

The Reading of the Will

by

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Leviticus 19:9-13

⁹When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.

¹¹You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. ¹²And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD. ¹³You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.

Luke 12:13-21

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵And 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.” ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸Then 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. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰But 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?’ ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

No one even knew Ed had a heart condition. Not even his wife, Sue; and she knew almost every move Ed made since their wedding nearly thirty-five years before. But she had no idea that Ed had been driving into the city to see a cardiologist every six months. So, it shocked her as much as everyone else when Ed collapsed at the breakfast table at fifty-four years old.

They weren't very religious, but Ed often said, "they were just religious enough to be Presbyterian." The funeral was brief. The minister said a few words, and that evening Sue, and the children, and a few others sat in stiff leather chairs in the attorney's office to hear him read the will. Sue didn't even know they had a will. Not that she would have. Ed took care of everything.

The lawyer fidgeted in his seat a bit, avoiding eye contact with anyone as he began. "I, Edward Longford, being of sound mind and not acting under duress or undue influence, do hereby declare that all of my personal property I give to my dear, beloved Betty." You could have heard a pin drop. Now who's Betty?

There was a man who came up to Jesus as he was teaching to a crowd. The man needed him to settle a family dispute. "My brother," he yelled out, "he's not doing right by me. Tell him he's wrong. Tell him to split what Dad left us straight down the middle. 50/50." According to first century Jewish law, an older brother would receive two-thirds of an estate, while a younger brother would receive the final third.

It stands to reason that the man speaking to Jesus is the younger brother, and he thinks it unfair, especially after he's heard Jesus say the last shall be first. He has a vested interest in the outcome of that will.

But Jesus isn't there to be the mediator of familial inheritance disputes. So he answers the man by telling a story of another man.

There's a man of great means, Jesus calls him a rich man, who has a large estate, a great big, beautiful farm in fact. He's done quite well for himself, and having experienced a very good year of returns, he needs to build new barns that allow for those returns to be safeguarded.

He's only thinking about the future. You never know what the future will bring. The world is a mess, better to be safe than sorry. And then he says to himself, "Self, you've done well. Now it's time to relax. Eat and drink till you're stuffed. Be happy, Self, you've earned it." Now what's wrong with that? That's what every single retirement planning commercial tells us is the goal.

You've seen them. There's the Fidelity one that has that bright green line that you are supposed to follow as it takes you to your dreams. I have a Fidelity account, and these days I occasionally log on to see the performance of my small portfolio just so I can completely depress myself.

Some years back they had a commercial where a man left a meeting with his Fidelity advisor and as he's walking his own green line he steps off of it to look at a few classic cars for sale. But the advisor opens the front door and yells down the street, "stay on the line." It's what we are supposed to do. We stay on the line, and at the end we should get to celebrate.

So, what's God doing when God yells at this poor little rich man? God says to him, "You fool. Tonight, you will die. Now who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?" Jesus says, "This is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren't rich towards God." What's all that about?

Last spring, I read for the first time Jane Smiley's 1991 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *A Thousand Acres*. It's a modern retelling of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Set on a one-thousand-acre farm in Iowa, the prosperous farmer, Larry Cook, decides he's tired of farming, and

divides up his farm among his three daughters. When the youngest balks, he cuts her out of the will entirely. As the story develops, however, we learn that maybe Larry didn't want to do any of this in the first place. Maybe he wasn't in his right mind. Maybe he was fooled into it by a scheming banker. And perhaps his two oldest daughters were quick to claim their inheritance for their own tortured reasons.

The novel is as gorgeous in its scenery as it is tragic in its prose. I really don't want to spoil the ending, but as I said the book was written in 1991, so you've had plenty of time to read it before now. Well, that scheming banker, Marv Carson, slithers in and out of the story, until by the end he has claimed it all. All one thousand acres.

A day before the estate sale, in the very last chapter, the eldest daughter, Ginny, says, "Marv Carson wanted to be generous with us—we could take whatever personal possessions we liked [from the farmhouse], and he wasn't going to say a word about it. 'You girls deserve that much,' was what he told me over the phone."¹

We can just imagine it, can't we? Imagine Marv offering up a sly grin. He took the long view by playing off the desires of the sisters. He knew they would let their greed be better of them. They didn't just want the land. They worked to expand the entire operation by building larger barns and grain stores and hog houses than they could afford. And they longed for the neighbors to make them the envious talk of the town café.

The rich man in the story isn't that complex. In fact, I dare say he's not morally bankrupted any more than any of us. He isn't trying to scam anyone. He's not a thief. He's not mistreating his workers. He just has a deeply misguided sense of priority. He can't see the forest for the trees.

Notice the farmer's consistent focus throughout his inner monologue: "What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops?"

¹ Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*, 1st Anchor Books ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 357.

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...”

The relentless use of the first-person pronouns “I” and “my” betray a preoccupation with self. There is no thought to using such extravagance to help others. No expression of gratitude to God or anyone else for his good fortune. One scholar notes the farmer has fallen prey to worshipping the most popular of gods: the triune god we call *me, myself, and I*.

His mirror showed him that he was self-sufficient enough to not only have earned it single-handedly, but to keep it as well. That enormous excess was for him, and him alone. Who would he leave it all to anyway? He just doesn’t get it. I suspect that’s why Jesus calls him a fool.

It’s quite dangerous when we think we have it all, because in a split second it could all be gone: brain aneurism, heart attack, car crash. Jesus calls him a fool not because he has a lot, but because he’s unable (or perhaps unwilling) to share his abundance. He just doesn’t see how the hunger of his neighbor is his problem. He fails to understand the interconnection, and he doesn’t know that his own clock is about to strike midnight.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. offered a sermon on this text, and he said this about the problem with the rich man:

He was a fool because he failed to realize that wealth is always a result of the commonwealth. He talked as if he could plow the fields alone. He talked as if he could build the barns alone. He failed to realize the interdependent structure of reality... Something should remind us before we can finish eating breakfast in the morning we are dependent on more than half of the world. We get up in the morning and go to the bathroom and reach over for a sponge, and that’s handed to us by a Pacific Islander. Then

we reach over for a bar of soap, and that's given to us at the hands of a Frenchman. And then we reach up for a towel, and that's given to us by a Turk. And then we go to the kitchen for breakfast, getting ready to go to work...and we drink coffee. That's poured in our cups by a South American. Or maybe we are desirous of having tea. Then we discover that that's poured in our cup by the Chinese. Or maybe we want cocoa this morning, and then we discover that that's poured in our cup by a West African. Then we reach over for a piece of toast, only to discover that that's given to us at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. And so, before we finish eating breakfast in the morning, we are dependent on more than half the world.²

King said that in 1961, over sixty years ago. Think about how much more the global economy is interconnected now. And we think we did it all on our own. Phooey. We had help. Even when we didn't see it.

I have a friend, Sarah, who told me that when she and her husband were raising their children money was very tight. So, she said they cut back on a lot of spending. Saved where they could. Made their lifestyle fit their budget. The one thing Sarah said they didn't cut back on was their food expense.

She told me, "What bring us deep joy is making dinner for people; hosting friends and loved ones; neighbors and church members; delivering dishes to people who could use a hot meal. We wanted our kids to see us continuing to show hospitality and generosity in that way. So, we sacrificed in other areas to keep making lots of food." Friends, there's saving, and then there's saving.

It seems being rich towards God is about a lot more than giving our financial resources to the church. It's about giving our very lives away towards God and each other. What does it mean to give our life

² Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*, 1st Anchor Books ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 357.

away? I used to think it meant being prepared to take a bullet in the event a Communist soldier pointed a rifle at me and yelled “deny Christ and you can live.”

But it doesn't mean that. It means doing all of the little things that add up to Jesus. It's committee meetings; playing with our children on the floor; picking up our neighbors' paper; sitting with someone at a hospital; offering restraint in an email; showing up to Sunday morning worship; attending to the pain of someone else; making a meal for loved ones and strangers alike; praying and then listening; and when the barn starts to fill up, inviting others to come and take some grain because it won't keep forever.

It's not just the inheritance we leave for others that counts. It's how we live before the will is read. Amen.