

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 18: 18-27, 19:1-10 *"Men With Money"*

Historians tell us that the population of Galilee and Judea in the 1st C. was 90% peasant - "people of the land" as they were called - with perhaps 10% wealthy landowners, old-time aristocratic families, merchants, people attached to the High Priestly and Herod families. There was almost no middle-class as we think of it - you were, in essence, either rich or poor. Out of "the rich," the Gospels tell us of two men who emerge as Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem for the momentous week before Passover.

The two men are very different: one pious, reputable, called "a ruler" and probably a synagogue president or perhaps even a member of the Sanhedrin ruling council. The other is a "chief tax-collector," a despised collaborator with the Roman occupiers, part of a group renowned for their dishonesty, and a virtual outcast from good Jewish society. Both men want to see this Jesus, the Galilean rabbi of whom everyone is talking, who is making his way through the villages into Jericho before his final trek up the mountain road to Jerusalem. Both men have money; they are among "the rich." But when they meet Jesus, they will have very different reactions to him and to their own wealth.

1) *The Rich Young Ruler*

One is often referred to as "the rich young ruler," which is a conflation of the things said about him in Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels. He seeks Jesus out, he is polite, he has good questions to ask the rabbi. How does he enter "eternal life"? - a synonym for what Jesus calls "entering the kingdom of God" or his disciples call "being saved." It's *the* question that Jesus presses in all his ministry: who will be a part of the kingdom he has come to proclaim and to begin?

Jesus points the man to obedience to God, to Torah observance, to the Ten Commandments. Interestingly, Jesus focuses on the so-called "second table of the Law" - the commandments that are summed up in "love your neighbor as yourself." He does not ask the young man (who from the word used to describe him is probably somewhere between 25 and 40) whether he "loves God with all his heart." The man, who judging from his answer may have been a Pharisee, affirms that he has never broken a major commandment since he was a young boy. He is, in a word, a good and pious man, and he wants to know how to enter Jesus' kingdom. You would think this was just the kind of person Jesus was looking for. Certainly we would have found him admirable - a "good person." Even today we would think he

fitted our idea of what a “believer” should be.

Why then does he not end up as one of Jesus’ star disciples? Why does he turn away from Jesus, sorrowing? Because Jesus in effect asks him about his love for God – the “first table of the Law” – compared to his love for wealth. Which does he love, which does he serve? Jesus has always made it very clear that among his disciples, “you cannot serve God and Mammon.” The test for this rich young man is whether he can part with his money, and whether he can “leave everything” to follow Jesus, as other men and women in Jesus’ company have done. The man’s answer to Jesus is clear, and sad – “no thank you.”

This little scene of course throws the Twelve into astonishment and confusion. What’s happening? If this man can’t be part of the kingdom, if he can’t be saved, who can be? After all, isn’t wealth a sign of God’s blessing? Isn’t this man pious? Doesn’t he already give his tithes, his alms to the poor, like all good Jews? Isn’t it accepted wisdom that wealth is fine, as long as you are generous with it? Why is Jesus making it so difficult for this man?

“How hard it is,” says Jesus, “for the rich to enter the kingdom. It is easier to get a camel through a needle’s eye.” “Well then, nobody will be saved!” say the Twelve. But Jesus is quite clear: what is humanly impossible is nothing to God – with him “all things are possible,” including the conversion of rich, self-centered, and independent men and women.

2) *Zacchaeus the Tax-Collector*

And as though to prove his point, shortly afterwards Jesus meets another rich man, with very different results. His name is Zacchaeus; in Hebrew Zakkay, a shortened

form of the ancient and honored name Zachariah. He is a tax collector and wealthy, and he too wants to see Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps he has already heard that Jesus is “a friend of tax-collectors and sinners.”

People like Zacchaeus needed friends. They were despised for collaborating with the Romans in exacting excise taxes on the movement of goods, animals, produce. They set up their collection booths at crossing points and near city gates. They were businessmen; private contractors who bid for their tax-collecting jobs. They paid the expected taxes ahead of time to the Roman authorities, and then collected all they could to cover their payments. Most people regarded what they did as “institutionalized extortion” – they stopped you on your journey to the city, they decided the value of what you were bringing, and they demanded a certain portion of it, or coinage instead. They were often assisted by Roman soldiers. They were so unpopular that the rabbis declared them “unclean” and said that even having a tax-collector come into your house made *your* home “unclean.”

Zacchaeus was a chief over a regional group of collectors, and he wanted to see “the friend of tax-collectors and sinners.” So being short in stature, he climbed a sycamore-fig: a tree like an oak with spreading branches that was easy to climb. He did more than see Jesus: Jesus saw him, called his name, bade him come down, told him that he would come to Zacchaeus’ house that day to eat! So it was true – this man truly was “a friend of tax-collectors and sinners”! That was what the critics said as Jesus went to Zacchaeus’ house: “there he goes again, the rabbi who shares a table with sinners.”

But the effect of Jesus’ friendship and grace gets through to Zacchaeus. He is welcoming, he is joyful, he offers fellowship, he is repentant. He promises to make restitution

for extorting money from people. He will give away half his wealth immediately. "Today," says Jesus, "salvation has come to this house."

What is impossible with men is possible with God. Pious, good men turn away from Jesus and his kingdom in sorrow at his demands; disreputable men turn to Jesus in repentance and joy at his grace. Jesus has come, he says, to "seek and to save the lost" – the "lost sheep of the house of Israel." The Good Shepherd seeks the lost, the Great Physician heals the sick. Through him, "God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away," as Jesus' mother had sung before his birth.

3) *Wealth And Discipleship*

What shall we say about "men with money?" First of all, that "we are they." In the world of the 21st C., *we are "the rich."* We dispose in our trash more food than some people eat in a week; we give to the Thrift Store more clothes and more furniture and more decorative items than most people in most of the world in most of history have ever seen or imagined.

So whatever else we may think about wealth, we have it. Is it a sign of God's blessing? Well, compared to poverty it certainly seems so! Does God bless us so because we deserve it? Or is that outside our frame of reference – are we well off simply because we have amassed education and skills and worked hard and live in a thriving free-market economy where anyone can prosper if they will just apply themselves? Do we ever make a connection between our wealth and God's favor or disfavor? Is economic life linked to spiritual life? If so, how?

You can't read far in the NT without becoming aware that to Jesus, wealth was not a sign of God's favor but a *source of*

danger. He understood, in a way we are only just beginning to grasp, that making economics the driving force of life leads to trouble, both for those who prosper in a "market economy" and for those who do not – not to mention what it can do to whole nations in a "global economy." Our preoccupation with "the bottom line" now drives our choices in almost every area of life: where we will live, what kind of education we will give our children, what careers we will pursue, how our communities are shaped, how our businesses are run, how we look to the future either personally or nationally. Will this or that choice make for more or less income, property value, cash flow, investment return, capital accumulation?

We are, in biblical terms, very close indeed to worshipping "mammon." Money is no longer a means of exchange, but a symbol of status, a tool of power, a source of stability or not. Dollars are weapons: see how your bank or credit card company rewards or punishes you with fees and interest rates that depend on your wealth and credit rating! See how governments and national banks influence other countries' behaviors by giving or forgiving loans. Wealth is almost an obsession: those with millions of annual income can't resist cheating to get even more. See how many newspaper pages and web pages are devoted to tiny print detailing the up-to-the-minute prices of everything from companies to commodities to funds to bets on future prices!

When we rely on wealth, we live and die by our account balances, whether we are individuals, families, or churches. If our security is in our portfolios, the size of our pension fund, or the amount of our reserves, we may wake up one day to find that the Stock Market has crashed, a war in the Gulf has pushed oil to \$250 a barrel, hurricanes or floods have destroyed the infrastructure of a

whole region! Jesus' language was much homelier: "beware storing your treasure where moths can eat and rust decays." Instead, start trusting God; look to your Father in heaven to provide your daily bread and much more besides, and "seek first his kingdom."

Practically speaking, where are we in relation to the two men with money? Rich, pious, obeying the law, but turning away from Jesus? Or joyful, repentant, welcoming Jesus into our homes? Ready to use our money to help others, or needing to hold onto it ourselves? Ready to grasp what it means to be part of the new community that Jesus came to establish – a community where how much you earn and how much you have is irrelevant? Are we ready to enter the kingdom, even if that means that we take on a whole new responsibility for using our wealth for God? Are we ready to move beyond dropping a \$10 bill in the collection plate if we happen to be in church?

In short, is our wealth a blessing, or a hindrance, to our spiritual lives? Which are we – the pious and obedient man who is still a slave to Mammon, or the disreputable one who can't believe that Jesus wants to eat with him, and is drawn into joyful repentance and trust and discipleship and generosity?

Jesus makes clear that God can set us free from worry over, or worship of, wealth. Mammon is powerful stuff, able to capture our hearts and lives. God offers us salvation as a gift – but it has, you may say, a *price*: that we become completely dependent on him and on his son Jesus Christ, the Shepherd and Savior of the lost.

Let us pray...