

GOD'S WORD TO THE RICH
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 Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, NY, NY
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Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
 Psalm 91
 1 Timothy 6:6-19
 Luke 16:19-31

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 All Saints Episcopal Church
 Littleton, NH

We follow up today on last week's lessons and Jesus' confusing parable about a corrupt steward who feels the heat and is shrewd enough to see the light and do something about it. Curtis, as difficult as that text is—perhaps the most difficult in the New Testament—I think you got it just right.

Today, we continue to hear Jesus' challenging words about wealth. Some of you have heard me say this before: the only thing Jesus talks about more than wealth in the gospels is God's love for us. Now I don't know about Episcopalians, but I do know what such talk about money does to Presbyterians—it makes them very anxious. And why? Because most Presbyterians I know have all they need and more—usually *much more*. I suspect the same is true for Episcopalians—most of us have all that we need and more.

I have learned, as I served among some very wealthy people in New York City, enough is best. I also learned what the lure of wealth can do—the love of mammon, as Fr. Curtis rightly pointed out last week. The desire for more, more than we need, is as deadly now as it was when Jesus told this parable.

It's the subject of both our Gospel and Epistle lessons. 1st Timothy has other warnings as well—cautions against false teachings and practices that had begun to creep into the church, things like forbidding marriage and demanding abstinence from certain kinds of food and drink. Firmly anchored in the Hebrew Bible, earlier in the fourth chapter of 1st Timothy we are told that everything we have is to be received with thanksgiving. Why? Because God created it, and everything God creates is good. Nothing is to be rejected so long as it is received with thanksgiving. We are told that in doing so it is made holy.¹

This is the context in which we are to hear this word from God concerning wealth this morning. Wealth is good. It is God's gift to be received with thanksgiving and used for God's good purposes. When we do so, it is made holy. So far, so good. Now let me frame this another way.

Do you and I see our homes, jobs, our salaries, our subsidies, our social security checks, our retirement savings, our IRAs, our pensions, our stocks, bonds and dividends, if we are fortunate enough to have them, as gifts from God? Or are they just prudent financial planning and shrewd stock picking on our part? Do we bless God for the things we have been given—receive them with thanksgiving as God's gifts to care for us and for God's work in the world—thereby making them holy? Or do we see them as the result of our hard work, something that frankly, has nothing to do with God but are our own to do with as we please so long as it is not illegal?

One attitude sanctifies our wealth—quite literally, makes it holy and suitable for God and God's work. The other makes wealth an idol that competes with God for our faith—our trust, worship, allegiance, and energies. It is seductive, destructive, and deadly and its unbridled pursuit is the root of all evil.

It is not money that is the root of all evil—one of the most misquoted texts in scripture—it is the *love* of it. Succumbing to money's seductive power not only absorbs all of our life, attention, and faith, it causes us to throw away the rules or believe they don't apply to us. As the

lesson warns, “those who want to be rich fall into temptations and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.”² It becomes an addiction as destructive as cocaine. Think of those who have given up everything else of value, in order to have more and more of it, destroying their lives and the lives of those around them.

One of my New York parishioners who finally left Wall Street told me, “My first million-dollar bonus was quite a rush. But you soon learn they make the handcuffs out of gold.” The seduction and relentless pursuit of that gold is destructive if not deadly. Ask a Wall Street widow. Ask the young woman whose boyfriend was killed in a fight over drug sale territory. Ask the children of a corporate CEO—male or female—who put work before all else, especially family.

Most treacherous—the love of money replaces and destroys your faith. Even in the first century, the pursuit of wealth was seducing Christians away from their primary relationship with God, causing them to wander from the faith. They didn’t decide to quit believing in Christ or serving God in his name. They simply became so absorbed in making and having more—worshiping mammon—they wandered away, dropped out, and started serving what they thought was a more reliable savior. Has that changed?

The lesson warns us to shun the singular pursuit of wealth in order to give ourselves to God and God’s work: the pursuits of righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness.

Now none of those things come to any of us easily. It is why the church urges us to the daily practice of spiritual disciplines. It is why we need Eucharistic worship weekly to listen for what God is saying to us in scripture and sermon, to pray in word and song, and to be fed by and on Christ so that we have the nurture and strength we need to follow and serve him in this idol-filled world. That’s what we give up when we are not here on a Sunday—the voice, presence, and power of Christ in us.

But there is more than Sunday worship: the spiritual discipline of daily worship through the devotional reading of scripture, contemplation, and prayer; the discipline of sacrificial giving, offering back to God the time, talent, and treasure we have been given.

Stewardship season is soon upon us. I told Father Curtis I was going to kick it off with this sermon. The support of this place is more than a matter of fiscal necessity or personal responsibility. Every pastor will tell you one’s spiritual health can be measured by their giving. It is fundamentally about trusting and serving God. We need to be giving to the church and its work sacrificially—at least 10%—the biblical norm. Doing so keeps us focused on who we are, whose we are, and clear about who and what it is that gives us life. Spiritual disciplines are essential if we are to fight the good fight of faith.

Let me say that again, for this phrase is as misquoted almost as much as the text about money. The text does not say, “Fight the good fight,” as though any fight in town is encouraged so long as its mission is thought to be good. It says, “Fight the good fight of the faith.” All of this stuff about wealth, leadership, esteem, and care for God’s earth is really a fight about faith and where we place that as we respond to those places where God has called us to serve him, as Fr. Curtis reminds us at the conclusion of each service on Sundays.

At the ground zero of our lives, these struggles are about where you and I place our trust, where we find our hope, and where we get our meaning. Is it in stuff, and our appetites, hobbies and whims, so that the one who dies with the most toys wins, or in something more eternal than “stuff” and its false promises?

This was the rich man’s problem in Jesus’ parable. By the way, I am told that it was this parable that caused Andrew Carnegie to give away his wealth. He became convinced there would be no rich people in heaven.

In the parable, the man had invested in no one but himself all of his life. He had used God’s good gifts only for himself—no concern for any other one or thing and had ignored the bible’s injunction to care for the poor, the widow, and the aliens among us. With his life over,

everything was gone. The bell had rung, the market was closed—closed eternally. Knowing it was too late for him, he begged Father Abraham to send someone to warn his brothers so that they did not end up likewise. Abraham said No! “They have Moses and the prophets—they have the scriptures—they have been more than warned but have taken no heed. Why then would they listen, even if someone were to rise from the dead?”

I hope you hear both the irony and foreshadowing of his resurrection in Jesus’ words! For he has been raised from the dead. And if that is true, how is it one dares still to live only for themselves, ignoring the weightier matters of life, where it comes from, to whom it belongs, and what we do with it?

“Fighting the good fight of faith” means “taking hold of the eternal life to which you were called and for which you made the good confession.” Receive what you have as God’s gift and do so in thanksgiving. But set your hope, not on your wealth, but on God, who has not only richly provided you with everything good for your enjoyment, but given you enough to share, to invest in a different kind of commodity, what my late friend Ernie Campbell loved to call “Kingdom Securities.”

Dr. Campbell, then Pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, did not wear his ordination on his sleeve, and like many of us, preferred not to be so identified when traveling, lest we listen to confession the entire trip. When caught up in conversation on an airplane or train, and asked what he did for a living, Ernie usually said he was an investment advisor. Predictably, when the journey came to an end his seat-mate would inevitably ask for a hot stock tip. Ernie would then say, “Kingdom Securities; invest in Kingdom Securities.”

At the end of our lives, none of us is going to say we wished we had saved more money, built a bigger house, or left more to our children. From that final perspective of clarity, we are going to say, “I wish I had invested more in Christ and his work. For these are the signs of a life well lived in the good fight of faith. Risen from the dead He calls us to make him Lord daily—follow him, with head, heart, time, talent, wealth—with everything.

He is here among us now: in these words and at this table. Take hold of him, follow, find life that is really life, for “kingdom securities” never lose their value.

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; amen!

¹ 1 Timothy 4:3-5

² 1 Timothy 6:9