

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – August 4, 2019

[Luke 12:13-21](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Luke 12:13-21

(From *Homiletics*; “The Theohedonia Option”, August 4, 2013)

"Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me'" (v. 13). Lacking clues as to why this unidentified man sought Jesus' mediation with his family dispute, interpreters have the splendid opportunity to propose a variety of scenarios. For example, perhaps the man felt his brother was slighting him. If so, his request echoes Martha's entreaty, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" (Luke 10:40). Conceivably, the man suspected his brother was cheating him or acting irresponsibly with the family assets. If that's the case, this brother may have thought it advantageous to solicit the Lord's involvement in order to help resolve the controversy.

Then again, the man's request for his share of the inheritance might be akin to that expressed by another legendary son who said, "Father, give me the share of property that will belong to me." Shortly after his father honored the request "the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living" (Luke 15:12-13).

Although the brother's motivation is unknown, his declaration comes across as pretentious; it is shrouded with a feigned generosity of spirit. Jesus recognizes this and will have none of it. On the contrary, "he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?'" (v. 14). Agile of mind, like many well-trained rabbis, Jesus responds with a question. Rather than offering a direct answer, Jesus' query pierces the man's thinly veiled request. It reveals a presumption that undergirds his initiative, which appears to be an attempt to find allies who will support his effort to force his brother's hand.

Jesus, however, refuses to serve in that capacity. Instead of being drawn into this family dispute as mediator, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. It's possible the real concern isn't about justice -- fiduciary or familial -- but about getting what he thinks belongs to him, and getting it sooner rather than later. Meanwhile he likely had no intention of becoming the catalyst for an admonition on greed, but that's what happened. And as is so often the case, his foolhardy declaration produced an unintended consequence.

After directing his query to the outspoken brother, without warning, Jesus addresses the crowd, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (v. 15). The admonition is universally applicable since greed is a sinister and immoral affliction that worms its way into each person's heart. Jesus knows that this man, along with everyone else, needs to be warned about the dangers of greed. Although Luke does not record any specific protest or objection, Jesus' censure surely had to generate a high degree of discomfort. After all, greed is an affliction that few, if any, avoid, and, despite our ability to give good gifts, we are evil as Jesus had already made clear (Luke 11:13; cf. 13:1-5).

To press his point, Jesus offers a parable as a way to illustrate the wisdom of keeping one's life free from greed. It begins optimistically enough with, "The land of a rich man produced abundantly" (v. 16). This detail, however, reveals an essential truth that is easily overlooked due to the statement's simplicity. Though he doesn't recognize it, it's the land -- or rather, God who created and sustains the land -- that is the source of the man's wealth.

The farmer not only fails to acknowledge that this abundant crop is a gift, but he is also oblivious to his neighbors. His attitude and response to his bountiful harvest stands in absolute contrast to Boaz when Ruth and other women were welcomed as they gathered barley (Ruth 2). The farmer isn't malicious, but he's a selfish wretch who doesn't even consider sharing his oversupply. His only concern is for *his* wants and *his* life. Thus when he thinks about the situation, he asks himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store *my* crops?" (v. 18). Also note how he refers to the harvest -- it's not "the crops," but "my crops."

Though he still walks among the living, the farmer is already dead. Avarice seeds have taken root in his heart and choked it. In a way, he personifies the seed that falls among the thorns -- he is "choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life" (Luke 8:14). Tragically, he is trapped by his own self-interest. Foolishly, he thinks he is the master of his own destiny, and, for that reason, he wants to make certain his future will be secure and comfortable.

Thus the farmer concocts a plan for his cornucopia: "I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul [τῆ ψυχῆ μου], Soul [ψυχή], you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry" (vv. 18-19). His self-absorption is inexorable. Every facet of his farm expansion is self-centered as evidenced by the habitual use of "I" and "my." He is, to be sure, a pitiful creature whose excessive self-preoccupation is distasteful, and, even though he is unaware of it, a calamity is about to unfold.

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life [τὴν ψυχὴ σου] is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'" (v. 20). The use of ψυχή is notable. It's not just the farmer's βίος (biological) life that is "being demanded," but his ψυχή (soul) life. He is not only losing his physical life, but that which distinguishes him as a living soul -- his identity (cf. Luke 9:24; 17:33). Beyond that, the rhetorical question lingers as it goes unanswered. God had spoken to him, but the farmer had no reply. The silence intensifies the surety of God's judgment. Although the farmer doesn't know who will become heir to his barns and grain, without doubt, he knows that the provisions he had hoped to secure for himself are about to vanish.

The parable ends at verse 20 though a case could be made for extending it through verse 21. Regardless, verse 21 reads either as Jesus' concluding admonition or as Luke's summary. Either way, the moral of the story is this: all will end up like the farmer if they "store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God" (v. 21; cf. Luke 12:33-34). Ultimately, Luke's aim is to exhort his community to think about the allure of wealth and recognize the insidiousness of greed because of its potential to destroy the soul.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for this text (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on Luke 12:13-21

- 1.** Elisabeth Johnson, *workingpreacher.org* (August 4, 2019) asks a question that is surely on the minds of many readers/hearers in the contemporary affluent west: *“Many who hear this parable, especially in a North American context, may wonder: Why is the rich farmer called a fool? One could easily argue that the rich man is a wise and responsible person. He has a thriving farming business [and] will have ample savings set aside for the future and will be all set to enjoy his golden years. Isn’t this what we are encouraged to strive for? Isn’t it wise and responsible to save for the future? The rich farmer would probably be a good financial advisor. He seems to have things figured out. He has worked hard and saved wisely. Now he can sit back, relax, and enjoy the fruits of his labor, right?”* What does this scripture, and Jesus’ parable, have to say to those of us who have enough wealth to consider savings, investments, retirement planning, etc?
- 2.** *“...one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”* (v. 15). How many of us find ourselves caught up in the material pursuits of life? How many of us have been lured into the consumer lifestyle, without ever making a conscious decision to do so? Jesus implies that the anecdote is living a life “rich toward God” (v. 21). So what does that look like? Does such a life necessitate renouncing wealth? Living in intentional and voluntary poverty? Yielding our possessions to a collective, as in the early church? Balancing production and affluence with gratitude and generosity? Putting our wealth to work for the public or common good rather than our private benefit?
- 3.** Perhaps when you read or hear this scripture, your mind, like mine, jumps ahead a few chapters to another Jesus parable that is unique to Luke, with the so-called “Prodigal Son” who also wanted his inheritance divided up between him and his brother and given to him (Luke 15:11-32). It seems that maybe Luke had a “thing” for inheritance squabbles! But have you ever considered what the Hebrew scriptures had to say about inheritance law? Surely this is something that a “teacher” or rabbi, as the fellow in this text refers to Jesus, would be expected to be able to interpret and offer some advice about. Some texts of relevance would be Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:6-9 or Deuteronomy 21:15-17 (as taken from the notes in the Harper Collins NRSV Study Bible). Why do you think Jesus doesn’t engage any such laws from the Torah in his replies?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?