



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

2 Poland Manor
Poland, Ohio 44514
330-757-1547

November 6th, 2016

**A sermon by
Brent J. Eelman**

"Your 401K"

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.'¹⁴ But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?'¹⁵ And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'¹⁶ Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly.¹⁷ And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?"¹⁸ Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."²⁰ But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.

The parable that I read to you is usually called, "The Parable of the Rich Fool." What is so foolish about this man? Today we would use words like,

- savvy,
- productive,
- prudent,
- diligent,
- industrious,
- wise,
- and visionary to describe him.

What was so foolish about him? The same values he embodied were imparted to me by my parents.

- Save for the future.
- Think ahead.
- Work now, play later.

When I graduated from school and started working in a "real job", I remember receiving advice from many that it was important to lay aside part of my income so that I might have a good "nest egg" when it came time to retire, (a 401K). Once again, the words we might use to describe this behavior are prudent, wise, and savvy. What was so foolish about this man? Would not a better name for this parable be, "The Productive Farmer"?

This parable of Jesus' is troubling because it challenges our values. It forces us to look at what we consider to be most important in life. It is troubling because it deals with the unexamined accumulation of wealth. Jesus' comment at the conclusion of the story cuts like a razor: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God."

This morning I would like to look at this provocative parable.

- It is a unique parable in terms of its style.
- It confronts our unchallenged and oft unexamined values. What was so foolish about this man?
- It asks the existential question, "Am I also a fool?"

I

The first thing that we should notice about the parable is that it did not focus on the actions of the *productive farmer*; rather on his thinking. The farmer's productivity, his bigger barns were props for the narrative. The focus was on his self-talk. This parable was not about building bigger barns for more crops. It was about human motivation. It was about the heart's desires and fears. What was the *productive farmer* thinking about? What motivated him? This was what concerned Jesus. This was what Jesus' message focused upon: human motivations. Why do we do what we do? At the core of our motivations is the spiritual question: What is most important in our lives?

The great 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich, described "faith as an ultimate concern." That which we place first or of ultimate concern in our lives is our God. What was first in the *productive farmer's* life? What was his heart's desire? This was the focus of Jesus' parable: Not what he did, but what he believed.

This parable is unique in biblical literature because we overhear the *productive farmer's* inner dialogue. We learn what was important to him. We discover his motivations. We come face to face with his "ultimate concern"... his god. We are no longer, distant observers; rather we are intimate with his thoughts and desires. Are his thoughts, worries, and dreams like ours?

Notice the productive farmer's use of the first-person pronoun. "I" occurs 6 times, and "my" occurs 5 times! In only 2 verses! What does that tell us about the *productive farmer*? "It's all about me!" His thoughts were self-centered.

But, we may argue, would this not characterize all our thoughts? Perhaps, but it also reveals the farmer's motivations. What does he desire? To "have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." What does he fear? That he will not have enough. What is important? Security and ample goods laid up for many years. What is his ultimate concern? His own skin. His own happiness. His own stuff.

He may be outwardly devout. He may be an individual who participated in ritual and appeared to be quite pious. He may have gone often to the temple to pray. But Jesus' focus was on his heart and its desires. The *productive farmer* didn't love God with all his heart. He didn't even think of his neighbor. He was busy dreaming, planning, and building his barns.

II

Why was this *productive farmer* a fool? Jesus, no doubt was familiar with Psalm 14, "The fool has said in his heart, there is no God." Psalm 14 comes alive in this parable of the *productive farmer*. When we hear his thoughts; when we come to know the desires of his heart; we learn that there is no God in his life. "It is all about me." As I just said, he may be outwardly pious. He may go to the temple for prayer. He may even tithe a proportion of his wealth... but in his heart there was no God. He was a functional atheist.

This parable of Jesus challenges our values, our behaviors, and our thinking. I know it challenges mine. Earlier this summer, I celebrated my 65th birthday, and one of the things that I did during the day, was to check out my 401K. (Technically I have a 403b, but it functions the same.) As I looked it over, I asked myself, do I have enough there? Should I have a bigger plan, (i.e. build bigger barns). Will I be comfortable in the future? Can I say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry"? It dawned on me that our modern 401K's are the cultural equivalent of the *productive farmer's* storage barns.

Each of us knows our inner dialogue. I like to think that I have had a productive career in ministry and whatever I have put aside has been the result of hard work and prudent planning. What makes me different than the farmer in Jesus' parable? This parable is like an arrow aimed at the heart. Am I a fool? I wrestle with this. I believe that is why Jesus told this parable. He wanted disciples like you and me to grapple with our inner motivations.

III

The parable of the *productive farmer* challenges each of us to examine our own values, our own ultimate concerns, our heart's desires, indeed the investments that we are making in life. It reminds us that Jesus was not merely concerned about the outward trappings of piety. Christ knows our heart.

Jesus told this parable so that his listeners would struggle, indeed wrestle, with what it meant to be his disciples. Jesus calls us to that same struggle. Too often we focus on externals and seldom on our motivations and our thinking. This is especially true when it comes to wealth and the accumulation of goods and other things.

Interestingly:

- Jesus did not condemn the *productive farmer* for being a good farmer and producing abundant crops.
- Jesus did not condemn the *productive farmer* for building bigger barns.
- Jesus did not condemn the *productive farmer* for being savvy and prudent.
- Jesus did not condemn the *productive farmer* for his wealth.

No.

The *productive farmer* was a fool because for all his planning, for all of his savvy, for all of his prudence, he neglected that which is most important... the condition of his soul. His accumulated wealth literally choked the life from his soul.

For the record, Jesus was never anti-materialist. The core message of the New Testament is that God became material... flesh! As a Jew, he believed that God created the physical world and called it good, (*toiv*). He was familiar with the words of the psalmist, "The earth is the Lord's and all its fullness." The material world is good and belongs to God. The Greek philosophers were anti-materialists, but not Jews and Christians.

Christ was concerned when we become obsessed with what we have and what we want. Christ was concerned when our material pursuits become the dominant theme and control our lives, (and this is an affliction of the rich, the poor, and those in between!).

You may have noticed that throughout my sermon, I referred to the farmer as the "*productive*" farmer, not the "foolish" farmer. I believe that we can identify with his productivity and his vision. But if we do not recognize what is so foolish in this man.... Are we fools too? Has contemporary discipleship missed the point of Jesus' teachings?

The question this parable raises for the contemporary disciple is what is in our 401K? Most of us are prudently putting aside part of our treasure for those "golden years." Jesus reminds us that there is also a spiritual 401K... Should we not be thinking about our spiritual portfolio? Should we be investing other parts of our lives? Investing in the health and welfare of others. Investing in a cleaner more peaceful world. Investing in prayer and spiritual maturity. Investing in sharing the good news of Christ with others. We speak of being "Christ-like". Christ invested everything, even his life on the cross, for the welfare and salvation of others.

When I read the parable of the Rich Fool, I personally found a great deal of uncomfortable identification with him. As we contemplate our lives, and as we invest for our future... the temptation is to think only of ourselves, only of "me". The temptation is to think solely in terms of what we have, what we want, and what we think we will need. When this is our focus... we too are fools. Discipleship is letting go of foolishness and embracing the grace of Jesus Christ. This invitation is good news. Amen.