

ARE WE RICH FOOLS OR WISE FOOLS? - Luke 12:13-21
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A Sermon by
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Rich Fools, Wise Fools.

Jesus calls them people who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.

Let me share some true stories about being rich fools or wise fools

Perhaps we go out of our way to avoid mistakes because they are too painful. The church ought to be a place where we can admit our mistakes, receive the forgiveness of God, and gain wisdom to move on. That is much the same attitude as was shown by IBM's founder, Tim Watson.

He was a member of the First Presbyterian Church of Poughkeepsie, NY where my former colleague, Merle Irwin, served as pastor. This story about Tim Watson is told in Robert Kreigel's book, *If It Ain't Broke, Break It*. One of IBM's vice presidents took the initiative on the development of a new product. The product was a flop and cost the company \$10 million. Watson asked the VP to come to his office because he wanted to discuss something with him. When

the VP arrived in Watson's office he was holding a letter of resignation. Watson turned and said: "Let you go? We just spent \$10 million giving you one heck of an education! I can't wait to see what you do next."

Was Mr. Watson a rich fool or a wise fool?

Here's another story.

A few years ago while preaching in Duke University Chapel, James Howell said, "This university has all sorts of awards that honor successful alumni who have had success in business, medicine, law, and the ministry. These are people who have taken what they have learned here and worked that into a successful life. I want to see this university establish an award, not for the person who has achieved success because of his Duke education, but for the person who has suffered the most because of a life that is lived on the basis of what he learned here.

Who are the rich fools and who the wise?

A third story.

James Clelland, a Scotch Congregationalist, loved to tell the story that when he was a young preacher he was paid for preaching a sermon the then astounding sum of three hundred dollars. On a visit to his dour Calvinist mother in the highlands of Scotland he proudly told her of his good

fortune. Three hundred dollars just for one sermon!

Clelland's mother replied, "Oh son, there used to be a time when to betray our Lord they only had to pay Judas thirty pieces of silver."

Rich Fool or Wise?

A fourth story.

Beloved Roman Catholic Priest, Theologian, and author, Henri Nouwen, used to tell a story of an old holy man who saw a scorpion floating helplessly in the water of the River Ganges. The old man leaned out over the water, hanging to some roots, and tried to rescue the scorpion. As soon as he touched it, the scorpion stung him. Instinctively he withdrew his hand. A few seconds later, having regained his balance, he stretched himself out again. This time the scorpion stung him so badly that his hand became swollen and bloody. The old man's face contorted with pain.

Just then a passerby saw the old man stretched out over the roots struggling with the scorpion. He yelled, "Hey, stupid, old man! What's wrong with you? Only a fool would risk his life for the sake of an ugly, evil creature! Don't you know you could kill yourself trying to save that ungrateful scorpion?" The old man turned to the stranger and said calmly, "My friend, just because it is the scorpion's nature to

sting, that does not change my nature to save." (Henri Nouwen, quoted in Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus*, Multnomah, 2004, pp 126-27.)

Rich Fool or Wise?

It's always a shock when we realize that Jesus looks at things differently than we look at things. Earlier in Luke's Gospel Jesus says, "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose his or her soul?" (9:25).

Most of us honor those who "gain the whole world," or at least a big slice of it. We honor these people in our yearly roundup of "the most successful" and "the most famous" in our celebrity magazines. Yet Jesus calls these successful people "losers," which brings us to this little story of Jesus about the rich farmer. Here is a prudent, productive man whom we might call a success. He is not only a success at farming but he is also a wise manager of his success. He builds great, secure barns to hold all of his grand harvest. We might give him the "Farmer of the Year" award, if there is such an award. Jesus calls him, "You fool!"

When the WorldCom scandal hit in 1998 followed by the Enron scandal or 2001 thousands ended up unemployed with the loss of millions of dollars in investments, the president of WorldCom was called "a fine Christian man," by

his pastor. And those in the Enron scandal were called fine upstanding citizens. And much the same could be said about those in the scandals of our most recent economic crisis.

What would Jesus call them? Wise or Fools? Greedy?

Over the course of my ministry I've seen dozens of marriages ruined and families devastated by nothing more than simple greed -- working too many hours, buying too much, getting too deep in debt.

Greed. Rich fools or wise fools?

The farmer in our scripture passage was a fool, Jesus implied, because he actually thought that he could secure his life on the basis of his stuff. Get the stuff piled high enough, deep enough, it's a barrier against death and misfortune. And for such thinking, Jesus calls him a fool.

I heard about a young man, a youth minister who was serving a conservative Christian church. He led the youth into a number of controversial activities:

- anti-abortion protests,
- anti-drug rallies,
- picketing at a movie theater.

The youth of the church responded well to his ministry and the youth group grew.

Then one day he appeared in the office of his seminary

field education supervisor to tell me that he had been unceremoniously fired.

Why?

He had simply made a videotape containing a collection of TV commercials hawking many products promising to make you successful, rich, well-liked, loved, and attractive to the opposite sex. Then, at the youth meeting that Sunday evening, he showed the tape and led the youth in a discussion of these TV advertisements, discussing the ways in which television tries to lure us into the acquisition, hoarding, and grabbing of things that TV tells us will make our lives better. They discussed what this materialist greed, hoarding, getting, and buying does to our families and to our souls.

The next week he was fired. He was told by the senior pastor, "that was a foolish thing to do."

I wonder what Jesus would have called it?