**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**LUKE-044**. **THE RICH FOOL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"13. And one of the company said unto Him, Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me. 14. And He said unto him, Man, who made Me a judge or a divider over you? 15. And He said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. 16. And He spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: 17. And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits! 18. And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. 19. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. 20. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided! 21. So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God. 22. And He said unto his disciples, Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat; neither for the body, what ye shall put on. 23. The life is more than meat, and the body is more than raiment."*

*Luke 12:13-23*

What a gulf between the thoughts of Jesus and those of this unmannerly interrupter! Our Lord had been speaking solemnly as to confessing Him before men, the divine help to be given, and the blessed reward to follow, and this hearer had all the while been thinking only of the share in his father's inheritance, out of which he considered that his brother had cheated him. Such indifference must have struck a chill into Christ's heart, and how keenly he felt it is traceable in the curt and stern brushing aside of the man's request. The very form of addressing him puts him at a distance. Manis about as frigid as can be. Our Lord knew the discouragement of seeing that His words never came near some of His hearers, and had no power to turn their thoughts even for a minute from low objects. What do I care about being confessed before the angels, or about the Holy Spirit to teach me? What I want is my share of the paternal acres. A rabbi who will help me to these is the rabbi for me. John Bunyan's man with the muck-rakehad his eyes so glued to the ground and the muck that he did not see the crown hanging above him. How many of us find the sermon time a good opportunity for thinking about investments and business!

Christ's answer is intentionally abrupt and short. It deals with part only of the man's error, the rest of which, being an error to which we are all exposed, and which was the root of the part special to him, is dealt with in the parable that follows. Because the man was covetous, he could see in Jesus nothing more than a rabbi who might influence his brother. Our sense of want largely shapes our conception of Christ. Many to-day see in Him mainly a social (and economical) reformer, because our notion of what we and the world need most is something to set social conditions right, and so to secure earthly well-being. They who take Jesus to be first and foremost a judge or a dividerfail to see His deepest work or their own deepest need. He will be all that they wish Him to be, if they will take Him for something else first. He will bidmen divide the inheritancewith their brethren after men have gone to Him for salvation.

But covetousness, or the greedy clutching at more and more of earthly good, has its roots in us all, and unless there is the most assiduous weeding, it will overrun our whole nature. So Jesus puts great emphasis into the command, Take heed, and keep yourselves, which implies that without much heedand diligent inspection of ourselves (for the original word is see), there will be no guarding against the subtle entrance and swift growth of the vice. We may be enslaved by it, and never suspect that we are. Further, the correct reading is from all covetousness, for it has many shapes, besides the grossest one of greed for money. The reason for the exhortation is somewhat obscure in construction, but plain in its general meaning, and sufficiently represented by the Authorised and Revised Versions. The Revised Version margin gives the literal translation, Not in a man's abundance consisteth his life, from the things which he possesseth, on which we may note that the second clause is obviously to be completed from the first, and that the difference between the two seems to lie mainly in the difference of prepositions, fromor out of in the second clause standing instead of inin the first, while there may be also a distinction between abundanceand possessionsthe former being a superfluous amount of the latter. The whole will then mean that life does not consist in possessions, however abundant, nor does it come out of anything that simply belongs to us in outward fashion. Not what we possess, but what we are, is the important matter.

But what does lifemean? The parable shows that we cannot leave out the notion of physical life. No possessions keep a man alive. Death knocks at palaces and poor men's hovels. Millionaires and paupers are huddled together in his net. But we must not leave out the higher meaning of life, for it is eminently true that the real life of a man has little relation to what he possesses. Neither nobleness nor peace nor satisfaction, nor anything in which man lives a nobler life than a dog, has much dependence on property of any sort. Wealth often chokes the channels by which true life would flow into us. We live by admiration, hope, and love, and these may be ours abundantly, whatever our portion of earth's riches. Covetousness is folly, because it grasps at worldly good, under the false belief that thereby it will secure the true good of life, but when it has made its pile, it finds that it is no nearer peace of heart, rest, nobleness, or joy than before, and has probably lost much of both in the process of making it. The mad race after wealth, which is the sin of this luxurious, greedy, commercial age, is the consequence of a lie--that life does consist in the abundance of possessions. It consists in knowing Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent. Is there any saying of Jesus Christ's more revolutionary, or less believed by His professed followers, than this?

The story of the rich fool is not a parable in the narrower meaning of that word--that is, a description of some event or thing in the natural sphere, transferred by analogy to the spiritual--but an imaginary narrative exemplifying in a concrete instance the characteristics of the class of covetous men. The first point noted is that accumulated wealth breeds anxiety rather than satisfaction. The man is embarrassed by his abundance. The trouble of knowing how to keep it is as great as the labour of acquiring it, and the enjoyment of it is still in the future. Many a rich man is more worried about his securities than he was in making his money. There are so many bags with holesthat he is at his witsend for investments, and the first thing he looks at in his morning's paper is the share list, the sight of which often spoils his breakfast.

The next point is the selfish and arrogant sense of possession, as betrayed by the repetition of my--my fruits, my barns, my corn, and my goods. He has no thought of God, nor of his own stewardship. He recognises no claim on his wealth. If he had looked a little beyond himself, he would have seen many places where he could have bestowed his fruits. Were there no poor at his gates? He had better have poured some riches into the laps of these than have built a new barn. Corn laid up would breed weevils; dispersed, it would bring blessings.

Again, this type of covetous men is a fool because he reckons on many years. The goods may last, but will he? He can make sure that they will suffice for a long time, but he cannot make sure of the long time. Again, he blunders tragically in his estimate of the power of worldly goods to satisfy. Eat, drink, might be said to his body, but to say it to his soul, and to fancy that these pleasures of sense would put it at ease, is the fatal error which gnaws like a worm at the root of every worldly life. The word here rendered take thine easeis cognate with Christ's in His great promise, Ye shall find rest unto your souls. Not in abundance of worldly goods, but in union with Him, is that rest to be found which the covetous man vainly promises himself in filled barns and luxurious idleness.

There is a grim contrast between what the rich man said and what God said. The man's words were empty breath; God's are powers, and what He says is a deed. The divine decree comes crashing into the abortive human plans like a thunder-clap into a wood full of singing birds, and they are all stricken silent. So little does life consist in possessions that all the abundance cannot keep the breath in a man for one moment. His life is required of him, not only in the sense that he has to give it up, but also inasmuch as he has to answer for it. In that requirement the selfishly used wealth will be a swift witness againsthim, and instead of ministering to life or ease, will eat his flesh as fire. Molten gold dropping on flesh burns badly. Wealth, trusted in and selfishly clutched, without recognition of God the giver or of othersclaims to share it, will burn still worse.

The parableis declared to be of universal application. Examples of it are found wherever there are men who selfishly lay up treasures for their own delectation, and are not rich toward God. That expression is best understood in this connection to mean, not rich in spiritual wealth, but in worldly goods used with reference to God, or for His glory and service. So understood, the two phrases, laying up treasure for oneself and being rich towards God, are in full antithesis.