

RICH IN GOD'S SIGHT

The key verse of the parable Jesus tells here has a way of sending a chill down the spine. In that verse God exclaims, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you.." Hearing that dramatic warning, maybe you have surmised, "Will I ever get caught in a situation where those stern words are addressed to me?"

Generally we tend to feel we have our lives on the right track. We try to keep a pleasing balance between material things and the things of the spirit. But when we look objectively, we are concerned about our own security—both for the present and the future. Frankly, we have money on our minds more than we'd like to admit. Often these material concerns are so pervasive that in honesty we would have to agree that God might be justified in surprising us with the indictment here: "Fool! This night your soul is required of you!"

The plain fact is that a lot of the time our soul's concern is not about being rich in God's sight, but about being rich, period—or at least financially secure. Jesus pulls no punches here when he points out that all of us at our demise will end up empty-handed anyway, and at that bottom line the only wealth that will count is whether we are "rich toward God," as Jesus puts it.

Jesus drives home his point by telling a story we know as "The Parable of the Rich Fool." In the story Jesus tells about a wealthy man, which in his day would probably mean a successful farmer. Crops, barns; more crops, and more barns. In our day Jesus might have used characters like folks who are consumed in the stock market or other investments; or those addicted to gambling, or even a young married couple who will do almost anything in order to ascend to the next rung on the ladder of success.

At any rate, the hour for calling the question draws closer and closer for every human being. Finally, BAM! The symbolic barns we have been building are toppled. Time runs out, and we hear the voice say, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you." The question being called, of course, is this: Rich? Or rich in God's sight?

You and I do not have to have Jesus draw us a picture in order to realize the folly of thinking that life is only a matter of money, or of the security such funds provide. We are the people of God; we know the supreme blessings involved in being "rich in God's sight." So that is what we want to consider in a positive way: being rich—or being rich in God's sight.

As we consider the parable, the first point that impresses us is the story's sense of urgency. Time marches on. The days and years tick away. There are certain things that ought to be done before time runs out. Being rich in God's sight means first of all our realization that there is a spiritual urgency about life. That urgency primarily involves our own eternal salvation. In the Gospels Jesus' initial message was the same as John's clarion call: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near!" Though Jesus dealt with people in a patient manner, one can sense an urgency about everything he said and did. There is an opportune time. There is a day of salvation.

Many of the hymns of Christianity stir us in regard to the urgency of our eternal salvation. The advent hymns breathe the urgency too or how about the old Gospel hymn: Softly and tenderly. Time is now fleeting; the moments are passing, passing for you and for me. There are spiritual urgencies concerning our salvation that we need to tend to!

Does not this urgency also have to do with the Christian enterprise—the Christian mission? The very word mission has a ring of urgency about it. We are "Rich in God's sight" when we are fairly consumed by this mission. We are rich when we are proclaiming the riches of God's love in Christ to others. Again the hymn writers inspire us toward the call: "Stand up, stand up for Jesus, as soldiers of the cross, lift high the royal banner, it must not suffer loss." Harry Emerson Fosdick stated the urgency long ago in a verse of his hymn, "God of Grace and God of Glory." He writes: Rich in things and poor in soul: Grant us wisdom; grant us courage lest we miss your kingdom's goal. Have we no more Christian values?

Of course we do! Most people I know have moral values that reflect the standards of the Ten Commandments. Our problem is not that we have lost our values, or that as Christians we have lost our sense of Christian missions. What we have lost is an urgency about these things. That is the heart of the story Jesus tells here, isn't it? The farmer lacked a sense of urgency. He didn't realize that time flies—and finally runs out. This farmer was no vicious unbeliever; few of us are. He was a confused farmer—confused about crops and barns and investments and security, and about what place such things should hold in his life.

A lot of destructive things happen today in our society because evil people are active in doing evil things. But equally true, a lot of evil is happening because many good people are doing nothing. A sense of urgency escapes them. In theology it is called "sins of omission."

Whenever Christians say the Apostles' Creed they not only enunciate their Christian faith; they also proclaim their Christian values. For instance, when we say we believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth, we affirm a gracious and loving God as the giver of the earth

to us all. But we are also saying that we value the gift of the earth; we will care for it and be good stewards of it.

These Christian values not only need to be affirmed; they need to be put into practice. In fact in our day there is an urgency about the need to care for the earth. Yes, it is the environmental concern, and it is front burner stuff. We have gotten rich off the earth but have not been “rich toward God,” as Jesus says, in treasuring the earth by avoiding its misuse and abuse.

Lovers of God’s creation will teach their children and grandchildren at an early age about the sacredness of the land. They will implement their sense of values about the creation by sometimes casting their vote with those political candidates who share similar values. They will, in short, not allow lesser souls to continue painting the world into a corner until its fatal condition becomes irreversible. Yes, to be “rich toward God” means ultimately standing as sentinels over the riches of the earth God made. May the day never come when God will be forced to stand over the planet and lament toward its inhabitants, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you!”

Speaking of souls, what about the souls of our children, our youth? As we express our Christian values in the creed, we need to communicate these values to our children and youth, as another sign that we are rich in God’s sight. The souls of young people are precious, partly because they contain such fertile ground, soil filled with the potential of becoming rich toward God. What productive souls await God and the church in our own children! They stand and sit here, just waiting to have their values formed.

How much more could a Christian be considered “rich in God’s sight” than to be able to say, “I helped a young person come to know Christ; I did what I could to bring Christian values to the young people of my church.” Children will generally follow effective leaders. They will listen to those who take time to listen to them. Young people are ready; they are always standing near the edge of responding.

At this point concerned adult Christians would point out that they do feel an urgency about the whole matter of making young people Christians. Indifference is not their problem. But a problem does plague them: they feel inadequate about communicating with youth; they don’t know how to bring Christian values to children—even to their own.

I have two points in response to these. Number 1, when you don’t know how to do a job, you seek training. Bringing our children to faith is a job, and it is our job. In fact, it is one of the features of the vocation of Christian parenthood. Christian parents need to seek training in caring for the souls of their children, and the church needs to provide the training. Number 2, there are plenty of

gifted young adults and adults, in our church, who are willing to share their faith with the children of our community.

All such things, of course, involve time and money. To be “rich in God’s sight” means that Christians will literally pay the cost involved in the urgent mission of bringing faith and Christian values to all children and youth of the church, and I pray to God, the many outside the church. Pastors these days hear the frequent observation voiced that their congregations are increasingly make up of gray heads. The unspoken projection assumed in such an observation is that someday there may be nothing but gray heads worshiping in the churches. Perhaps it could come to that. At that point, one can again imagine the divine exclamation that would send a shiver down the spine. “Fool! This night your soul is required of you!”

Urgency! That’s the theme of the parable here. And the flip side of it all—the side that brings us an encouraging and enabling word—involves the grateful realization that God once regarded our salvation and rescue as being urgent. God was not indifferent to the plight of his children. God realized how close to the edge our sins had gotten us; how, indeed, we had become lost sheep, shepherdless and alone. With urgency, “while we were yet sinners,” God dispatched a good shepherd among us. The shepherd went forth uncomplaining, leaving the ninety and nine, to find the one lost soul. Yes, this divine shepherd—wonder of all wonders—became a weak, powerless Lamb of God, and went to the cross and was crucified for us all. There is a divine urgency in God’s love. Our Lord Jesus Christ did not delay in bringing us this kingdom of love. We are saved! We are rescued! We are now rich IN God, with all the wealth of eternal life waiting for us. Now it is time to become rich TOWARD God, rich in God’s sight, as we position ourselves to extent God’s riches to a waiting world.