

His name was Henry Thomas Paige, but those who knew him had given him the nickname *old pancake*. A Canadian by birth, he had moved down to the western United States during the California gold rush. Since the vast majority of treasure hunters were migrating to California, Henry spent most of his time wandering around Idaho, Nevada and Montana looking for gold. He laid claim to as many areas as he could, hoping that he might strike it rich somewhere. One day, Old Pancake saw a couple of miners wandering around a ridge of one of the areas that he had claimed. He rode his horse down to let these miners know that this was his claim. During the conversation, the 2 miners expressed their interest in the area to Henry. The greed in Paige immediately rose to the surface. He had little in the claim; maybe he could turn a fast profit. After a few minutes of haggling back and forth, Henry finally agreed to sell these 2 miners the rights to 160 acres for \$11,000. Overjoyed at his apparent good fortune, Henry took the money and ran. He invested it in a general store that went bankrupt and lost every penny of it. Eventually, penniless and despairing, Henry took his own life in 1870. Those 2 miners? They began to work that area, and eventually they struck it rich. For that land, which they bought for \$11,000, has yielded one half of all the silver that has ever been mined in our country, estimated at over 100 million dollars. The whole reconstruction of our country after the Civil War was funded by the ore found on that one property. But the only thing that greedy Henry ever got out of that land was his name. Henry Thomas Paige Comstock thought that he had made a fast buck when he first sold those 160 acres to those naive miners; but it was through their hard work and persistence that the Comstock Lode of silver that funded the rebuilding of our country was mined.

We have been looking at several areas in our lives where we should be especially grateful during these November Sunday mornings. We have already looked at being grateful for God's mercy and God's forgiveness the past two weeks. Now this morning we want to look at being grateful for God's provisions. We want to look at this subject through the back door as it were. The greatest hindrance to our appreciating God's provisions in our lives is greed. And greed is one of the greatest temptations that we face this time of year. This is the last Sunday in November which makes it the first Sunday of Advent. We have now officially entered a most sacred time of year; the season during which we celebrate the birth of our Savior. But in the midst of this special season, greed raises its ugly head each year. In fact, it is not even a stretch to admit that this is the greediest time of the year in our country. Over 60% of the retail business for the whole year will take place during these next few weeks. Many people like Henry Comstock will be under the delusion that some material possession will bring them inner joy and peace. But like Henry, many will be led down the road to despair. And if this season is like most others have been, many people in our country will commit suicide during and

after this season. Many because they didn't listen to Christ's teachings about greed. Many because they weren't thankful for God's provision of life. There was a common Roman saying back in the time of Jesus. *Money is like sea water; the more a man drinks the thirstier he becomes.* That wise saying is just as true today as it was 2,000 years ago. Listen to what Jesus says about greed in the passage found in Luke 12:13-21:

LK 12:13 Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

LK 12:14 Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?"

¹⁵ Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

LK 12:16 And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop.

¹⁷ He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

LK 12:18 "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. ¹⁹ 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." '

LK 12:20 "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?'

LK 12:21 "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

The setting of this parable is quite clear from the context. An unnamed individual has come up to Jesus desiring that Christ give a judgment in a family dispute over an inheritance. Now the Lord answers with a rather abrupt statement. You see, the issue was really not one that required a judgment from Christ for the O.T. Jewish law spoke clearly to this very issue. According to Deut. 21:15-17, the firstborn was to receive a double portion of the inheritance so that he could be in a position to administrate the family in the father's absence and the remainder of the inheritance was to be divided up equally amongst the other siblings. The Scriptures couldn't be clearer. Well, then, why was this individual standing before Christ. The response of our Savior indicates that He detected a covetous attitude present - that this family member (likely one of the younger children) was not content with dividing the material possessions according to the Scriptures, but he desired another ruling, hoping for a better settlement. He was contesting the ruling. No doubt, it is possible that this individual was being cheated, but Christ's response would infer the probability that this person was just not satisfied with his lesser portion. So Christ takes this opportunity to teach the disciples, for He directs

the parable to all of them, a parable about a rich farmer who made some critical mistakes.

As we first look at this parable, our initial response is to see many admirable qualities in this wealthy farmer. He was certainly an industrious man, a man who worked very hard. He also appears to be an honest man. There is no hint that any of his wealth was acquired through dishonest or treacherous means. He was an organized man, showing great thought and foresight. He carefully planned and prepared for the future, and this shows a measure of wisdom and prudence. So we initially see many admirable qualities in this farmer and Christ certainly does not condemn these as he gives the parable.

In fact, we are at first tempted to pity this man. Here he worked with diligence for his whole life preparing for a good retirement, and then suddenly he passed on and was not able to reap the fruit of all his hard work. We have a temptation to almost consider this man to be a victim of unfortunate circumstances. Let me even go a bit farther here to surmise that if the unfortunate circumstances of an untimely death had not occurred, if this man would have continued to live on to old age in retirement, this man probably would have become one of the more prominent members of his community. And if this man lived today, he likely would be a man to whom we might consider going for counsel, for financial advice of where and how to invest our money, for time-management training as to how to organize our schedules so that we might be more productive, for long-range planned sessions as to how to prepare for the future. But the Lord Jesus Christ had quite a different opinion about this wealthy farmer, didn't he? God called this man a fool. And we can assume that if he hadn't died, but had lived on to old age in retirement, God still would have considered him to be a fool, for his death wasn't what made him a fool in God's eyes.

Now in light of the natural conceptions that we have of this prosperous, well-organized businessman, and the clear verdict that is handed down by Christ here in this parable, we must ask ourselves the question, 'Why would God consider this man to be a fool?' Hard work and organization and honesty and planning are said to be virtues throughout the Bible. What made this man a fool in God's eyes? I believe the answer to that question is not necessarily found in what the man did - for he did many good things that were not wrong in themselves - but rather the answer is found in what the man forgot to do. For this wealthy farmer made 4 very serious mistakes in his life. These are mistakes that when made lead an individual down a foolish road in life. These are mistakes that when made lead us to not be grateful to God for his provisions. I would like to look at these 4 mistakes that this man made with you this morning.

1. While the rich farmer was careful to plan for himself, he forgot all about his neighbor. He forgot that the most precious possessions are not found in the things that we own but in relationships that we have with other people.

One of the details of this passage that immediately jumps out is the repetitive usage of the first person. *I* and *My* are repeated over and over. This parable is only 5 verses, but *I* is found 6 times and *my* another 5 times. It is clear that this rich farmer was obsessed with himself and his own plans. In contrast, there is no reference to anyone else in the whole parable. So this rich man models one of the characteristics of a foolish person - an obsession with self, selfishness.

Ambrose, the pastor of the church in Milan where Augustin was discipled in the ways of the Lord, said of this wealthy farmer while preaching on this passage about 1600 years ago, "thou hast barns already - the bosoms of the needy, the houses of the widows, the mouths of orphans and infants."

Greed and selfishness are very socially acceptable vices in our country today. In the book entitled, *The Day America Told the Truth*, James Patterson and Peter Kim reveal some shocking statistics about how far many in our country are willing to go today in their attempt to satisfy their greed. The question was posed as to what a person would be willing to do for 10 million dollars. The authors found 25% willing to completely abandon their families, 23% willing to become prostitutes for a week, 16% willing to give up their American citizenship, and 7% willing to kill a stranger in cold blood. 25% even said that they would be willing to denounce their faith in the God for 10 million dollars. Jesus once warned that it was impossible to serve two masters, that no one could serve both God and money. It is evident that many have chosen money over God in our country. And this has inevitably led to greed and selfishness. It certainly has robbed many of their gratitude for God's provisions. For where one who commits himself to serve God also then commits himself to love his neighbor as himself, one who worships money sees his neighbor only as a competitor. If he can't use his neighbor to gain more money, he has no use for his neighbor at all. Like this rich man, he forgets all about his neighbor.

2. In the second place, note with me that while the rich farmer was careful to value his material goods, he neglected any relationship with the giver of those gifts.

There is no hint of gratitude towards God in this parable. There is no spirit of thanksgiving found here. It is as if this man had accumulated all of his wealth by his own wits and abilities.

The Rich Farmer forgot who gave him the strength to plant the seeds, he forgot who created the soil to receive the seeds, he forgot who made the sun to shine, he forgot the one who sent the life-giving rain. He became so obsessed in valuing his material goods, that he could not see beyond them to recognize the source of all those goods.

One of the greatest temptations that we face in life is to replace the giver of all good gifts with the blessings that are given. It is the very temptation that turned the Israelites from God. The Israelites were very

religious people. But they took the law of God that had been given to them for their good, and they so scrutinized and dissected and expanded that law that the Mishnah and the Talmud became the objects of their worship. So when the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah sent from God, came to them, they couldn't even recognize him, because they were so caught up in the legal requirements that they had made from the law. They had taken the law that God had given to them and used it to replace God himself.

So it is easy for us to take one of the many blessings that God gives to us - our family, our job, our material possession, even our church - and replace God with that blessing. The blessing then becomes an idol that hinders our relationship with God.

In Numbers 21, we find a remarkable story of God's deliverance of his people.

*a terrible plague of poisonous snakes had invaded the nation of Israel

*People were being bitten and then dying of snake bites.

*God instructed Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole

*Those who looked in faith at the bronze snake would be healed

*Great deliverance; you would think that there would be gratitude towards God who gave the healing, wouldn't you?

*Instead, the children of Israel began to worship the bronze snake. They took the very blessing that God had given to them, and they worshiped it.

*During the revival of Hezekiah's day almost 1,000 years later, he had to destroy that bronze snake because it was hindering relationship with God

*Jesus said that the bronze snake was a picture of him - John 3:14 - Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.

*Even today, people are worshiping the blessings of God and forgetting the giver of those blessings, just like this rich farmer.

3. While the rich farmer was careful to provide for his physical body, he totally ignored his spiritual soul. This man was under the delusion that a man is what he has. This is seen in the words that he uses. "I will say to myself, you have plenty of good things laid up for many years." vs. 19. The word translated "myself" is psuke. The primary meaning of this word according to Kittel is the natural, physical life. It comes from the root meaning to breathe. It was originally used in the manner of cooling something by blowing on it much like you would hot coffee or soup. It is clear from the context that this is the perspective of this rich farmer. He sees only this life, only his physical breathe, and he identifies it with what he owns. He forgot that there is more than matter and material things. He forgot that he was also a spiritual being. He used the term

of himself that is also used in the Bible of animals as well as man. He did not see himself as a unique spiritual being. So in his obsession with himself, and his wrong view of himself, he simply focused on the now, the immediate.

It is so easy to look at ourselves as the compilation of all that we own. It is a great temptation for us to do this because that is what advertisers are trying to get us to do all the time. When a new car is advertised, the promoter is trying to get a person to identify himself with that car, so that when he slips into the seat behind the wheel, he becomes one with that car. The car forms his identity. The advertiser knows that if he can do that, he has sold himself a car. The fashion designer tries to convince us that clothes make the person. If you dress for success, you will be successful. They try to get us to identify ourselves with the clothes that we wear. This is a common advertising tool that is used by just about every product.

We must resist the temptation to identify ourselves with anything material here on this earth. We are not the sum of our possessions. There is more to us than just this physical body. We have an eternal being - and that, by far, is our most precious possession. If we neglect our eternal natures, like this rich man, we are going to become consumed with that which is earthly. And that leads us to the final mistake that he made.

4. While the rich farmer was planning out his time here on earth, he forgot all about eternity.

Now you can see how one step led to the next. The rich man was selfish- obsessed with himself. This led him to focus on that which he had and not see beyond his possessions to the giver of all good gifts. This also led to an improper view of himself, not seeing the totality of who he really was. And this inevitably led to focusing his whole attention on the here and now, forgetting that there was an eternity that was awaiting him in the future. This rich farmer had shut out of his mind the possibility of death and any accountability to anyone outside of himself. He had made plans for many years. He had planned to build bigger and bigger barns. He was going to fill those barns with grain. Yet he failed to realize that he only had one day left.

Someone once said that the Devil seldom tried to convince people that they will never die. He knows that this method would be foolish because people would never buy it. It is too obvious that we are all going to die one day. Instead, the devil whispers in our ears, "You will not die soon." It won't be today. You have many years left. And how many of us are really convinced of that statement. So as some of our friends and relatives pass away from the earthly scene, we say in our hearts that we will not die soon. And we end up living within the fragile, imagined bubble of a conceived immortality.

That is what this rich farmer did. He had everything planned out. Yet it is ironic that this man who exercised such noble foresight and planning here on the earth, never did plan for the most crucial matter - the real purpose of his existence.

And here we find the real core of his fallacy that led God to call him a fool, a senseless one. For there are possibilities and there are probabilities and there are certainties in the future. There are things that will possibly occur if the circumstances are right and there are things that will probably occur unless the circumstances drastically change. But then there are also the certainties. These events are destined to happen. A promotion at work is a possibility – it could happen if the company prospers. Our next birthday is a probability – it likely will happen unless some tragedy strikes. But Death is a certainty – it will happen for each of us some day unless the Lord returns first. Standing before God is a certainty. It is the destiny of every person once to die and after that the judgment. (Heb. 9:27). A person is shrewd to consider the possibilities, and it is certainly prudent to plan for the probabilities. But a person is truly wise if he makes sure he plans for the certainties. For a person who spends all of his time and energies in the possible events and even probable events to the complete neglect of the certain events is a fool.

Jim Elliot once said, He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. Jesus would agree. Do you?