

Historical Commentary



(The Eighth Sunday of Trinitytide - Year C)

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Luke 12:13-21 from Church Fathers and John Calvin

Ambrose: This whole passage is provided so that suffering may be endured for confession of the Lord...Since greed is often accustomed to tempt virtue, the Lord adds the precept to remove this sin by stating the precedent, "Who has appointed me judge or divider over you?" He who descended for a divine purpose fittingly declines earthly tasks and does not allow himself to be a judge of lawsuits and an arbitrator of riches. He is to judge the living and the dead and apportion deserts. You must not consider what you seek but from whom you request it. You must also not think that you must shout against big or little things. This brother is fittingly rebuked. He eagerly desired to trouble the steward of the heavenly with the corruptible. Not a neutral judge but piety as mediator should divide an inheritance among brothers, although people should seek an inheritance of immortality, not of money.

Augustine: He was correct when he did not listen to the man who, in disagreement with his brother, said, "Master, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." He said, "Master, tell my brother." Tell him what? He said, "To divide the inheritance with me." The Lord said, "Speak, man." Why do you want to divide it except because you are human? Whenever someone says, "I am of Paul," but another, "I am of Apollos," are you not merely human? "Tell me, man, who has appointed me a judge of the inheritance among you? I have come to gather, not to scatter." He said, "I say to you, guard against all greed." Greed wants to divide, just as love desires to gather. What is the significance of "guard against all greed," unless it is "fill yourselves with love"? We, possessing love for our portion, inconvenience the Lord because of our brother just as that man did against his brother, but we do not use the same plea. He said, "Master, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." We say, "Master, tell my brother that he may have my inheritance."

Cyril of Alexandria: What does the rich man do, surrounded by a great supply of many blessings beyond all numbering? In distress and anxiety, he speaks the words of poverty. He says, "What should I do?" ... He does not look to the future. He does not raise his eyes to God. He does not count it worth his while to gain for the mind those treasures that are above in heaven. He does not cherish love for the poor or desire the esteem it gains. He does not sympathize with suffering. It gives him no pain nor awakens his pity. Still more irrational, he settles for himself the length of his life, as if he would also reap this from

the ground. He says, "I will say to myself, 'Self, you have goods laid up for many years. Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself.'" "O rich man," one may say, "You have storehouses for your fruits, but where will you receive your many years? By the decree of God, your life is shortened." "God," it tells us, "said to him, 'You fool, this night they will require of you your soul. Whose will these things be that you have prepared?'"

Augustine: "The redemption of a man's soul is his riches." This silly fool of a man did not have that kind of riches. Obviously he was not redeeming his soul by giving relief to the poor. He was hoarding perishable crops. I repeat, he was hoarding perishable crops, while he was on the point of perishing because he had handed out nothing to the Lord before whom he was due to appear. How will he know where to look, when at that trial he starts hearing the words "I was hungry and you did not give me to eat"? He was planning to fill his soul with excessive and unnecessary feasting and was proudly disregarding all those empty bellies of the poor. He did not realize that the bellies of the poor were much safer storerooms than his barns. What he was stowing away in those barns was perhaps even then being stolen away by thieves. But if he stowed it away in the bellies of the poor, it would of course be digested on earth, but in heaven it would be kept all the more safely. The redemption of a man's soul is his riches.

Leo the Great: The devil, even in the midst of our efforts, does not relax his schemes. At certain periods of time, we must take care of the reenergizing of our strength. The mind, concerned with the goods of the present, can rejoice in the temperate weather and the fertile fields. When the fruits are gathered into great barns, it can say to its soul, "You have many good things; eat." It may receive a kind of rebuke from the divine voice and may hear it saying, "Fool, this very night they demand your soul from you. The things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

This should be the careful consideration of wise people, that since the days of this life are short and the time uncertain, death should never be unexpected for those who are to die. Those who know that they are mortal should not come to an unprepared end.

Ambrose: He uselessly accumulates wealth when he does not know how he will use it. He is like him who, when his full barns were bursting from the new harvest, prepared storehouses for his abundant fruits, not knowing for whom he gathered them. The things that are of the world remain in the world, and whatever riches we gather are bequeathed to our heirs. The things that we cannot take away with us are not ours either. Only virtue is the companion of the dead. Compassion alone follows us. It is the guide to the heavens and the first of the mansions. Through the use of worthless money, it acquires eternal dwellings for the dead. The Lord's commands testify when he says, "Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations."

Cyril of Alexandria: It is true that a person's life is not from one's possessions or because of having an overabundance. He who is rich toward God is very blessed and has glorious hope. Who is he? Evidently, one who does not love wealth but rather loves virtue, and to whom few things are sufficient. It is one whose hand is open to the needs of the poor,

comforting the sorrows of those in poverty according to his means and the utmost of his power. He gathers in the storehouses that are above and lays up treasures in heaven. Such a one shall find the interest of his virtue and the reward of his right and blameless life.

John Calvin: Our Lord, when requested to undertake the office of dividing an inheritance, refuses to do so. Now as this tended to promote brotherly harmony, and as Christ's office was, not only to reconcile men to God, but to bring them into a state of agreement with one another, what hindered him from settling the dispute between the two brothers? There appear to have been chiefly two reasons why he declined the office of a judge. First, as the Jews imagined that the Messiah would have an earthly kingdom, he wished to guard against doing anything that might countenance this error. If they had seen him divide inheritances, the report of that proceeding would immediately have been circulated. Many would have been led to expect a carnal redemption, which they too ardently desired; and wicked men would have loudly declared, that he was effecting a revolution in the state, and overturning the Roman Empire. Nothing could be more appropriate, therefore, than this reply, by which all would be informed, that the kingdom of Christ is spiritual. Let us learn from this to regulate our conduct by prudence, and to undertake nothing which may admit of an unfavorable construction.

Secondly, our Lord intended to draw a distinction between the political kingdoms of this world and the government of his Church; for he had been appointed by the Father to be a Teacher, who should divide asunder, by the sword of the word, the thoughts and feelings, and penetrate into the souls of men, ([Hebrews 4:12](#),) but was not a magistrate to divide inheritances. This condemns the robbery of the Pope and his clergy, who, while they give themselves out to be pastors of the Church, have dared to usurp an earthly and secular jurisdiction, which is inconsistent with their office; for what is in itself lawful may be improper in certain persons.

There was also in my opinion, a third reason of great weight. Christ saw that this man was neglecting doctrine, and was looking only to his private concerns. This is too common a disease. Many who profess the Gospel do not scruple to make use of it as a false pretense for advancing their private interests, and to plead the authority of Christ as an apology for their gains. From the exhortations which is immediately added, we may readily draw this inference; for if that man had not availed himself of the Gospel as a pretext for his own emolument, Christ would not have taken occasion to give this warning against covetousness. The context, therefore, makes it sufficiently evident, that this was a pretended disciple, whose mind was entirely occupied with lands or money.

Christ first guards his followers against covetousness, and next, in order to cure their minds entirely of this disease, he declares, that our life consisteth not in abundance. These words point out the inward fountain and source, from which flows the mad eagerness for gain.

This parable presents to us, as in a mirror, a lively portrait of this sentiment, that men do not live by their abundance. Since the life even of the richest men is taken away in a moment, what avails it that they have accumulated great wealth? All acknowledge it to be

true, so that Christ says nothing here but what is perfectly common, and what every man has constantly in his mouth. But where is the man that honestly believes it? Do not all, on the contrary, regulate their life, and arrange their schemes and employments in such a manner as to withdraw to the greatest distance from God, making their life to rest on a present abundance of good things? It is therefore necessary that all should immediately arouse themselves, lest, by imagining their happiness to consist in riches, they entangle themselves in the snares of covetousness.

This parable shows us, first, that the present life is short and transitory. Secondly, it points out to us, that riches are of no avail for prolonging life. We must add a third, which is not expressed, but may easily be inferred from the other two; that it is a most excellent remedy for believers, to ask from the Lord their daily bread, and to rely on his providence alone, whether they are rich or poor.

The design of Christ is simply to show that the life of men, which they imagine to be strongly protected by the fortress of their riches, is every moment taken away. The rich man is thus convicted of folly, in not knowing that his life depended on another.

...they are rich according to God, who do not trust to earthly things, but depend solely on his providence. It matters not whether they are in abundance or in want, provided that both classes present their sincere prayers to the Lord for their daily bread. The corresponding phrase, layeth up for himself, conveys the idea that this man paid no attention to the blessing of God, but anxiously heaped up an immense store, so that his confidence was shut up in his barns. Hence we may easily conclude that the parable was intended to show, that vain are the deliberations and foolish attempts of those who, trusting to the abundance of their wealth, do not rely on God alone, and are not satisfied with their own share, or prepared for whatever may befall them; and, finally, that such persons will suffer the penalty of their own folly.