

Question: What would Jesus say about the battles some people engage in over an inheritance? How can this kind of thing be avoided?

In our society it is not uncommon to hear of families fighting over large or small inheritances. Arguments over money and possessions from an inheritance can cause bitterness which divides siblings and creates strain between a surviving parent and other relatives for the remainder of their lives. Jesus teaches us that the way to avoid this kind of dispute is to deal with the problem of greed.

One time a man came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me” (Luke 12:13). Jesus refused to get involved in this feud because he saw the greater problem was greed between the brothers, not legal rights. As long as both brothers suffered from greed, no settlement would satisfy them (cf. Ecclesiastes 5:10-11). Jesus said to the brothers, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15).

To illustrate the problem of greed about an inheritance, Jesus told a parable: “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" 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?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:16-20).

From this parable we see that focus on self to the neglect of others is a characteristic of greed. The farmer was not called foolish because he was rich or because he was planning for the future but because he thought only of himself. In the parable, he used the words “I” and “my” eleven times. Greed tends to drive people into isolation and misery.

In addition, Jesus called attention to yet another problem with obtaining wealth through greed. God said to the rich farmer, “This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have

prepared for yourself?” (Luke 15:20). In the Old Testament, Solomon once explained it this way: “I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. . . For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune” (Ecclesiastes 2:18-21).

We also need to be aware that those who are greedy— along with all those who are immoral and impure idolaters—will have no inheritance in the kingdom of God. Instead, they will become the objects of God’s wrath (Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5-6). On the other hand, those who faithfully follow Jesus may not receive many possessions in this world; but they will receive “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3-4).

Relationships are too important to allow a battle over an inheritance to drive us apart. We need one another more than we need the inheritance. The Bible teaches that it is better to be wronged and cheated than to cheat and do wrong to another, especially a Christian brother (1 Corinthians 6:7-8). At another time Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

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