

## THE RIGHT QUESTION: LUKE 12:15-20

Pete Parks

Director of Campus Ministry

Peninsula Area

Baptist General Association of Virginia

He was a farmer, a good one: successful, rich. He seems to have had it made. He had set great goals for his farming, and the great harvest had meant that he had reached them; in fact, he had surpassed them. Perhaps he had even made the cover of *Farmers' Digest*, "Farmer of the Year". But the great harvest created a problem for him too, for he did not have adequate space in which to store it all. He decided what to do — more crops, then more barns. Then he could store it all and live comfortably for the rest of his life. But in God's eyes he was a fool, and he lost it all, including his life.

As I read this parable, I began a familiar type of dialogue with myself, "Whew! I'm glad I'm not a farmer!"

And my other self answered me (You do carry on conversations with yourself, don't you?), "Get with it. This parable isn't about a farmer!"

"Sure it is," I replied. "See, it says right here, 'The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully.' If that's not about farming, what is?"

"Good point," I came back. "But that's not the point of the parable."

"Sure it is," I explained. "It talked about how well he did and what he had to do with his crops. Boy, that's a lot to have on you. I'm glad I'm not a farmer."

"IT'S NOT ABOUT FARMING!" I exclaimed. "It's about how he dealt with his wealth."

"Yeah, and that's pretty unusual. He must have been quite a farmer to get rich doing it. I wonder if farmers today could learn from him," I thought out loud.

"THE POINT OF THE PARABLE IS NOT HOW TO FARM!" I cried. "IT'S ABOUT THE PRIORITIES OF LIFE! LOOK AT IT!"

And I did look at it. I looked at it long and hard. I think I had fallen into the trap that many others have. Most of us don't really let God's Word do what it is supposed to do. Sure, we read it, study it, and memorize it, but we don't really let God speak to us through it. If I can avoid finding the real point of a passage and don't listen to God, I don't have to change anything. I can continue living a comfortable life as I always have. The parables can really confront that, however. Most of them have a main point, and when you discover it, you exclaim, "Look at that. He was a fool." Then you discover that the parable is a mirror, and you are pointing at yourself.

I did look at this parable, and as we look at it now, let's look at the four things that were spoken. Hopefully, we can find that point and see if it does confront us.

- I. "What shall I do for there is nowhere to store my crops?" It is a parable about a farmer. He was a good one; he had a good operation going, and he had done much better than even he expected, but the large harvest meant that he had a crisis on his hands — no storage space. "What shall I do?"

He had stepped back to look at his situation, and he had asked a good question. When a crisis is present in one's life, it is also an opportunity. Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living, but Jesus, here, as many other times, shows us persons who are examining their lives with the potential for real growth. So it is for the farmer; this crisis was an opportunity to step back and examine his life, an opportunity to ask some significant questions. Is my life going the way it should? Am I happy with all that I've accomplished? Will my accomplishments do anything to make the world a better place?

It was also a good time to examine his relationship with God; after all, God had *some* part in the growing of the crops. One of the main messages of the Old Testament is that God blesses the efforts of the righteous. Prosperity was seen as a sign that God

approved of one's life, so the implications here at least to those who heard the parable as Jesus told it, were that not only was the farmer a successful grower, but also a righteous man.

"What shall I do?" He asked a very good question. Perhaps you too have asked it. I know that I have, sometimes in exasperation, confusion, or frustration. Have you asked it? It is an appropriate one for a college student to ask, and my guess is that you have asked it not only once, but repeatedly. What shall I do about this course I'm failing? What shall I do about this relationship? What shall I do about my summer plans? What shall I do about this job offer? Even, what shall I do with my possessions? None of these are easy questions, and many times questions such as these force you to struggle to find the answers; they require you to examine your whole existence, to search your very soul in the process.

Perhaps the farmer struggled with his question. If he *was* a righteous man of God, and if he was serious about that relationship with God, then I know it was a struggle, for when God is a part of our life, if we really acknowledge His place there, we have to struggle with questions, some of which non-Christians never face. What does God expect of me? How much authority do I give God in helping me with setting my life's priorities? What does God want me to do with the things He has given me? How does He want me to invest my abilities, talents, gifts, my money? What shall I do?

- II. "I will do this. I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods." As we look at the farmer's answer, it doesn't appear to have come from much of a struggle. It doesn't appear that he consulted with God or even acknowledged His existence. He had decided on a plan of action, "I will do this." He would keep it all

for himself. *That's* what this parable is about, greed, selfishness.

If one was attempting to categorize persons, we might divide them into two types, the givers and the grabbers. The givers would be those who look to see the needs of others and then attempt to meet those needs. They are the helpers, sharers, lovers, in the best sense of the word. Then there are the grabbers, those who think life owes them everything; these persons are out to get all they can, however they can, no matter who or what they might step on in the process. Their thoughts are constantly on themselves, looking out for their own needs and wants. What am I going to get out of this? How will this help *me*? Maybe the line between the givers and the grabbers is not that clear, for if we are honest, we all have some giver and grabber in us, but I know for certain that the grabber side of the farmer was in charge. In fact, he was a special kind of grabber. He was a hoarder. "I will do this." "I've got it, and I'm going to make sure that I keep it." He planned to build even larger barns to store the excess crops. Never mind that there were hungry people that desperately needed some of what he had. And he also needed additional space to keep all of the additional stuff that he was going to buy with the profit he made on the sales.

Hoarders think that security lies in keeping everything close to them, letting go of nothing. They build up the walls of their life with things so that no one can get close to them and so that they will not have to look at anyone who has nothing. These hoarders feel very secure, but it is a false sense of security. Their whole life is built on the temporary, the perishable, so they are a very vulnerable group. When you are a hoarder, the more you have, the more you think you need, and you have to work harder just to keep yourself from slipping. It's like digging a hole at the beach; the more you dig, the more sand slides down into the hole, and you have to dig harder to

keep the hole there. It becomes an endless task in which you think you need more and more just to stay the same.

How different the hoarders are from Jesus, as He is described in Philippians 2, "Who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped," or "hoarded," as Clarence Jordan puts it in *The Cottonpatch Version*. Jesus willingly gave up all that was due Him when He became a person. He could have hoarded the glory, the honor, the power, but He left it all behind. Not only did He become a mere person, He became a servant, Paul tells us, giving His ministry to serve others. Jesus was the ultimate giver; as His followers we should be asking the question of how we might give, not just our possessions, but our lives.

- III. "And I will say to my soul, 'You have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.'" The farmer had answered his question by deciding to hold on to it all. Then he began to make plans for the rest of his life, but in doing so he made two presumptions that were way off base.

First he presumed that being well off assured a good life. Now he would be able to satisfy all of his desires. As Clarence Jordan translates his thoughts, "Self, you've got enough stuff stashed away to do you a long time. Recline, dine, wine, and shine!" He thought that anything he wanted was his. Today he might buy every new fashion that came along, then toss it aside as it went out of style the next season. He might buy VCR's for the TV's in every room of his house. He might drive around in a different car every day of the week. He is a perfect example of those who are taken in by all the commercials promising excitement, success, love, and fulfillment if one only buys the right product.

He also presumed that being well-off assured a long life (see that false sense of security creeping in). He

thought that since he could buy anything he wanted, he could buy a long life in which to enjoy it all. He thought that he could control the destiny of his soul. He thought that he had it made.

Who does have it made? What does it take to have it made? Who do you think has it made? Most of us think that everybody else has it made, and that as soon as we can get what they have we will have it made too. We are like little children at Christmas who think that if they can just get this toy, and that toy, and the other toy, they will be in paradise; they will have it made. Then the day after Christmas we all see how hollow their paradise is; their great joy is no more. You might think, if I can only get him or her to start dating me, then I'll have it made, and then when you start dating, the person is not as attractive. If I can only become a member of that group, then I'll have it made, but membership in the group is not what it seemed. If my folks will only buy me that car, I'll have it made, but the car is more trouble than it's worth.

So who has it made? Another one of the parables of Jesus tells us. In Matthew 13:44 we read, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." *This* farmer knew what it meant to have it made, so when he saw the opportunity, he sold everything he owned for the treasure. It's that way with the Christian, Jesus says. The Christian recognizes that a relationship with God through Jesus Christ is the real treasure, and will give up everything to possess it. The Christian knows what it means to have it made.

- IV. "Fool! This night your soul is required of you." The farmer has done all the talking up to this point. Finally we hear from God. He truly has the last word.

God called him a fool, a dummy, an idiot. The farmer thought that his soul was going to have it made, but it was recalled by its creator. He made his decision, and it was wrong.

There is an interesting thing here, though. If you were to read this parable in Greek, as Luke wrote it, you would read, "Fool! This night they require your soul," to translate it literally. I have to wonder, what is the "they"? Is it a way of referring to God in a plural sense? Perhaps. Is it a way of referring to the angels, "Comin' for to carry *him* home"? Maybe. I think, however, that it is referring to his possessions. The farmer thought that he owned all of his things, but in reality, they owned him. He was in reality, a slave to the things he thought were there to serve him. As Clarence Jordan puts it, "These things are putting the screws on your soul." He was in bondage to his things; he was dependant on them for his life, and whether he died or not (the text doesn't actually say), this dependance is the real tragedy. Perhaps he spent the rest of his life serving things. I pity this poor little rich farmer.

You know persons like that, folks that have bought everything under the sun and now have to work like dogs to keep their financial heads above water; some that thought drugs were a blast, alcohol was great, and now are enslaved to those cruel masters from whom escape becomes increasingly difficult; those who became popular by pretending to be someone they're not, and now cannot face life without the mask that makes their acceptance possible. These things require your soul.

Are *you* glad you're not a farmer, that you don't have to face the things he faced? Don't kid yourself. You too may think you have control of your life and its destiny, when in reality you may be a slave yourself. You may have asked the right questions and come up with the wrong answers. This parable ends here, but the good news doesn't, for the life and death

of Christ make it possible for us to decide on the wrong answers, but to be able to start over knowing that we are forgiven. Questions must still be raised; one must still struggle with them at times, but if we acknowledge God's presence and rely on His guidance, the questions and the crises that precipitate them can become opportunities for growth.

May God give us the strength to continue asking questions, the courage to admit when we are wrong, the grace to allow us to begin again, and the vision to continue on our way.