

# **Rich Towards God**

**Proper 13 Track 2**

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**L**et your continual mercy, O Lord, cleanse and defend your Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without your help, protect and govern it always by your goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. AMEN.

*Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23 (NRSV)*

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. <sup>12</sup> I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, <sup>13</sup> applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. <sup>14</sup> I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

<sup>18</sup> I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me <sup>19</sup> —and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. <sup>20</sup> So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, <sup>21</sup> because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. <sup>22</sup> What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? <sup>23</sup> For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

***Colossians 3:1-11 (NRSV)***

**So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, <sup>3</sup> for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. <sup>5</sup> Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). <sup>6</sup> On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. <sup>7</sup> These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. <sup>8</sup> But now you must get rid of all such things--anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. <sup>9</sup> Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices <sup>10</sup> and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. <sup>11</sup> In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!**

***Luke 12:13-21 (NRSV)***

**Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” <sup>14</sup> But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” <sup>15</sup> And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” <sup>16</sup> Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. <sup>17</sup> And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ <sup>18</sup> Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. <sup>19</sup> And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ <sup>20</sup> But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ <sup>21</sup> So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”**

In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus warns us against greed. He says, **“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”**

Our Old Testament lesson from Ecclesiastes offers a view of life “under the sun”. That is, a view that all that exists is this world. The author’s

conclusion is that when he considers this, **“I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.”**

It’s clear that the people who put together our lectionary put these two Bible passages together as a warning against materialism and greed. But there’s a bigger context here than what our lectionary editors had in mind. Our gospel reading is from a section of Luke’s gospel where Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and his death on the cross. In this section he warns his disciples against two things that have no place in the Christian life: hypocrisy *and* greed.

Our gospel reading begins at Luke 12:13. What goes on in verses 1 through 12 goes back to the end of chapter 11, where Jesus confronts the scribes and Pharisees about their hypocrisy. And of course, this makes them mad. Chapter 11 ends with **“the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile toward him and to cross-examine him about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.” (Luke 11:53-54 NRSV)** So Jesus then warns his disciples against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and prepares them for the opposition his disciples will inevitably run into if they follow him wholeheartedly.

People often criticize Christians for being hypocrites. A Christian hypocrite keeps his or her faith secret because they’re afraid of what other people will think. You know, **“I don’t want people to think I’m a religious fanatic.”** The Pharisees refused to believe Jesus because they were afraid of what their colleagues would think.

But Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid of other people, even those who might want to persecute and kill them for their faith in him. No, he says, **“fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell.” (Luke 12:5 NRSV)** Who’s he talking about? God, of course. Because to God, everything we say and do is open. If we think and believe one way and behave another, it’s no secret to God. So Jesus encourages his disciples to speak boldly about him, regardless of the consequences. He says, **“everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God.” (Luke 12:8-9 NRSV)** He tells them not to worry about what they have to say to the authorities who arrest them, because the Holy Spirit will give them the right words at that very moment.

And that’s where our gospel for today begins. Jesus is interrupted by someone in the crowd. He asks him to intervene with his brother about dividing

their inheritance. Jesus responds with the parable of the rich man who tore down his barns so he could build new barns big enough to hold all his stuff. He has the rich man say, **“Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”** Jesus goes on, **“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’** Jesus ends by telling us, **“So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”**

So on his way to Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus warns his disciples against not standing up for your faith in him for fear of what other people might think of you, and against accumulating possessions as though this world is all that matters. So let's find out how to live authentically for Christ by looking at our second reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Paul is showing the Christians in Colosse how to live in this world as Christians. But he's not giving them rules or a code of behavior. No. He's reminding them of how Jesus has transformed them as people. He says, **“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”** The Bible teaches us that living as a Christian is not a matter of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps to follow a moral code. It's a matter of believing the gospel: that Jesus died for your sins, and that God has included you in Jesus's death and resurrection. Let me say that a different way. Believing in Jesus means believing that when he died for you, you died as well. And when he rose to new life you did as well. As Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, **“I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”** (Galatians 2:19b-20 NRSV) Living for Christ means living out Jesus' own life in your life. It means God has made you a new person, a new creation. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, **“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”** (2 Corinthians 5:17 NRSV)

Paul tells us we live our lives out of the change Jesus has brought about in us by doing four things: *seeking* the things that are above, *setting our minds* on things that are above, *putting to death* what is earthly in us, and *getting rid* of the life we once lived.

The first two have to do with **“things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”** This is a reference to the first verse of Psalm 110. It's the most-quoted Old Testament verse in the New Testament. Jesus himself quoted it as referring to himself. Here he is in Matthew's gospel in

an encounter with the Pharisees: **“Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ‘What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?’ They said to him, ‘The son of David.’ He said to them, ‘How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’”? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?’ No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.”** He’s referring to the first verse of Psalm 110: **“The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”** (Psalm 110:1, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 753)

Now this psalm isn’t saying that Jesus is sitting on a jeweled throne next to God the Father. It’s saying that Jesus, the humble servant of God and humans, who grew up in Nazareth and died penniless and abandoned, has defeated death and been exalted by God to rule God’s own eternal kingdom. That kingdom will come in its fulness when Jesus returns at the end of time. God will clear the world of all its brokenness and misery when he sends his glorious Son to judge the world. Every sin, every cause of pain and heartache will be gone. And because Jesus is there, we now have complete access to the presence of God here through him.

Paul says we’re to *seek* those things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. We’re to *set our minds* on them, **not on “things on the earth.”** Does that mean that we can’t put dates on our calendars, or have a career, or study economics, or buy a car? No! Surely that would make us so spiritually-minded that we’d be no earthly good. No. Paul means we’re to consciously recognize where our true life is—**“hidden with Christ in God.”** It’s Christ’s life that is really our life. **“When Christ, who is [our] life is revealed, then [we] also will be revealed with him in glory.”**

So it’s the earthly things that will be left out of God’s kingdom when Jesus comes back that we’re not to think about. We’re to *put them to death* because they don’t belong in God’s kingdom, things like **“fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, (which is idolatry).”**

Now we’re getting to the hypocrisy and greed Jesus is warning us against as he makes his way to Jerusalem and the cross. These are things that have no place in God’s kingdom, where our life is. Hypocrisy is lying. How can lying and falsehood have any place in God’s kingdom, especially lying about our faith in the King, who calls himself **“the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6 NRSV)?** And how can greed have any place in God’s kingdom? It’s idolatry

because it means putting possessions ahead of God. It comes from our breaking the tenth commandment, that forbids coveting. Coveting means wanting something that isn't yours. Coveting always precedes **“fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, (which is idolatry).”**

Because we are new creations in Christ, Paul says we have to live like the people we really are, not the people we used to be. Paul says we have to **get rid of “the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.”** This means we **“must get rid of all such things--anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.”**

Jesus wants us to be **“rich towards God.”** That means to receive from him all that God has done for us in Jesus. In Jesus we have forgiveness of sins. We have died with Christ, which means that in his cross, we can put to death all the sinful and negative impulses and ways that injure individuals and keep humanity in suffering and misery. In Jesus we have actual citizenship in God's eternal kingdom, the spiritual realm where God's will is perfectly accomplished. So let's boldly testify to what Jesus has done for us, and gladly proclaim the riches we have in Jesus.

Jesus wants us to be rich towards God. Paul tells us how by living out Jesus' life in us by doing four things: ***seeking*** the things that are above, ***setting our minds*** on things that are above, ***putting to death*** what is earthly in us, and ***getting rid*** of the life we once lived.

Amen.