

"I Will Pull Down My Barns" (Lk. 12:18)

By St. Basil the Great (cir. 370 AD)

1. Temptations come in two forms. Sometimes affliction proves the heart like gold in a furnace, testing its purity by means of suffering. But for many, it is prosperity of life that constitutes the greatest trial. For it is equally difficult to preserve one's soul from despair in hard times, and to prevent it from becoming arrogant in prosperous circumstances. The great Job, that invincible athlete, is an example of perseverance in the first kind of temptation. With a steadfast heart and an unwavering mind, he braved all the devil's violence as if it were a raging current. The more daunting and formidable the tactics employed against him by the adversary, the more Job's superiority over the temptations was clearly demonstrated. But there are others who are examples of the temptations that come from the good life, including the rich man whose story was just read for us. Not only did he possess wealth, but he hoped to obtain even more. As the lover of humankind, God did not immediately judge him for the ingratitude of his ways, but rather attempted to satisfy him by adding even more wealth to what he already had, thus inviting his soul to a more sociable and civilized demeanor.

"The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones.'"¹ Why did the land produce abundantly, when its owner had no intention of benefiting others with the abundance? So that the patience of God might be made manifest, since God's goodness extends even to people such as this. "For He sends rain on the

righteous and on the unrighteous, and makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good.”² Indeed, such goodness on God’s part actually serves to heap even more punishment upon those who do evil. God brought showers upon the earth that had been cultivated by this man’s greedy hands, and gave sunshine to gently warm the seeds and multiply their produce in abundance. From God comes everything beneficial: fertile soil, temperate weather, plenty of seeds, cooperation of the animals, and whatever else is required for successful cultivation. But human beings respond with a bitter disposition, misanthropy, and an unwillingness to share. Such characteristics are what this man offered back to his Benefactor. He did not remember that he shared with others a common nature, nor did he think it necessary to distribute from his abundance to those in need. He did not keep even a word of the commandments: “Do not neglect to do good for the needy,”³ and “Do not let mercy and loyalty forsake you,”⁴ and “Share your bread with the hungry.”⁵ He did not heed the urgings of all the prophets and teachers.

Though his barns were filled to bursting with the abundance of his goods, his miserly heart was still not satisfied. By constantly adding more to what he already possessed, augmenting the existing surplus with annual increases, he fell into this intractable dilemma. He refused to be satisfied with what he already had on account of his greed, yet neither could he store the new harvest on account of its abundance. His purposes thus reached an impasse, and he was at a loss how to proceed. “What should I do?” he wondered. Who would not have pity on someone so besieged with troubles? He was made miserable by abundance, wretched by the good things he possessed, and still more wretched by the good things he still expected to receive. The land does not produce revenue for him, but rather brings

forth sighs of discontent; he does not harvest an abundance of produce, but rather cares and sorrows and severe hardship. He laments like those afflicted with poverty. Or rather, do even those hard pressed by poverty give forth such piteous cries? “What should I do? What will I eat? What will I wear?” These things the rich man also exclaims. He is sorely afflicted; his heart is eaten away with cares. What would cause others to rejoice causes the greedy person to waste away. He does not rejoice at all the good things he has in store, but is rather pricked to the heart by the wealth that slips through his fingers, lest perhaps, as it overflows the storehouses, some of it should trickle down to those outside his walls, so as to become a source of aid for those in need.

2. It seems to me that the passion afflicting this man’s soul resembles that of the gluttonous, who would rather burst as a result of over-indulgence than share part of what they have with those in need. O mortal, recognize your Benefactor! Consider yourself, who you are, what resources have been entrusted to you, from whom you received them, and why you received more than others. You have been made a minister of God’s goodness, a steward of your fellow servants. Do not suppose that all this was furnished for your own gullet! Resolve to treat the things in your possession as belonging to others. After all, they bring pleasure for only a little while, then fade away and disappear, but afterwards a strict accounting of their disbursement will be demanded from you.

But you! You keep everything locked up and securely fastened with gates and bars. You lie awake at night with worry, taking counsel with yourself (and having recourse to a most foolish counselor at that!). “What should I do?” How easily you might have said, “I will satisfy the souls of the hungry, I will throw open the gates of my barns and summon all

those in need. I will imitate Joseph in his philanthropic proclamation; I will cry with generous voice: ‘Come to me, all you who lack bread, let everyone share as if from common springs in what God has graciously given.’”⁶ But you are not such a person. How do I know this? You begrudge your fellow human beings what you yourself enjoy; taking wicked counsel in your soul, you consider not how you might distribute to others according to their needs, but rather how, after having received so many good things, you might rob others of their benefit.

Those who seek the soul were at hand, and this man was conversing with his soul about food! That very night his own soul would be required of him, and all the while he was imagining he would be enjoying his possessions for years to come. He was permitted to make all these decisions and to clearly express his intention, so that he might receive a sentence worthy of his choice.

3. Do not suffer the same thing yourselves. Indeed, it was for this purpose that these things were written, so that we might avoid a similar fate. Imitate the earth, O mortal. Bear fruit as it does; do not show yourself inferior to inanimate soil. After all, the earth does not nurture fruit for its own enjoyment, but for your benefit. But whatever fruit of good works you bring forth, you produce for yourself, since the grace of good works redounds to those who perform them. You gave to the poor, and in so doing not only did you make what you gave truly your own, but you received back even more. For just as grain, when it falls upon the ground, brings forth an increase for the one who scatters it, thus also bread cast to the hungry yields considerable profit at a later time. Therefore, let the end of your harvesting be the

beginning of a heavenly sowing. As the Scripture says, "Sow for yourselves righteousness."⁷

Why then do you go to so much trouble, why do you wear yourself out, seeking to secure your wealth with bricks and mortar? After all, "a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches."⁸ If it is the honor that derives from wealth that attracts you, just think how much more glory you will gain by having a multitude of children call you "father" than by having a multitude of gold coins jingling in your purse.⁹ You must leave your money behind in the end whether you will or no, but the honor that proceeds from good works will escort you to the Master. All the people will surround you when you stand before the Judge of all, calling you "father" and "benefactor" and all the other titles that pertain to those who show philanthropy. Do you not see those in the theaters, who, for the sake of momentary glory and the applause and acclaim of the crowds, scatter their wealth to wrestlers, actors, animal tamers and the like, even though they are reprehensible characters? And you, are you fainthearted in your spending, when you are about to attain such great glory? God will receive you, angels will extol you, all people from the creation of the world will bless you. Your glory will be eternal; you will inherit the crown of righteousness and the Kingdom of Heaven. All these things will be your reward for your stewardship of perishable things. But you do not even consider them, forgetting about things hoped for in your concern for the things of the present.

Come now, distribute your wealth lavishly, becoming honorable and glorious in your expenditures for the needy. Let what is said of the righteous be said also of you, "They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever."¹⁰ Do not enhance your own

worth by trafficking in the needs of others. Do not wait for a dearth of grain to open your granary: “The people curse those who hold back grain.”¹¹ Do not wait for a famine in order to acquire gold. Do not make common need a means of private gain. Do not become a dealer in human misery. Do not attempt to turn the chastisement of God into an opportunity for profit. Do not chafe the wounds of those who have already been scourged.

You, however, have regard for gold, but not for your own brothers and sisters. You recognize the inscription on the face of a coin, and can tell the counterfeit from the genuine, but you completely ignore your brothers and sisters in their time of need.

4. Yes, while the glitter of gold so allures you, you fail to notice how great are the groans of the needy that follow you wherever you go. How can I bring the sufferings of the poverty-stricken to your attention? When they look around inside their hovels, they do not spy any gold among their things, nor shall they ever. They find only clothes and furnishings so miserable that, if all their belongings were reckoned together, they would be worth only a few cents. What then? They turn their gaze to their own children, thinking that perhaps by bringing them to the slave-market they might find some respite from death. Consider now the violent struggle that takes place between the desperation arising from famine and a parent’s fundamental instincts. Starvation on the one side threatens a horrible death, while nature resists, convincing the parents rather to die with their children. Time and again they vacillate, but in the end they succumb, driven by want and cruel necessity.

And what does a parent think at such times? “ Which one should I sell first? Which one will earn the greatest favor with the grain merchant? Should I choose the eldest? But I cannot bear to do so, since he is the firstborn. The youngest? But I take pity on his youth, as yet untouched by tragedy. This one looks just like his mother, that one shows aptitude in his lessons. Curse this helplessness! What am I to do? Which of my children shall I strike? What kind of beast shall I become? How can I forget the bond of nature? If I hold onto all of them, I must watch them all perish with hunger. If I send one of them away, how will I be able to look the others in the eye ever again? They will always view me with suspicion and mistrust. How can I manage my household, when I am responsible for the loss of one of my own children? How can I ever sit down at the table, which now has plenty of food as a result of such a decision? ”

And while the parents come with tears streaming down their faces to sell the dearest of their children, you are not swayed by their sufferings; you take no account of nature. While famine oppresses these miserable wretches, you hem and haw, feigning ignorance of their plight, and thus prolonging the agony. They come offering their very heart in exchange for food. And yet not only is your hand not stricken with paralysis for taking profits from such misfortune, but you haggle for even more! You wrangle so as to take much and give little in return, increasing the tragedy on every side for these wretches. Tears do not move you, groans do not soften your heart, but you remain adamant and unbending.

In everything you see gold, you imagine everything as gold; it is your dream when you sleep and your first thought when you awaken. Just as those who are out of their mind do not see reality, but rather imagine things out of their malady, thus

also your soul, being seized with avarice, sees everything as gold or silver. You would rather see gold than the sun itself. You wish that everything could be transformed by nature and become gold, and for your part you intend to turn as many things into gold as you can.

5. To what lengths will you not go for gold? Your grain becomes gold for you, your wine solidifies into gold, your wool is transformed into gold; every exchange, every thought produces gold for you. Gold itself brings forth even more gold, multiplying itself through loans at interest. There is no satisfying the craving; no limit to the desire is to be found. We often permit immoderate children to gorge themselves on the things they desire the most, so that by means of overindulgence they might learn moderation. But greedy people are not like this; rather, the more they stuff themselves, the more they desire. "If riches flow in, do not set your heart on them."¹² But you check the flow and stop up the outlets. When riches are closed up like this so that they become stagnant, what do they do for you? Once wealth has been forcibly contained until it becomes a flood, it washes away all its embankments; it destroys the storehouses of the rich man and tears down his treasuries, charging like some kind of enemy warrior.

But will he indeed build larger storehouses? It seems doubtful that he will leave anything but ruins to his successors. For his departure from life came much sooner than his greedy plan to rebuild the storehouses could be accomplished. Let him meet the end that accords with his evil intent; but you, if you are persuaded by me, will throw open all the gates of your treasury, supplying liberal outlets for your wealth. Like a mighty river that is divided into many streams in order to irrigate the fertile soil, so also are those who give their wealth to be divided up and distributed in the houses of the poverty-stricken. Wells become

more productive if they are drained completely, while they silt up if they are left standing. Thus wealth left idle is of no use to anyone, but put to use and exchanged it becomes fruitful and beneficial for the public.

How great is the praise of the recipients of beneficence; do not discount it! How great is the reward from the righteous Judge; do not doubt Him! Let the example of the rich man who is under examination accompany you everywhere. By keeping what he already had, while at the same time endeavoring to gain even more, he committed tomorrow's sins today. No suppliant had yet approached, but he showed his cruelty in advance. He had not yet gathered his harvest, yet he was already found guilty of avarice. The earth was welcoming all to its richness: it germinated the crops deep in the furrows, produced large clusters of grapes on the vine, made the olive tree bend under a vast quantity of fruit, and offered every delicious variety of the fruit tree. But the rich man was unwelcoming and unfruitful; he did not even possess as yet, and already he begrudged the needy.

And besides, how many perils there are before the ingathering of the harvest! For hail may flatten the crops, searing heat may snatch them out of hand, or unseasonable rain may ruin them as it pours down from the clouds. Yet you do not pray to the Lord to complete the good work. Rather, by anticipation you make yourself unworthy of receiving what has just begun to sprout.

6. Though you speak to yourself in secret, your words are examined in heaven. Thus, it is from heaven that you will receive your reply. But what sort of things do you say to yourself? "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry day after day." Oh, what

senselessness! If you had the soul of a pig, what better news could you have given it? Are you really so animal-like, so devoid of understanding as to what is good for the soul, that you offer it the foods of the flesh and serve it things that go into the latrine? If your soul possesses virtue, if it is full of good works and dwells near to God, then indeed it has “many good things,” and should rejoice with the soul’s own pure joy. But because you consider only earthly things and have made your belly into a god, because you are entirely fleshly and enslaved by passions, hear the fitting appellation that is given to you, not by any human being, but by the Lord Himself: “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” Worse even than eternal punishment is this scorn on account of your folly.

In just a little while, his life will be snatched away, and what is he thinking? “I will pull down my barns and build larger ones.” Well done, I would say for my part. The treasuries of injustice well deserve to be torn down. With your own hands, raze these misbegotten structures. Destroy the granaries from which no one has ever gone away satisfied. Demolish every storehouse of greed, pull down the roofs, tear away the walls, expose the moldering grain to the sunlight, lead forth from prison the fettered wealth, vanquish the gloomy vaults of Mammon.

“I will pull down my barns and build larger ones.” But if you fill these larger ones, what do you intend to do next? Will you tear them down yet again only to build them up once more? What could be more ridiculous than this incessant toil, laboring to build and then laboring to tear down again? If you want storehouses, you have them in the stomachs of the poor. Lay up for yourself treasure in heaven. The things deposited there are not devoured by moths, nor are they spoiled by

corruption, nor do thieves break in and steal them. But you reply, "I will give to the needy when I have filled the second set of barns." You are so sure that the years of your life will be many; beware, lest death the pursuer catch up to you sooner than you expect! And even your promise is not a token of goodness, but rather a sign of your evil intent. For you promise, not so that you might give in the future, but rather so that you might evade responsibility in the present. At this very moment, what prevents you from giving? Are not the needy near at hand? Are not your barns already full? Is not your heavenly reward waiting? Is not the commandment crystal clear? The hungry are perishing, the naked are freezing to death, the debtors are unable to breathe, and will you put off showing mercy until tomorrow? Listen to Solomon: "Do not say to your neighbor, 'Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it.'"¹³ You do not know what tomorrow will bring.

How many precepts you ignore, since your ears are plugged with avarice! How much gratitude you ought to have shown to your Benefactor, how joyful and radiant you ought to have been that you are not one of those who crowd in at others' doors, but rather others are knocking at your door. But now you lower your eyes and quicken your step, muttering hasty responses, lest anyone pry some small coin from your grasp. You know how to say only one thing: "I do not have, I cannot give, I myself am poor." You are poor indeed and bereft of all goodness: poor in love, poor in kindness, poor in faith towards God, poor in eternal hope. Make your brothers and sisters sharers of your grain; give to the needy today what rots away tomorrow. Truly, this is the worst kind of avarice: not even to share perishable goods with those in need.

7. “But whom do I treat unjustly,” you say, “by keeping what is my own?” Tell me, what is your own? What did you bring into this life? From where did you receive it? It is as if someone were to take the first seat in the theater, then bar everyone else from attending, so that one person alone enjoys what is offered for the benefit of all in common — this is what the rich do. They seize common goods before others have the opportunity, then claim them as their own by right of preemption. For if we all took only what was necessary to satisfy our own needs, giving the rest to those who lack, no one would be rich, no one would be poor, and no one would be in need.

Did you not come forth naked from the womb, and will you not return naked to the earth? Where then did you obtain your belongings? If you say that you acquired them by chance, then you deny God, since you neither recognize your Creator, nor are you grateful to the One who gave these things to you. But if you acknowledge that they were given to you by God, then tell me, for what purpose did you receive them? Is God unjust, when He distributes to us unequally the things that are necessary for life? Why then are you wealthy while another is poor? Why else, but so that you might receive the reward of benevolence and faithful stewardship, while the poor are honored for patient endurance in their struggles? But you, stuffing everything into the bottomless pockets of your greed, assume that you wrong no one; yet how many do you in fact dispossess?

Who are the greedy? Those who are not satisfied with what suffices for their own needs. Who are the robbers? Those who take for themselves what rightfully belongs to everyone. And you, are you not greedy? Are you not a robber? The things you received in trust as a stewardship, have you not appropriated them for yourself? Is not the person

who strips another of clothing called a thief? And those who do not clothe the naked when they have the power to do so, should they not be called the same? The bread you are holding back is for the hungry, the clothes you keep put away are for the naked, the shoes that are rotting away with disuse are for those who have none, the silver you keep buried in the earth is for the needy. You are thus guilty of injustice toward as many as you might have aided, and did not.

8. “These are fine words,” you say, “but gold is finer still.” It is just as in the case of those who converse with the licentious concerning chastity: while they are condemning immorality, those whom they address are burning with desire at the reminder. How can I bring the sufferings of the poor to your attention, so that you might realize from what misery you are collecting riches for yourself? Oh, how desirable will these words appear to you on the day of judgment: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was naked and you gave me clothing.”¹⁴ But how great will be the trembling, the sweat, and the darkness that surround you when you hear the sentence: “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was naked and you did not give me clothing.”¹⁵ Moreover, those who are under accusation in this passage are not those who have stolen anything; these charges are rather leveled against those who have not shared with others.

I have spoken words that I thought would be profitable for you. For you who are persuaded, the promised good things that await are evident; for you who disobey, the threatened

punishments have been plainly written down. I hope that you may escape these chastisements by making a better choice than the rich man, so that your own riches may become a ransom for you, and you may progress toward the good things that have been prepared for us in heaven, by the grace of the One who calls us all into His Kingdom, to whom be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Notes

1 Lk 12.16–17.

2 Cf. Mt 5.45; Basil reverses the usual order.

3 Prov 3.27 LXX.

4 Prov 3.3 LXX.

5 Is 58.7.

6 Cf. Gen 41.53 – 57.

7 Hos 10.12.

8 Prov 22.1.

9 Basil here seems to play on the assonance between *pater* (“father”) and *stater* (a gold coin).

10 Ps 112.9.

11 Prov 11.26.

12 Ps 61.10 LXX.

13 Prov 3.28.

14 Mt 25.34–36.

15 Mt 25.41–43.

Translation from the book *On Social Justice*.