

It was the author of Ecclesiastes who wrote, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.” (Eccl. 3:1) But some things just seem to be timeless. An article in Friday’s Washington Post on private equity firms, that pool the capital of large investors and buy out whole companies, *e.g.*, recently, Chrysler, the Hilton hotel chain. Because they are privately held, they are lightly regulated.

Now that some of these private equity firms are going public (selling shares to the public), they have to disclose, for the first time, how much their managers earn. The “amounts were staggering,” reports the Post. One manager made \$684 million on the firm’s deal when the firm made its first public offering of stock. Members of Congress “were not only dazzled by the amount but also disgusted by how little [this individual] and other private-equity managers pay in taxes.”¹

These managers are taxed at lower rates than firefighters and janitors, because their earnings are taxed at the capital gains rate of 15%, less than half the 35% rate on regular income. This arrangement is not called for by any law or IRS regulation, but is based in something like “custom,” over time. Some scandalized members of the House and Senate intend to change that if they can, but it won’t be easy. In response, private-equity firms “have hired an army of tax lawyers and lobbyists to block legislation that would raise taxes” on these firms when they go public.

Stunning! A modern but timeless story of “it’s all about me.” All about my expectations which I consider to be my rights, to which I am entitled. And if I ever give a thought to anybody else, well, too bad for folks who are not as well-positioned.

To be fair, I don’t know these people, or any more about them than I read in the paper. I know nothing about their motives, goals, what makes them tick. That is what is so lovely about the gift of a parable—today, the parable of the rich man whose land produced abundantly. He doesn’t have a name, address, relatives, colleagues, or friends. He’s a character in a story, not a player on the street—Wall Street, or any other.

So, we are free to consider his situation as broadly as we like or dare, to wonder and imagine about him, and how his story may reflect on us, ourselves and our own times—without having to feel guilty. This man exists only to help us see, and see more clearly.

A simple story, but stunning. And it is sad. All about what I have, and what I will: I will do, I will pull down, I will store, I will say. Also about “my”: my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods, my soul. Oops! “My soul”? There’s the rub. It turns out that his soul is no more his than any of the rest of it—crops, barns, grain, or goods.

¹“Wall Street’s Lucrative Tax Break Is Under Fire,” Washington Post, Aug 3, 2007, p. A1.

“This very night your life/soul is being demanded of you.” (Greek is both soul and life.) God requires his soul, which is as much a gift as all the rest. “Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?” (Mk. 8:37). “For the ransom of our life is so great, that we should never have enough to pay it.” (Ps. 49:7)

There is another reading of this from the Greek. “This very night they are demanding your soul/life of you.” The first takes the plural and reads it as the divine plural. If not so, then what? Who are “they”? All those goods that have preoccupied the rich man now claim his very soul, his very life. As if his soul has leached out into his possessions, which the wisdom of the ages has long recognized will not and cannot last. (*See, e.g.*, Eccl. 2:4-11, 20-23.)

A frightening, cautionary tale for our own day, when we are constantly barraged with new products that work their way into our unconscious and conscious as things we need. Consumers in danger of being consumed by our possessions.

“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed” The word in Greek has in it the word for “more” (*pleonexia; pleon*), a condition of always needing more, always seeking more possessions. Colossians calls greed “idolatry” (3:5), putting something that is not God in the place of God. Filling real hunger of the soul with that which will not satisfy, no matter how much more we get and have. It is an addiction as deadly as any other.

There is a reminder of this in the new home equity line commercial on tv: the monkey on the woman’s back reaching out and destroying things around her at great expense. “You need a Name of Bank home equity loan. Get that monkey off your back!”

The problem is not with being rich, owning lands, having an abundant crop, or making a profitable deal. The problem is not even with having barns, putting something away for the future. Stewardship is good, responsible. Abundance is a good. Jesus is all about abundance. It is Jesus who made of 5 loaves and 2 fish an abundant meal for 5,000, to show the abundance of God.

The problem is the man does not have a clue about any of it—where his abundance comes from or what to do with it. You have to wonder, where has he been all his life. What has he been listening to? What has he been thinking? Did he never hear: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength?” Or the words of the psalmist, “The eyes of all wait upon you O Lord, and you give them their food in due season. You open wide your hand and satisfy the needs of every living creature?” (Ps. 145:16-17)

The one thing he has been preoccupied with is not the one thing needful that Jesus spoke of in the house of Mary and Martha. (Lk. 10:42) What if he had ever prayed even one phrase of the prayer the Lord gave to his disciples—a prayer that is rooted in ancient Jewish tradition. “Hallowed be your name,” that would help put life into perspective. Or “Your kingdom come.” Or “Give us the bread we need for today.” What a shift in world view those simple words will work in a person.

And he doesn't know what to do with what he has been given. He holds it all tightly in his clenched hands, locks it up in his barns. Reading about this parable, more than once I came across the image of hands opening, fingers spreading a little, so that some of what is held can flow out to be shared.

This story always make me think of Joseph in Egypt. He also had crops stored in barns. But not for himself, as a store for the whole people, against the certainty of famine. What else might the man have thought, or done? This is a gospel of joy and sharing. A banquet to which all are invited would be good. What about the man's laborers? A bonus for their work would be nice. Thanks to God in any form would be appropriate.

A sad tale. "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." How does one do that, be rich toward God? Maybe it begins with a shock, a waking up, getting outside ourselves and seeing how we have been living our life, sucked in by a consumer mentality far more than we had realized. Maybe it begins with fear engendered by the recognition that this old story is more about ourselves than we have seen before.

Surely it begins with a deep awareness of how rich God is toward us, toward all human beings and all creation. This is how we are able to move from the "old ways" in the first half of the reading from Colossians, not only greed and the rest, but the ways that flow from them: "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth." To move from column A, to column B: "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." To "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly . . . and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God." (Col. 3:)

There is one thing that is needful for the rich fool, the thing that he could not see, or chose to ignore. He does not know how precious he is—his life, his soul—to God. He does not see how abundantly he is blessed by God. Or maybe—and this is quite terrifying—he does not care. He may that well defended against God and anyone who might be part of his life. It's all stored up in his barns, while he's missed the only thing that matters in this life. To save his life, his soul, he has to risk sharing it, letting it go; to open his hands and let it flow out, trusting that whatever he risks, whatever he gives away, he will receive back, in abundance.

Some things are timeless.