

“Called Out from a Place of Wealth”  
Mark 10:13-27  
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The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent

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“How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God,” Jesus says. Thankfully, he also says, “for God, nothing is impossible,” but we’re clearly not the easiest material God has to work with. Today we’ll explore how this uncomfortable passage can be good news for us.

Let me start by clearing up some things. First, the Bible never says that money, per se, is bad: “The *love* of money is the root of all evil,” Scripture tells us, not the money itself. God made us physical, material creatures who have bodies and possessions, and he called us “very good.”

Nor does the Bible speak with one uniform voice about what we are to do with our money. In some passages, the poor are given preference in the eyes of God, and the rich condemned; but in other passages, wealth is considered a sign of God’s blessing. In some verses, Jesus calls the apostles to leave behind all their possessions; but in other verses, he instructs his followers to give alms for the poor, which is impossible to do without resources. In some places, early Christians gladly pool their money and hold all goods in common; in other places, wealthy patrons provide generous hospitality for believers as they gather in their homes. There is no single Biblical mandate about money.

There is, however, a clear mandate about *faith*. Throughout Scripture, faith is a decision of ultimate orientation: do I, or do I not, orient myself toward God, and God alone, who creates, sustains, and saves me? Do I, or do I not, allow God, and God alone, to lead, define, and guide me? Do I, or do I not, shape my life around God’s will, which is ultimate, and keep everything else in its penultimate place?

This is not a one-time question, but an ongoing decision of life – even for the most faithful. And the rich man who came to Jesus is truly faithful. He is not to be brushed off as a caricature of self-importance, greed, oppression, or any of the other ways the wealthy can be dismissed. This man humbles himself before Jesus, kneeling at his feet. He vows his own obedience to God, and has sincerely kept all the Lord’s commandments from his youth. He comes with openness and without guile, genuinely seeking answers from Jesus: what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus – Jesus loves him.

So what goes wrong? Is Jesus asking too much of him? That’s hard to imagine; Jesus knows exactly what we’re capable of, and more importantly, knows exactly what it is we need. Indeed, Jesus tells this man that he lacks “only one thing.” He tells him he needs to give his money away because it had become a millstone around his neck. *The wealth the man owned had come to own him.* And that’s what’s known as idolatry.

“Idolatry.” What an old-fashioned word. It was, in fact, fairly meaningless even to me for years – something out of the Old Testament that had to do with little gold bull-shaped “god-lings” that Israelites worshiped instead of Yahweh. It was New Testament professor Luke Timothy Johnson who helped me understand the manifold and perverse forms of idolatry today. In his brilliant book *Sharing Possessions*, he invites us to consider the particular shape of our own lives ... to consider whether there are things that have taken over the rightful place of God:

“Idolatry, in simple terms, is the choice of treating as ultimate and absolute that which is neither absolute nor ultimate. We treat something as ultimate by the worship we pay it ... [not] the worship of lips or of incense but of service.

“... My god is that which I serve .... Whatever I may *claim* as ultimate, the truth is that my god *is* that which rivets my attention, centers my activity,

preoccupies my mind, ...motivates my action. ... Diagnostically, I can tell what my god is by seeing what it is around which the patterns of my life organize themselves” (Luke T. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), p. 49, emphasis mine).

It’s an old saying that a look at our checkbook can tell us what our real values are, and I would add that we should check our calendars too, if we want to examine the true priorities on which we spend ourselves. But I suspect that discovering our deepest patterns requires even more substantial examination. We can’t begin to get a grip on this in a fifteen minute sermon; nevertheless, let me prime the pump by suggesting some significant questions for you to reflect on later. So ... what are the things around which my life revolves? Here are some diagnostic questions:

\*What is it that motivates me to get up in the morning? What will I make time for, no matter how busy I am?

\*What is the high point of my day: helping someone? Closing a deal? The end of work or school and the beginning of free time? The first drink? My loved one’s kiss?

\*When I lie down to go to sleep, what is the tape that runs through my mind? Is it the work I didn’t finish, the free time I never had, the family member who’s sick, the interview I face tomorrow?

\*When I look at others around me, with what measure do I compare myself to my peers? My title, my education, my looks, my money, my family? What is my strongest suit? Of what am I most proud? (Based on *Sharing Possessions*, pp. 51-2).

This is hardly an exhaustive list, but it is a place to begin. No single question can reveal the truth. But *cumulatively*, questions like these help us discover what we spend ourselves on, what we rely on for our sense of identity,

what we lean on for reassurance ... in other words, what “gods” we serve. The truth is that *anything* we can accumulate, control, be proud of, compare ourselves with, or devote ourselves to can become a functional substitute for God. It’s obvious when an alcoholic depends on a drink, but it’s just as real when teenage girls live want desperately to be pretty, or college-bound kids rank their worth by their SAT scores, or executives compare the size of their compensation, or ministers the prestige of their churches, or socialites the buzz about their parties, or philanthropists their legacy on the wall of contributors. Notice that *none of these things* – alcohol or beauty or intelligence or money or achievement or popularity or generosity – *none of these things is bad*. These things are only corrupt when they forget their place. They do not give us our value. Only God can do that.

The truth is that even the church can take the place of God. My sister Karen, who, as you know, is also a pastor, had a remarkable experience last summer on her sabbatical, which included a pilgrimage to the Iona Abbey in Scotland. She shared this story with her own congregation, and has given me permission to share it with you too. Karen was sitting in the Abbey in a quiet, meditative service. It was dark; the church was only illuminated by candles. As she prayed, she had a vision. She was in a small room. In the center of the room was a statue, which turned into a church – and it filled the entire room. Her family was also in the room, though the statue was so big she couldn’t see them. Karen was scurrying around, a woman on a mission, and whatever it was she was doing felt to her urgent and important. Their son Ben was at the edge of the room, going out the door. Ben is 16 years old and that’s exactly what he’s doing – he’s about to go out into the world. But it made her so sad to think of losing him. Karen’s husband Gene was on the far side of the statue. He had his nose buried in a book. And then there was Luke, their 9-year-old son. Luke was pouting and sulking and generally being mad. That was her family. They were all together in this room, separate

from each other, each absorbed in their own lives, with this enormous statue in between them, taking up most of the room. It was awful. And it was so true it broke her heart, and she wept.

And then she prayed: “Please God, is there some way to be different? Isn’t there some other way?”

And it changed. Instantly, it changed. Almost everything was still the same – it was the same small room, each of them exactly where they’d been before – Ben, with his hand at the door; Gene, off in his own corner; and Luke, still mad at the world. But the statue had disappeared. And in its place was a table. In the center of the room was a round table. And she knew immediately it was the Lord’s table. A table where they could gather with each other. A table meant for love. And one other thing had changed. She had stopped being frantic. She was quiet, sober now. All she wanted was to love this family of hers, which, for the first time in years and years, she was free to do now. That is what the Lord offered her ... which hadn’t been an option when she had made the church the “god” she served (Karen Chakoian, Pastor, 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Church, Granville, Ohio, as shared in conversation and in a paper prepared for the 2006 Moveable Feast).

Luke Johnson, again, gently points us to this fundamental issue:

“The real question comes when I ask ‘Where is it that the meaning and power of my individual human life is sought? In what or where do I seek my sense of worth and identity? What is it, seen or unseen, which is the ‘bottom line’ for me? ... What is it for which I move and act? ... What is it, in my actual life, that functions as my god?”

Anything – anything – can become an idol. Generally, it is our strongest suit that takes us over: the more intelligent we are, the likelier we are to let that define us. The more successful we’ve been, the larger the stakes we place in that game. The more money we have, the greater the chance that we hold our identity there.

In our community, I suspect that all of these strengths can overtake us, without us even knowing it. That's what happened to the rich man, and why Jesus tells him to sell everything he has and give it away and find his real treasure in heaven.

Because only then will he find his real meaning, real life, real security, and real identity, which is something that money can't buy.

And he can't do it. He can't let it go. "When he heard this, he was shocked, and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And it makes me wonder ... it makes me wonder: what would we do?

We're clearly not the easiest material that God has to work with. But thank God – thank God – that he love us so ... and that *nothing* is impossible with him. Amen.