

July 24, 2016

St. Luke 12:13-21: ***“The Real Issue”***

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*Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions (Luke 12:13-15)."*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In the opening of our gospel lesson for this morning, we are first of all confronted with the concept of authority and the notion of authorization. It helps us to understand what we can and cannot do. A teacher is authorized by parents to teach their children. A pastor is authorized to be a steward of the means of grace through the call of the congregation, and is scripturally understood as having been called by God himself to preach the word in its truth and purity and administer the sacraments according to Christ's institution.

When the "someone in the crowd" asks Jesus to be an arbitrator over an inheritance, it is important to note that Jesus refuses the request. He will not do it. By his refusal, Jesus is making it clear that he has not been authorized to do that (according to his human nature). This is not his purpose for coming into the world. It is a very important thing what Jesus does here, for it makes a distinction between secular and churchly (sacred) purposes. It is not the job of the church to administer worldly affairs. While Jesus went to Bethlehem at the command of Caesar Augustus before he was born, he will not take upon himself an authority that has not been given to him and become a court of law, though he is judge of all.

The second part of the opening of our gospel lesson is just as important. While Jesus will not be an arbitrator over an inheritance and secular purposes, he will make it clear that he has been authorized to deal with all sin that is behind such requests for arbitration. The implications of this text are extremely helpful for us as Christians who are simultaneously members of the kingdom of heaven, and aliens and strangers down here, and yet also happen to be living as citizens in various countries with differing laws that govern secular affairs. In very simple terms, the church's purpose is not to govern secular affairs, but she is to point out sin wherever it is to be found, and finally lead people to salvation. In the final analysis, sin and eternal salvation is **The Real Issue**. Perfection in this fallen place is out of the question. And if there would be any positive change in societies and governments, the kingdom must come into people's hearts. In fact, if it were not for the reality of sin, there would be no such thing as a government. A perfect society needs no one to govern anything.

But, I digress. While an individual Christian, who is a citizen of a particular country may be authorized to do certain things in secular life such as a lawyer or a policeman, the church is about the gospel of Jesus Christ - forgiveness, life, and salvation. Hopefully, when we realize that we are a part of a kingdom that is not of the down here, we are freed to understand that the task of the church is not to make a great kingdom on earth - a Babylon. Rather, the church calls everyone to repentance and to the eternal kingdom that is perfect and lasts forever. Consequently, the church of Jesus Christ reveals sin and reveals the only Savior. And, this becomes increasingly difficult and a perilous thing to do when secular society and government calls evil good and good evil. And so, while laws may be contrary to the law of God and

the church suffers under them in every generation, the church maintains her righteousness when she calls evil - evil and good - good, regardless of the consequences. This relieves the church of any notion that it is her task to be a church that will create heaven on earth - a task that is impossible. She is, in fact, a light and city on a hill, as Jesus states: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16)."

If there is to be any real changes in societies and governments, the kingdom of Christ must come into hearts, and even then the sinful flesh remains. A perfect place will never happen in this life. And, the end of the matter is recorded for us in the book of Revelation: "Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever (Revelation 11:15).'" It is only in this moment that all things will finally be perfect and wonderful. Until then, there will always be strife and inequality. That is why it is silly to think that there is any solution that will make everything right down here except for Jesus and the eternal kingdom he gives.

All those who are members of the church in Christ are able to really think this way because they actually believe that sin and salvation are real, and that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. They believe that Jesus has given himself by dying on the cross to forgive sins. They believe that Jesus is everything. In fact, the people of God believe that it is far more important to have Jesus than every atom of the creation. Even living forever on this earth is not appealing. The Christian simply desires to have God and be with him in glory. Everything else, even what we might call great gifts of God in this fallen place can ultimately go away, only as long as there is God himself and we are his and he is ours. That is **The Real Issue**.

What Jesus warns us against in our lesson is a thing called covetousness. This is when we want something that is an insult to God and who he is. It is when we think that our everything is outside of him and somewhere else. And there is a part of us that desires everything and anything but God and his will for us. There is a constant danger that we would give up God for what we think is a greater god. In Aesop's fables there is the reflection of the dog.

A Dog, to whom the butcher had thrown a bone, was hurrying home with his prize as fast as he could go. As he crossed a narrow footbridge, he happened to look down and saw himself reflected in the quiet water as if in a mirror. But the greedy Dog thought he saw a real Dog carrying a bone much bigger than his own. If he had stopped to think he would have known better. But instead of thinking, he dropped his bone and sprang at the Dog in the river, only to find himself swimming for dear life to reach the shore. At last he managed to scramble out, and as he stood sadly thinking about the good bone he had lost, he realized what a stupid Dog he had been.

It is very foolish to be greedy for everything but God. The danger is that we drop what we have for what we think we can get. It says in Psalm 73:25, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing

on earth that I desire besides you.” Or, in the example that Jesus gives in the parable that is recorded in our lesson:

The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, “What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?” And he said, “I will do this: I will tear 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, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” But God said to him, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God (Luke 12:16-21).

Do you know what it means to be “rich toward God?” It actually is the opposite of covetousness. To be rich toward God means to believe that there is nothing greater than to have God. When we look at Jesus and all that he has done for us, we come to the realization that nothing we desire can compare to having him and all that he gives. And, to demonstrate that one believes, or to live a life in him, is be willing to share him with others and even to be willing to give up everything for the one who is all in all.

By no means do I agree with all of his theology, but it was once said by John Tillotson, “He who provides for this life, but takes no care for eternity, is wise for a moment, but a fool forever.” And I would like to add this: he who exchanges God for anything or anyone may find what he thinks is treasure on earth, but in the end all is lost. What is **The Real Issue** of our lesson? Jesus answers it in Matthew (16:24-26): “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?” Indeed! That is **The Real Issue**.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott