not determined by the abundance of wealth.”*

<sup>16</sup> Then He told them a parable:

*“A certain rich man had land that was very fertile, <sup>17</sup> and he pondered, ‘What shall I do? I have nowhere to store all my crops!’ <sup>18</sup> So he said, ‘This is what I will do: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and I will store all my grain and my goods in them. <sup>19</sup> And I will say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years; take a rest, eat, drink, and be merry.’*

*<sup>20</sup> But God said to him, ‘You fool! Your life is required of you this very night, and who will have everything you hoarded?’*

*<sup>21</sup> This is what will happen to those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich in the things of God.”*

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## Review

As we read this story of Jesus, it appears so very simple. A man with a sense of personal injustice asks Jesus to help sort out his inheritance (12:13), but instead, gets a lesson on priorities. Jesus begins by warning the man about the dangers of acquiring wealth (12:15), and then launches into a simple parable. This is designed to remind everyone that however much we value this life, God alone is our judge and our true ‘wealth’ (12:21), and to ignore this is folly.

The more we think about this and apply it to ourselves, the sharper this message becomes. Jesus’ first warning is against ‘*all forms of covetousness*’ (12:15), which is a broad term covering all forms of personal desire for more. We cannot escape the warning of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:17) never to covet what other people own, and each one of us knows how difficult this can be. Then, it is easy to think of the ‘rich man’ in Jesus’ parable as a modern multimillionaire or billionaire; someone who has everything (12:18f.) and enough to squander in excess. Yet few of us who live in western society can escape the charge of having more than we need and both storing and squandering the excess. A brief look at the range of our personal possessions should suffice to persuade most of us that Jesus’ parable speaks to us directly. We cannot brush it aside.

The man who approached Jesus came with a sense of injustice. His father must have died recently leaving an inheritance to be divided, and he was not happy with the arrangements.

He wanted Jesus to perform the duties of a Rabbi or elder, and do two things, define his inheritance and then make sure it was apportioned properly. These were the tasks of a 'judge' and 'arbitrator' (12:13) in Judea. As an aside, it is worth being aware that Deuteronomy 21:17 stipulates a double share of an inheritance should go to the eldest son, and the Old Testament says little more about the laws of inheritance than that. We can imagine that this man felt cheated either by an elder brother who had taken everything, or more likely, that there were disputes about the relative value of items and the correct assessment of a reasonable 'share'. The details are not important, but we can all feel the emotions of such matters; it is easy to think that an inheritance is ours before it has been received, and at such times, perceived injustices create great tension and potential family strife.

Typically, Jesus went to the heart of the matter, which was not justice, but the state of heart of a man who wanted what he thought was his. The very fact that he had come to seek Jesus' arbitration showed that in some way, he wanted something that did not yet belong to him, so Jesus pointed to his problem, which was covetousness (12:15). Of all the 10 commandments, the command '*You shall not covet*' is arguably the most difficult, for every time someone looks at something owned by another person and wants it, they dip their toes into the unclean and unhealthy pool of covetousness. Much sin hangs on the way people hide their deeper wants and desires inside, whilst allowing them to control their lives.

Jesus then saw the opportunity to deliver a powerful and memorable parable; the parable of the rich land owner. Its famous phrase, '*eat, drink and be merry*' (12:19) has come to stand for that blithe and ignorant 'party' approach to life which ignores eternal consequences. The parable's message, however, points to the difference between earthly and heavenly riches, between the temporary benefits of this life and the eternal benefits of the next, and ultimately between success and disaster.

The picture here is that of someone in control of his life and whose affairs are successful. What could be better than having crops to spare! Then, everyone lived from year to year giving thanks to God for survival and knowing that drought or disaster could ruin everything. Many Old Testament stories are about droughts, when people were forced to turn to God in desperate times (e.g. the story of Joseph – Genesis 37-48, the prophecies of Elijah – 1 Kings 17-19), but it also contains stories about Israel's self content when life was good and they ignored their God (e.g. Solomon's failures – 1 Kings 11, the ignorance of King Ahaz – Isaiah 7, or the blindness of Kings Josiah and Manasseh – 2 Kings 23). Speaking to a people who knew their history better than we do, Jesus' parable drew on these past echoes to make a sharp point about the present. The true measure of spiritual riches is not wealth or anything of this life, it is a desire to know God and readiness to meet Him (12:21).

The story itself is well known. A man builds extra barns for the excess of his crops; so what is wrong with this? We must however look at this with first century rather than modern eyes. In a world where food was scarce and successful crops were unpredictable, the first priority beyond private need was generosity to the community. We may not think of it today, but this man had obligations and options. His excess should first be distributed to the poor, or to other families who did not have the benefit of 'fertile ground' (12:16). The man benefitted from the 'good' land passed down to him, but it was not his 'property'. In Israel, all land belonged to God and was distributed according to ancient law (see Joshua 13, Numbers 26, 36). Yet he used the produce of the land for his own gratification, causing God to set about righting the social wrong and calling his life to account (12:20).

Matthew reports Jesus' powerful saying; '*store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal*' (Matt 6:20). But by reporting this great parable of Jesus, Luke's version of this teaching gives us so much more. This passage reminds all God's people of the primary obligation of faith in Christ, which is to yield all things to Him and seek the good of others not ourselves. The pathway of

true discipleship is found through a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and through the help of the Holy Spirit build up treasures *'in heaven'*. We are therefore confident of our future after death and our blessing in eternity.

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## Going Deeper

### ***Notes on the text and translation***

**V14** ***'who made me a judge and arbitrator over your claim?'***

*Other translations:*

*'who appointed me a judge or arbitrator between you'* (NIV)

The word for 'judge' is straightforward, it refers to someone appointed to decide a case. The word for 'arbitrator' means someone who divides up a claim according to a judgement, perhaps a court official responsible for enacting a claim. Jesus says He is neither the one to decide the man's claim or to make it happen.

**V15** ***'covetousness'***

*Other translations:*

*'greed'* (NRSV, ESV, NAS etc.)

Nearly every translation has the word 'greed' here, but the Greek is far more subtle. It uses the far more general word 'covetousness', which harks back directly to the last of the 10 Commandments. Because people know that the word 'covet' is an important Old Testament word, I reckon that it is important to translate it in this way wherever it is found in the New. Covetousness implies a range of attitudes about desiring what is not possessed, as well as downright greed.

**V15** ***'life is not determined by the abundance of wealth'***

*Other translations:*

*'a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions'* (NIV)

*'for not even when one has an abundance does life consist of his possessions'* (NAS)

This is a tricky passage to translate, though the gist of the message is clear. The Greek says something like this, *'for not in rich measure is the life of anyone found to exist'*. Each translator tries to find the best way to convey this in good English, but there are many ways to do this.

**V18** ***'my goods'***

The Greek here is interesting, because just as in English, the word for 'good', meaning 'good things', is used to refer to someone's property, as in 'goods'. The primitive idea is easy enough to understand; if someone keeps something as a possession it is because it is valued it as 'good'; hence, 'goods'.

**V19** ***'I will say to myself ...'***

*Other translations:*

*'I will say to my soul ...' (NRSV, ESV, NAS etc.)*

The Greek does in fact say *'I will say to my soul ...'* but this was a manner of speaking in the first century, meaning simply *'I will say to myself ...'*, and I do not think it necessary to translate the colloquialism. To do so implies that there is a stress on the word 'soul', and there is not.

## **Further Comments**

### ***Jesus refusing to be a judge?***

At the beginning of the story, Jesus turns away from the idea that He might act as a rabbi or judge. Why did He do this? Surely Jesus is a righteous judge of all people and all things? We should be careful in our presumptions, because John reminds us in a famous quote from Jesus addressing Nicodemus, of these words:

*'it was not to judge the world that God sent His son into the world, but that through Him the world might be saved.'* (3:17)

If anything, this passage reminds us that Jesus' prime work is to save people, and to tell them what they must avoid if they are to find faith in Him which leads to this salvation. Jesus' work is not so much to be the judge but to point people towards the God who is Judge of all.

### ***The significance of 'covetousness'***

There are other stories of Jesus where, if we look carefully, we can find evidence that Jesus was concerned about people's covetousness. It is not easy to see, but in the story of the rich man who came to Jesus asking about inheriting eternal life, Jesus quotes most of the Ten Commandments (Matthew 19:18, Mark 10:19), but omits 'you shall not covet'. So when the rich young man says that he has kept all these, Jesus says *'but you lack one thing'* and tells him to give his possessions away. He has of course fallen at the hurdle of covetousness and kept for himself what should be given to the poor, which is the same point we find here in this passage. It does not take much to spot that the man who called out to Jesus in this story appeared to want justice but what lay behind this was his covetous attitude towards his inheritance, and Jesus had to expose it.

### ***The ownership of land and inheritance***

There is a great deal in the Old Testament about inheritance in the Promised Land of Canaan (e.g. Joshua 13, Numbers 26, 36 and much more). Great debates were held about the details of the inheritance of the tribes, including the rights of women (Numbers 26,27), and the 'Promised Land' was the idealistic title of Israel's land, reminding them that the land belonged to God. All land was supposed to be passed down within families, and great consternation followed the actions of kings when they took land away from ordinary Israelite families (see the story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21). All these things would have been uppermost in people's minds as they heard Jesus.

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## **Discipleship**

### ***Application***

#### ***The sin of covetousness***

Because coveting is something done mostly in private, it is an obstinate and difficult sin. We are normally close to only a few people, and so we do not always spot covetousness in those we meet and neither do we find it easy to see in those we love. Who are we to judge the covetousness of others?

Of course, this is the point. We can only deal with this troublesome sin by ourselves or by taking action to ask for help from others. Covetousness is an attitude of heart by which the soul desires wealth or anything else of this world; the soul has a sinful tendency to desire objects or money and value them more highly than God Himself. I have known Christians for example who miss church for a family event, spend more on gifts than on the house of God, or who insist that unless this or that happens their presence and their money will not go towards God's purposes. In all such things, inner motives are revealed in their awfulness.

One of the reasons why I sit lightly to any theology that says Christians should expect earthly wealth from God is because it opens us up to the temptation to covet. We should of course expect God's blessings in this life, but always keep an eye out that we do not sail close to the wind of this sin. Christian living is all about motives; if our motives are godly and pure then we can rejoice in God's blessings, but if the devil has half a chance to tug at our sleeves and he will do this whether we like it or not, then we must be very, very careful. Our wants and desires are a prime indicator of faith; they are focussed on either God or the world.

### ***Laying up treasure 'in heaven'***

What can we do to store up treasure in heaven? The Bible is fairly clear about this, telling us consistently throughout the Old and New Testaments that what God wants of His people is their effort to do His will on earth. James talks of practical faith (James 2:20f.), Jesus call for His disciples to be obedient to God (Mark 1:27, Matthew 28:20 etc.), and Moses calls God's people to honour their God by being obedient and worshipping God alone (Exodus 19:5, 20:1f.). Christian faith has never been something abstract that someone can merely give assent to and be saved; it is the power of God invited into the soul, which changes the individual completely into a loving servant of God and others.

### ***Ideas for what to do***

- Take the opportunity to spend a quiet hour seeking the Lord's guidance about any covetous attitudes you have or any worldly things that tempt you to be covetous.
- Do a small amount of research into how land is distributed in your country. Who owns what? And what proportions are owned by people and not governments, industries or the extremely wealthy? What does this distribution say about the kind of society in which you live?

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. What does this passage teach us about ourselves? What do you think is the key meaning of Jesus' parable here?
2. How can we deal with the sin of covetousness, and why is it so difficult to deal with?
3. Is it, or is it not important to keep our heavenly destiny in mind while we live this life, or is it something we can be concerned about 'later'?

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## Final Prayer

Lord God, save us from the sin of covetousness. Take our hearts and make them Yours, we pray, so that we do not give ourselves unwittingly to the enemy. Purify our inner thoughts and feelings, and take away from us those ridiculous preferences and prejudices that are unworthy of one who is called by Your name, Lord Jesus Christ, **AMEN**

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