

Luke 12:13-34

Jesus is not very practical

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I'm not a very practical person.

I don't know much about building or plumbing or welding or cars.

It's all very well having been trained in Greek and Hebrew.

It's all very well being about to solve maths equations
or play the piano.

But sometimes it would be good to have some practical skills.

Though it is lovely to have a wife who is good with hammers and nails -
if slightly embarrassing because it shows me up.

Jesus was a carpenter.

So he ought to have been practical.

Can't get much more practical than a carpenter.

But some of his teaching doesn't come across as very practical.

Let me illustrate with four examples from our reading today.

Example number 1.

A bloke approaches Jesus

looking for some help with a concrete problem.

There's a dispute between him and his brother
about the family inheritance.

But Jesus instead of helping him out,

tells him he's not an arbiter between them,

and tells him some abstract stuff about greed.

It's all very well to have some teaching about greed.

But when you've got a particular problem,

it's not very practical, is it?

It doesn't help the man sort things out with his brother.

Example number 2.

In addressing this question of greed,

Jesus tells a parable.

And the parable seems to condemn a farmer
for just doing something any sensible farmer would do.
If his barn is not big enough to hold his harvest,
he builds a bigger barn.
What's wrong with that?
It just seems like a sensible practical thing to do.

Example number 3.
Jesus teaches his followers not to worry about food or clothing.
It's one thing to teach them
not to worry about having extravagant food or clothing,
but Jesus teaches that they shouldn't worry about food or clothing at all.
But that's not very practical.
You can't go running around naked,
or you'd end up in jail or a mental hospital.
And you can't very well serve Jesus effectively
if you don't have any food in your tummy.
It sounds all very spiritual to say don't worry about that stuff,
but it's just not practical.
We need some religious teaching that helps us live in the real world!

Example number 4.
Jesus doesn't just recommend
giving a portion of your income to the poor.
He recommends selling your assets
and giving that to the poor.
But that's not very practical.
You've worked hard for those assets.
If you give them to the poor who haven't worked for them,
they won't value them.
They'll waste them.
And you won't have anything left to give to the poor
next time you see a need.
It sounds fine and dandy.
But it's not practical.

Some of what Jesus says doesn't sound very practical.
But what I want to say to you today,
is that the things Jesus says that don't sound very practical,
are actually incredibly practical and wise.
And our protests about Jesus being impractical
are our efforts at avoiding what's really good for us.
Our protests are evidence that we don't trust God enough
to do what he tells us to.
But if we actually did trust him enough to live his way,
we would find out it's definitely practical.
So let's look at those four examples in turn
and discover how practical Jesus really is.

So first of all,
a man approaches Jesus wanting Jesus to intervene
in his dispute with his brother over the family inheritance.
And Jesus instead warns him about the danger of greed.
Now a couple of things to observe about the man's request.
Firstly, it's not entirely clear what he is asking.
Is his brother trying to take the entire family inheritance,
and he's scared that he's missing out?
Possibly.
Or is the family inheritance in the form of a farm,
and the brother wants to keep it whole and they both work it,
while the man wants it split in two,
and each brother works his half?
Possibly.
Jesus doesn't make any effort to find out.
Second thing to notice,
The man doesn't ask Jesus to arbitrate between the two brothers.
He doesn't say to Jesus,
"Could you come and help my brother and I settle our differences.
No. Instead he tries to enlist Jesus on his side of the dispute,
before Jesus even knows what the dispute is about.
That's not what you'd call a good sign.
You can't enlist someone to help you

because they have greater wisdom
and then tell them exactly what answer they need to come to.
And Jesus demonstrates his greater wisdom.
Jesus has discerned a more important issue.
Greed can derail your life.
Jesus has looked at the man's heart and he's found greed there.
And this is actually a far more important issue.
Have you see what happens when someone who is afflicted by greed
get a bee in their bonnet about an inheritance issue?
It completely takes over their thinking.
They can't think about anything else.
That's a big problem.
Not least because they can forget about God.
And that might cause them to miss out on eternal life.
That's a far bigger problem than any inheritance matter.
So far from being impractical in his response to the man,
Jesus was actually addressing the most important issue first.
And if the man got his greed under control,
he might be in a position to sort things out with his brother.

OK, what about Jesus' second impractical notion.
He's telling a parable about greed.
And the main character is a farmer
who just does the practical thing that any farmer would do.
His crops are too big to fit in his barns.
So he builds bigger ones.
There's no suggestion that this farmer did anything dishonest
in accumulating his wealth.
It's just hard work and the blessing of good soil.
So what is the problem?
What's wrong with building bigger barns?
The interesting thing is
that Jesus doesn't criticise his idea of building bigger barns.
He criticises his attitude towards God.
Here are Jesus' words again.

"This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God."

The man has a bad attitude,
and you can see it in the words he says to himself.
I'll read them with emphasis.

"This is what Ill do.

I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones,
and there I will store up my surplus grain.

And Ill say to myself,

"You have plenty of grain laid up for many years.

Take life easy;
eat drink and be merry."

Do you get the picture that this man is self focused.

There are seven 'I's and 'my's in just a couple of sentences.

And his future plan is totally centred on himself enjoying the good life.
Jesus is not impractical.

He's just letting us know that when God blesses us,
we need to be thinking about how to be a blessing.

Blessed to be a blessing.

Not blessed to pamper ourselves.

And when you've been blessed,
being a blessing is entirely practical.

You actually enjoy your blessings more,
if you can see them doing some good.

And like Jesus says,
if you store them up.

You have very little control over what happens to them after you die.
It's totally practical to use your blessings to bless others
while you have that opportunity in this life.

And it's totally practical to keep in mind
that each of us need to give an account to God for what he's given us.
That the reality.

It's only practical to keep the reality in mind.

OK let's move to Jesus' third impractical suggestion.
Don't worry about food or clothing.

Now it does seem entirely practical to worry about these things.
None of us would get very far without food or clothing.
But Jesus is not telling we don't need food or clothing.
He's telling us not to worry about them.
He uses the examples of birds and flowers.
They have enough food and beautiful clothing
and they never worry.
Now of course not worrying doesn't mean taking no action.
The ravens that Jesus was talking about
don't expect the worms to crawl into their beaks.
They find themselves some worms
using the beady eyes that God has given them.
They take action.
And there's nothing wrong with us taking action
to make sure we have food and clothing as well.
But what we are not to do is worry.

Why should we not worry?
Because God knows our needs and he is able to provide.
Is it practical to trust him?
Well he's looked after you so far,
and that should be a good reason to trust him now.
And when you compare the security of trusting God with worrying,
"well what's the point of worrying,
it never was worthwhile,"
as the old song goes.
Or as Jesus puts it,
who of you by worrying
can add a single hour to your life?
Worrying actually doesn't achieve anything
except giving you insomnia, high blood pressure or ulcers.
Jesus' warning against worrying is actually totally practical.
Worrying subtracts hours from your life,
and it degrades the hours you have.
There is nothing more practical than trusting God to provide for you.

OK we are on to our last example of Jesus' impracticality.
"Sell your possessions and give to the poor," he says.
Nothing about a proportion of your income.
It's reduce your capital -
and give to the poor.
But you can only give it away once.
You give it to the poor now,
and what will you give the person who comes asking tomorrow.
Maybe it will be you who is asking tomorrow.
That's not very practical at all, is it?
Well let's think about it.
Jesus doesn't say sell all your possessions.
He just says to sell your possessions.
Presumably you get to choose which ones you sell and which you keep.
Who else is going to choose?
And the experience of many people
is that too many possessions can be a source of worry and stress.
The more you have,
the more you have to look after.
And looking after possessions comes with the worry
about protecting them from theft and damage.
Many possessions need regular maintenance.
If you've ever owned a holiday house,
then you'll know
that as much as it's lovely to have a place to get away to,
there's an extra lawn that needs to be mown,
extra walls that need painting,
extra white goods that break and need to be fixed or replaced.
Extra possessions are a lot of work.

Now you may actually enjoy the extra challenge
of having more things to take care of.
And you may have found ways
that you can use them to the glory of God.
If so well and good.
Praise God for giving you the energy to serve him in that way.

But not everyone has that experience.
Some people find that their possessions are a burden.
They find the worry and stress of looking after them
detracts from their quality of life.
Other people aren't stressed about their possessions,
but they just wake up one day and think,
I've got a whole pile of stuff here I just don't need.
I'm not even interested in it anymore.

Well if someone were in one of those categories,
what could be more practical than selling some possessions.
Get rid of the worry and stress they cause.
Free up your time from the work they demand.
Let someone who actually appreciates the possessions
have the use of them.
It sounds very practical to me.

And there's a further upside.
Jesus says,
"Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out."
He's talking about treasure in heaven.
Jesus says the person who is generous with their possessions
will be rewarded in the next life by God.
And the advantage of these rewards are that they are maintenance free.
Unlike our possessions which wear out,
heavenly treasure will not wear out.
"A treasure in heaven that will never fail,
where no thief comes near and no moth destroys."
Our earthly possessions break after a while.
Heavenly treasure lasts forever.
People want to flog your earthly possessions from you.
It's not possible for them to steal heavenly treasure.
And what would be the point anyway?
God has an unlimited supply.
What would be the point of stealing something
for which there is an unlimited supply.

It would be like someone stealing the autumn leaves
that line the streets at the moment.
No doubt they are pretty if you pick them up and look closely.
but if someone steals your autumn leaves,
you just go and pick up some more.

It's actually immensely practical
to store up for yourself treasure in heaven.
If you sell your possessions and give to the poor,
you are swapping something that wears out
for something that lasts forever.
If someone offered you to swap your car
for one that never needs to be serviced and will never wear out,
you would laugh at them because the offer is too good to be true.
But that is what God offers.
And he is for real.
You can swap your earthly possessions,
for possessions that never wear out.
Treasure that is totally secure,
so you never have to worry about keeping it safe.
To do so is totally practical.

Well we've looked at four examples this morning
where many people would say that Jesus is not practical.
And we've found in each case that Jesus is totally practical.
Is there a common thread?
Yes there is.
If you are living without considering eternity,
then Jesus won't seem very practical.
But once you factor in eternity,
then everything that Jesus says makes total sense.
Eternity is true.
So Jesus is actually very practical.