

Redefining Success: Reinterpreting the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21) through the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

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Abstract

In today's world, success is typically measured by material accumulation, financial stability, and visible achievement. Yet the biblical literature presents an alternative perspective that challenges such reductionist understandings. This article uses the social scientific method of biblical interpretation to examine the parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:13-21 through the lens of Abraham Maslow's theory of Needs. By placing the parable into conversation with Maslow's motivational framework, the study argues that the rich fool represents a case of arrested psychological and spiritual development: materially secured yet existentially deficient. Although he satisfied his physiological and safety needs, he failed to progress towards belongingness, self-actualisation, and transcendence. The divine pronouncement exposed the fragility of wealth-centred identity and reframed success in relational and transcendent terms—being “rich toward God.” This integrative reading contributes to interdisciplinary biblical scholarship, showing the underlying motivational structure of the Rich Fool's behaviour and its implications for the contemporary definition of success.

Keywords: *Success, Parable of the Rich Fool, Luke 12:13-21, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.*

INTRODUCTION

Success is a universal human pursuit. From ancient civilisations to modern capitalist societies, humanity has continually sought to understand what constitutes true success. Yet despite its universal appeal, success remains an elusive and contested concept, lacking a single, generally acceptable definition (Kavalenko, 2021). Its meaning varies across cultures, disciplines and historical periods

In contemporary societies, success is predominantly construed in terms of financial wealth, material possessions, professional advancement, and elevated social status. Wealth functions not only as a basic symbol of success but also as its primary means of validation. Within this framework, individual well-being is frequently reduced to material position, measured by income or GDP (Conceição & Bandura, 2008). This materialistic worldview foregrounds the prosperity gospel, which tends to equate divine blessings with material abundance, and often neglects the deeper aspects of human happiness (Boaheng, 2025).

Defining success solely within this materialistic paradigm holds serious psychological, social, moral and spiritual implications. Studies have shown that materialistic cues, such as the display of wealth or luxury in mass media advertising and social media, can trigger the self-discrepancy process and lower self-esteem (Consiglio & van Osselaer, 2022). When success is defined primarily in terms of material possessions, it fosters unhealthy comparison, dissatisfaction, and increased rates of anxiety and depression (Santos & Cassidy, 2024)

Socially, it legitimises inequality, casting the wealthy as successful and the poor as failures. It obscures structural injustices and fuels competitive consumerism, indebtedness and performative lifestyles (Kuusela, 2022). Morally, it devalues intrinsic values such as character, hard work, relational depth, and communal responsibility, shifting attention from who a person is to what a person has, which undermines traditions that prioritise inner transformation and love of neighbour (Kasser, 2016).

Biblical traditions frequently warn against idolising material possessions as the ultimate end of life. A persuasive example appears in Luke 12:13-21. The pericope emerged from a request for Jesus to intervene in a family inheritance dispute. In response, he cautioned against covetousness, stating that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. He then told a story, commonly referred to as the Parable of the Rich Fool, about a wealthy farmer whose field produced abundantly. Faced with the challenge of storing his surplus, he resolved to tear down his old barns and build larger ones, planning to relax and enjoy life afterwards. But that same night, God demanded his soul. Jesus hence concluded, "So is the fate of everyone who stores riches for himself and is not rich towards God."

Scholars have extensively interpreted this narrative as a critique of greed, socio-economic injustice, and the illusion that material accumulation can guarantee ultimate well-being (Mugabe, 2014; Uwaegbute, 2022). While such ethical readings remain significant, the narrative also raises deeper anthropological and existential questions about the nature of success and human aspirations: what constitutes true success? Is material abundance equivalent to fulfilment? Is existential meaning guaranteed by economic security?

To address these questions, this study adopted the theory of human motivation, particularly Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, as a heuristic framework. According to Maslow, human beings are motivated by a progression of needs ranging from basic physiological and safety needs, through belonging and esteem needs, to higher-order aspirations such as self-actualisation and transcendence needs (Maslow, 1943; 1970). By engaging this model, this study interrogates the biblical text beyond its usual moralistic interpretation as a critique of greed to a deeper exploration of human fulfilment and the true meaning of success.

In recent decades, biblical scholarship has employed theoretical insight from other disciplines, such as psychology and anthropology, into biblical interpretation (Rohrbaugh, 1993). This approach, known as social science criticism, treats scriptural texts not only as theological documents but also as reflections of human psychological experiences. It examines the motivations, interpersonal dynamics, personality structures and perceptions of biblical characters and authors. The approach does not replace theological exegesis but rather complements it by illuminating the psychological dimensions of religious experience and moral reasoning (Pilch, 1997).

Employing a social-scientific approach, this study reinterprets the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21) through the lens of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. It explores the biblical parable in its narrative and theological contexts in the Gospel of Luke. It examines the underlying motivational structure of the Rich Fool's behaviour. Through this interdisciplinary framework, the study seeks to challenge the dominant cultural materialistic definition of success and reorient the concept towards deeper existential and spiritual fulfilment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Parable of the Rich Fool has attracted sustained theological reflection across different historical periods and interpretive traditions. Most scholars agree that the narrative serves as both an ethical and theological critique of greed, misplaced security, and the deceptive belief that material wealth guarantees ultimate fulfilment (Nwaomah, 2009; Mugabe, 2014; Ngele et al., 2017). However, the parable has been interpreted in diverse ways within biblical scholarship.

One major interpretive strand of the parable understood it as an ethical warning against avarice and materialism. Uwaegbute (2022), and Ngele et al. (2017) interpreted the parable as precisely such a warning, emphasising the moral responsibility attached to wealth. They argued that the rich man's failure lies not in his wealth accumulation but in his unwillingness to use it for the benefit of others. He stockpiled the resources that he could have used to help others. Jatau (2025) considered the Parable of the Rich Fool a theological critique of covetousness and the ethical challenges of wealth acquisition and management. It exposes the moral dangers inherent in an excessive preoccupation with material possessions.

Green (1997) interpreted it within the socio-economic context of first-century Palestine. He argued that Luke's Gospel consistently presents wealth as a morally ambiguous resource that must be evaluated in relation to one's responsibilities toward God and neighbour. He observed that the problem in the parable is not agricultural productivity itself but the rich man's self-centred worldview, reflected in his repeated use of possessive pronouns ("my crops," "my barns," "my grain"). This linguistic pattern highlights the man's radical individualism and lack of social consciousness.

Some scholars have approached the text from an existential perspective, interpreting it as a meditation on human mortality, the uncertainty of life and the futility of grounding one's identity in material possession. Snodgrass (2014) noted that the rich man's plan to expand his barns shows a desire to control the uncertainties of life through accumulation. Yet the sudden divine verdict exposes the fragility of such strategies, revealing that human efforts to secure the future through wealth remain ultimately vulnerable to mortality and divine judgment.

In the same vein, Rindge (2011) read the narrative within Jewish and Greco-Roman wisdom, interpreting it as a reflection on mortality, the transience of earthly possessions and the necessity of orienting one's life toward eternal realities. He moved beyond the dominant moralistic reading of the parable as a critique of greed, framing the narrative as an exploration of how individuals negotiate the tension between possession and the inevitability of death.

Other scholars have highlighted the theological dimension of the narrative, arguing that the rich man's issue is not his wealth per se but the failure to be rich towards God. Within this framework, Morrison (2017) noted that the Rich Fool exemplified one who overlooks the social responsibility inherent in wealth. Thus, the narrative functions not only as a personal moral warning but also as a broader theological challenge to economic self-sufficiency and social indifference.

Noble (2016) provided a significant exegetical re-evaluation of Luke 12:21, traditionally rendered as "rich toward God." He argued that the phrase should be interpreted as "giving wealth to God" through almsgiving. According to him, this interpretation is linguistically grounded in Greek syntax, in which the phrase identifies God as the beneficiary of charitable acts. By integrating philological and intertextual analysis, Noble reframes the parable as a call to responsible stewardship and positions charitable acts as central to being "rich toward God."

Gowler (2012) argued that parables are not straightforward didactic stories but rhetorical constructs that operate as enthymemes. An enthymeme is a form of argument in which certain premises are left unstated, requiring the audience to supply missing elements. Applied to the parable, this means that Jesus deliberately leaves interpretive gaps that compel listeners to engage actively with the narrative. Gowler noted that when read within its first-century socio-economic context, the parable of the rich man is already morally compromised- indeed “rapacious”- before divine judgment is pronounced. The authors further argued that the parable critiques not only individual greed but also a failure to practice what they term “vertical generalised reciprocity”- a form of economic redistribution from the wealthy to the poor without expectation of return. This concept reflects Luke’s broader theological emphasis on economic justice and social responsibility.

A further line of interpretation of the parable focuses on the socio-economic implications for contemporary societies. From this perspective, the rich man’s surplus accumulation is understood as a reflection of an exploitative economic structure and a neglect of communal responsibility. The act of storing excess grain rather than redistributing it to those in need symbolises the dynamics of economic inequality that persist in many societies today.

Iyaregh (2024) offered a contextual reading of the text within the Nigerian socio-economic realities, particularly issues of corruption, materialism, and inequality. He argues that Nigeria’s political and economic elites embody the moral and spiritual failure of the rich fool, even in a more aggravated form, given that many have acquired wealth through corrupt means. By contrasting the biblical figure with the Nigerian elite, the author deepened the ethical critique of materialism and corruption in the nation. Consequently, the parable has been interpreted as a critique of both personal greed and unjust economic systems.

Despite these diverse theological and socio-economic interpretations, most analyses converge on the idea that the central issue in the narrative concerns the misalignment between material prosperity and spiritual responsibility. The rich man’s tragedy lies not simply in possessing wealth but in constructing his identity and security around it. This insight opens the door for interdisciplinary dialogue with psychological theories of motivation and human flourishing. However, existing literature has not systematically applied psychological frameworks to this parable.

This present study builds on the contextual sensitivity of the reviewed scholarship while extending the analysis by incorporating a psychological framework. This interdisciplinary approach offers a more nuanced understanding of the motivational structure of the Rich Fool’s behaviour and the true nature of success.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Understanding the motivational dynamics underlying the actions of the Rich Fool requires an analytical framework that can explain human aspirations, priorities, and the pursuit of fulfilment. One of the most influential theories addressing these concerns is the Abraham Maslow Hierarchy of Needs. This theory provides a valuable conceptual lens for examining the psychological dimension of human behaviour, particularly in relation to the pursuit of success, security and meaning. Its application to religious experience, mysticism and spiritual development further enhances its relevance to biblical interpretation. When applied to the Parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:13–21, it provides important insight into the motivational

structure that shapes the rich fool's actions and the broader implications for understanding human success.

Overview of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow first formulated his theory in his seminal article *A Theory of Human Motivation* (1943), and later expanded it in his book *Motivation and Personality* (1970). He proposed that human beings possess a structured system of needs organised hierarchically. According to this model, individuals are motivated to satisfy lower-order needs before progressing toward higher-order ones. Maslow categorised these needs into five primary levels: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualisation needs.

At the most basic level are physiological needs, encompassing essential biological requirements such as food, water, sleep, and shelter. These needs are fundamental to survival and exert the strongest motivational influence when unmet (Trivedi & Mehta, 2019). Once the physiological needs are satisfied, individuals begin to prioritise safety needs. These include the desire for stability, security, protection from harm, and predictable living conditions.

The third level consists of love and belonging needs, reflecting human desire for meaningful interpersonal relationships, social acceptance and a sense of communal belonging. Maslow argued that human beings are inherently social and therefore require relational connections in order to experience psychological well-being (Maslow, 1943).

Above these are esteem needs, which involve the desire for recognition, respect, competence, and achievement. Esteem can arise both internally, through a sense of self-worth and mastery, and externally, through social recognition and status. Fulfilment of these needs contributes to confidence, autonomy, and a stable sense of identity.

At the peak of Maslow's original hierarchy of needs lies self-actualisation. This stage represents the realisation of one's fullest potential and the pursuit of personal growth, creativity, and meaningful life goals. Self-actualised individuals are motivated not merely by basic needs but by the desire to express their capabilities and contribute meaningfully to the world.

In his later work, Maslow extended the model to include self-transcendence as a higher-order need. (Maslow, 1970). This level reflects a movement beyond self-gratification towards a commitment to values, causes or realities greater than the self. Self-transcendence involves experiences of unity, spirituality, altruism, and devotion to ideals that surpass the individual gain (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). It resonates strongly with many religious traditions, which frequently emphasise spiritual devotion and stewardship as markers of authentic human flourishing.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs has not been without criticism. Scholars have questioned its cultural specificity and bias, its assumption of linear progression, and its lack of empirical validation (Papaleontiou-Louca et al., 2022; Saif, 2024). Nonetheless, the theory remains influential across psychology, education, management science, and the social sciences as a heuristic tool for understanding human motivation. It has also been applied to religious experience, mysticism, and spiritual development, providing a useful interpretive lens for analysing the motivations and choices of biblical characters. By applying this framework to the Parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:13–21, it illuminates the underlying motivational structure of the man's behaviour and the broader implications for understanding the concept of success and human aspirations.

The present study

While theological scholarship has traditionally emphasised the ethical and spiritual dimensions of in the pursuit of success, and psychological studies have explored the dynamics of human motivation, relatively few studies have integrated these perspectives into the analysis of the Parable of the Rich Fool. A search of major theological and psychological databases revealed no peer-reviewed articles that systematically apply Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to the narrative. This lack of interdisciplinary dialogue represents a significant gap in scholarship.

This study, therefore, seeks to bridge this disciplinary divide by placing the Parable of the Rich Fool in dialogue with Maslow's theory of human motivation. It aims to understand the underlying motivational structure of the Rich Man's behaviour, and to provide a conceptual framework basis for exploring how the parable challenges culturally dominant definitions of success that emphasise wealth and material security. The study offers a narrative critique of reductionist conceptions of success and an invitation to pursue a more holistic vision of human fulfilment.

The Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12: 13-21)

Parables have served as a potent and durable pedagogical tool throughout history. Deeply rooted in the teaching traditions of sages, prophets, and rabbis in the Ancient Near East (Mugabe, 2014), parables are typically simple, short stories with deep meaning, designed to convey moral and spiritual truths to diverse audiences (Chimweokwu, 2015). These stories often carry layers of meaning, prompting the audience to think deeply beyond their surface value to understand the spiritual and moral lessons they convey.

Jesus engaged his listeners on multiple levels using parables drawn from everyday imagery and relatable scenarios. Jesus' parables were meticulously crafted as moralising stories and thought-provoking analogies intended to illuminate a critical aspect of life, human behaviour, and the kingdom of God (Snodgrass, 2005; Uwaegbute, 2022).

Historical and Literary Context of the Parable of the Rich Fool

The Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21) is one of the fourteen parables in the gospel of Luke. It belongs to the so-called 'travel narrative' (Luke 9:51-19:27), a distinctive body of literary material peculiar to Luke (Nwaomah, 2009). It is one of the four narratives in the section that address the issues of possessions (See 12:22-34; 14:12-33; 16:1-13; and 16:19-31). The parable is situated within the broader discourse in which Jesus addressed both the crowds and his disciples on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (12:1-3), the providence of God (12:4-7), and the need for allegiance to God (12:10-12).

As he was teaching, someone from the crowd interrupted him, appealing: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me" (v. 13). This interruption provided the immediate context for the parable, shifting the discourse from general teaching to a specific instruction on covetousness and human aspiration.

Consulting a rabbi for a legal ruling was not uncommon in first-century Palestine (Matthew 19:3; John 8:3, 11). The First-century Israel perceived itself as a theocratic state. There was no distinction between "canon law" and "civil law." The scripture was the "law of the land," and its interpretation and adjudication were the responsibility of Scripture scholars, commonly referred to as "rabbis" or "teachers of the law" (Stacy, 1997, p. 286). So, a rabbi well-versed in the law of Moses was expected to render authoritative judgment on a wide range of life issues, whether religious, secular, or civil matters (Bock, 1996).

The petitioner appealed to Jesus, as a rabbi, to intervene in the case between him and his brother over inheritance. Although Luke provided no explicit details about the nature of the inheritance in contention, Uwaegbute (2022) and Van Eck (2009) observed that family inheritance disputes were common in first-century Palestine and often revolved around contested land rights. First-century Palestine was largely an agrarian society, and land was the primary economic asset. It functions as the chief source of wealth, social status, and long-term security. It directly shapes the livelihoods of families and communities.

Land ownership constituted a significant tool of power and affluence in the Ancient Near East. However, its distribution was highly unequal. It was often monopolised by a limited elite population- the aristocratic families, priestly households, and politically connected individuals, which implemented a stringent land tenure system that reduced the peasant majority to conditions of tenancy, sharecropping, or landless labour (Griffin, 2002). Within this extractive economic framework, wealthy landlords often accumulated surplus production through tenant farming or hired labour, thereby further expanding their socio-economic influence (Wright, 2000; Robertson, 2020). This systemic social injustice and economic inequality provided the context for several inheritance disputes in both historical records and the biblical narrative.

However, rather than Jesus addressing the petitioner's request, he posed to him a rhetorical question: "Who appointed me a judge or an arbiter (literally, a divider) over you?" He turned to the crowd: "Take heed, and keep yourselves from all forms of covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. It is so surprising that Jesus refused the request of the petitioner, given his commitment to the pursuit of social justice, particularly for the impoverished and marginalised. Why, then, did he refrain from intervening in this case?"

Stacy (1997) argued that the petitioner does not appear to belong to the oppressed class that typically attracts Jesus' advocacy. More so, the dispute is about money, and Jesus showed little or no interest in money matters. According to White (2000) Jesus' mission on earth was not to settle civil disputes but to preach the gospel and raise the consciousness of eternal realities. However, Mugabe (2014) argued that the petitioner may not have had a legitimate claim to the inheritance under Jewish inheritance law (cf. Deuteronomy 21:15-17; Numbers 27:1-11), which would have explained the absence of external intervention.

Beyond these considerations, the narrative itself shows that Jesus' refusal is not rooted in legal restriction but in his discernment of the petitioners' underlying motive. He perceived covetousness behind the request. Thus, rather than addressing the petitioner's immediate concern, Jesus turned to the broader audience, warning: "Take heed, and keep yourselves from all forms of covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Covetousness (Greek: *πλεονεξία*; *pleonexias*), literally means having more. It conveys a strong sense of acquisitiveness, greed, avarice, fraud, and exploitation (Green, 1997, pp. 488-9; Perry, 1975, p. 825). The young man sought to exploit Jesus' public influence to coerce his brother into complying with his demands.

To further illustrate his point, Jesus told them a parable. Characteristic of Lukan narrative (cf. Luke 10:30; 15:11; 16:1, 19), the parable is about an intentionally unidentified figure: A certain rich man. The land of a certain rich man produced abundantly. The adjective rich (Greek: *πλουσίου*; *plousiou*) highlights not only the man's elevated social status but also his prosperity and economic achievement. Although Luke provided no additional information about his identity, he is likely one of the elites in the countryside.

With his abundant harvest, he was faced with the challenge of storage: “He said to himself, what shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?” His reverie swiftly culminated in a plan: “And he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grains and goods.

This decision of the rich man has been interpreted differently by scholars. While some have applauded it as an apparent economic prudence, strategically aimed at securing long-term prosperity and personal comfort, others accused him of selfishness and hoarding. Nolland (1993) viewed the decision as “an exemplary model of forward thinking, practical wisdom, and readiness for decisive action” (p. 686). His plan to pull down his barns and build larger ones reflects forethought, a willingness to invest in infrastructure, and a concern for long-term sustainability. For Shepherd (2019), “The rich man seems to be exercising good economic stewardship” (p. 244).

However, Moxnes (2004) argued, while the man’s decisions are reasonable, they are fundamentally self-centred. His internal deliberation revealed “a personality whose wealth is guarded avariciously.” His prudent management, therefore, is not virtuous stewardship but a manifestation of greed and myopic self-reliance (p. 89).

The rich man interprets his abundance as a guarantee of future stability and leisure. Thus, he spoke to his soul: “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years- relax, eat, drink, be merry.” This moment reflected the culmination of his worldview. It expressed not only his fulfilment but also his self-indulgence.

The narrative reached its climax when God addressed him, calling him a “fool” and announcing the immediate demand of his life: “Fool! This night, your soul is required of you, and what you have prepared, to whom will it be?” Within the biblical wisdom traditions, the Greek word ἄφρων (aphron) translated fool is not a characterisation of cognitive incapacity, but rather a moral indictment. It describes one who despise God and his sovereignty (Psalm 14:1; Prov. 1:7; 1 Cor. 11:16). Unlike the terms ἄγνοια (ignorance) or μωρός (imprudence or mental slowness), aphon denotes a deliberate, wilful repudiation of wisdom. It signifies moral and spiritual deficiency rather than intellectual bankruptcy.

The rich man lived “as if everything he possessed was his own, and he owed nothing to God or man” (White, 2000), which was his major pitfall. His folly lies in a life estranged from divine perspective and marked by disregard to the needs of others. This error, however, may be more subtle than overt wickedness. As Snodgrass (2010, 194) noted, the man “did nothing wrong, except that his stuff and his celebration determined his vision of life.” “There is no hint of avarice, cheating or immorality... that this man was hoarding his crop.... His additional wealth honestly came by because God’s providence and kindness blessed him” (Bock, 1996, p. 1151). His fundamental failure lies in a catastrophic misorientation of life – what may be described as a wrong telos.

The abruptness of the divine judgment underscores the fragility of human plans and the unpredictability of life. Despite his careful preparations for the future, his existence proves fundamentally insecure. His practical atheism led not to security, which he thought he had, but to ultimate futility.

Jesus, therefore, concluded, “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.” The expression provides the interpretive key for the parable. “Being rich towards God” stands in sharp contrast to the man’s materialistic worldview. It points to a life oriented towards God rather than self-gratification, where one’s

wealth is not measured by abundance of material possession but eternal values such as faithful stewardship, generosity, and obedience to God's will and purpose (Davis, 2018; Noble, 2016). Thus, true success is not defined by accumulated possessions but by alignment with the divine economy, where resources are shared and treasures secured not in barns or banks but in service to God and others.

The Rich Fool through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

The Parable of the Rich Fool presents a character who appears, by conventional standards, to have achieved remarkable success. His land produced abundant harvests, he had the resources to expand his storage infrastructure, and he looked forward to a future of comfort and leisure. From a modern capitalist's perspective, the man represents a model of success and the ideal of financial prosperity and security. Yet the narrative ultimately portrays him as a tragic figure whose success proves illusory. The divine verdict exposed the weakness of wealth-centred identity and called into question whether material possessions truly reflect human flourishing.

When interpreted through Maslow's theory of needs, the parable showed a striking pattern: the rich man successfully satisfied lower-level needs for survival and safety but failed to progress toward higher-order needs involving relationships, meaning, and transcendence. This imbalance ultimately exposes the inadequacy of defining success in material terms.

Maslow's model provides a structured framework for analysing how human aspirations evolve from basic physiological needs to higher forms of fulfilment. Applying this framework to the Parable of the Rich Fools reveals how the rich man's motivations align with different levels of need satisfaction and how his inability to move beyond lower-level concerns leads to the story's tragic outcome.

Physiological Needs: More than Enough

The most basic level in Maslow's hierarchy consists of physiological needs- those requirements essential for biological survival, such as food, water, shelter, and rest. As Maslow stated, when these needs are lacking, they dominate a person's motivation and compel individuals to seek immediate satisfaction (Maslow, 1943).

So the story began at a point where the most fundamental needs were already fully satisfied. The rich man clearly possessed more than enough resources to satisfy his basic needs. His land produced an exceptionally abundant harvest, providing a surplus that far exceeds his immediate consumption needs.

From Maslow's perspective, this abundance should free him to pursue higher-level aspirations. For once survival needs are secured, individuals are theoretically free to focus on relationships, personal growth, and existential forms of fulfilment. Yet the parable demonstrates that such progression is not automatic. Instead of moving toward higher-order needs, the rich man became increasingly preoccupied with the management and preservation of his material surplus.

This fixation highlights an important psychological phenomenon: even when basic needs are satisfied, individuals can remain psychologically stuck at lower levels of the hierarchy if they continue to perceive security as uncertain or insufficient (Maslow, 1943). In the case of the Rich Fool, his abundance paradoxically fuelled the desire to accumulate even more resources.

Safety Needs: The Pursuit of Absolute Security

The second level of Maslow's hierarchy involves safety needs. These include the desire for stability, predictability, and protection from harm or threats. Individuals seek to secure their future through savings, property ownership, and institutional security. The rich man's central decision- tearing down the older barns and building bigger ones- reflects precisely this motivation. His plan to store surplus grains is an attempt to control life's uncertainties through strategic accumulation.

From a rational economic perspective, the decision to store excess harvest seems prudent. Agrarian societies often rely on storage systems to protect against future scarcity. Yet, the narrative suggests that the rich man's motivation extended beyond practical foresight. His inner dialogue revealed a deeper focus on self-preservation and comfort: "You have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry."

This statement reflects a worldview where material security becomes the basis of existential confidence. The rich man assumed that the accumulation of resources could guarantee a stable and predictable future. Yet the divine interruption exposed the fragility of this assumption. Despite his preparations, his life remained vulnerable to the unpredictable reality of mortality.

Through this reversal, the parable challenged the illusion that wealth can bring absolute security. From Maslow's perspective, the rich man was trapped at the second level of the hierarchy, endlessly reinforcing safety through further accumulation while neglecting higher needs.

Love and Belonging: Missing Relationship

The third level of Maslow's hierarchy involves the need for love and belonging- emotional connection through family relationships, friendships, community participation, and social bonds. These relational bonds provide psychological support and contribute significantly to personal well-being (Tunçgenç, van Mulukom & Newson, 2023). Significantly, the parable makes no mention of any meaningful relationship. The rich man's internal dialogue contained no reference to family members, neighbours, workers, or the wider community. His reflections revolved entirely around personal possessions and personal goals. He spoke to himself, never consulting or interacting with others. His wealth did not support communal wellbeing or shared prosperity; it was a tool for private consumption and personal security.

This absence of relational engagement suggests that the rich man has neglected the belongingness dimension of human fulfilment. In Maslow's framework, the failure to cultivate meaningful relationships creates psychological imbalance, even when material conditions are good. Human well-being depends not only on economic stability but also on healthy social connections and communal participation (Maslow, 1943; Diener & Seligman, 2004). The parable thus revealed relational bankruptcy hidden beneath material abundance: he has vast resources yet remains socially and emotionally isolated. poor. His life was centred on managing possessions rather than cultivating relationships.

Esteem Needs: The Illusion of Self-Sufficiency

The fourth level of Maslow's hierarchy concerns esteem needs. These include both self-esteem, such as confidence, competence, and personal achievement, and social esteem derived from recognition, respect, and status within a community.

The rich man's agricultural success likely conferred significant social prestige on him within his cultural context. As a prosperous landowner, he would have enjoyed a high level of economic status and influence. His ability to produce surplus crops and expand his storage infrastructure reinforced his sense of personal accomplishment and competence.

However, the narrative revealed a subtle distortion in how he viewed his accomplishment. Rather than seeing his prosperity as part of a broader network of social and divine providence, he interpreted it as a purely individual accomplishment. His repeated use of possessive language- "my crops," "my barns," "my grain," and "my goods" showed a worldview centred on self-sufficiency. This is what psychologists referred to as inflated self-reliance. When individuals attribute success exclusively to personal effort, they can develop an exaggerated sense of independence that obscures their dependence on others and on external circumstances (Schaumberg & Flynn, 2017; Okolo et al., 2018).

The divine declaration that interrupts the narrative exposes the illusion underlying this self-sufficiency. By calling the man a "fool," God reveals that the rich man's confidence rests on a fundamentally unstable foundation. His wealth cannot protect him from the ultimate reality of mortality. Consequently, the esteem he derives from his possessions proves temporary and ultimately empty.

Self-Actualisation: The Failure of Personal Fulfilment

At the highest level of Maslow's original hierarchy lies self-actualisation- the realisation of one's fullest potential and the pursuit of meaningful life goals. Self-actualised individuals typically show creativity, authenticity, moral awareness, and a commitment to values beyond immediate gratification.

In the Parable, the rich man showed little or no evidence of higher personal development. His ambitions remain narrowly focused on consumption and leisure: "eat, drink, and be merry." This orientation suggests a life given to pleasure rather than purposeful growth. It reflects a misunderstanding of what constitutes genuine fulfilment. While leisure and enjoyment are not inherently the problem, they replace the deeper meaning of self-actualisation. Maslow argued that those who fail to pursue personal growth may experience existential stagnation, even with favourable material conditions (Maslow, 1943).

The rich man's tragedy lies precisely in this stagnation. Despite his remarkable economic success, his aspirations remain confined to maintaining and enjoying wealth. He did not pursue creativity, moral responsibility, or service to others. As a result, his life lacked depth and significance.

Self-Transcendence: The Missing Piece

In his later work, Maslow added self-transcendence as the highest stage of human motivation. Self-transcendence involves orienting one's life toward values beyond personal fulfilment, such as compassion, spirituality, and devotion to a greater cause. Within the theology of Luke's Gospel, this dimension corresponds to the idea of being "rich toward God." The parable concluding statement contrasts material wealth with spiritual richness, a life marked by generosity, humility, and awareness of divine reality (Davis, 2018; Noble, 2016).

The rich man's failure is most evident at this level. His plans contained no reference to gratitude, generosity, or spiritual reflection. His orientation was entirely self-directed. He never reached the transcendence the narrative implicitly encourages. From the Maslow perspective, the rich man represents a case of arrested development (Maslow, 1970). His life demonstrates

how individuals can achieve extraordinary success in satisfying lower-level needs while simultaneously neglecting the higher dimensions that give human existence its meaning.

Redefining Success: Implications for Contemporary Society

The parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21) remains fundamentally relevant in today's world, where the pursuit of material success often eclipses spiritual, moral, and communal values (Okoye, Ugwu, and Nnadi 2024). Interpreted through Maslow's theory of needs, the parable offers a framework for understanding modern life struggles. In an age defined by consumerism, competition, and relentless ambition, the story highlights the enduring tension between accumulating material possessions and finding meaning, self-gratification, and transcendence. Thus, it calls for a critical re-thinking of what it means to be successful and to achieve a good life.

1) The problem of materialism

Today, success is often measured by income, possessions, social status, and social media hype (Burnasheva & Suh, 2021; Hwang & Jeong, 2020). This mirrors the Rich Fool error of equating abundance with fulfilment. Such a mindset fuels an endless cycle of wanting more, which Jesus identified as covetousness, often driven by fear, insecurity, and comparison. It leaves people perpetually discontent, pulling them away from gratitude, stewardship, and meaningful relationships (Okoye, Ugwu, and Nnadi 2024).

The parable functions as a countercultural critique of the idea that prosperity guarantees purpose. It shows that material abundance, disconnected from higher values, leads to a deeper existential poverty. True success is not about having more but being more.

2) The neglect of higher-order of human needs

Modern notion of success disproportionately emphasises lower-level needs, such as comfort, safety, and status, while neglecting higher-order needs like love, belonging, meaning, and contributing something beyond self-interest. In Maslow's terms, this represents stagnation at the foundational levels. Today, economic and technological advancements are achieved at the expense of communal bonds, ethical awareness, and spiritual sensitivity, leading to increased alienation, anxiety, and moral numbness (Kame & Tshaka, 2015).

The Rich Fool embodied this imbalance: materially secured yet relationally isolated and spiritually bankrupt. His fixation on accumulation exemplified a stunted model of human flourishing, where the pursuit of security displaced the search for meaning. The parable thus serves as a warning against a life confined to self-referential goals.

3) Toward a holistic and ethical redefinition of success

A more adequate understanding of success must integrate material sufficiency with psychological well-being and spiritual orientation. Both the parable and Maslow's theory affirm that while physiological and safety needs are essential, they are not the end goal. Jesus' concept of being 'rich towards God' reframed success in relational and ethical terms, emphasising stewardship, generosity and accountability (Willmer, 2008).

In this view, success is not defined by possession but by purpose; not by accumulation but by the responsible use of possessions for the common good. It represents a state of wholeness where external achievements align with inner virtues and social responsibility.

4) Spiritual transcendence as the apex of success

At the peak of human fulfilment lies what Maslow called self-transcendent- a movement beyond self-interest towards connection with others and the sacred (Llanos & Martínez Verduzco, 2022; Koltko-Rivera, 2006). This resonates closely with Luke's idea of being “rich towards God”. Within this framework, success is redefined as participation in a larger moral and spiritual order, characterised by meaning, interdependence and ethical responsibility. In contrast to contemporary culture of self-promotion and accumulation, this vision restores the moral dimension of success, emphasising not ownership but stewardship as not personal gain but shared flourishing.

CONCLUSION

Applying Maslow’s hierarchy to the Parable of the Rich Fool reveals a profound critique of materialistic definitions of success. Although the rich man achieves economic prosperity and personal security, his life remains psychologically and spiritually incomplete. His failure to pursue relational connection, personal growth, and transcendence ultimately renders his success hollow.

The parable, therefore, invites readers to reconsider how success is measured. Rather than equating success with wealth accumulation, the paper suggests that authentic success requires movement toward higher-order needs that integrate relational, moral, and spiritual dimensions of life.

In this way, Jesus’ teaching anticipates insights that modern psychology would articulate centuries later. Both perspectives recognise that human flourishing cannot be reduced to material prosperity alone. Genuine success involves aligning human aspirations with deeper values that nurture both personal growth and spiritual awareness.

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