

## The Parable of the Foolish Rich Man

Explaining the Gospel Reading  
Luke 12:16-21



*In* the Gospel this parable is prefaced by these words of warning from Jesus: *Guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one's life does not consist of possessions.* v. 15. When a person lives as though life did consist in what one owns, then he is foolish, for his belongings will surely desert him in the end. A widely circulated story in the Middle East tells of a well-to-do Christian who was the opposite of the man in this parable. This man directed that, when his open coffin was carried through the streets to burial [*the local custom*], his empty hands be extended to show that he was taking none of his wealth with him to the grave.

The rich man's folly is expressed in his belief that the purpose of wealth is pleasure (to "rest, eat, drink, be merry," v. 19) and that he would live long enough to enjoy all his wealth. The Scripture takes another view. St. Paul makes an important distinction between need and abundance when discussing material possessions. He exhorts the Corinthians to generosity, with the assurance that *God is able to make every grace abundant for you, so that in all things, always having all you need, you may*

*have abundance for every good work.* – 2 Corinthians 9:8. This saying of St. Paul is also incorporated into the wedding ceremony of the Greek Orthodox Church. The believer's abundance – the surplus not required to provide for personal needs – is meant to be devoted to good works. This is the prosperity for which the Church prays in Mystery of the Crowning. *Fill their houses with wheat, wine and oil and with every good thing that they may in turn bestow on them that are in need.* Another prayer reads, *That, having a sufficiency of everything, they may abound in every good work that is good and acceptable to You.* The Greek Orthodox traditional devotion to hospitality is a long-standing witness to the way this principle has been lived.

What then deludes a person into thinking that material prosperity secures real life? For Clement of Alexandria it was the adulation of others that was at least in part responsible. He describes; *Although wealth is of itself sufficient to puff up and corrupt the souls of its possessors and to turn them from the path by which salvation is to be attained, they stupefy them still more...by making them utterly despise all things except wealth...* We can imagine what Clement would have thought of the celebrity mania promoted by many in the media today.

Clement's perspective on how to treat the rich was very different. *It appears to me to be far kinder... to aid them in working out their salvation in every possible way...and thus healing their souls by the grace of the Saviour, enlightening them and leading them to the attainment of the truth, for whoever obtains this and distinguishes himself in good works shall gain the prize of everlasting life.* He continues with some advice we can all take to heart, *Now prayer that runs the course until the last day of life needs a strong and tranquil soul; and the conduct of our lives needs a good and righteous disposition, reaching out towards all the commandments of the Saviour.* No one develops a tranquil soul overnight: it's the work of a lifetime if we seek to become rich in what matters to God. V. 21

