

The Parable of the Rich Fool

Luke 12:13–21 — an Author & Audience study
through the lens of Dallas Willard's Scandal of the Kingdom

By Shane Gunn • Greek NT & ESV

CENTRAL TEXT — LUKE 12:13–21

Greek NT (v.15): Ὁρᾶτε καὶ φυλάσσεσθε ἀπο πάσης πλεονεξίας, ὅτι οὐκ ἐν τῷ περισσεύειν τινὶ ἡ ζωὴ αὐτοῦ ἐστὶν ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αὐτῷ.

15 “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” — **Luke 12:15 (ESV)**

Greek NT (v.20): ἄφρων, ταύτη τῇ νυκτι τῆ ἄν ψυχὴν σου ἀπαιτοῦσιν ἀπο σοῦ· ἂ δεῖ ἡτοίμασας, τίνοι ἔσται;

20 “Fool! This night your soul (*psychē*) is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” — **Luke 12:20 (ESV)**

Greek NT (v.21): οὕτως ὁ θησαυρίζων ἑαυτῷ καὶ μὴ εἰς θεοὺν πλουτῶν.

21 “So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” — **Luke 12:21 (ESV)**

Full passage: Luke 12:13–21. A man in the crowd asks Jesus to settle an inheritance dispute. Jesus refuses the role, warns against covetousness, and tells the parable of a farmer whose barns outgrew his soul.

SETTING THE LESSON — TWO VIEWS, ONE PARABLE

To hear Jesus rightly we must hear the parable twice: once from the **author's** desk — Luke shaping his gospel for Theophilus — and once from the **audience's** bench — a first-century crowd steeped in honor, inheritance, and barns as signs of blessing. Then, with Dallas Willard, we will lay those two hearings under the scandalous claim of the kingdom: *your soul, not your stuff, is what matters — and the kingdom of God is available to you right now.*

POINT 1 — THE AUTHOR'S VIEW (LUKE'S PURPOSE)

Luke, a Greek physician writing to Theophilus (Luke 1:3), gathers teachings of Jesus that repeatedly overturn ordinary assumptions about wealth. The Rich Fool sits inside a long travel narrative (Luke 9:51–19:27) where Jesus is set-faced toward Jerusalem and teaching his disciples what kingdom life looks like on the way.

Luke places this parable deliberately. Just before it: Jesus warns against the *leaven of the Pharisees* (12:1) and tells his disciples not to fear those who kill the body but cannot touch the soul (12:4–5). Immediately after it: the teaching on anxiety — *seek first the kingdom* (12:22–34). The Rich Fool is the hinge. Luke is saying: **fear of God** → **freedom from possessions** → **trust in the Father.**

Greek NT (12:4–5): μη φοβηθητε απο των αποκτεινοντων το σωμα ... φοβηθητε το ν ... εχοντα εξουσιαν εμβαλειν εις τη ν γενναν.

Luke 12:4–5 (ESV): “Do not fear those who kill the body... fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell.”

Luke's editorial fingerprint shows also in the refusal of v. 14. Luke's Jesus will not be cornered into the role of *kritēs* (judge) or *meristēs* (arbiter) of property. Luke is drawing a bright line: the Messiah did not come to redistribute barns. He came to redeem souls.

POINT 2 – THE AUDIENCE’S VIEW (FIRST-CENTURY EARS)

The crowd around Jesus heard this parable very differently than we do. For them:

- **Inheritance was identity.** Land passed from father to sons (Num 27; Deut 21:17). Losing an inheritance meant losing your place in the covenant people. The man’s request in v.13 was not greed on the surface – it was survival.
- **Barns were a sign of blessing.** “Your barns will be filled with plenty” (Prov 3:10) was a promise to the righteous. A Galilean farmer whose land *euphorēsen* (produced plentifully) would have been congratulated, not called a fool.
- **“Eat, drink, be merry” echoed Ecclesiastes.** The audience heard Qoheleth’s refrain (Eccl 2:24; 8:15) – the pious resignation of a wise man. The rich farmer is *quoting Scripture to his own soul*. He sounds devout.
- **“Fool” is a theological verdict.** In the LXX/Hebrew world, the *aphrōn / nabal* is not an idiot but a practical atheist: “The fool says in his heart, “There is no God” (Ps 14:1 LXX 13:1). When God calls this man *Ἀφρων*, the crowd flinched. It is the worst thing a pious Jew could be called.

So the audience hears a man who looks *blessed, prudent, and biblically quotable* – and God calls him a functional atheist. That is the shock Luke wants to land.

POINT 3 – THE SOUL MONOLOGUE

Read the parable again and count the pronouns. In five verses the rich man says “I” six times and “my” five times. He talks to himself (v.17), plans for himself (v.18), and preaches to himself (v.19). His only dialogue partner is his own *psychē*.

Greek NT (v.19): ἐρῶ τῇ ψυχῇ μου· Ψυχὴ, ἔχεις πολλὰ ἄγαθα ἔτι ... ἀναπαύου, φάγε, πίε, εὐφραίνου.

Luke 12:19 (ESV): “I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

Notice: he feeds his soul with *grain*. He tries to satisfy *psychē* with *agatha* (goods) that the barn can hold. God’s reply in v.20 punctures the category error — *your soul is not yours to feed, and not yours to keep*. **“This night they are demanding your soul back from you.”** The verb *ἀπαιτοῦσιν* is impersonal plural: the loan is being called in.

Dallas Willard taught that the parables are not moral fables; they are invitations into a kingdom that is *already at hand*. For Willard, the scandal is that Jesus keeps insisting the really real world — God’s world — is available right now, and that it runs on an economy almost nobody believes in until they try it. The Rich Fool is, for Willard, the patron saint of the counter-example.

Willard’s core framing: the human self is a soul (*psychē*) — the integrating center of mind, body, will, and relationships. The soul is what you *are*, not what you have. Every person is an unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God’s great universe. To mistake your possessions for your life is not a tactical error; it is an *ontological* one.

The scandal, in four moves:

1. **God is here, now.** The Rich Fool plans decades while ignoring the One already standing at his barn door.
2. **Kingdom life is available today.** He could have stepped into it with his very next decision — and did not.
3. **The currency of that kingdom is the soul.** Barns will not convert. Goods will not translate. Only the person survives.
4. **“Rich toward God” is a way of living now.** It is not a deferred reward; it is a present posture — generosity, attention, trust, prayer, obedience.

Willard would say: the farmer was not punished *for* having crops. He was exposed *by* them. The harvest revealed what he had always been doing — arranging a life that needed no God. The barn was the altar of a very small religion.

POINT 5 – THE TWO LENSES, SIDE BY SIDE

AUTHOR’S LENS (LUKE)

Jesus refuses the role of earthly arbiter. The gospel reframes the question from “how do I get my share?” to “what is my life actually made of?” The parable is Luke’s bridge from *fear God rightly to seek the kingdom first*.

AUDIENCE’S LENS (CROWD)

A man who looks blessed, prudent, and pious is pronounced a practical atheist. Barns, proverbs, and inheritance law will not save you when the soul is called in tonight. The parable indicts respectable religion.

WILLARD’S LENS (KINGDOM)

You are a soul. The kingdom of God is within reach. The tragedy is not that the fool died young, but that he never lived — he never once acted as if the King were real and present.

OUR LENS (PLEASANT SPRINGS)

We read this in a culture obsessed with retirement barns. The parable asks us plainly: what are we building that cannot follow us past this night? And who around us is God already calling us to be *rich toward*?

POINT 6 — THE SOUL IS THE POINT

Why the soul is most important — four reasons from the parable itself:

- 1. The soul outlives the barn.** Every possession he named was still sitting there in the morning. He wasn't. *"The things you have prepared, whose will they be?"*
- 2. The soul is the only thing God asks for by name.** God does not ask for the crops. He asks for the *psychē*. Everything else is negotiable.
- 3. The soul is what you are becoming.** Willard: "The most important thing about you is not the things that you do, but the person that you are becoming." The farmer spent a lifetime becoming someone whose soul could only speak the language of inventory.
- 4. The soul is what we shepherd in others.** Our calling as a church is not crowd management or barn-building. We are the place where souls are formed, fed, and aimed at God — *community, home, unity, relationship, care, hope.*

POINT 7 — "RICH TOWARD GOD" — WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Jesus' closing phrase — *εἰς θεοῦ πλουτῶν*, "rich toward God" — is not about piling up spiritual capital. It is about the *direction of the heart*. To be rich toward God is to live as though God is the real audience, the real employer, the real neighbor, and the real heir of everything you steward.

Practical marks of a soul rich toward God:

- It gives before it hoards (2 Cor 9:7).
- It prays before it plans (James 4:13–15).
- It names God in its monologues — no more "Soul, I will say to you..." with God absent.
- It sees people, not just assets. The man in v.13 wanted an inheritance; Jesus wanted the man.
- It treats today as the day of the kingdom, because tomorrow belongs to God alone.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Reading as the first-century audience: which details in this parable would have sounded like blessing to you — and where does the verdict of “Fool” catch you off guard?

2. Luke puts this parable between a teaching on fearing God (12:4–5) and a teaching on anxiety (12:22–34). What changes when you read it as the hinge between those two?

3. Willard says the scandal of the kingdom is that it is available *now*. What would it look like this week to act as though that were true at work, at home, and with your wallet?

4. Make a list of what you talk to your own soul about. Would Jesus call any of those monologues the speech of a fool?

5. Where in your life are you quietly building larger barns — and what would it mean to stop and be “rich toward God” instead?

6. Whose soul has God put in your path that only *you* can love well right now?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, you have made us souls, not storehouses. Forgive us for the monologues we preach to ourselves while you stand at the door. Teach us to fear you rightly, to hold our goods loosely, and to be rich toward you in the ordinary hours of this week. Do not let us meet you tonight as strangers to the kingdom that has been within our reach all along. Through Jesus, who refused to be our arbiter so he could be our Savior. Amen.