

## **Sermon on Sunday 17 August 2025**

**Rev. Alan Stewart**

### **Rich towards God**

Recently, I've been selling off some of my record collection, mainly to make way for more records! Once a vinyl junkie, always a vinyl junkie. Imagine my surprise when I listed on Ebay a twelve inch single by Norwegian synth-pop trio Aha and, what I'd picked up in a Belfast bargain bin in the 1980s for 99p, sold for a staggering £325 and 15p!

Why's it worth that much? Well, I guess it's a combination of rarity (it's like hen's teeth apparently), condition (it's in great nick) and collectability (there's at least two crazy Aha collectors out there willing to pay crazy money to own it!)

Let's ask a slightly different question; 'how do we judge a person's worth?' What criteria might we use? Rarity? Well we're all 'one of a kind'; ain't no other you, ain't no other me. Collectability? Desire, I suppose, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Condition? Well some of us are definitely in better shape than others. Which reminds me my cassock is definitely shrinking.

More likely, we would judge someone's worth by their wealth, their skills, their status, their usefulness; their achievements, their youth, their health, their appearance, their class, their clothes; their politics; their colour.

It's a very human thing to judge others, and ourselves, even if we know that the real answer to the 'what am I worth?' question is found in 'none of the above'.

Which brings me to our parable today.

It starts with a question about one of those incredibly divisive things; inheritance Jesus however isn't interested in arbitrating between the brothers involved. Instead he says 'guard yourself from all kinds of greed; life doesn't consist in an abundance of possessions'. And then he goes on to tell a parable about a rich man who lands a record harvest, so he tears down the existing barns and builds bigger ones. Then he says to himself 'relax, take it easy; eat, drink and be merry'.

A real success story. This guy's now worth a lot. But what good is all that achievement, all those possessions, all that success, Jesus asks, when in the blink

of an eye, it can disappear. When that great leveler Death comes-a-calling, you can't take any of it with you. It's an ageless story; we devote our lives to stockpiling for our future, only to discover that we have no future.

Death gives everything perspective. It reminds us just how precious and fragile and short this one life can be.

This parable, I have to admit, hits hard personally. Not just because I'm stockpiling records, but because I know I base my identity and security in the wrong things; my job for instance, how 'successful' the churches are that I lead; in how much I'm respected or liked, and yes, in the possessions I have. I've bought into that consumer lie, that I am what I have. And it's a trap because all of these things can change just like that.

Self worth needs to be grounded in something or Someone else; something or someone bigger; something or someone dependable.

The answer to the question 'what am I worth?' is, I believe, 'I'm worth what God thinks I'm worth'. And believe it, he holds each one of us in the highest regard possible, so high in fact, he thinks we're worth dying for. This is the true basis of our worth and identity.

Jesus ends his parable with a call to be 'rich towards God'. What did he mean? Well, typically he didn't say.

I think first and foremost he's calling us to prioritise and invest in our relationship with God. When we do that, we begin to see God's definition of 'rich'.

To be rich in compassion, that ability literally to suffer alongside someone else.

To be rich in generosity, with our time, our money, our resources.

To be rich in human-kindness and mercy and forgiveness.

The rich man in the parable is painted as a self-centered and solitary person, with no one it seems to leave his fortune to. His entire focus is on his own wellbeing and therefore he leaves no lasting legacy of any worth, just barns full of rotting grain.

Every time we are 'rich towards God', a legacy is created that doesn't end when we end; it goes on living in others.

Ronald Rolheiser tells the story of young student he knew living with terminal cancer, who once said these extraordinary words; 'There are only two tragedies in life and one of them is not dying young. These are the two tragedies; if you go through life and don't love and if you go through life and don't tell those whom you love that you love them'.

I stand before you today to say that you are loved, God's beloved. And so is each and every person who walks this earth. And understanding this is the secret to breaking down the barriers between us. You know, maybe Jesus refused to provide the legal answer to the man's question about inheritance because he wanted the man to focus on his relationship with his brother, rather than the accumulation of wealth. If he had intervened, then maybe it would have led not only to a division of property but also the rupture in a relationship.

On the face of it, Jesus was by our standards of success and worth, a failure. He was poor, discredited, finally abandoned and crucified. And yet the riches of his life, his story, his teaching, his sacrifice, his Spirit, his legacy lives on millennia later, through each life that models his.

If the young man had asked Jesus a different question; 'what am I worth?', I imagine he would have said 'everything'.

Luke 12

<sup>13</sup> Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

<sup>14</sup> Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" <sup>15</sup> Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

<sup>16</sup> And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. <sup>17</sup> He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

<sup>18</sup> "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. <sup>19</sup> And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

<sup>20</sup> "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

<sup>21</sup> "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."