

Job 22:21-26

Mark 10:17-31

October 10, 2021

Kirkwood Sunday/The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE COST OF LIVING

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

One of my favorite Jimmy Buffett songs is from his 1999 CD called *Beach House on the Moon*. It's called "A Little Spending Money" and it goes like this:

*Now I'm not talking 'bout excessive greed.
The kind that puzzled the scribes and Pharisees.
I don't worship it like a golden calf,
But change in my pocket's always good for a laugh.*

*I've seen it brighten up the eyes of a child.
It even makes the Dali Lama smile.
It's no relation to the meaning of life,
But it's a dang fool husband doesn't spring for his wife. . .*

*A little spending money, money to burn.
Money that you did not necessarily earn.
Rainy days seem to wind up sunny,
Long as you got a little spending money.*

*I got no financial conscience.
Can't worry where it went.
A lasting treasure or a moment of pleasure,
Worth it every cent.*

*Coin or paper, baby, silver or gold.
All denominations, nouveau or old.
Can't have a turkey without oyster dressing,
It's the root of all evil, the sum of your blessings.*

*Don't need no armored car or time locked vault.
Don't need no shaker full, just a few grains of salt.
You may get by lookin' good and being funny,
But life's a little less restrained . . .*

*With a little spending money, money to burn.
Money that you did not necessarily earn.
Rainy days seem to wind up sunny,
Long as you got a little spending money.*

“Life’s a little less restrained with a little spending money . . .” But that begs the question – How much is enough? It is estimated that at the peak of his career, John D. Rockefeller was worth approximately \$418 billion in today’s dollars. Compare that to Jeff Bezos’s fortune of \$177 billion! When Rockefeller was asked once, “How much money is enough money?” he replied, “Just a little bit more.” In a variation of the story, he was asked, “How much money does it take to make a man happy?” he answered, “Just one more dollar.”

Brad Stollery, a Canadian financial writer, posed this thought experiment: Suppose you’re one of five people who have been selected by a mysterious philanthropist to participate in a contest. The five of you all have comparable debt-levels and costs-of-living, as well as similar, middle-class financial situations. You’re all roughly the same age, equally healthy, have the same number of children, and you all live moderately low-risk lifestyles. Privately, a representative of the donor approaches each of you one by one with a blank check and pen and poses the following question: How much money would you have to be paid, right here and now, to retire today and never receive another dollar of income (from any source) for the rest of your life? The catch is that whoever among the five players writes the lowest amount on the check will be paid that sum. The other four players will receive nothing.¹

The richest man in the whole county was sitting in the front pew on the last night of the revival. No one knew exactly how much he was worth, but he owned a lot of businesses and property in the town, the county, the state, and even across the country. Plus, he made no secret of his wealth, as he led a very fine lifestyle. When the usher handed him the offering plate, the rich man was overwhelmed. He signaled to the organist to stop playing and stood up to face the congregation. With tears in his eyes, he said, “Forty years ago tonight I sat right here in this pew at another revival and I was convicted. When the offering plate came by, I reached in my pocket and pulled the only and last dollar I had to my name and put it in the plate. I gave away everything I had. Look how the Lord has blessed me!” Someone in the back shouted, “Do it again!”

The Sunday School teacher was talking to the boys and girls about the importance of generous giving. “Boys and girls,” she said, “how many of you would give \$50 to the poor.” All of the children raised their hands. The teacher was impressed. “How many of you would give \$100 to the poor?” Again, every hand went up. “How many of you would give \$1000 to the poor?” Once more, it was unanimous. “Well, how many of you would give \$1 to the poor?” All of the children raised their hands except one little boy named Billy. “Why, Billy,” the teacher asked. “You said you’d give \$50, \$100, even \$1000 to the poor. Why won’t you give \$1 to the poor?” Billy said, “Because I actually have \$1.”

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. Who can blame them? Riches and possessions were seen as blessings from God, blessings for your faithfulness. If a rich man (blessed by God) who has kept all of the commandments since his youth can’t “get into heaven,” then who in the world can? “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Let’s take Jesus’s picture example literally – it’s impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle! Then who can be saved? Although Mark doesn’t indicate this, imagine Jesus saying, “Ah, guys, now you’re starting to catch on!”

You **can’t** do anything to inherit the kingdom of God – eternal life. Maybe the rich man’s question was sincere. After all, Mark tells us, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him . . .” Jesus doesn’t condemn money or riches or possessions in and of themselves in this story. But he does tell the rich man, “You lack one thing . . . go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor.” When the man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving . . . “But, Jesus, I actually have many possessions!” No matter how admirable his motivation, it’s as if he thought he could earn or buy **his way into heaven**, his salvation.

And there’s the rub for the rich man . . . and perhaps for all of us. Jesus has an uncanny way of taking questions and turning them upside down and inside out and posing them in a new way to the original asker. The rich man asked, “What must **I do** to inherit eternal life?” and Jesus ended up talking to him about using what he had to help other people, and Jesus taught the disciples about what it means to live in true community as one of his followers. As someone has pointed out, throughout this whole section of Mark we’ve been hearing from this fall, Jesus turns every encounter and every question into a teaching about the kingdom of God and what kind of behavior is required of those who want to enter God’s kingdom. It’s what I’ve referred to as a “life orientation” toward God, and we’ve heard it over and over and over since the beginning of June – first in the Sermon on the Mount, then in Paul’s instructions to the Ephesian believers, and now as Jesus makes the journey to Jerusalem with his disciples.

Peter began to say to Jesus, “Look, we have left everything and followed you!” On the one hand, Peter is simply stating the facts. Do you remember? Jesus said to Simon and Andrew, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Mark 1:17-18) On the other hand, Peter might have been comparing himself and the other disciples to the rich man who just walked away sorrowful – “Look at us, Lord, we’re not like that guy.” And it’s almost as if you can hear the apostle Paul’s words, “If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:3)

It’s about our life orientation. THE question that comes up from this story about the rich man is, Did Jesus command only this man to sell all of his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow him? or Does Jesus’s command apply to everyone, all of us? That’s a tough question, because not many of us want to think that Jesus meant it literally for all of us. How are we supposed to do that, Jesus? And so, one way to handle

that dilemma is to see the rich man's possessions as symbolic of whatever it is that gets in the way of your devotion to Jesus Christ. Actually, that's a helpful interpretation. What in life are you so closely tied to that it's hard to be a faithful follower of Jesus on the way?

Then again, this story about the man with many possessions hits close to home, doesn't it? So much of the time, our money and our possessions are how we keep score in life – either when we judge other people or evaluate our own self-worth. Funny thing, though – why is it that when we compare what we have to what others have, we usually look at people who have more than we do and wish for that \$1 more, rather than look at people who have less than we do and give thanks for our many blessings – and automatically use what we have to help those who have less?

Last week, I read this story on Facebook – perhaps you saw it: One day, a very wealthy father took his son on a trip to the country for the sole purpose of showing his son what it was like to be poor. They spent a few days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family. When they returned home, the man asked his son, “How did you like the trip?” “It was great, dad,” the son replied. “Did you see how poor people can be?” his father asked. “I sure did,” his boy said. “So what did you learn from the trip?” his father asked.

The son said, “I saw that we have one dog and they have four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon. We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, but they have friends to protect them.” The boy's father was speechless. Then his son added, “Yeah, dad, it showed me just how poor we really are.”²

Jesus and the rich man – it's a tough story. But, no matter how we choose to interpret it, the meaning is pretty clear and it's the same thing Jesus has been teaching his disciples (and us) all along the way to Jerusalem – life in the kingdom of God is radically different from the life defined by this world. In fact, life in the kingdom of God may sound impossible – but there's the word of grace today – “but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

One final story: An American tourist in Jerusalem met up with a monk who offered to show him around the monastery. On the tour, they came to the monk's room. The tourist noticed no TV or radio, only one change of clothes, a towel, and a blanket. The man asked the monk, “How do you live so simply?” The monk answered, “I noticed you have only enough things to fill one suitcase. Why do you live so simply?” To which the tourist replied, “But I'm just a tourist, I'm only traveling through.” And the monk said, “So am I, so am I!”³

Let us pray: God of infinite patience and wisdom, we come to you with so many things that claim our time, our energy, our resources, our very

lives. Help us to place our lives and our trust in you. Give us courage and strength to truly be your disciples. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

NOTES

¹Jessica Stillman, "How Much Money is 'Enough'? This Simple Thought Experiment Gives You an Exact Number to Aim for: Constantly chasing more and more will make you miserable. The right goal gets you off the treadmill," at www.inc.com.

²Although I saw this story on Facebook, I couldn't find it again. This version is from "A Rich Father Leans a Big Lesson From His Son About What True Wealth Is," at www.reshareworthy.com.

³Wiley Stephens, "Sticker Shock for the Soul," October 14, 2012 at www.day1.org.