

## CHAPTER XII

*The Marks of Discipleship (V)*

## LIFE—AND “MUCH GOODS”

## THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL

“And one out of the multitude said unto him, Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me. But he said unto him, Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you? And he said unto them, Take heed, and keep yourselves from all covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: and he reasoned within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have not where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, be merry. But God said unto him, Thou foolish one, this night is thy soul required of thee; and the things which thou hast prepared, whose shall they be? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

(*Luke 12: 13-21*)

*The Parable of the Rich Fool*

What did Jesus teach about material wealth? Concerning money the anathemas of the moralists are always easy, often thoughtless, and sometimes insincere. When all anathemas have been hurled, the fact remains that we inhabit material bodies and must meet the demands of a material world. We live, not in a vacuum, but in a realm of things. The Word became flesh; the Invisible is revealed through that “which is made.” Faith and science may one day resolve the apparent duality of matter and spirit, but for purposes of daily living that duality remains. A wise religion will not ignore either of its terms.

It is evident that possessions are needed to enhance man’s freedom. It is even doubtful if character in this world can be complete without them. Things are the tools of living; a workman is helpless without tools. “No man,” said a wise old law, “shall take the mill or the upper millstone to pledge; for he taketh a man’s life to pledge.”<sup>1</sup> If life is constantly threatened in physical tenure, character is also threatened; though in courage it may defy the threat. An unequal struggle for daily bread saps mind and spirit as well as body. When a man who is accustomed to live from hand to mouth finally achieves property, he has reached a critical fork in the road; thereafter he will walk either in sturdier manhood or in the folly of an acquisitive life. Possessions may fulfill their perfect work, or they may smother him. It is a brave sight to see a man stake out his own claim in the common freehold and thereby learn independence, responsibility, and the joy of giving. Communism in the extreme Marxian meaning does not commend itself

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 24: 6.

as a social goal. It "taketh a man's life to pledge." Ownership seems a desirable, if not an essential, aid of character.

Jesus did not indiscriminately condemn wealth. It is true that He bade the rich young ruler "sell all"<sup>2</sup> and follow; but He was then prescribing an individual surgery, not a universal rule. He did not require indigence as indispensable in discipleship. His first followers were called not from penury, but from homes of some comfort. They followed a homeless Man, but He did not sentence them to ascetic poverty; He came "eating and drinking." The well-to-do centurion,<sup>3</sup> who built a synagogue for the town in which his soldiers were stationed, won favor in His eyes. The Bethany home, in whose hospitable friendliness He found sheltering joy, appears to have been a home of "substance." The robe of Jesus for which the soldiers cast lots may not have been of "fine linen," but it was worth owning. Dr. George Adam Smith has argued forcefully,<sup>4</sup> and not without historical evidence, that "a certain degree of prosperity, and even of comfort" is necessary for the free exercise of religious faculties: "Poverty and persecution . . . put a keenness upon the spirit of religion, while luxury rots its very fibres; but a stable basis of prosperity is indispensable to every social and religious reform, and God's Spirit finds fullest course in communities of a certain degree . . . of freedom from sordidness." Thus social reform, though it may pride itself on being irreligious and be condemned as such, may be the necessary precursor of a revival of genuine faith. Certain it is that Jesus made no sweeping indictment of material wealth.

And yet!—who has issued warnings half so forthright as His against the devastating effect which "much goods" may have on character? "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!"<sup>5</sup> . . . "Ye cannot serve God and mammon."<sup>6</sup> These warnings were not spoken in railing or bitterness. They were not the invective of a rebel against the eco-

<sup>2</sup> Luke 18: 22.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 7: 2, 9.

<sup>4</sup> In his exposition of Joel 2: 28-32 in "The Book of the Twelve Prophets" (Expositor's Bible).

<sup>5</sup> Luke 18: 24.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 16: 13.

nomie order. Such rebels, when pressed to the wall, frequently offer no worthier proposal than that the poor should have the rich man's luxuries, in which the rich man has found no peace. Jesus' warnings are spoken gravely and from a depth of pity. He had little earthly wealth. He desired little. He saw men faring sumptuously, and felt no tinge of envy. From some depth of peace He gave account of His frugal lot: "I have meat to eat that ye know not of."<sup>7</sup> It is that deliberate renunciation of the world's goods for the sake of a hidden kingdom which gives point and power to His warnings against material wealth. His lowly way haunts a mercenary and ostentatious generation—and convicts it. We cannot forget how a Galilean Peasant looked one day at a man whom we would call eminently successful, and said of him—"Thou fool!"

"Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me."<sup>8</sup> The man's mind was so full of his inheritance that he broke rudely upon a message to a "multitude." The multitude could wait! Here was One who seemed to be taken for a prophet; he would "use" Him. Some word from Him might fulfill his grasping ambition where other means had failed. But Jesus refused to be a "petty magistrate." He had higher work than that of legal and industrial arrangements. His not to write economic regulations! His to live a life and speak a truth which would be a fountain-head of ever purer laws and ever worthier institutions to the end of time. We would not exchange His cross for a treatise on property rights. "Who made me a judge over you?" Then turning to the multitude:<sup>9</sup> "Keep clear of covetousness in every shape and form, for a man's life is not part of his possessions because he has ample wealth."<sup>10</sup> And He told them another story. . . .

The "Certain Rich Man" appears to have come by his wealth honestly. His farm yielded heavy crops. He did not "add

<sup>7</sup> John 4: 32.

<sup>8</sup> There is no ground to assume that the "brother" had treated the complainant unjustly. Perhaps the quarrel was against the ancient law of inheritance which gave the older brother two-thirds of the property and the younger brother one-third. (See Deuteronomy 21: 17.)

<sup>9</sup> The connection between the incident and the parable seems to have been historical. If it is due to Luke's arrangement of material it is extraordinarily natural and apt.

<sup>10</sup> Moffatt's translation which admirably conveys the distinction which Jesus drew between a man's life and his goods.

field to field" by oppression, or "devour widows' houses" by fraud, or cheat the hireling in his wages. Nor was he a miser; he said to himself with a certain *bonhomie*, "Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." He was foresighted and practical; he had all the marks of a good business man. When his harvests taxed the capacity of his barns he built greater barns. In the realm of finance he thought in big terms and moved with sure step. He had definitely "arrived." His neighbors greeted him with the deference due to the "successful." In a modern city he might be one of the "key men"; but Jesus called him a fool. He failed to keep a clear space between himself and his possessions!

A man must keep things at their distance. He must be *in* the material world, but not *of* it. He must say to his possessions: "You are not my life. You never can be my life. There is a gulf set between you and me." The gulf is proved because his possessions cannot even answer him! But the Rich Man thought so persistently and with such concentration about his "goods" that the necessary line of distinction between *him* and *his* was erased. His life was lost in his livelihood.<sup>11</sup> He (the self of the man) was absorbed into his ownings. The essential "within" of his nature was swallowed by the world "without."

Of course he was an egotist. Things are a jealous god; they brook no rival. His soliloquy as translated in our version occupies sixty-one words.<sup>12</sup> "I" occurs six times in that brief monologue, and "my" or "thine" (addressed to himself) six times. He had no thought for God. "My fruits," he called them; "my grain." But in what sense were they his? Could he command the sap in the tree, the fertility in the soil? Were sunrise and sunset under his control? Was the faithfulness of returning seasons his merit? If the rain had been withheld, where then would have been his wealth? "The *ground* brought forth plentifully"; all the man could do was to take nature's tides at the flood. He was carried to fortune on a fecundity,

<sup>11</sup> This distinction is in the Greek. When Jesus says, "A man's *life* consisteth not in the abundance of the things," He employs the word *zoe*. But in Mark 12: 44, Luke 8: 43, 15: 12, 21: 4, "living" means "livelihood," and the word used is *bios*.

<sup>12</sup> In the Greek there are only forty-six words, and the egotism is even more apparent.

a light, a heat, a constancy in nature's cycles, which are boundless mysteries of blessing—and he called them "mine"! His title was earned—"Thou fool!"

Of course he was bereft of fellow feeling. Other men had enriched him; for he did not plough, reap, and build barns single-handed. Always wealth is more an achievement of society than of the individual. Society maintains and enforces laws without which separate industry would be impossible. Society provides that bulwark of common honesty which, in the last resort, is the only guarantee of investments. The sources of income are land, labor, and ideas. However resourceful and industrious the individual may be, his contribution is slight compared with the vast fund of labor and ideas which the living and the dead pour out for him "without money and without price." The rich man reached affluence mainly by reason of the *commonwealth*. Yet he had no gift of sympathy. "What shall I do, because I have not where to bestow my fruits?" Was there no sickness to heal, no nakedness to clothe? Were there none on whom a sharper problem pressed, who were compelled to ask, "What shall I do, because stark poverty has come to be our guest?" Deliberately this man proposed to spend the rest of his days on the pleasure of his body: "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, be merry." He was heedless of his comrades of earth, even as he was heedless of God.

Of course he was in reality a pauper. He lost even his physical life. We are not told that his sudden death came because the grind of getting had sapped his strength. It is a fair assumption. Many such men do die in what should be the prime of manhood. Their friends remark on the mysterious Providence which brought them to an early grave, when, in fact, there was nothing mysterious about it—except the mystery of folly which drives men to burn themselves out for things. The minister intoned over their graves, "forasmuch as it hath pleased God"; but we can be reasonably certain that it did not please God. They died by their own act. They gave their physical life to gain a world.

But his pauperhood did not consist in the loss of his physical life; there was a far more tragic loss. Jesus sacrificed His

physical life when He was a young man. He invited death by fealty to the ideal far more wittingly than other men invite death by their slavery to things. He taught His disciples that the cessation of breathing may be a minor calamity: "Be not afraid of them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul."<sup>13</sup> The tragedy of the Rich Man was that the sudden death of the body brought realization of a *soul* sick unto death. All the "within" of his nature had been stolen from him by his property.

He had forfeited intellectual joy. Once his mind had made alert response to the multitudinous messages of earth and sky, and to the vital touch of other minds. But in the amassing of things he died while he lived, as trees sometimes die—from the top downwards. The woodland "flecked with leafy light and shade" found him blind. The majesty of stars left him unmoved. Poets and prophets had no truth for him. Thus Rudyard Kipling's words describe his complacent doom:

"And because we know we have breath in our mouth and think we have thought in our head,  
We shall assume that we are alive, whereas we are really dead . . ."

"The Lamp of our Youth will be utterly out, but we shall subsist on the smell of it,  
And whatever we do, we shall fold our hands and suck our gums and think well of it.  
Yes, we shall be perfectly pleased with our work, and that is the perfectest Hell of it!"<sup>14</sup>

Spiritual joy likewise had been quenched. Walt Whitman offered his confession of faith, "I love God and flowers and little children." That love made him rich beyond reckoning. But the so-called Rich Man had no such love. His money had cheated him of those memories, ideals, and affections which are life's veritable treasure. Ultimately our choice lies between a world within ourselves and a world outside; the crux of character is in that decision. What is wealth? A conscience void of offence, cleansed by frequent prayer, made virile by high resolve and noble deed—the glad outgoing of human love—compassion's

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 10: 28.

<sup>14</sup> Rudyard Kipling, "The Old Men" ("The Five Nations," Doubleday, Page and Company).

springs kept quick and warm—obedience to ideals which brood over our mortal journey like a galaxy of stars—the quest for a soul washed white, worthier homes, kindlier industry, purer patriotism, a planet spinning in destined righteousness and peace—the finding of the Great Companion Whose love atones for our mistakes and sins . . . herein is wealth beyond all price, the treasure of the world within!

This was the wealth which a "certain rich man" exchanged for barns. He erased the definitive line between life and livelihood, between the soul and things. He failed to keep his possessions at their menial distance. But the line which he obliterated death retraced! "This night they require thy soul of thee!"<sup>15</sup> and the things which thou hast prepared, whose shall they be?"<sup>16</sup> The line between self and possessions now became a gulf. The man travelled one way; his property travelled another way, beyond his control. Bereft of the world without, his only treasure was a world within. That treasure he had despised; and he was destitute! The fact that his death came suddenly in the heyday of material prosperity adds dramatic force to the truth of the story, but the truth would have remained had the Rich Man died full of years. He was dead while he lived; the cessation of breathing was but the belated announcement of his earlier demise. So Jesus ended the story in a terse sentence which once more sharply drew the line between the "within" and "without" of our lives. We must choose, He said, between a mundane treasure and being "rich towards God."

This is revolutionary teaching. We do not believe it, except in certain moments of piercing insight. If we did believe it, it is doubtful if we would have courage to obey; for it would make havoc of an age that is cluttered with things. Our standards of success are almost fatally entangled with the lust for acquisition, but we are not yet ready to abandon them. We

<sup>15</sup> The impersonal phrase, "They are demanding thy soul," and its present tense, are very impressive. There is no need to assume that "they" means the angels of death, or that the man came to a violent end at the hand of robbers. The Gospel of Luke frequently uses this impersonal plural, e.g., 12: 48; 16: 9; 23: 31.

<sup>16</sup> "Whose shall they be?" underscores the parable's contention that life is distinct from things. The fact that wealth of a man's careful hoarding may be wasted riotously by his heirs serves to emphasize the folly of living for wealth. Cf. Psalm 39: 6; 49: 6; Ecclesiastes 2: 18-23; Job 27: 17-22.

pay Jesus the doubtful compliment of lip-service, but by our deeds we exclaim: "What will this babbler say?" He is still absurdly quixotic. Yet our "much goods" have not brought peace. An oriental writer, who is by no means blind to occidental virtues, lays this charge at our doors:

"You call your thousand material devices 'labor-saving machinery,' yet you are forever 'busy.' With the multiplying of your machinery you grow increasingly fatigued, anxious, nervous, dissatisfied. Whatever you have, you want more; and wherever you are, you want to go somewhere else. You have a machine to dig the raw material for you . . . , a machine to manufacture (it) . . . , a machine to transport (it) . . . , a machine to sweep and dust, one to carry messages, one to write, one to talk, one to sing, one to play at the theater, one to vote, one to sew, . . . and a hundred others to do a hundred other things for you, and still you are the most nervously busy man in the world. . . . Your devices are neither time-saving nor soul-saving machinery. They are so many sharp spurs which urge you on to invent more machinery and to do more business."<sup>17</sup>

The charge is difficult to refute. Since the dawn of the "industrial revolution" we have been absorbed in the exploitation of the material resources and powers of the planet. We have assiduously enlarged our bodies. The telescope is our larger eye; the telephone our stronger voice and ear; the automobile our swift, mechanical legs; heavy artillery our longer arm and more destructive fist. We wake o' mornings and don this larger body as easily as we don our clothes. We do not pause to ask if accumulation of things represents advance or retrogression; but Jesus looked at a man intent on barns and more barns, and called him a fool. There are plenty of lives to support the contention that the amassing of property, without an accompanying growth of love Godward and manward, is suicidal.

Materialism in practice has reached the proportions of an overwhelming and sinister threat. Materialism in theory we need not fear; *that* is a figure of straw which the mere breath of vital thinking will overturn. Possibly the doctrine of materialism could not have gained credence except as the plausible excuse for our conduct. Theories are frequently symptoms of the life we lead. If it is true that life is only galvanized flesh, that thought is only a temporary product of grey matter, and

<sup>17</sup> Abraham Mitrie Rihbany, "Wise Men from the East and from the West," p. 137. (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1922.)

that personality is only a phosphorescence from certain chemical reactions, *then it follows* that materialism has no more validity than any other doctrine. In company with other theories (idealism, for instance) it has been ground out of the machine. It is not more true or more false than idealism. There is no true or false; there is only the grinding of the machine. The vital synthesis of human experience may be trusted to deal becomingly with such folly of materialistic theory.

But materialism in practice remains a present menace. No one can wisely suggest the turning back of the clock. The powerloom will not abdicate in favor of the spinning-jenny, or the tractor in favor of the hand-plough. But our moral and spiritual "lag" must be redeemed! Increasing material powers are not safe except with proportionately improving character.<sup>18</sup> A drunken man afoot is dangerous; but the danger is multiplied if the drunken man is permitted to drive a car. An angry man can work damage enough with two fists; but the damage becomes calamity if the two fists hold a bomb. Enlarged powers spell enlarged peril, if the soul does not grow. If the soul lags behind the advance of the body, the advance of the body must be temporarily stayed. If the "world without" takes the bit in its teeth in mad flight and drags the "world within" bruised and bleeding at the end of entangled reins, the runaway must be stopped until the driver takes new control. Society can endure for a time without new inventions; it is doubtful how long it can endure without a better spirit. When livelihood absorbs life, when the "without" breaks bounds and subjugates the "within," the day darkens in folly.

Is the "certain rich man" our acquisitive generation? Can we hear a Galilean, Who possessed treasures of peace which our clutter of things cannot bestow, saying as of old, "Thou fool!"? There is a word of His which seems now like the play-candle of a little child, but which one day we will know to be the Lantern of Truth: "Make for yourselves purses which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not. . . ." <sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Dr. William Heard Kilpatrick has discussed this "lag" (or a comparable "social lag") as it concerns education, in "Education for a Changing Civilization," p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> Luke 12: 33.