



The Rich Fool

Luke 12:13–21

Introduction

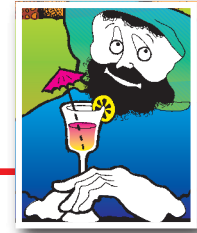
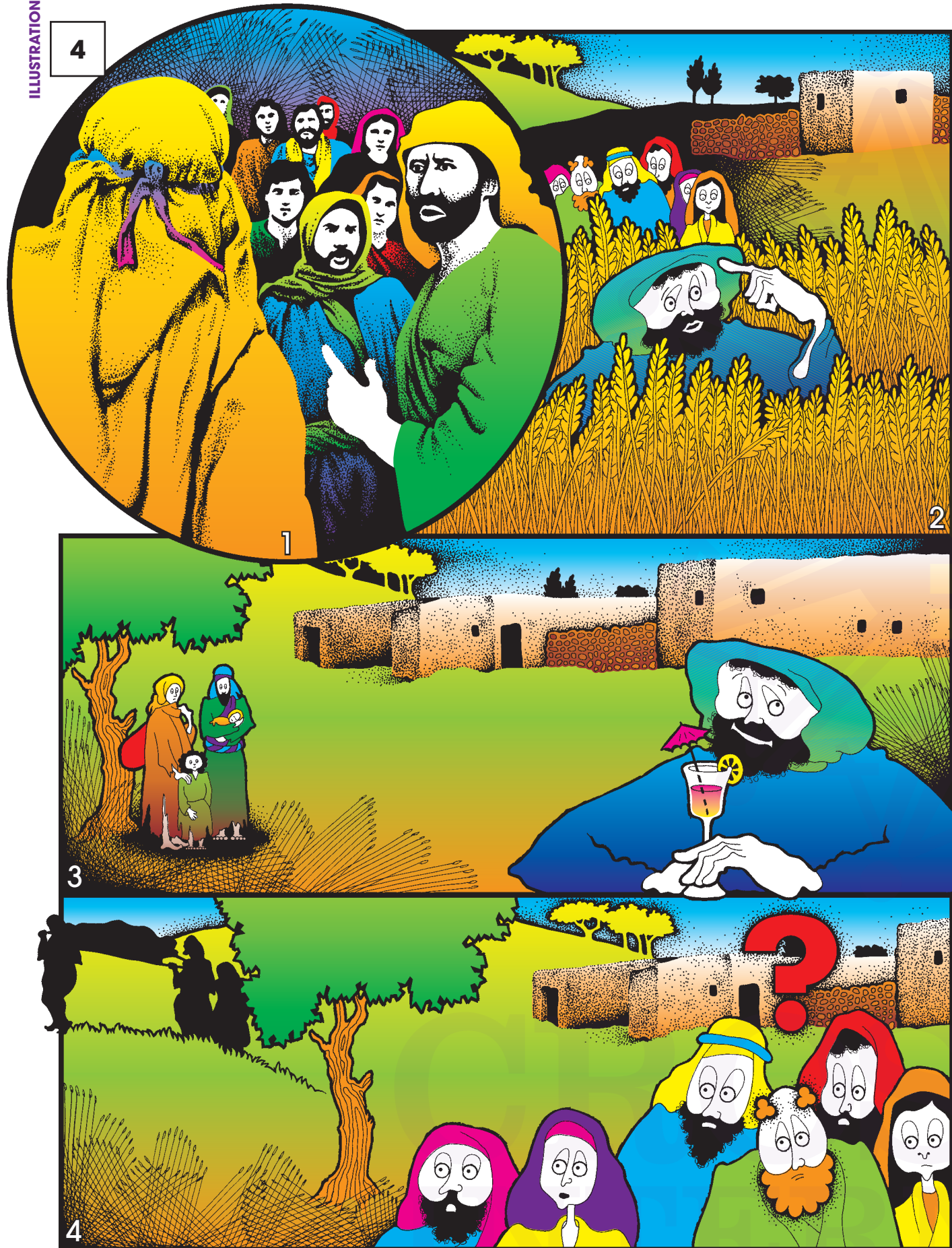
Luke says more about the downtrodden and poor than any other New Testament writer. His concerns echo those of Amos. At the same time, history reveals that many are more concerned with what is due to them rather than what is due to others. To grant people *their* understanding of *their* rights can lead to tragedy. Jesus stresses that people need to solve problems by developing a new understanding of themselves, Luke 13:1–3.

Opening Dialogue, Luke 12:13–15

- 1 Throughout history, dividing an inheritance has always been a sensitive issue and has created countless problems. Psalm 133:1 meditates on how good it is when sons cooperate harmoniously in dealing with such situations; in the psalm, to “live together in unity” is a technical term that has to do with family and community harmony.
- 2 The parable of *The Rich Fool* is preceded by an opening dialogue between Jesus and an anonymous petitioner. The petitioner makes a demand of Jesus, and Jesus responds to that demand. The issue at stake has to do with the age-old problem of dividing an inheritance. The dialogue gives rise to the parable that follows.

The Structure of the Parable, Luke 12:16–21

- 1 There is one “wisdom saying” before the parable (12:15b), and another after it, 12:21. In between are five stanzas:
 - a. In the *first*, goods are given.
 - b. In the *fifth*, the same goods are left behind.
 - c. In *between*, the rich man makes three speeches in which he discusses *with himself* ways of ensuring his future security. His goal is to enjoy the good life while life lasts. It is possible that these speeches reflect the sweep of time between recognizing and resolving the challenge.
- 2 The center stanza of the rich man’s philosophizing constitutes the crucial turning point in the story: *he* determines what *he* will do to resolve what *he* sees to be the problem. *He* consults with a committee of one—*himself!* But God has the final say. What the *man* plans to do is one thing. What *God* plans to do is another. The man spends his life accumulating and storing goods—only, finally, to be taken from them. He goes; the goods stay. In the closing section of the parable, the rich man learns that what he thought were *possessions* were *endowments*, and *even his very life is on loan from God!*



Ecclesiastes 5:10 makes a point that speaks to the passage as a whole: “The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth with gain.”

FRAME 1, Luke 12:13–15 (initial dialogue)

¹³Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵And he said to him, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

- 1 Jesus’ questioner *knows* what he wants, and tries to *use* Jesus to *get* what he wants. He does not *ask* Jesus for an opinion, but *orders* Jesus to implement a specific course of action. He wants Jesus to pressure his brother into finalizing the division *he has already decided on*.
- 2 In dealing with the issue of dividing an inheritance, *Roman law* required the agreement of both parties. *Jewish rabbis* taught that if one brother wanted a division, it should be granted. Rabbis were expected to know the law and give a ruling in keeping with it.
- 3 In the opening statement (12:13), the man addresses Jesus as “teacher” or “rabbi.” Hence, the man is saying to Jesus, “You are a rabbi—and everyone knows the opinion of the rabbis. I am right and my brother is wrong. You tell him so!” The man who confronts Jesus has decided what *his* rights are. He wants Jesus to help him pressure his brother to grant those rights.
- 4 Little wonder, then, that Jesus’ response has a note of gruffness to it: “Man, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” He refuses to act as a judge and divider, and rebuffs the petitioner. The relationship between the man and his brother is obviously already broken, and the man wants it finalized by total separation. But Jesus did not come to *divide* but to *reconcile*. He wants to bring people together, not separate them.
- 5 What the questioner needs is a new understanding of himself. He must learn that there is a greater gain than *getting* an inheritance, and a greater loss than *losing* an inheritance. *The petitioner’s problems will not be resolved even if his brother does agree to divide*.
- 6 Hence, in what follows, Jesus becomes a judge *over* them—not *between* them. He judges their hearts, not their pocket books. Both brothers must learn that there is more to life on earth than material concerns.
- 7 Jesus says, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed,” 12:15a. He follows this up with a wisdom statement: “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions,” 12:15b.

The Parable, Luke 12:13–21

FRAME 2, Luke 12:16,17 (the problem and the debate)

¹⁶Then Jesus told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’



- 1 The parable begins with, “The land of a rich man produced abundantly,” 12:16. But tragically, the man presumes that he himself owns the land, and what the land produces.
- 2 We are not told how the rich man of the parable got his riches. He has enough and more than enough. Now he finds himself having to deal with another bumper crop. He did not earn it and he does not need it. But what is he to do with it?
- 3 “And he thought within himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’” (12:17). The rich man debates within himself, perhaps for quite some time. He does not conclude that he is already sufficiently wealthy and does not need all this extra. He gives no thought to thanking God for the additional abundance. He simply refers to the bumper crops as “my crops,” and his only concern is how to preserve them to benefit himself.
- 4 When considering where he will store his abundance, one thought eludes him. As the Church Father, Ambrose of Milan, pointed out, ample storage was already available—in the mouths of the poor and needy! (Note the **onlookers** and the **poor** in **FRAME 2** and **FRAME 3**.) True, Paul says that we are to work so that we do not become a burden on others, 2 Thessalonians 2:7–12. However, he also states that we are to work to be in a position to minister to the needs of others, Ephesians 4:28.

FRAME 3, Luke 12:18,19 (the solution and the goal)

¹⁸Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

- 1 The decision is: “I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods,” 12:18.
- 2 Tragically, the possessive pronoun “my” shows up repeatedly throughout his deliberations with himself. He is alone when he makes his decision, and he will be alone when he consumes God’s gifts (God’s “endowments”).
- 3 The man speaks to himself—not the community. This is remarkable, for in the Middle East people live in tightly knit communities. The leading men of the village still “sit at the gate” and spend literally years talking to one another. The smallest transaction gives rise to hours of discussion. But the rich man has no one with whom to discuss his concerns and trusts no one. His wealth is his personal prison. He, therefore, meets only with his committee of one, himself, and finally makes his decision.
- 4 At that time, tithes and offerings were set aside in barns, and priests and Levites collected them from there. However, the man does not store his goods so that priests and Levites might collect them; he stores them in a place where they will ensure an ongoing abundant life for himself, 12:19.
- 5 The rich man makes a speech, but it is tragic. He has a solution, but it is pitiful. He has no one to whom he can announce his solution—no village, family, friends, village elders, fellow landowners, or servants and their families.

In the three parables of Luke 15, the shepherd, the woman, and the father have others to whom they can announce good news and with whom they can celebrate. The rich man has nobody. When he addresses his “soul,” he addresses his solitary universe.

- 6 He says, “I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” He thinks that the total needs of his total person can be met by material surpluses. He sees his little world existing for his own exclusive use and enjoyment. (Note the **cocktail** in **FRAME 3**.)

FRAME 4, Luke 12:20 (death and dilemma)

But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’

- 1 God finally says to the rich man, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded [“required”] of you.” The term “demanded” or “required” is one used in Greek for the repayment of a loan. The rich man’s life is on loan from God, and now God wants the loan returned. As his goods are a loan, so too is his life. Tragically, although “his” body is carried out for burial, “his” goods remain behind.
- 2 Possibly the rich man died soon after building his “maximum security storage bins.” But his security bins gave him no security.
- 3 Now God asks him, “And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” The rich man lived alone, planned alone, built alone, indulged himself alone, and probably died alone. There was no one to whom he might leave his wealth. He does not even know who will win the power struggle to gain access to his carefully secured wealth after he dies.
- 4 We are not told the man’s response. The parable is open-ended. Where did his next dialogue with himself take place, and what did he say?
- 5 The rich man’s silence demands that each of us grapple with the issues the parable raises, and answer God’s question in 12:20.

Conclusion

- 1 The parable concludes with a second wisdom statement, “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God,” 12:21. Those who direct their energy toward enriching themselves are misdirected. Such energy destroys the people that exert it. They fail to understand that humanity is to use God’s endowments to serve God by serving others.
- 2 We are not told anything about the response of the initial petitioner. However, he is to learn that the problem is not the division of the inheritance, but a will to serve self rather than to serve God by serving others—including the brother. Jesus challenges the petitioner to look beyond an immediate solution to the need to develop a new perspective.



Jesus and Sirach

1 Sirach 11:18,19 contains insights about the message of the parable:

*One becomes rich through diligence and self-denial,
and the reward allotted to him is this:
When he says, "I have found rest,
and now I shall feast on my goods!"
he does not know how long it will be
until he leaves them to others and dies.*

2 Jesus expands Sirach into a drama with two speakers, with God having the last word. Sirach states that people obtain wealth by using sharp minds and greedy hands. Jesus states that possessions must not be viewed as the end result of human effort, but as the endowment of a gracious God.

3 Sirach encourages people to ask, "What do I do with what I have earned?" Jesus teaches them to ask, "What do I do with what God is lending me?" Furthermore, Jesus says that not only are "possessions" to be viewed as things God entrusts to people; so also is every heartbeat.

4 Furthermore, while Sirach exposes the lifestyle of those who get rich by sharpness and grabbing, Jesus points to the isolation that the rich man brings into his life. He falls victim to himself. Sirach tells how a man gets his wealth. In Jesus' parable, the man is rich at the outset—and Jesus focuses on how he uses the surpluses.

Although we need *some* goods to sustain our physical life, *more* goods do not mean *more* life. With this thought in mind, the parable presents two warnings: *First*, the desire for material things can prove insatiable. *Second*, the abundant life can never be achieved through the accumulation of surpluses.

Live Simply...

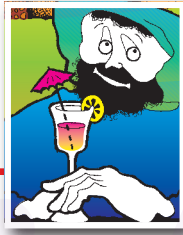
In *Issues Facing Christianity Today* (1984, p. 213), John Stott writes:

There are approximately 4.3 billion inhabitants on Planet Earth, one-fifth of whom are destitute. The World Business 1978 report, while conceding that there had been for 20 years "unprecedented change and progress in the developing world," went on: "Yet despite this impressive record, some 800 million individuals continue to be trapped in absolute poverty; a condition so characterized by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality, and low life expectancy as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human decency." One way to bring this home to us is to consider the provision of clean, safe water. In the West it is piped into our homes and instantly available to us at the turn of a tap. None of us would dream of regarding it as a luxury. We take it for granted. Yet 50% of the Third World population lack it, and 75% of them have no sanitary facilities, so that water-borne diseases kill an estimated 30,000 people every day and fill half the hospital beds of the world.

Meanwhile, whereas one-fifth of the world's population lack the basic necessities for survival, rather more than another one-fifth live in affluence and consume about four-fifths of the world's income. These wealthy nations contribute to the Third World development the derisory sum of \$20 billion, while spending 21 times that amount on armaments.

Although the world's population has increased dramatically since Stott wrote, the spirit of the statistics he quotes, and the challenge they present, have changed little. God's people must constantly bear in mind that their goal in life is not to live comfortably, but usefully. They are to strive to live simply, that others might simply live.

Questions for Reflection



Unit 4

1 According to Luke 12:13, a man came to Jesus with a request for help.

a. What was the man's problem?

b. What course of action did he want Jesus to take?

2 How did Jesus respond to the man's request, 12:14,15?

3 What challenge confronted the rich man in Jesus' parable, 12:16,17?

4 What course of action did he decide to take, 12:18?

5 Whom did he consult in making his decision?

6 What goal did he have in making his decision, 12:19?

7 What two radical flaws in the man's thinking did Jesus point to?

a. 12:16

b. 12:20

8 An early church father, Ambrose of Milan, said that the rich man had access to plenty of storage space—in the mouths of the poor and needy!

What message do Ambrose's words offer to many affluent nations and individuals in today's world?

9 What message does Luke 12:21 proclaim to humanity still today?
