

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

A Catholic Bible Study

· SESSION SEVEN ·

Wealth, Detachment, and Stewardship

The Rich Fool · The Unrighteous Steward · The Talents · Lazarus and the Rich Man

“A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

Luke 12:15 (RSV2CE)

LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE · WITH PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION

SESSION OVERVIEW

This session takes up a topic Jesus speaks about more often than nearly any other, and that contemporary Christians address less often than nearly any other. Jesus told more parables about money and possessions than about prayer. The Rich Fool warns against the illusion that wealth secures the soul. The Unrighteous Steward teaches the wise use of money for eternal purposes. The Talents make clear that what God entrusts to us must be invested, not buried. Lazarus and the Rich Man closes with the most pointed teaching Jesus gives about the eternal weight of how we treat the poor.

The pastoral aim is not to produce guilt about money but to surface the underlying spiritual question: to whom do my possessions belong? Catholic teaching here is consistent and ancient: God entrusts material goods to us as stewards, and we will give an account. The disciple’s relationship to wealth is the visible expression of the disciple’s actual loyalties.

Audience note: high-schoolers largely live off their parents’ resources; young adults are often dealing with student loans, first salaries, and habits that will shape decades. For high-schoolers the question is forming desires before the larger sums arrive; for young adults it is establishing the practice of generosity now, before lifestyle creep makes it harder later.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The Rich Fool: the soul required tonight

Luke 12:13-21 begins with a man asking Jesus to settle an inheritance dispute. Jesus refuses the role of arbiter and names the deeper problem: “Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man’s life does

not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Lk 12:15). The parable is short and devastating. A rich man whose land has produced abundantly plans bigger barns and years of comfortable ease, addressing his soul: “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry” (Lk 12:19). God’s response cuts the parable in half: “Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (Lk 12:20).

St. Basil the Great’s engagement with this parable is one of the most challenging texts in the patristic tradition. In his homilies *I Will Tear Down My Barns* and *To the Rich*, he presses the logic with disquieting clarity. The rich man’s sin is not that he is wealthy but that he calls the goods his own when they were entrusted to him for the relief of others. St. Basil’s teaching, faithfully summarized: the bread you keep belongs to the hungry, the cloak in your closet to the naked, the shoes molding in your possession to the barefoot, the silver buried in the earth to the destitute. To possess what you do not need while another goes without what they need is to keep what is not yours.

This is harder than most modern readers want it to be. The parable is not addressed only to the very wealthy; it is addressed to anyone who, like the man in the parable, has begun to identify the safety of the soul with the abundance of the barns. The fundamental question is not how much money the disciple has, but who the disciple thinks owns it.

The Unrighteous Steward: wise use of an unjust mammon

Luke 16:1-13 is one of the most difficult parables because Jesus appears to commend behavior that is, on its face, dishonest. The steward, fired for waste, rapidly reduces the debts of his master’s creditors so they will welcome him after his dismissal, and the master commends him for his shrewdness. Jesus then draws the lesson: “Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations” (Lk 16:9).

The tradition has clarified what Jesus is and is not commending. He is not commending the steward’s dishonesty; he is commending his urgency and his recognition that his position is temporary. The shrewd steward used what was about to be taken from him to secure relationships that would outlast his job. The disciple’s wealth is likewise temporary and should be used now, while it is still in hand, to make eternal friends: to bless the poor (with whom Christ identifies himself, and by whose treatment he judges us, Mt 25:31-46), to support the Church, to fund the works of mercy. The point is not the morality of the steward’s methods but the recognition that wealth must be deployed for purposes that survive death. The parable closes with one of Jesus’ most uncompromising statements: “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Lk 16:13). Money is not neutral; it functions as a rival lord, and the disciple must decide which one receives the loyalty.

The Talents: investing what is entrusted

The Talents (Mt 25:14-30) and its parallel, the Pounds (Lk 19:11-27), share a structure: a master entrusts goods, departs, and returns to settle accounts. The faithful servants invest and produce a return; the unfaithful servant buries what he received and produces nothing. His defense is revealing: “Master, I knew you to be a hard man ... so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground” (Mt 25:24-25). His failure is not dishonesty; it is fear-driven inaction.

St. John Chrysostom (*Homilies on Matthew*, Hom. 78) treats the buried talent as a warning to those who treat their gifts as private possessions rather than goods entrusted for the service of others: the servant did not lose what he was given; he simply did not put it to use. St. Gregory the Great (Forty Gospel

Homilies, Homily 9, on the Talents) reads the talents as every gift God entrusts, not money alone. Extending his principle: what is entrusted includes intelligence, skills, time, education, opportunity, family, and faith; each disciple has a portfolio specific to his or her life, and each will give an account of what was done with it. The diversity of amounts (five, two, one) is part of the teaching: the master's assessment is proportional to what was given. The question is not whether you are the five-talent or the one-talent servant, but whether you have invested what you have.

Lazarus and the Rich Man: the eternal weight of how we treat the poor

Luke 16:19-31 is the only parable in which Jesus gives a character a name. Lazarus, the beggar at the rich man's gate, is named; the rich man is not. In life the rich man is anonymous to anyone outside his circle and the beggar is anonymous to him; in death the situation reverses, and Lazarus is in the bosom of Abraham, named and known, while the rich man is in torment and unknown. The rich man's sin is not active cruelty; he never abuses Lazarus. His sin is that he stepped over Lazarus every day at his own gate without seeing him. The neglect was the sin. This parable is addressed to anyone who has more than they need while another, in their own line of sight, has less. The eternal stakes are unmistakable.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

These are the deep roots of Session 7's parables. The Proverbs text is opened with the group in the Unrighteous Steward discussion; the rest are developed here.

PSALM 49:16-20 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"Be not afraid when one becomes rich ... For when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not go down after him ... Man cannot abide in his pomp, he is like the beasts that perish."

Psalms 49 is the wisdom background of the Rich Fool: wealth does not extend the life or accompany the soul beyond the grave. The Rich Fool dramatizes what the Psalm declares.

PROVERBS 19:17 (RSV2CE)

"He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed."

Proverbs 19:17 is the structural logic behind both Lazarus and the Rich Man and the sheep and goats of Matthew 25. Mercy to the poor is treated by God as an investment with him personally; neglect of the poor is a debt the soul will face.

DEUTERONOMY 15:7-8 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren ... you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need."

Deuteronomy 15 establishes the foundational obligation: generosity to the poor is not optional charity but a covenantal duty rooted in God's prior generosity to Israel. The rich man at his gate violates this covenant in its most basic form.

ISAIAH 58:6-7 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness ... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him?"

Isaiah 58 is one of the clearest Old Testament statements that worship without justice for the poor is unacceptable to God. It is the prophetic background for everything Jesus says about wealth and the poor.

SIRACH 29:10-12 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"Lose your silver for the sake of a brother or a friend ... Lay up your treasure according to the commandments of the Most High, and it will profit you more than gold. Store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will rescue you from all affliction."

Sirach 29 articulates the theology behind the Unrighteous Steward and Lazarus: almsgiving is not charity added to the spiritual life; it is itself an act of the spiritual life that stores treasure where rust cannot reach. Jesus draws on a coherent Jewish tradition when he tells these parables.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

Method: Direct quotations appear in quotation marks with citation; faithfully represented teaching without a single quotable line is given as paraphrase with citation.

St. Basil the Great (c. 330–379)

St. Basil's homilies *I Will Tear Down My Barns* and *To the Rich* are the tradition's most sustained engagement with the Rich Fool. God entrusts wealth to the rich for the relief of the poor; goods retained beyond genuine need are not the rich man's property but the poor man's. This is not communism in any modern sense: St. Basil affirms private property and personal responsibility, but he insists that ownership is stewardship, not absolute possession, and that the soul that hoards is not safe but in moral peril.

St. John Chrysostom (347–407)

St. John Chrysostom returns to Lazarus and the Rich Man across his preaching, most powerfully in his series *On Wealth and Poverty* (seven homilies on Lazarus): the rich man's sin was not active cruelty but the failure to see the poor man at his own gate. On the Talents (*Homilies on Matthew*, Hom. 78) he presses that the unfaithful servant's sin is not theft but inaction; many Christians fail not by sin in the obvious sense but by neglecting to put their gifts to use.

St. Gregory the Great (540–604)

St. Gregory's Forty Gospel Homilies (Homily 9, on the Talents) reads the talents as every gift God entrusts, not money alone. Extending his principle, the gifts entrusted include intelligence, time, education, position, opportunity, and faith, as well as money; each disciple has a particular portfolio,

and each gives an account proportional to what was given. The servant with one talent is not condemned for having only one but for failing to use it.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)

St. Thomas treats the moral theology of property in *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 66. Drawing on the patristic tradition (especially St. Ambrose and St. Basil), he teaches that private ownership is licit and even necessary for ordered social life, but that ownership exists for the universal destination of goods: goods a person possesses in superabundance are due, by natural law, to the succor of the poor (ST II-II, q. 66, a. 7); and in a case of manifest and urgent necessity, one who takes what is needed to sustain life does not commit theft, because in such necessity all things are common. This is not a denial of property rights but the framework within which they are rightly understood.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 2401

“The seventh commandment forbids unjustly taking or keeping the goods of one’s neighbor and wronging him in any way with respect to his goods. It commands justice and charity in the care of earthly goods and the fruits of men’s labor.”

CCC 2404

“In his use of things man should regard the external goods he legitimately owns not merely as exclusive to himself but common to others also, in the sense that they can benefit others as well as himself. The ownership of any property makes its holder a steward of Providence.”

CCC 2447

“The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities. ... Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God.”

SESSION GOALS AND TIME ESTIMATE

Goals for the leader

1. Surface the often-unconscious assumption that wealth secures the soul. The Rich Fool exposes it. **2.** Establish the Catholic teaching that ownership is stewardship, not absolute possession. **3.** Press the Talents into the specifics of each participant’s entrusted portfolio. **4.** Let Lazarus and the Rich Man land with the eternal weight Jesus gives it. Do not soften it. **Time estimate (90 minutes)**



Opening prayer and check-in: 10 min



The Rich Fool (read, discussion): 20 min



The Unrighteous Steward (read, Proverbs discovery, discussion): 15 min



The Talents (read, discussion): 20 min



Lazarus and the Rich Man (read, discussion): 15 min



Application and closing prayer: 10 min

PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

“Father, all that we have comes from your hand. Tonight as we hear your Son’s parables about wealth and stewardship, give us courage to hear what is hard. Help us to recognize that what you have entrusted to us is for your purposes, not ours alone. Show us how to invest, not bury, what you have given. Open our eyes to the Lazarus at our gate. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Check-In (5–10 min)

Briefly: did you do the concrete act for the wounded person you named last week? What did it teach you?

READ ALOUD

Jesus told more parables about money and possessions than about prayer; he clearly thought this was a topic the Christian life depends on. Tonight we hear four of them. They will not be comfortable. They ask us to look honestly at our relationship to what we have, and to those who have less. The aim is not guilt; it is conversion.

PART ONE · THE RICH FOOL (LUKE 12:13-21)

Have someone read Luke 12:13-21 aloud.

LUKE 12:18-21 (RSV2CE)

“And he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones ... And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they

be?’ So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

READ ALOUD

St. Basil the Great preached on this parable in fourth-century Cappadocia, and his teaching is uncomfortable and inescapable. The bread you keep and do not need belongs to the hungry; the cloak in your closet you do not wear belongs to the naked; the shoes molding in your possession belong to the barefoot; the silver buried in the earth belongs to the destitute. He is not making a modern political point about ownership; he is making a theological one. Goods that exceed our need and that we have not directed toward those who lack are, in the moral order, not ours. We have been entrusted with them.

Q1. [TEXT] The rich man’s plans are not, on their face, evil; he stores his crops and plans for the future. Look carefully at his speech in verses 17-19. What is the precise problem with what he says?

Leader note: He addresses his soul as if it were secured by the abundance in his barns. He calls the goods “my grain” and “my goods,” plans many years ahead on the strength of his possessions, and treats wealth as the foundation of the soul’s safety. God’s response cuts through every assumption: the wealth is not ultimately his, and the years are not his to plan. God is the true owner; the man holds his goods as a steward who will give an account (cf. CCC 2404). His ownership is real but not absolute.

Q2. [TRADITION] St. Basil teaches that what we have beyond our genuine need belongs, in moral fact, to those who lack what they need. How does this fit alongside the Catholic affirmation of private property and personal responsibility?

Leader note: Catholic teaching affirms private property as a real good, and also the universal destination of goods (CCC 2401-2402): created goods are intended by God for the benefit of all, and ownership is a stewardship under that intention. St. Basil is not denying property; he is locating it within its theological purpose. Personal responsibility includes using what God has entrusted in a way that serves his purposes for those goods.

Q3. [LIFE] Be honest: in what specific ways have you treated something you possess as if it were ultimately yours rather than entrusted? It might be money, time, energy, or talent. The question is the rich fool’s.

Leader note: The convicting question. Press for honesty. The point is not to extract a list of failures but to surface the underlying disposition. Most participants have areas where stewardship has slid into ownership. Recognition is the first conversion.

PART TWO · THE UNRIGHTEOUS STEWARD (LUKE 16:1-13)

Have someone read Luke 16:1-13 aloud. This is one of the more puzzling parables Jesus tells.

LUKE 16:8-9, 13 (RSV2CE)

“The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness; for the sons of this world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations ... You cannot serve God and mammon.”

Now have someone read Proverbs 19:17 aloud.

PROVERBS 19:17 (RSV2CE)

“He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed.”

Q4. [TEXT] Jesus is plainly not commending the steward’s dishonesty. Read Proverbs 19:17 beside the parable. In its light, what is Jesus commending, and what does “making friends by means of mammon” actually mean?

Leader note: He commends the steward’s urgency and his recognition that his position is temporary: the steward used what was about to be taken from him to make friendships that would outlast his job. Proverbs 19:17 supplies the mechanism: kindness to the poor is a loan to the Lord himself, who repays. So “making friends by means of mammon” means using temporary wealth now, for the poor, the Church, and the works of mercy, to secure what survives death. Let the group connect the two texts before you summarize.

Q5. [TRADITION] Jesus closes with one of the most uncompromising lines in the Gospels: “You cannot serve God and mammon.” Why frame the choice as binary? What does that imply about the way money operates in a soul?

Leader note: Money is not neutral; it functions as a rival lord. A person who treats money as the foundation of safety has, structurally, the same posture toward money that a worshiper has toward God, and the two cannot occupy the same place in the soul. Jesus is not saying you cannot have money; he is saying you cannot serve it as if it were God. The disciple has to decide which one will be Lord.

PART THREE · THE TALENTS (MATTHEW 25:14-30)

Have someone read Matthew 25:14-30 aloud.

MATTHEW 25:24-26 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

“He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man ... so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant!’”

READ ALOUD

St. Gregory the Great preached on the Talents in his Forty Gospel Homilies (Homily 9), teaching that the talents are every gift God has entrusted, not just money. Extending his insight: intelligence, time, opportunity, education, position, faith, family, health, even suffering. Each of us has been entrusted with a portfolio specific to our life. The question is not whether you are the five-talent or the one-talent servant. The question is whether you have invested what you have.

Q6. [TEXT] Look at the unfaithful servant’s defense: he calls the master a hard man and says he was afraid. What does fear do to stewardship? Why is the buried talent worse than a risky investment that lost half its value?

Leader note: Fear paralyzes; the buried talent produced nothing, while a risky investment would at least have shown movement and trust. The rebuke (“wicked and slothful servant”) is striking because the servant did not steal or squander;

he just hid. Inaction with what God has given is itself a moral failure. And fear is no defense, because the master is not actually who the servant said he was; his true character is shown in his generosity to the faithful servants.

Q7. [LIFE] What specific gift has God entrusted to you that you have been burying out of fear? A gift of speech, of presence, of resource, of leadership, of skill, of faith. What would it look like this week to take a small step toward investing it rather than hiding it?

Leader note: Press for specificity. Every participant has at least one buried talent. Common ones in young-adult groups: a gift of teaching not offered, a willingness to lead a study that has been postponed, a generosity delayed until “when I have more,” a friendship gift kept private. The first investment is small; the first step matters more than the eventual size.

PART FOUR · LAZARUS AND THE RICH MAN (LUKE 16:19-31)

Have someone read Luke 16:19-31 aloud.

LUKE 16:19-23 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

“There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores ... The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom.”

READ ALOUD

Notice that Lazarus is named and the rich man is not; this is the only parable in which Jesus gives a character a name. In life the rich man is anonymous to anyone outside his circle, and the beggar is anonymous to him. In death the situation reverses. St. John Chrysostom’s point is sharp: the rich man’s sin is not active cruelty. He never beats Lazarus. His sin is that he stepped over Lazarus every day at his own gate without seeing him.

Q8. [TEXT] The rich man and Lazarus are physically close in life; Lazarus is at the gate. Why does the proximity in life make no difference, and what does that proximity become in eternity?

Leader note: Proximity without recognition is moral failure. The rich man saw Lazarus daily and never closed the small distance, and in eternity that distance becomes an unbridgeable chasm (Lk 16:26). The gap we tolerate in life becomes the gap we cannot cross in death. The geography reverses: Lazarus, kept outside the gate in life, is now inside Abraham’s embrace; the rich man, inside his comfortable house, is now outside the realm of comfort.

Q9. [LIFE] Who is Lazarus at your gate right now? Not in the abstract. Specifically. Who is the person whose hardship is in your line of sight whom you have learned not to see?

Leader note: Press for specifics. Lazarus is not a category; Lazarus is a person: a homeless man on a regular route, an aging neighbor, a coworker going through a divorce, a classmate whose family is collapsing, a grandparent whose loneliness has been ignored. The parable converts when the person is named.

Q10. [TRADITION] What does it mean that this is the only parable in which Jesus names a character? What is he doing by naming the beggar and not the rich man?

Leader note: He reverses the world’s evaluation. In life the rich man is famous and the beggar anonymous; in Jesus’ telling the beggar has a name and the rich man does not. Heaven sees what earth misses. God knows by name the ones the

world overlooks, while the rich man's anonymity reflects his culpable neglect, not his wealth as such. It is a quiet revolution in how God values, not a claim that poverty alone saves or wealth alone condemns.

APPLICATION AND CLOSING

CLOSING CHALLENGE

Three concrete practices this week. First, identify one specific item or amount you currently treat as yours but could direct toward someone in need, and direct it. Do not wait. Second, take the buried talent you named in question seven and make one investment with it this week, however small. Third, name the Lazarus at your gate and do one thing this week to recognize him by name: bring him a meal, sit with him, send him support. The parables will be doing their work in you for the rest of your life; this week, begin.

Scripture Memory

LUKE 16:13 (RSV2CE)

"No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

Closing Prayer

"Father, you have entrusted us with goods, gifts, time, and opportunities that are not finally ours. Forgive us for the times we have called 'mine' what was always yours, and the times we have stepped over Lazarus at our gate without seeing him. Give us courage to invest, not bury, what you have placed in our hands. Make us, this week, faithful stewards of what you have entrusted, and merciful neighbors to those you have placed in our path. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen."

GOING DEEPER (OPTIONAL)

Use any of these as your group has time and interest.

QGD1. [TEXT] Read Matthew 25:31-46 alongside tonight's parables. The sheep and goats sets the same teaching at the eschatological level. How does it confirm and intensify what you have heard?

Leader note: Matthew 25 makes explicit what the parables imply: the way the disciple treats the poor, hungry, stranger, sick, and imprisoned is the way the disciple treats Christ himself. The Lazarus at your gate is, in moral and spiritual reality, Jesus at your gate, and the eschatological consequence is the same as in Luke 16.

QGD2. [TRADITION] CCC 2447 calls almsgiving "a work of justice pleasing to God," not only charity. Why does the Church frame almsgiving as justice, and what changes when we hear it that way?

Leader note: Justice is what is owed; charity is given beyond what is owed. Drawing on St. Basil and the universal destination of goods, the tradition teaches that the relief of those in need is, in part, a matter of justice, not purely optional generosity. This is not communism; it is the recognition that goods exist within God's providence for the good of all. Hearing almsgiving as justice corrects the temptation to treat all giving as elective.

QGD3. [LIFE] If you are a young adult beginning to earn an income, this is the season in which lifelong patterns of generosity are formed or not formed. What disciplines would you want to put in place now, while it is still relatively easy, that will be much harder later?

***Leader note:** Concrete suggestions: a percentage commitment to the parish (CCC 2043 names contribution to the needs of the Church among the precepts), a regular almsgiving practice, an automatic transfer that happens before lifestyle expands, a rule of life that fixes generosity as the first call on income rather than the last. The point is the discipline of generosity, not a particular percentage.*

QGD4. [TRADITION] CCC 2404 calls every property owner “a steward of Providence.” What changes about your relationship to your possessions to think of yourself as a steward rather than an owner?

***Leader note:** Stewardship implies accountability: a steward will give an account and holds property under another’s authority and direction, whereas an owner can do as he pleases. The tradition refuses the language of absolute ownership and locates all human possession within God’s prior ownership. This frame is not less serious than secular ownership but more, because the steward’s use will be evaluated.*

SCRIPTURE INDEX FOR THIS SESSION

Primary parables: Luke 12:13-21 | Luke 16:1-13 | Matthew 25:14-30 (with Luke 19:11-27) | Luke 16:19-31

Old Testament background: Psalm 49 | Proverbs 19:17 | Deuteronomy 15:7-11 | Isaiah 58:6-7 | Sirach 29:8-13

New Testament support: Matthew 6:19-21 | Matthew 25:31-46 | 1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19 | James 5:1-6

Catechism: CCC 2401, 2402, 2404, 2447

Sources cited: St. Basil the Great, *I Will Tear Down My Barns and To the Rich* | St. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty* and *Homilies on Matthew*, Hom. 78 | St. Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, Homily 9 | St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 66.