

# On Worldly Folly

by John Wesley

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*The sermon warns against the folly of prioritizing material possessions and wealth over spiritual growth and wealth, and encourages listeners to lay up treasure in heaven.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:19, Luke 12:20

**Topics:** "Spiritual Riches", "Worldly Wealth"

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## Description

John Wesley preaches on the folly of worldly wealth, using the parable of the rich fool from Luke 12:20 to illustrate the dangers of placing trust in material possessions rather than in God. He emphasizes that true wisdom lies in recognizing the transient nature of life and the importance of using our resources to help others rather than hoarding them for ourselves. Wesley warns that the pursuit of earthly treasures leads to spiritual emptiness and urges listeners to be 'rich toward God' instead. He calls for self-examination regarding where one's true treasure lies and encourages a life of generosity and service to others.

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## Transcript

"But God said unto him, Thou fool!" Luke 12:20.

But one of these fools is commonly wiser in his own eyes "than seven men that can render a reason." If it were possible for a Christian, for one that has the mind which was in Christ, to despise any one, he would cordially despise those who suppose "they are the men, and wisdom shall die with them." You may see one of these, painted to the life, in the verses preceding the text. "The ground of a certain rich man," says our blessed Lord, "brought forth plenteously." (Luke 12:16, &c.) "And he reasoned within himself, saying, What shall I do? for I have no room 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 fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thy ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool!" I propose, by the assistance of God,

I. To open and explain these few full words; and,

II. To apply them to your conscience.

I. 1. To open and explain them. A little before, our Lord had been giving a solemn caution to one who spoke to him about dividing his inheritance. "Beware of covetousness; for the life a man," that is, the happiness of it, "does not consist in the abundance of the things that he possesseth." To prove and

illustrate this weighty truth, our Lord relates this remarkable story. It is not improbable, it was one that had lately occurred, and that was fresh in the memory of some that were present. "The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plenteously." The riches of the ancients consisted chiefly in the fruits of the earth. "And he said within himself, What shall I do?" The very language of want and distress! The voice of one that is afflicted, and groaning under his burden. What shalt thou do? Why, are not those at the door whom God hath appointed to receive what thou canst spare? What shalt thou do? Why, disperse abroad, and give to the poor. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Be a father to the fatherless, and a husband to the widow. Freely thou hast received; freely give. O no! He is wiser than this comes to; he knows better than so.

2. "And he said, This will I do;" -- without asking God's leave, or thinking about Him any more than if there were no God in heaven or on earth; -- "I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my goods and all my fruits." My fruits! They are as much thine as the clouds that fly over thy head! As much as the winds that blow around thee; which, doubtless, thou canst hold in thy fists! "And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years!" "Soul, thou hast much goods!" Are then corn, and wine, and oil, the goods of an immortal spirit? "Laid up for many years!" Who told thee so? Believe him not; he was a liar from the beginning. He could not prolong thy life, if he would. (God alone is the giver of life and death.) And he would not, if he could; but would immediately drag thee to his own sad abode. "Soul, take thy ease; eat, drink, and be merry!" How replete with folly and madness is every part of this wonderful soliloquy! "Eat and drink?" Will thy spirit then eat and drink? Yea, but not of earthly food. Thou wilt soon eat livid flame, and drink of the lake of fire burning with brimstone. But wilt thou then drink and be merry? "Nay, there will be no mirth in those horrid shades; those caverns will resound with no music, "but weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth!"

3. But while he was applauding his own wisdom, "God said unto him, Thou fool! This night shall thy soul be required of thee. And then whose shall those things be which thou hast prepared?"

4. Let us consider his words a little more attentively. He said within himself, "What shall I do?" And is not the answer ready? Do good. Do all the good thou canst. Let thy plenty supply thy neighbour's wants; and thou wilt never want something to do. Canst thou find none that need the necessaries of life, that are pinched with cold or hunger; none that have not raiment to put on, or a place where to lay their head; none that are wasted with pining sickness; none that are languishing in prison? If you duly considered our Lord's words, "The poor have you always with you," you would no more ask, "What shall I do?"

5. How different was the purpose of this poor madman! "I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my goods." You may just as well bury them in the earth, or cast them into the sea. This will just as well answer the end for which God entrusted thee with them.

6. But let us examine a little farther the remaining part of his resolution. "I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thy ease, eat, drink, and be merry." What, are these the goods of a never-dying spirit? As well may thy body feed on the fleeting breeze, as thy soul on earthly fruits. Excellent counsel then to such a spirit, to eat and drink! to a spirit made equal to angels, made an incorruptible picture of the God of glory, to feed not on corruptible things, but on the fruit of the tree of life, which grows in the midst of the paradise of God.

7. It is no marvel, then, that God should say unto him, "Thou fool!" For this terrible reason, were there no other: "This night shall thy soul be required of thee!"

And art thou born to die,

To lay this body down?

And must thy trembling spirit fly

Into a land unknown?

-- A land of deepest shade,

Unpierced by human thought;

The dreary regions of the dead,

Where all things are forgot?

"And whose then shall all the things be which thou hast provided?"

II. 1. The Second thing which I proposed was, to apply these considerations; which, it is certain, are some of the most important that can enter into the heart of man. In one sense, indeed, they have been applied already; for what has been said has been all application. But I wish every one who reads or hears these words, directly to apply them to his own soul.

2. Does it not concern every one that hears, -- "The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully," -- to inquire, "Was this ever the case with me? Have I now, or have I ever heretofore had, more worldly goods given than I wanted? And what were my thoughts upon the occasion? Did I say in my heart, What shall I do? Was I distressed by my abundance? Did I think, 'I have much goods laid up for many years?'" Many years! Alas! What is thy life, if protracted to its utmost span? Is it not a vapour, that just appeareth, and vanisheth away? Say not, then, I will pull down my barns; but say to God, in the secret of thy heart, "Lord, save, or I perish! See, my riches increase; let me not set my heart upon them! Thou seest I stand upon slippery ground; do thou undertake for me!

Uphold me, Saviour, or I fall!

O reach me forth thy gracious hand!

Only for help on thee I call,

Only by faith in thee I stand.

See, Lord, how greatly my substance increases! Nothing less than thy almighty power can prevent my setting my heart upon it, and being crushed lower than the grave!"

3. "I ask thee, O Lord, 'What shall I do?'" First of all, endeavour to be deeply sensible of thy danger; and make it matter of earnest and constant prayer, that thou mayest never lose that sense of it. Pray that thou mayest always feel thyself standing on the brink of a precipice. Meantime, let the language of thy heart be, "Having more means, I will do more good, by the grace of God, than ever I did before. All the additional goods which it hath pleased God to put into my hands, I am resolved to lay out, with all diligence, in additional works of mercy. And hereby I shall 'lay up for myself a sure foundation, that I may attain eternal life.'"

4. Thou no longer talkest of thy goods, or thy fruits, knowing they are not thine, but God's. The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof: He is the Proprietor of heaven and earth. He cannot divest himself of his

glory; he must be the Lord, the possessor, of all that is. Only he hath left a portion of his goods in thy hands, for such uses as he has specified. How long he will be pleased to lodge them with thee, thou dost not yet know; perhaps only till to-morrow, or to-night. Therefore talk not, think not, of many years. Knowest thou not, that thou art a creature of a day, that is crushed before the moth; that the breath which is in thy nostrils may be taken away at a moment's warning; that it may be resumed by him that gave it, at a time thou thinkest not of it? How knowest thou but, the next time thou liest down on thy bed, thou mayest hear, "This night shall thy soul be required of thee?"

5. Is not thy life as unstable as a cloud; fluctuating as a bubble on the water? It fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay. "Many years!" Who is sure of one day? And is it not an instance both of the wisdom and goodness of God, that he holds thy breath in his own hand, and deals it out from moment to moment; that thou mayest always remember, to "live each day as if it were the last?" And after the few days thou shalt have spent under the sun, how soon will it be said,

A heap of dust is all remains of thee;

'Tis all thou art, and all the proud shall be!

6. Consider, again, the exquisite folly of that saying, "Soul, thou hast much goods." Are, then, the products of the earth food for a heaven-born spirit? Is there any composition of earth and water, yea, though air and fire be added thereto, which can feed those beings of a higher order? What similitude is there between those ethereal spirits, and these base-born clods of earth? Examine the rest of this wise soliloquy, and see how it will apply to yourself. "Soul, take thy ease!" O vain hope! Can ease to a spirit spring out of the ground? Suppose the soil were ever so improved, can it yield such a harvest? "Eat, drink, and be merry!" What! can thy soul eat and drink? Yea,

Manna such as angels eat,

Pure delights for spirits fit.

But these do not grow on earthly ground; they are only found in the Paradise of God.

7. But suppose the voice which commands life and death pronounce, "This night thy soul shall be required of thee; then whose are all those things thou hast provided?" Alas, they are not thine! Thou hast no longer any part or lot in any of the things that are under the sun. Thou hast then no more share in any of these things of earth, than if the earth and the works of it were burnt up. Naked thou camest out of thy mother's womb, and naked shalt thou return. Thou hast heaped up many things; but for what end? To leave them all behind thee! Poor shade! Thou art now stripped of all: Not even hope is left.

8. Observe the remark which our Lord has left upon the whole occurrence: "So is every one who layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God," -- such a fool, such an egregious madman, as it is beyond the power of language to express! However wise he may be in his own eyes, and perhaps in those of his neighbour, he is in reality the greatest fool under heaven, who heapeth up things from which he must soon be separated for ever: And whoever is seeking happiness in the things that perish is laying up treasure for himself. This is absolutely inconsistent with being "rich" (or rather, growing) "toward God;" with obeying that scriptural command, -- "My son, give me thy heart." He who is child of God can truly say. --

All my riches are above;

All my treasure is thy love:

He can testify, "All my desire is unto thee, and to the remembrance of thy name!"

9. Let every one who readeth these words, narrowly search his own heart. Where hast thou laid up thy treasure hitherto? Where art thou laying it up now? Art thou labouring to be rich toward God, or to lay up earthly goods? which takes up the greater part of thy thoughts? Thou that art careful for outward things, diligent in doing good, and exact in outward duties, -- beware of covetousness; of decent, honourable love of money; and of a desire to lay up treasures on earth. Lay up treasure in heaven! A few days hence, thou wilt step into a land of darkness; where earthly fruits will be of no avail; where thou wilt not be capable of eating and drinking, or gratifying any of thy senses. What benefit wilt thou then receive from all thou hast laid up in this world? What satisfaction in all which thou hast treasured up, -- all thou hast left behind thee? Left behind thee! What! couldst thou then take nothing with thee into the everlasting habitations? Nay then, lay up treasure, before thou go hence, which fadeth not away. Preached at Balham, February 19, 1790

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