

# The Wisdom to Know the Difference

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*Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)*  
*July 31, 2022*

*Text:* Luke 12:13-21

I dropped my son off at his day camp on Friday for the last time. He's been enjoying it the whole summer—every weekday he's had 5 hours to swim, to play games, to dance to music, to make new friends. And it was a little sad to come to the end of what had been such a good experience. Enjoy every minute of the last day, I told him. Good things come to an end—you can't always control that. But you can decide to be present, to be engaged, to be cheerful and encouraging. (He tells me the camp staff brought out ice cream and a DJ for their last-day celebration, so it seems like they were on the same page.)

A few years ago, I remember talking to someone who had a relative with dementia, and it was hard to connect in the way that they had in the past. If they got to talking about memories, or about people or things that weren't there in the room, this relative would experience a lot of confusion and anxiety. You can't control that, I remember saying. You can't do anything about that. But you have the present. You can share the moment together. Talk about what's in the room, what's happening then and there.

“There are things that are up to us, and there are things that are not up to us.” These are the opening words of *The Handbook* by Epictetus, a book that was written just a few years after the gospels. Outside of the Bible, these are probably the words I come back to most often. For Epictetus, leading a fulfilling life comes from learning to tell the difference between the things that are up to us and the things that aren't. There is freedom, he says, in basing your virtue, your hopes, and your happiness not on the stuff that happens to you, which you can't control, but on your choices, your responses, and the story you tell about yourself. It's not the hand you're dealt, but how you play it. It's not the part you were assigned in the play, but how you live into the role. There's great wisdom here.

There's so much that happens to us that is outside of our control. People get sick or seriously injured. We lose loved ones. We fall out with people we care about. Financial markets wobble, and we lose a job or a home. And if this is the way life works in the twenty-first century, you can imagine what it was like 2000 years ago, as Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem. So many of the stories he tells involve a sudden crisis. He talks about two houses—one built on rock and one on sand—that are tested by a flood. He talks about a master giving money to his servants to invest, and demanding to know how well they've done when he comes home. And he talks about ten bridesmaids who fall asleep, and when the bridegroom comes, only those who thought to buy extra lamp oil can go with him to the wedding. In this kind of story, there's an external reality of some kind that comes crashing in. There's something the central characters can't control, and this outside force reveals the good and bad of the things that the characters can control.

The scholars call these “eschatological parables,” because these are metaphors

that help to describe the Last Judgment, or what it looks like to give an accounting to God for how we've lived. But you don't have to go all the way to the end of your life or to the end times of history to know that stuff happens. There are things that aren't up to us that come crashing into our lives all the time, and it's these moments of crisis that bring into focus the things that are up to us.

The story we hear Jesus telling in today's gospel is one of those stories, I think. I'm going to show you a painting by Rembrandt—this is how he sees the rich fool of the parable. Look at the statements of account that hem him in on one side and the other. There's no room for anyone else in this life. It's as though he's already buried himself in a tomb of his own making. Jesus tells this story to contrast "those who store up treasures for themselves" on the one hand, with those who are "rich toward God" on the other hand.

So, Jesus tells a story about a man who found himself with an embarrassment of riches. Jesus tells this story, as he tells so many of his stories, in response to a question shouted out from the crowd. A man asks Jesus, as a rabbi with expert knowledge of Jewish law, to tell his brother to divide the inheritance with him. But Jesus won't oblige him. Instead, he turns to the whole crowd with a stern warning: "Take care! Watch out!"

And in the final verse we heard this morning we hear the purpose of this story—Jesus shows us a story about a man who stores up treasures for himself, so that he can contrast this way of living with a different way, one that he describes as being "rich toward God."

The man who stores up treasures for himself, as I said, is stuck in a life that's too small. It has no room for anyone else. He's left talking to himself. Did you notice, too, that when he talks to himself, he also talks to himself *about* talking to himself? "I will say to my soul, 'Soul...'" Somehow, though, he's the only one who doesn't get the joke.

But then God interrupts the rich man's soliloquy. God says, "This very night your life is being demanded of you." And the word for "being demanded" is one that can be used to describe calling in a loan. The man thought his accounts were all in the black, but he had forgotten the biggest outstanding obligation of them all. Because his life itself is a loan from God, one that must be paid back—no exceptions. And when that loan comes due, what does the rest of it matter? No man is an island, wrote the English poet John Donne. No one exists entirely on their own, because we all receive our life and everything in it from God. The life that the rich man tried to construct for himself is an impossibility, even on its own terms, because his statements of account are incomplete when they fail to show what is owed to God.

So what does it look like to be "rich toward God"? Jesus doesn't flesh this out here, in this parable, but I think we can sketch the outline of it. It means doing the opposite of what the rich man does. It means gratitude for God's gifts, and for the increase that comes from them. It means paying back the interest on our life, as it were, by attending to the needs of the poor—the ones scripture tells us God takes special interest in.

In a couple of weeks my family will be headed up to the Finger Lakes, where we often spend our vacation. A few years ago we were there early in the summer, and on Sunday we worshiped at a nearby Presbyterian church. During their sharing of joys and concerns, a member of the congregation stood up and asked us to join in giving thanks for the first fruits of the harvest. He was a farmer, and he had brought with him a basketful of new potatoes, from which he invited all of us to help ourselves freely, explaining that the fruits of the earth belong to God, who sends the rain and the sun to make them grow. He and his wife, he said, could think of no more fitting way to

acknowledge the gifts they were beginning to receive than to share them with God's people.

This couple had the wisdom to tell the difference between the things that are up to us and those that aren't. The sunshine and nourishing rain that bring good things out of the earth are not up to us. Gratitude, though, is up to us. Generosity is up to us.

What are the blessings that have fallen into your life lately? What opportunities do you have to offer something up to the God whose ceaseless generosity makes it all possible?

We have received so much—not only the world we live in and its blessings, but the unconditional love of God shown to us through Jesus, who was willing to venture his entire life as a sacrifice to give us forgiveness and a new beginning. Jesus shows us himself what it is to be rich toward God. May you, gifted with such generous love, make your life a fitting return on such a great gift.

Amen.