

The Folly of Wealth

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Mark 10:17-22

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’ ” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Well, it appears once again I get to preach about money and possession and it is not yet stewardship season. That begins in a couple of weeks. Speaking about money and possessions doesn't bother me too much since that is what I do regularly as Financial Wellness Program Director at MMBB Financial Services. For those who may not know, I work for MMBB Financial Services. MMBB stands for the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board of the American Baptist Churches. It is a financial services ministry that helps pastors and church staffs save for retirement and we provide education and resources for all financial seasons of life. I am also a CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER™, professional, so I am fairly comfortable talking about money, faith, and possessions.

For years many Christians felt it was improper to talk about politics or money at church. Well, those days are long gone and rightly so. Jesus addressed politics and money all through the gospels. When Jesus got angry over the buying and selling of merchandise in the Temple and

overturned the tables, that was a physical and verbal statement on politics, faith, and finance. When Jesus commended the widow who gave her last money for the work of her faith community, that was a comment on money, faith, and possessions. When Jesus ordered the disciples to travel lightly as they went out two by two, and not to carry anything except a staff—no bag, no money, and not to wear too many clothes. That was a statement about possessions and faith. When Jesus told the religious leaders that they tithe mint, dill, and cumin, but have forgotten the weightier matters of the law like justice, mercy, and faith—that was a political statement as well as a statement on faith, and religious protocol.

Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann, wrote in **Money and Possessions**, that *Jesus was focused on issues related to money and possessions, the ways they are deployed in a world governed by God, and the ways in which they define and skew social relationships.*

Jesus didn't shy away from hard topics of money, possessions, and faith. He addressed them head on. And since we are a congregation that follows the way of Jesus Christ, we must do likewise.

Jesus lived in a culture that equated divine favor with wealth. If you had favor with God, you were blessed with money and things. It was believed that the more money and possessions one had, the more honored you were by God. There are many today who still prescribe to this thinking. It is called a prosperity gospel. This false gospel believes in the doctrine of name it and claim it; call it and haul it; and stab it and grab it. Many well know televangelists and mega-church pastors preach this theology. They ask their followers to sow a seed of faith by sending them money and the evangelist preaches that God will bless the giver according to the amount of money that is sent to them. Seems to me that one person is being blessed while the other is being bilked—but I'm just saying.

The rich man in our text today would have been well known and respected in his community. He had lots of money and in that social/religious context it meant he had found favor with God. We are not told why the man approached Jesus. There must have been some urgency to his concern because the text reads that the man ran to Jesus. Here was a man accustomed to following the rules—he kept the 10 commandments **and** he had the means to get anything and everything he wanted. Yet, he suspected that just because he followed all the religious laws, was well known, and was wealthy, eternal life was not guaranteed.

There are so many things I love about Jesus' response to this rich ruler. Verse 21 is the best. It reads, that Jesus loved the man. He spoke compassionately toward the man. Jesus didn't say, ***"You idiot, you don't give a rat's fanny about the poor. You only care about yourself and getting more and more stuff. You haven't learned how to live right on earth. And now you want to know about eternal life?"*** No, Jesus didn't say that. We might have said that, but Jesus loved this uninformed rich man. There is a word right there for someone. Our rhetoric needs to match our faith. Nastiness and hate filled speech ought not come from the mouth of those who say they love the Lord—regardless of political affiliation. Amen

Although Jesus spoke compassionately toward this man, he was very direct about what he needed to do if he wanted eternal life. Jesus told the man to do five things. Jesus said—go, sell, give, come, and follow. These five things were imperatives or commands in verse 21. They were more than mere suggestions. If those of us gathered in this sacred space want to experience the fullness of what God has in store for us, these 5 imperatives are in order for us too.

First, go—go do something. Stop standing around asking questions, or lamenting how bad things are. We are to get off our do nothings and GO do something! The life of a disciple is more than contemplative. There is a time and place for quiet reflection. Even Jesus got away

for a season. And if we are to maintain our sanity in times like these, we will have to power down periodically. But we are called to go, to work, and be with the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and those in prison. We are called to believe and support those that have been sexually abused and harassed. We are called to go and be with those whose children are still in detention centers. 20 years after Matthew Shepard's murder, we are still commanded to go and show solidarity with all LGBTQ people who are at risk of violence and discrimination. The first word was to go.

Second, sell what you have. I'm sure this shocked the rich man. What does eternal life have to do with selling stuff? Well, for this man his possessions were a roadblock to his spiritual growth and his spiritual service. To Jesus, we are not what we own. Even today, money and possessions are equated with power and prestige. We are easily caught up in our consumer culture where more is better. We want the newest gadgets, better toys, more investments, and bigger homes. We crave more stuff. Radical sacrifice, and living a spiritual discipline of poverty, and getting rid of stuff is not at the top of our to do list. We have a hard enough time getting rid of clutter in our closets. Say amen somebody.

We also have a tendency to think this scripture does not apply to us because we are not wealthy—or are we? We may not be as wealthy as some politicians, entertainers or sports personalities, but according to Allianz Financial, in 2015 the US had 41.6% of the world's wealth while we are only 4.4% of the world's population. Now I will be quick to admit that the US also has the greatest wealth disparity among the haves and the have-nots. Yet, our excess consumption, even though we may feel we have so little, deprives others of resources they need just to survive.

While you may not consider yourself wealthy, there may be things that distract you from worshipping God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Like the rich ruler, there may be roadblocks to our spiritual growth and spiritual service that we need to get rid of.

- Maybe its ego? That false image we are trying to maintain may be our undoing, for it keeps us in a cycle of perpetuating that which is not God-centered or helpful. Feeding our ego keeps us hustling in a way that is unhealthy for us and our families.
- Or what about that sense of entitlement. Maybe that is what you need to get rid of. That belief that I can do what I want, when I want, to whomever I want. Or the belief that this is **my** job. Or what about that sense of entitlement at church. I have heard it said this my ministry. I know what is best, I have been a member here for 50 years!
- Or perhaps your sense of entitlement gets played out believing someone owes you a job, or someone is supposed to take care of you. So, maybe we need to let that entitlement thing go.
- Whatever might be standing in the way of you giving your heart to God—Jesus said it has to go, sell it, get rid of it.

Go, sell, and **third give**. If we are going to be a people that follows the way of Jesus, we have to give to others. By giving away money, we rob it of its power. Money and possessions lose their divine quality when we give them away. Jesus told the rich man to sell everything and give it to the poor. Instead of chasing after more money, bless someone else. Then you will have real treasure, that can't be taken away.

One of my favorite bible verses, John 3:16 reads, God so loved the world that God **gave** the only begotten son that who ever believes in Jesus will not perish, but have everlasting life. God gave—not hoarded. Mr. Louis Barbarin, CEO of MMBB Financial Services, encourages us to move from striving for abundance to working toward having plenty. When we have plenty, we

have enough. Then when we have enough, we can give the rest away. Go, sell, and give to the poor.

Fourth Jesus said, **come**. Once we have divested ourselves of all the things that prevent us from giving our best to God, then we are ready to serve. So, come. The invitation to come to God is always before us. We are welcome just as we are.

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." When we come to Jesus, we will find, purpose and direction. No more wandering in the wilderness, we will find purpose for being and purpose for our gifts. The invitation is ours everyday—**EVERYDAY**—to come to Jesus.

Go, sell, give, come and lastly **follow**. When we come to Jesus we are to follow his ways. We are to love as he loved. We are to encourage the broken hearted, heal the sick, feed the hungry, and protect the children. We are to be peacemakers, and justice advocates. When we follow Jesus we are to care for the planet, the orcas, the wolves, the salmon, the air, the water, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Following Jesus is an active lifestyle. Yes, you will have to take some risk, but you will find purpose. Yes, there will be some sleepless nights, but the Divine Comforter will surround you. When we follow Jesus we may feel alone at times, but we will be surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, cheering us to march on and not to give up. There is an old Christian song we used to sing,

I have decided to follow Jesus,
No turning back, no turning back.

Though no one join me, still I will follow,
No turning back, no turning back.

My sisters and brothers—go, sell, give, come, and follow Jesus. Amen

Please stand as you are able to sing our closing hymn #575 O for a World