

Investment Advice from Jesus

Luke 12:13-34

Throughout 12:1-13:9, one theme that recurs and unites the entire passage is living in the light of the end, that is, in the light of our final accountability to God, whether at the end of life, or when Christ returns. Each account in this section reflects on how the end should shape the present.

Within the larger unit, 12:13-34 focuses more narrowly on how we use money, and on how the end should affect our present response to disposable income. Actually, even more than that: not just to disposable income, but to the money needed to meet our most basic human needs of food and clothing.

Day 1: Luke 12:13 Dividing an inheritance

In the midst of Jesus' warnings about coming persecution, and the need for his disciples to remain faithful even to the point of death, someone in the crowd injudiciously asked Jesus to resolve a dispute over inheritance.

The request provides a striking irony, presumably intended by Luke: Jesus is on a journey toward his own death in Jerusalem; he warns his disciples that they too may lose their lives in persecution; and then someone asks Jesus to divide an inheritance left by a relative who died.

It is this callousness – this obtuseness – which justifies the rebuke that follows: Jesus is going to die; the disciples may die; this man's father has already died; yet in the midst of these matters of finality and eternity, this fellow is preoccupied with getting his share of the family wealth.

Anyone who has gotten the short end of the stick in an inheritance can testify that the experience is both infuriating and unjust. Though the same could be said, and even more so, regarding martyrdom in the cause of righteousness. Anyone inflamed by suffering financial injustice is not likely to be able to cope with suffering the sort of injustice that following Jesus may entail.

In the end, this passage permits two concrete applications. Less so now, but certainly in a previous generation or two, it was common for the eldest son to inherit the lion's share of a father's wealth. Two questions follow. To the one who receives a disproportionately high share of the inheritance, is this really just, or should you consider sharing with your siblings? To the one who receives a disproportionately low share of the inheritance, how much does this injustice really matter – Jesus makes it clear that it does not matter a lot to him – given Jesus' death, your benefactor's death, and your own impending death? Aren't there better ways to expend energy than fighting for a fair share?

Day 2: Luke 12:14 Arbitrating justice

Luke follows up quickly with another irony, and one with biblical background. In Jewish tradition, regulations governing inheritance derive from the law of Moses, such as Numbers 27:1-11; 36:7-9; Deuteronomy 21:16-17. Since the laws do not cover every circumstance, Jews would commonly consult a rabbi for his application of the laws of inheritance to their specific situation.

Instead of honoring this normal request, Jesus replies, "Who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" As it happens, the wording of Jesus' response also comes from the Moses narrative. When Moses, adopted son of Pharaoh, intervened in a dispute between two Jews, one objected, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" (Exod 2:14). So Jesus invokes Moses against Moses: he invokes the Jewish rebuke against Moses to justify his own refusal to get involved in the sort of dispute that Moses later addressed.

Jesus intends at least two things by his reply. For one, something greater is going on in his ministry than in Moses' ministry. Moses dealt with such pedestrian matters as laws of inheritance, but now is no longer the time to trifle with such matters. Something far more important, and far more urgent, is at hand. Jesus implicitly urges the complaining man to give heed to the more important thing.

For the other, Jesus speaks ironically, prodding the man to think more deeply about who Jesus is, and what he has come to do. Jesus has actually come to be judge or arbitrator over this man. It's just that the matter for which the man seeks Jesus' arbitration is relatively unimportant. Jesus has not come to judge in financial matters; he has come to judge eternal matters. He has not come to judge temporal outcomes; he has come to judge eternal outcomes. In posing this rhetorical but ironic question, he is provoking the man to consider that God has actually set Jesus to be judge and arbitrator over us all, only not in matters of finance, but in matters of eternity.

Day 3: Luke 12:15a 'Keep' the law, 'guard' your heart, but do not 'horde' stuff

Jesus – or Luke – may intend another pun in this half-verse. 'Be on your guard' translates the Greek verb *phulasso* (from which we derive the word 'prophylaxis'). While nearly every word has multiple uses so one cannot simply assume a pun, other uses of this word may underscore the point. *Phulasso* was commonly used for upholding or 'keeping' the law. The verb was also used of 'guarding' one's property against theft, or of 'guarding' prisoners so that they do not escape.

If Jesus – or Luke – has these associations in mind, what he is saying, then, is: "Do not 'keep' the law regarding inheritance; instead, 'keep' yourself from your desire for inheritance." Or, "Do not 'protect' your stuff; instead, 'protect' yourself from your stuff." Or, "Do not 'guard' prisoners; instead, 'guard' yourself from becoming a prisoner of greed."

However many of these associations were in Jesus' (or Luke's) mind, he uses a strong word to describe the enslaving attractions of wealth: stand guard over your life, lest you become prisoner of greed. And if you have not been on guard, consider whether you might instead be imprisoned.

Day 4: Luke 12:16-21 Get rich, but in the right venue

Jesus does not fault the rich man for being ambitious, much less for being productive. He faults the man for being ambitious for the wrong things, and for being productive in the wrong direction.

With an overabundance of crops, this wealthy landowner does not consider giving to those in need, but only storing up for his own future. When his current barns prove inadequate, he tears them down to build newer and bigger structures. That way, he can sit back and take things easy: "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry."

But he did not have plenty of good things laid up for many years; he had too few things laid up for eternity. And he had no future of leisure and merriment. Instead, he would die that day, and give account of his life to God.

So Jesus invites us to reflect: if you were to die tonight, what would be your net worth (a) on earth, and (b) in heaven? Given that the night we die, we can no longer accumulate wealth in heaven, which sort of wealth accumulation takes the greater part of your time and energy currently? At your present rate of investment, where will the greater proportion of your wealth be at the end of your life, on earth or in heaven?

Day 5: Luke 12:22-30 What, Me Worry?

In quick pace, Jesus piles up reasons why we should not worry about our most basic physical needs of food and clothing.

The first observation, of course, is that the New Testament limits our most basic needs to these two: food and clothing (cf. 1 Tim 6:8). Our standards tend to be much higher: housing, private college education for our children, a secure retirement, late model cars, and the list goes on. Perhaps one of the reasons that we carry a considerable load of anxiety is that we are too ambitious for material goods (which takes us back to verse 15, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed...").

Then Jesus supplies at least four reasons not to worry: (1) because there are much more important things in life than food and clothing! (v23); (2) because God feeds ravens and clothes lilies, so we can count on him to feed and clothe us (vv24,27-28); (3) because worrying is totally unproductive, accomplishing nothing; and, (4)

because it is those who do not know God – not those who know him as Father – who have cause to worry about such things.

Of course, this is all very sound advice, but also very hard to live. What are you worried about this morning? Offer that up to the God who provides for you like a loving father, so that you can focus on more important things. Additionally, what restaurant are you planning to go to this week? What clothes do you hope to buy this season? Consider dispensing with these extras in life (tomorrow will tell you what to do with your savings!).

Day 6: Luke 12:31-34 What we should focus on

The parable of the rich landowner pointed to two problems with his worldview, not just one: first, his preoccupation with material goods and personal wealth; second, once he has attained wealth, his inclination to relax and party. Jesus closes by taking on this second tendency.

Notably, Jesus does not invite his followers to trust God for their material needs so that they can relax and take life easy. Instead, he invites them to trust God for their material needs so that they can turn their energies and efforts to higher pursuits, in particular, the work of God. We are still to strive, to pursue goals, to seek attainment, to have ambitions, only our energies and efforts are to be directed toward the work of God, rather than toward fulfilling our own basic needs. Yet this is a striving without worry, because it is a goal that God has ensured we can attain: it is our Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom (12:32).

Because our place in the kingdom of God is secure, Jesus concludes, we can sell our possessions and give the proceeds to those in need (12:33). In so doing, we will receive bank accounts that never become depleted, and secure investments which never lose value in a stock market crash. More than that, by putting our treasure in heaven, we ensure that our hearts follow behind.

In the end, this is the most effective means to guard against greed. As we sell our possessions to give to the poor, we accumulate treasure in heaven. Since our hearts follow our treasure, almsgiving weans our hearts off of greed and onto God, off of earth and onto heaven.

Jesus actually calls us to an extraordinarily high standard, urging that we sell our possessions. As a more realistic first step, think about this: Likely you already have in mind something that you would like to buy. Rather than buying it – which causes it to depreciate – and then selling it in order to give the money to the poor, consider instead not buying it at all, but donating the cost directly to the poor. Do that a few times, and see whether your heart follows your accumulating assets away from greed and earth, and toward God and heaven.