

A SERMON OF REV. ROBERT DICKSON OF
NARROW WATER, (NEAR NEWERY) IRELAND
(Said to have been his favorite by those who wrote of him)

REV. ROBERT DICKSON, 1728, Oct. 6, 1804

Reverend Dickson was born in County Down, Ireland, and educated at The University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland. He graduated in 1756. Reverend Dickson was of the Presbyterian faith. He is buried in the Clonallan Parish Church Cemetery, at Warrenpoint, County Down, Ireland.

The sermon is transcribed from the original, which is on file in the North Carolina, Archives, at Raleigh, N.C., by Reavis E. Dixon, 503 Palmas Ave., Waycross, Georgia, U.S.A. 31501. Reavis Dixon is the first Cousin, eight generations removed, of Rev. Dickson.

The list of Irish towns which precede the sermon is Reverend Dickson's record of where, and the date that the sermon was preached.

Luke XII. 16-21

At Narrow Water 23 Feb. 1772	At Narrow Water 27 May 1782
At Carlingford 1 Mar. 1772	At Carlingford 22 Dec. 1782
At Newery 3 May 1772	At Narrow Water 25 Dec. 1782
At Mourn? 13 May 1772	At Newery 20 Oct. 1783
At Narrow Water 29 Nov. 1772	At Narrow Water 11 Jan. 1783
At Carlingford 7 Nov. 1773	At Narrow Water 29 Aug 1784
At Narrow Water 1 May 1774	At Carlingford 5 Nov. 1786
At Narrow Water 9 Jul. 1775	At Narrow Water 12 Nov. 1786
At Carlingford 23 Jul. 1775	At Narrow Water 27 Jun. 1790
At Newery 11 Aug. 1776	At Narrow Water 10 Jul. 1791
At Newery 16 Feb 1777	At Narrow Water 9 Jun. 1793
At Narrow Water 23 Feb. 1777	At Narrow Water -- Feb. 1795
At Narrow Water -- Feb. 1778	At Narrow Water 4 Sep. 1796
At Carlingford 8 Mar 1778	At Carlingford 23 Dec. 1796
At Narrow Water 21 Feb. 1779	At Narrow Water 4 Feb. 1798
At Dundalk 8 Aug. 1779	At Narrow Water 22 Jun. 1800
At Narrow Water 16 Jan. 1780	At Narrow Water 31 Oct. 1802
At Carlingford 12 Mar. 1780	At Narrow Water 26 Feb. 1804

Luke XII. 16-21

This Parable, like many Others, took its rise from a particular Incident. While Our Saviour was encouraging his disciples to an undaunted profession of the gospel, instructing them how to act, assuring them of proper Assistance in the most important conjunctures, he was interrupted by one of the Crowd preferring a petition to him, to this Effect; that he would please to act as Judge or Umpire in a cause between himself and his brother, concerning a contested Estate, to a share of

which he thought himself entitled. But our lord refused to take any cognizance of the affair, alledging that he had no Authority to determine such [ma]tters. It appears from his whole, as well as from this passage, that he did not consider himself as having any Jurisdiction in Civil causes. And tho' his Enemies often laid Snares for him, tempting him with much Artifice to assume Civil Power, yet he always, with Superior Wisdom avoided it.

But knowing that in this Case, the Wrong or Injustice, on whichsoever side it lay, sprung from a Motive of Avarice or Selfishness, he begins a New Series of Instructions to his disciples & the rest of his Audience, by saying, take heed and beware of Covetousness. For a mans life consisteth not in the Abundance of the things which he possesseth.--Then he introduces the parable of the Text as an Illustration of the foregoing Proposition, & adds to it this moral Conclusion: So is he that layeth up Treasure for himself, but is not rich towards God

There are but few of our Saviours Parables, & this is One, in which the Moral design is expressed previous to the Parable itself: the reason of which peculiarity seems to be this, that it is inserted in the midst of a discourse, & was intended to give Spirit and force both to the preceding & following admonitions, so as that they might make a deeper Impression on the minds of his Audience. But tho' this design is previously suggested, it is more largely expressed and applied in the subsequent Exhortations. We shall there[fore] consider the Parable, or the Character described in it.

1. In its Natural Property & Consistency.
2. In a Moral or Religious view.
3. As illustrating the forgoing Proposition. And
4. As Introducing the exhortations following.

1. We shall consider the Natural propriety & Consistency of the Character described. ---There was a Man, (saith the Parable) possessed of an Ample Estate, whose Lands proved so fertile, that they Yielded him a Return for the Culture he had bestowed upon them, beyond his Expectations. In a few years the produce was so great, that he was at a loss how to dispose of it. This occasioned him much perplexity & Study in devising by what Means he could best Secure all the Advantage & enjoyment of it himself. At length he resolved upon this Method as the Most expedient,---- to pull down his Old Scanty Barns & Store houses, & to build such as would contain & preserve the vast increase of his goods. Having settled this plan in his mind, he thought that as soon as he had executed it, all the trouble of life would be over, and he should then have nothing to do, but to regale himself without controul or Molestation. It gave him much Satisfaction to have determined upon so prudent a Scheme: and he was still more delighted with the prospect of so much ease and enjoyment, after he had finished the troublesome & laborious part. This plan which he had projected for the remaining part of his life, pleased his Imagination, & occupied his Mind so entirely, as to exclude all thought of any accident that might intervene to disconcert it. And indeed most persons are very credulous in believing what they earnestly wish to be true; and are very loth to admit the Idea of such Events as may disappoint their fond hopes, & demolish the Scheme of happiness which their Fancy hath erected. Such was the Temper & Situation of our wealthy proprietor. He pleased himself with the prospect not only of much goods laid up, but also of

many years in which he should enjoy them in the indulgence of all his appetites & desires. And to make his scheme compleat, he resolved to live for himself alone, & to give himself no concern about the affairs or Condition of others.

But where he seemed to himself to be most wise, he was most destitute of Understanding & his confidence was the mere effect of his folly. For the Providence of God soon detected the vanity of all his projects. A Single accident which he had least of all suspected, blasted his hopes, and ruined his Scheme in a Moment. He who had promised himself many Years of Voluptuous indulgence, did not live another day. That night he was removed from his dwelling on Earth to the place whence there is no return;--- that very night his Soul was required of him .

We shall now consider some distinct properties of the Character here described as copied from human life.----His ruling passion or predominant Inclination appears to have been the love of Pleasure, even in the lowest sense of the Word.----To regale himself with delicacies, to pamper his Appetites to the full, & to pass his whole time in such amusements, as might best contribute to dissipate thought, and recreate his Spirits with Mirth and Gaiety; or, as it is expressed in the Text in few words, to take his ease, Eat, Drink, & be Merry .

Now wherever this Scheme of Indolence & voluptuousness lies uppermost in the mind, other desires & passions will naturally follow in Subservience to it: As particularly, the desire of Gain, which will spring up & grow in proportion to it; because it is wealth only that renders it most practicable, & empowers Men to pursue & gratify such inclinations. This then of course becomes the Second prevailing passion in the mind of Such a person; & this is properly stiled Covetousness . For tho' in such a Character it is not always known & distinguished by that name, yet in fact Luxury and Avarice are not only Compatible, but naturally connected. Whoever considers the Gratification of his own fancy & Appetites in a State of ease & Independence, as the happiest kind of life, will naturally become greedy of acquiring the means of placing & supporting himself in such a State. And tho' his disposition to Expend may be equally powerful & more apparent, & by concealing his Avarice, save him from the Imputation of it, Yet he will be found upon Examination, to have a Stronger passion for Wealth, than is consistent with Honor & Generosity, if not common Honesty. It is not the penurious hoarding miser only, who deserves the name of Covetous . One man may be as greedy to acquire with a view of Spending, as another with a view of hoarding; And consequently the luxurious prodigal may harbour in his mind as Sordid & insatiable Avarice, as he who defrauds himself of the conveniences and even necessaries of life, to save expence. The latter indeed are the most remarkable, & therefore most exposed to common Censure; But if a man Scruples not to take the methods of falsehood, fraud, or oppression, in order to gain Wealth; or if he refuses to discharge Obligations, to relieve the indigent, or to contribute his Share to public Services; what difference does it make, whether it is for the Sake of expending, or hoarding? The greedy desire & insatiable Temper is the same in both Cases.

Hence we may discover another Quality of the Character described in the parable, (viz) Inhumanity; By which I do not mean downright Cruelty to others, but only a want of Social Affection, a want of tenderness, Compassion, & generosity. That this was a part of the Character intended, plainly appears from the Language which the Wealthy person uses with himself. For when persons are alone, conversing & debating with themselves with regard to their own future conduct

and condition in life, they give vent to the genuine purposes & Inclinations of their Hearts, & express themselves without disguise. When the wealthy person therefore had taken a View of his Augmented Stores & resolved upon his Measures for preserving & securing them, his mind naturally ran forward to the use and enjoyment of them; & he makes to himself such proposals & promises, as were most agreeable to his temper & Inclinations. Let us observe then his manner of thinking on this Occasion. Does he reflect thus with himself----"That the Providence of God had been exceeding liberal to him, far beyond his deserts or expectations. That he would therefore shew his Gratitude to Heaven by his Generosity to his fellow Creatures. That the Indigent & Miserable should find relief from his Abundance. That he would employ himself & his Wealth in discharging useful & important offices for the Welfare of his country, for the Service of Religion or the Support of the indigent & distressed. That his Soul would rejoice in the Honour & Happiness of exercising the noble prerogative of doing Good, & being the common friend & Benefactor of Mankind around him."----Such would have been the Sentiments of a Man of true Worth in the midst of his Abundance: But how different from the language of the Worthless Epicure in the parable? I will say to my Soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, Eat drink & be Merry. Thus he expresses the only purpose for which he was desirous of acquiring and preserving Wealth, & to which alone he was fully resolved to apply it. He is so far from thinking of the Fatherless, the Stranger, the diseased, & the destitute, as deriving any relief from his Abundance, that he seems even to have forgot his friends & relations; as if he had not the least regard for them, & the only Object of his Affection & kindness was himself.

We may sum up his qualities then in one Word, which is compleat Selfishness. His Wealth, his faculties, his time, & his thoughts were all devoted to the Service of himself, that base & Sordid Self, which had no conception of Rational Entertainments; no notion of the Satisfactions of Piety, or the Affections of Friendship, humanity, & Generosity; nor any relish for any other Enjoyments than those of foolish Mirth & voluptuous Gratification.

Now in reflection upon this character which our Saviour has drawn in few Strokes but Strong Colours, so as to render it perfect in its kind; we may be apt to look upon it as very extraordinary & Singular, Such as scarce ever existed in human life. And it is to be hoped, for the honour of human nature, that such finished Characters are but seldom to be met with. Yet there are too many in the World, who bear a strong resemblance to the picture here exhibited, tho' the likeness may not be perfect, nor perhaps clearly discernible at first view. For our savior adds, So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, but is not rich towards God. Every person whose main study in life is to enrich and gratify himself with external possessions, & Sensual Enjoyment, & who consequently neglects to acquire the Internal Endowments of Piety & Virtue, is in proportion comprehended in the foregoing description. A consistent and perfect Character of any kind is rarely, if ever, to be found in human life. Wisdom & Folly, Virtue & Vice, Generosity & Selfishness, are mixed together in the same person; & the Character takes its denomination from that which appears to be prevalent. But it is incumbent on every Man to consider, to which kind his own Character belongs, or what are his governing dispositions & views; And particularly whether the narrow & selfish, or the benevolent & Generous dispositions prevail. And let it be remembered, that under the Character of Selfishness are comprehended Vanity,

Luxury, & Sensuality, no less than the Spirit of penuriousness, or the desire of hoarding. For as we before Observed, Avarice is as often joined to Prodigality as to Parsimony, & more frequently in the younger part of Life, while the Senses & Appetites retain their Vigour. If the Supreme Object of our View be not to serve & oblige others, to relieve the wants of the needy, or add to the welfare of the community; but merely to please ourselves, exclusive of our fellow Creatures, & the happiness of Society: It does not at all diminish the Selfishness, whether our pleasure consists in lessening our Expence in Order to grow richer, or increasing them by intemperance & Luxury. For it is plain, that in either case we are equally laying up treasures for ourselves, without becoming rich toward God, i.e. without acquiring one mite of real Goodness.

2. Let us now in the Second place contemplate the Character described in a Moral & Religious View. i.e. Let us consider not its excellence and Worth, but its deformity and Worthlessness. For if there be a Character in the World thoroughly despicable; if there be a person who does not deserve to be regarded as a fellow Creature, it is undoubtedly the Man whose Heart is thoroughly Selfish. ---For tho' this Character does not necessarily imply such dispositions & Actions, as are of the most injurious & criminal nature, yet it is evident that whenever any temptations of profit or pleasure occur, he will not be restrained from committing the very worst of Crimes, by any Motives except such as are purely selfish, such as arise from a regard to his own Interest, Ease, or Safety. As he has no concern for the Welfare of Others, but makes his own will the supreme Rule, & his own pleasure the Ultimate End of all his actions; So if he does not Violate the rights of Society or of particular persons, by Acts of Injustice or Oppression, they are not in the least obliged to him for his seeming Moderation, Nor is there anything virtuous or praise-worthy in it. Because he is not withheld by any Affections of Generosity, Humanity, or Piety; but only by the fear of some detriment or Inconvenience to himself. But where he is not apprehensive of any trouble or danger ensuing to himself, he will not be in the least Scrupulous of Serving his own Interest, or gratifying his own Inclinations at the Expense or ruin of any other person or of the whole Community. The few Good Qualities he may seem to be possessed of are mere Effects of his prudence, or rather cunning, in discerning & avoiding those injuries & excesses by which he would hurt himself. And therefore tho' he may not be guilty of any Notorious breach of the laws either of God or Man, yet his Heart is destitute of Goodness, & of every Quality that can be thought to deserve, either the approbation of Heaven, or respect from Men. Such a temper then is absolutely inconsistent with every degree of Virtue or Moral Goodness, & it is equally incompatible with true Piety or Devotion. Whatever pretensions a Selfish Man may make to Religion, he can have no Other meaning, than to serve his own Ends more privately & Effectually under such disguise. He can have no esteem nor hardly the least conception of that Divine Character, that most sublime Glory & happiness, which consist in the infinite exertions of power and wisdom to the purposes of Goodness & beneficence. The only Impression which he is capable of, from the belief of a Diety, is that of a Slavish fear, or the terror of future and unknown punishments. Such a terror may probably haunt his mind, & sometimes gain a strong possession of it: But he will endeavour to dispossess it, either by the Cares and pleasures of the World, or by substituting the formalities of Superstition, instead of virtue and true religion. His affections & conduct turn upon the Same hinge with respect both to God and his fellow Creatures. In all the appearances he may put on, either of Piety or Humanity, his only view will be, to secure himself from the formidable Consequences of Human or Divine resentment without any

real value either for the approbation of God, or the good will of men.

Having thus weighed the Character described in the Balance of Religion or Morality, Let us in the 3. Third place attend to this parable as an illustration of the foregoing Proposition That mans life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth .

How many are there who think & act upon the contrary Maxim! viz: That Man's life does consist in the abundance of the things which he possesses. But the Error & Delusion of such a persons Mind, and his want of right Judgment as well as virtuous Disposition may be easily made to appear. He makes a false estimate of human life in the most important respects. In the first place he mistakes in supposing that the main happiness of life consists in the Enjoyment of Ease & pleasure, and the possession and application of wealth to that end. Having no Experience or relish of more substantial & lasting Satisfactions, he knows not what a loss he Sustains of all those Delights which arise from tranquility of Mind; from a Sense of Virtue, Honour, & Friendship; from a Confidence in the Wisdom & Goodness of the Deity; and from the hope of a future and Eternal Life.----He considers not that cultivation and exercise of the Nobler Faculties of the Mind & Worthier Affections of the Heart, are essentially requisite to the best enjoyments. Nor is he aware how mean & fugitive his good things are, how little capable of yielding a lasting contentment, even in the most prudent use of them; or how certainly vicious Indulgences will terminate sooner or later in uneasiness & remorse.

In the next place he shews his Error & Folly, by not taking into his view a future State. His Affections & Desires are confined by the very nature of them to the limits of this life, & often to much narrower limits. Since exclusive of Death, the want of Health, or the approach of Old Age will destroy all the pleasures of Voluptuousness. And then, the passion of Avarice alone will remain in the cankered Heart, & continue increasing to the End of a miserable life. During the course of Voluptuousness and Avarice, the Idea & Expectation of another life becomes fainter & is absorbed in Sensual and Worldly passion, the Heart becomes dead, & the Eye closed to every prospect of this kind. But if there be a life to come and an eternal State, it is evident that such persons take in but a very contracted view of their own Existence, entirely forget the principal part, & all their prudence & foresight fall infinitely short of that which is their only Study and which they fancy themselves to pursue most effectually; their own ease, Safety, and Happiness.

A third instance in which they deceive themselves, & make a false estimate of future Events, is in regard to the duration of their own lives. Their thoughts are continually employed, either upon the Sensual and Worldly Ends they propose to themselves, or the means of obtaining them. No room is left in their narrow Minds for Ideas & views of a different kind; Or if such ideas accidentally intrude, they are industriously expelled. Particularly, the continuance of their own lives is so absolutely Necessary to the Execution of their designs, & the enjoyment of their hopes, that the contrary Supposition is either never admitted, or else immediately rejected as unreasonable & offensive, or utterly impertinent & foreign to them. The slenderest probability passes in their Imagination for a certainty, merely by excluding all apprehensions of the contrary. I will pull down my barns, & build greater & there will I bestow all my fruits & my Goods . What then? When he had lived to execute this part of his Scheme---then--- I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast

much goods laid up for many years .--- That he had much Goods appears from the Story; but how came he to be so positive that he had many years before him? He was resolved to take it for granted, as a thing not to be questioned. For then the most pleasing part of his Scheme was to take effect; & he would come to the full enjoyment of all he had so carefully laid up.---- But the wisdom of Providence thought fit to order otherwise; At the very time when his mind was thus wrapt up, in the confident Hope of so much Sensual felicity, the Messenger of Death was at hand to dissipate all his projects, & hurry his Soul away he knew not whither. With how much meaning & propriety then is the appellation of fool given to him. Thou fool this night shall thy soul be required of thee .

The last thing we proposed was to consider the parable as introductory to our Saviour's following Exhortations to his Disciples --- Therefore I say unto you take no thought &c. These Exhortations have a manifest Connection with the parable, & are a Natural & just application of it, as addressed to the Appostles, & first disciples. In this view, they have undoubtedly a peculiar propriety. But the general Sense & Argument contained in them, are applicable in proportion to all mankind. For if life & Health (the most necessary and valuable things) cannot be secured or prolonged by much thought & constant Solitude; how vain is it to be depressed with care & Anxiety, or elevated with flattering Ideas & hopes, about other Inferior Matters?---- Such as possessions---Ornaments--- Cloathing or Diet. Of what use (for instance) are splendid Garments to the body that is decaying and mouldering into dust? Or the most exquisite food to the Sickly & loathing Appetite? Or [] possessions to him that must quickly leave them never to return?---- But if they place their chief honour & Happiness in the Endowments of the mind, in the possessions of knowledge & Wisdom, & the exercise of virture & goodness; these are indeed valuable Goods, & are truly laid up for many years. They Afford pleasure & Satisfaction Superior to all others; And men may promise themselves the enjoyment of this kind of wealth , not only through all stages of this life, but to the boundless Ages of Eternity.-----

S.B.