

Sermon on the Rich man who was a fool

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

When I was young and in school, I remember taking all kinds of classes; penmanship, geography, history, language (both English and foreign), mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, etc. And all during that time, in my own mind, all of these classes were independent, disconnect tasks to complete; items that were required to continue in school which, of course, was what one had to do when you were young. Either no one ever explained the interconnectedness and necessity of taking these assorted, seemingly unrelated courses, or it was not said very often, or I simply never heard it. Regardless, I went through many years of school attempting to master one subject after another with no real purpose or focus, rhyme or reason.

School was much like a jigsaw puzzle with a myriad of odd shaped pieces that when properly put together create a beautiful landscape or panorama. Yet much like a jigsaw puzzle, without the box that shows the 'big picture' that the puzzle seeks to represent, it becomes much more difficult, if not impossible to recreate the intended beautiful scene. In other words, the 'big picture' perspective is vital to anyone who seeks to successfully master almost anything. Many people who have home schooled their children, know that there are a variety of curriculums that use this exact principle of broad perspective first followed by specific details; from the whole to the parts. Again, without the larger perspective to have as a reference, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to appropriately categorize specifics. Further, much like a jigsaw puzzle, without the larger picture either pieces are put in the wrong place, discarded because they don't seem to fit, or given prominence in a way that was never intended.

This same principle applies not only to our **life in school** but to our **life in general** and also to our **spiritual life**. Without an idea of the big picture to use as a reference, we have the overwhelming likelihood of discarding important life lessons that the Lord presents to us because they don't seem to fit. Fortunately for us, the Lord is exceedingly patient and brings those lessons & experiences back to us again and again until we finally get it right and are prepared to move to the next lesson. Further without the big picture perspective, if we don't discard lessons, there is the other likelihood of overemphasizing something to the point of complete distortion and even making idols. One of the classic examples of this phenomenon is the approach that the Pharisees and Sadducees took regarding honoring the Sabbath. We are all familiar with their regular judgments and rebukes of Jesus when he performed miraculous and grace filled healings on suffering people when He encountered them on the Sabbath. The Jews condemned Jesus for breaking the Sabbath while He reminded them, with the true perspective, that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.

So, for us what is the big picture? What is the purpose of our life? Why are we here and how and where are we to proceed?

Let's hear the words of several people well known and recognized teachers of the Church. Archimandrite Zacharias who was a disciple of Elder Sophrony states in his book Remember Thy First Love, "our entire struggle in this life is aimed at discovering our 'deep heart' because that is the place where God manifests Himself."

St. Seraphim of Sarov in the book A Conversation with Nicholas Motovilov Concerning the Aim of the Christian Life says, “Prayer, fasting, watching, and all other Christian acts, however good they may be, do not alone constitute the aim of our Christian life, although they serve as the indispensable means of reaching this aim. The true aim of our Christian life is to acquire the Holy Spirit of God. “

Metroplitan Heirotheos and Fr. John Romanidies, contemporary theologians put it yet another way. They express it thusly “This is salvation: purification, illumination and glorification (also called deification or theosis) which is actual union with God.”

As you can hear from each of these Holy teachers, they all speak in slightly different ways about the same reality and each gives us their particular expression that may speak to us. With at least some larger perspective of the goal of our spiritual life, let us consider the puzzle piece of this week’s Gospel reading.

As with all of Christ’s teachings and parables there are many lessons. I would like to point out three today.

Immediately before this Gospel reading there is a passage where ‘one of the multitude said to Jesus “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” But Jesus said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or an arbitrator over you?” Jesus said the multitude, “Beware! Keep yourselves from covetousness, for a man’s life does not consist of the abundance of things which he possesses.” With today’s parable, coupled with this passage, one of the primary lessons is fairly obvious. **We must avoid the snare of acting and believing that the material world is the fulfillment of our life; for believing this falsehood leads to self-centeredness and greed.** St. Mark the Ascetic reminds us in his famous quote, “Remembrance of God is pain of heart endured in the spirit of devotion, but he who forgets God becomes self-indulgent and insensitive” If you remember last month we had the parable of the Lazarus and the Rich man which showed us the depths of insensitivity that one can fall when seeking life’s fulfillment only in the material world. That Rich man did not even notice Lazarus at his gates, let alone help Lazarus. Even in today’s brief passage we get the sense of the total self-absorption into which this landowner has fallen. In these few verses, which to our ear probably sounds fairly normal, the Lord uses I, my, mine, 11 times as if all the crops, barns, goods, lands and even his soul belonged to the rich landowner personally rather than that these things were his for a time as a steward for God.

Another lesson can be seen at the end of the parable when the man is called a fool because his soul is suddenly taken from him and Jesus summarizes his state saying “so is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” Obviously we need to be responsible and make genuine efforts to provide for ourselves and not be a burden on our brothers & sisters or society. But if we honestly reflect on our circumstance, all too many of us would admit that the overwhelming amount of our life’s energy is and has been spent attempting to secure things in this world and not toward God. All the promises of more free time to do the things that are really important because of new technology or industry quickly fades and we are actually left with less time than before. All the promises of improved communications and relationships with

the advent of electronic social media has resulted in people feeling more alone and isolated than ever before.

So, what could this man, and us as well, have done differently in order to build up treasure towards God? First, the man could have genuinely recognized God as the real source of his life and abundance and thanked God for that gift of plenty. Second, the man could have sought in prayer to God the best use of these fruits. We see in the story of Joseph who was sold into slavery and then became steward of the Pharaoh in Egypt that he built barns for an entire nation to store grain for 7 years. But this was done at the recommendation of God in order to save both the Egyptians and the Israelites from an upcoming famine and not simply to eat, drink, and be merry. Third, the man could have shared the gift given to him through the abundance of the crops with the many laborers who undoubtedly tilled, planted, tended, and harvested the crops. And further, the man could have generously shared and given to those in need. Since God had provided so much to him, surely there was plenty to spare for those in real need. All of these actions would have layed up treasure for the man toward God – as the man would have been acting with the same generous and loving Spirit as God who sends rain and sunshine on both the just and unjust.

Finally, the last point to mention is the speed and surprise in which the man's soul is taken from him and he dies to this life. At the last tally, death in this world, is close to a 100% certainty. Yet our society works very hard to keep that fact far from our hearts and mind. St. John Climacus in the Ladder of Divine Ascent lists as Step 6: Remembrance of Death. He says "Just as bread is the most necessary of all foods, so the thought of death is the most essential of all works." Remembrance of Death is a gift of God and puts everything into a truer and proper perspective. Remembrance of death is not a morbid obsession with death and dying but rather invokes in us the sense that life is short, that it may end at any moment, that we must hurry to do good, that we must not be bound up in pettiness and that we must live in such a way that at whatever moment death overtakes us, it will be a moment of triumphant life and not the life of a fool as this rich man was.

Brothers and Sisters, let us remember our high calling to become united with God and a reflection of His Spirit in this world, let us remember the lessons of the Parable of the Rich fool and avoid his folly, and let us launch into this Nativity Fast with the hope and expectation of seeing the Birth of Christ anew in ourselves and each other.

Amen