

TUTORIAL
1.50

It is foolish to give material things pre-eminence over God

See Tutorial 1.6 notes for overall instructions.

The portions of Scripture referred to in this tutorial are: **Luke 12:15-21, 16:19-31**.

Last time

Jesus was upset with the disciples when they tried to stop some parents from bringing their children to Him to be blessed. He used the opportunity to teach about how people cannot come to God in pride and self-confidence. Instead, they need to come realising their need and responding with child-like faith to what He says. He also spoke with a rich young man who was confident he had fulfilled God's law. By identifying what the guy was unable to give up - his money and stuff - Jesus showed that he had no hope of living up to God's perfect standards.

Jesus told a parable about a rich but, ultimately, foolish man

Jesus focused on the issue of materialism a number of times. Luke records two stories Jesus told in which He vividly illustrates the results of being preoccupied with money and stuff. Just after His conversation with the rich young guy, Jesus gives everyone listening a blunt warning, "You really need to be careful that your life isn't being run by greed...and greed comes in a lot of subtle forms. The value of your life is not measured by how much money or stuff you have." Then he tells them this parable - it's fictional in a sense, but it certainly could, in fact actually *has* happened many times in real life. (Luke 12:15-21) It goes like this:

There's this guy who owns a farm on really rich soil. It's highly productive in terms of yield. The owner has harvested and stockpiled so much already that he's filled up all his barns and can't fit in the surplus. He decides the only solution is to pull down the existing barns and build even bigger ones, and then fill them up as well. *Then*, he thinks, I'll have enough. It will be really cool. I can kick back, chill out, have absolutely anything I want. I'll have people over all the time and we'll have a great time." But God says to the man - who can't

hear, because he's not listening - "You're a fool. You're going to die tonight...then who's going to enjoy everything you've worked for? Because it certainly won't be you." Jesus sums up, "Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God." The picture Jesus paints of this man is one that is very familiar to the people. Maybe there are even one or two prosperous farmers in the crowd that day. But really, He could have chosen someone from any occupation or way of life to illustrate the point. Certainly wealth is no prerequisite for greed, nor vice versa. Poor people can be preoccupied with getting more. Middle class folk are just as likely as anyone to look for their security in material possessions.

The foolishness of the man in the parable is not in him being wealthy per se. Clearly he has no sense of proportion. He's never satisfied. Having plenty doesn't stop him wanting more. This is not a symptom of what he already has, but rather of the assumptions he's built his life on. He thinks that when he's filled his even bigger barns, he'll be happy and contented. But no doubt he thought the same at each previous stage. His worldview orientation is the same as the majority of human beings. Even those whose lives have been realigned to God's Story still regularly find themselves functioning according to this predominant paradigm.

This *materialism*, is closely linked with a *materialistic* worldview. Even if people say they believe in something beyond themselves and this world, in their daily lives they function as though there *is* nothing else. What they have, or more often, what they don't have yet but would like to have, defines them and their world in a way that they tell themselves is complete. It leaves no room to consider anything beyond their world or this life. A relationship with God, if considered at all, is only valued for the help they believe - are told to believe - He might give them in their pursuit of physical comfort, security and entertainment. Thoughts of death are pushed aside. They don't fit, they're unhelpful, disturbing, a "downer". But at the end of the day, no matter how tightly someone has crammed their world with stuff, whether they've been rich, comfortable, or "battlers", death explodes the whole thing and brings them face to face with God asking them the questions they've so carefully avoided in life.

Jesus told a story about a rich man and a poor man

A little further on in his account (Luke 16:19-31) Luke records another story Jesus told to expand on the points He's been making about materialism. He describes a rich man who is able to afford really expensive clothes, eat good food and generally live a luxurious lifestyle. In the audience that day are some Pharisees, and this guy is probably meant to represent their class of Jews who are self-righteous but also greedy and preoccupied with money. Every day a man can be seen lying near the gate of this rich man's house. He's too sick and frail to work so - and this is not uncommon in that culture - he lives near this

wealthy household in a precarious dependence on their charity. He survives on any leftover scraps that are given to him. Jesus gives the destitute man's name as Lazarus - a common name in that society. He doesn't name the rich man. Apart from the huge gap in their standard of living and status in the community, there's another even more fundamental difference between them: Lazarus is a true believer...he's realised that he can never please God by his own efforts, he has repented and turned to God in faith for salvation. The rich guy, on the other hand, has never come to this point...so the debt and judgment for his sin is still in place. Whether or not he's religious, we're not told, but regardless, he stands condemned by God's perfect standard. We know this because the consequences of this fundamental, spiritual, difference between the two men are about to play out...they both die. In death, their bodies are no doubt treated very differently.

A rich person in the society is honoured with a long and lavish funeral and then buried in a special tomb. The corpse of a beggar, on the other hand, is often thrown without ceremony onto the town tip to be eaten by wild animals. But neither of these men could care less about all that now. Now the disparity in wealth and material security they've had on earth doesn't matter. The gap in their previous standing in the community is irrelevant. They both face eternity, and what that will look like for each of them is determined by God's criteria, a world away from human standards.

So because Lazarus' sins have been forgiven, he is taken to the peace and comfort of heaven.

For his Jewish audience, Jesus describes this as being taken by God's spirit messengers - angels - to where Abraham is. The rich man, on the other hand, whose sin has never been dealt with, finds himself in a place of terrible torment. Jesus stresses the terrible nature of this existence without the presence of God. The man faces an unbearable eternity that he can do nothing but bear. He cries out for mercy...but it is too late. There are no more chances. He entered eternity with his sin-debt owing, and he'll now be paying forever. His wealth when he was alive, and even his lack of compassion for the poor, dying man at his gate are not, in themselves, the reason why he's now suffering - any more than Lazarus' poverty and suffering on earth is the reason why he is now enjoying freedom from any pain or suffering.

God's true story does not include the concept of *karma* - that we earn what we get in the next life - good or bad - by what we've done in the previous life. The reason why the rich man is now in an eternity of anguish, cut off from God and all that is good, is because he lived his life as though there was no eternity. He left no room in life on earth for God, much less for others in need. He allowed his felt needs, his comfort, his ambitions, his future, to crowd out the reality of his real need before God. He never turned to God in humble repentance and faith in the way that God provides for sin to be forgiven. And those moments in his life when God the Great Communicator, the One who tirelessly seeks for his lost race - when He did get through the self-indulgence, the elaborate

defenses, the clutter of all the *stuff*...in those few unguarded moments when it struck the man that perhaps he'd been sold a lie...each time he had ignored God's voice. Or he'd put it off... "Maybe I'll think about it when I'm old, when I have time, when I've got all the money I want." The terrible thing is that now he, and billions of others like him, will spend eternity remembering and regretting the times they turned away from truth. That is the true horror of eternity in hell.



DISCUSSION POINTS

It is foolish to give material things pre-eminence over God

1. As you think about the different strategies Satan has adopted for keeping people from listening to God's Story, how do you think materialism rates in terms of effectiveness? Do you think it is more effective with some parts of our society than others? Why?
2. Reflect, if you care to, on any ways in which you feel you might sometimes fall prey to materialism in your own life. Are there any principles you can draw from God's Narrative so far that might help to establish and maintain a healthy balance or "tension" in this area?
3. Have you heard Jesus' story about the rich man and Lazarus used to support the idea that our eternal destiny is determined by whether we've been a good or bad person in our lives? (If not, can you see how this could happen?) How can we avoid making such incorrect interpretations and invalid applications from portions (pericopes) of God's Word?



ACTIVITIES

It is foolish to give material things pre-eminence over God

1. Think through and write descriptions of *materialism* expressed in these three different, but related, ways: a) As a defined philosophical system, b) As a worldview and overriding cultural value, c) As an everyday, real-life preoccupation for most people.
2. Imagine moving into a community where you are far wealthier than anyone else. Describe any challenges you feel this might present as you attempt to be one of God's Storytellers in that community; also how you might go about approaching those challenges.