

Ras-I Dowling is a rising 4th year at the University of Virginia. He is also the football team’s starting cornerback. Dowling is an excellent player; he is a candidate for All – American this year and has already been projected to be the number 2 pick by the NFL at his position next year.

Dowling could have left UVA after his 3rd year to play Pro Football. The Cavs are picked to finish last in their division in the ACC this year, so there isn’t a whole lot of incentive for Ras-I to come back for collegiate gridiron glory. This young man from Chesapeake had every monetary incentive to go pro last year. The average base salary and signing bonus for an NFL player in 2009 was \$1.3 million dollars.

And yet Ras-I Dowling is returning for his final year in college. In a recent interview he said, *“I came back to get my education, to be the first in my family to graduate.”* When asked about the temptation of the huge salary, Dowling replied, *“It’s tempting to anybody. One of the things that me and my dad talked about was that money is not going to make you happy at the end of the day. We had some of the best times without money.”*

Then Dowling reflected on what does make a person happy – on what really constitutes a rich and meaningful life. He said his best times growing up had nothing to do with money. Instead, it was *“just my momma and daddy treating us with love. Money is temporary. Love is forever.”*

Money is temporary. Love is forever. Ras-I Dowling’s statement is a pithy summary of Jesus’ parable in the gospel this morning, a story known as the Parable of the Rich Fool.

A guy strikes it rich and amasses a fortune – so much that he’s got way more than he needs to live. Instead of sharing his fortune with others, he plans to sock it away so that he can rest easy for the remainder of his days. He tells his soul, *“Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry.”*

Just when he’s settling in with his Cuban cigar and his single malt scotch to help his soul relax, another voice butts in. God says, *“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And these things you have prepared, whose will they be?”* Apparently, the guy doesn’t have the last word on his soul. And it’s clear that his money is temporary.

Human beings are especially vulnerable to the lure of possessions. Possessions represent status and in the case of the Rich Fool, possessions represent security. Instinctively we know that “money can’t buy me love”, as the Beatles said, and that you can’t take it with you – or as Jesus says, our lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions. We know these things, but the lure is nearly irresistible anyway. I hope and pray that Ras-I’s life doesn’t take a turn for the worse when the paychecks start coming in.

This is not going to be a sermon on the evils of money: Jesus never calls money evil. But, He does warn us against placing our trust in money, for it cannot provide security. And he says that if we spend our life in pursuit of possessions, we may end up rich, but not rich in the way the counts. It would have been better for the man in the parable to give away his excess, rather than tear down his barns in order to put up his 10,000 square foot state of the art barn. If he had given his money away, he might have started to be rich in the way it counts.

It reminds me of a local minister who is starting a huge capital campaign for his church. He led off with one of the best fundraising lines I heard in a while. He said to his congregation one Sunday morning, "*There is good news and there is bad news for our capital campaign. The good news is that we have all the money we need to start building. The bad news is that it is all in your pockets!*" You might as well get it out of your pockets now, because you won't be able to use it when your life is being demanded of you.

Jesus tells us what it means to be rich in the way that really counts, to be rich in the way that brings fulfillment and meaning. He says that we are to be "*rich toward God.*" It's a great phrase. What does it mean to be rich toward God? I get a version of that question frequently. People say, "O.K. I understand that I am a sinner saved by grace and loved unconditionally. (I personally don't think any of us really get that down to the depths, but that's another sermon.) So what about Christian living?" It's another way of asking what it means to be "rich toward God."

I love the way our late, great Justin Holcomb answered that question one time to a haughty and belligerent Darden student. They were at a party and this young guy accosted Justin and said, "I'm tired of all this grace you preach at Christ Church. I need some discipline and challenge and accountability! What about Christian life!" Justin knew this guy really well – knew that he was quite wealthy and also knew that he had been shacking up with his girlfriend. So Justin, in just the way only he can do, shot back, "*OK? You want to know what God demands of you? Starting giving your money to the church and stop sleeping with your girlfriend!*" Boy, I miss Justin! Be careful what you ask for. Justin gave him the Law he wasn't looking for. That guy left Christ Church before Justin did.

So what does it mean to be "rich toward God"? Ras-I has already given us the answer: love. Justin gave that guy the straight up law; Jesus gives us the summary of the Law that we hear at the beginning of every Communion service – Love God and love your neighbor. Loving God and loving others is to be rich toward God.

What does it mean to love God? I would agree with the Westminster Catechism on this one. What is man's chief end? *To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.* To love God is to enjoy Him, delight in Him, to be a creature who depends on his or her Creator. It is to delight in the absurdity of the gospel and join in on the joke that God loves us despite us. I was sent a poem this week titled "The Best Poem Ever." That's quite a claim, but the

poem's message is as good as it gets. It is about a guy whose life was demanded of him this very night.

*I was shocked, confused, bewildered/As I entered Heaven's door
Not by the beauty of it all/Nor the lights or it's décor.
But it was the folks in Heaven/That made me sputter and gasp
The thieves, the liars, the sinners –/The alcoholics and the trash.
There stood the kid from seventh grade/Who swiped my lunch money twice
Next to him was my old neighbor/Who never said anything nice.
Bob, who I always thought /Was rotting away in hell
Was sitting pretty on cloud nine/Looking incredibly well.
I nudged Jesus, "What's the deal?/I would love to hear your take.
How'd these sinners get up here?/God must've made a mistake.
And why is everyone so quiet,/So somber, give me a clue."
"Hush, child." He said, "They're all in shock,/No one thought they'd be seeing you!"*

To love God is to delight in His ways – that it is the first who are last and the weak who are strong and the fools who are wise. It is your daddy treating you with love.

To love your neighbor is the other way to be rich toward God. There are myriad ways to do that, of course. The fruit such love produces creates a rich life. There is a compelling scene that demonstrates this in Toy Story 3. Toy Story 3 is a children's movie that is not just a children's movie. Rather, it is a children's movie after the heart of the one who said, "Unless you become like a child you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Toys are like creatures, aren't they, who are loved by their Creator, who loved to be loved by their Owner. Toys delight in their Owner's ways.

The group of toys that have been together since the beginning are heading toward their apparent doom. They are on a garbage conveyor below a dump, hurtling toward a molten pit. They see no way out; they realize that their lives are being demanded of them this very night. How they respond moved me to tears. Jesse the cowgirl cries out "What do we do!?" Buzz Lightyear says nothing; he just takes Jesse's hand. Jesse grabs Woody the Cowboy's hand. Woody holds Mr. Potato Head's Hand, who in turn holds Mrs. Potato Head's hand. All the toys link up in love. There is no fear in their faces; there is acceptance and the strong link of love. They are in this together.

I won't give away the ending of Toy Story 3, but the characters are rich toward God in a way that I would only hope to be when my time is up. Rich toward God. Perhaps the deepest way to be rich toward God is to know that God is rich toward you. As the Bible says, "*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, yet though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.*" To know and receive God's grace is to love God and love others. To know and receive God's grace is to be rich toward God. Amen.