

Faithful Care: For Wealth

a sermon

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Mark 10:17-31

For the last two weeks, I've been talking about stewardship.

Lucky me! Lucky you!

Really, I've enjoyed it. I have!

As I've been saying before today, I have a short, simple definition of "stewardship." For me, stewardship is "faithful care."

Here's what I mean by that, by "faithful care."

God gives us gifts. These gifts are amazing. They're beautiful. These gifts, God gives them to us for our good and for our enjoyment. They don't belong to us, not *really*, but as we have them we are to treat them well.

God gives us gifts, and God expects us to care for these gifts. We show that we are faithful to God when we take care of what we have been given. Just as God entrusts us with many blessings, so are we to show we are worthy of that trust in how we treat these blessings. This is a big way we show we are faithful to God, and live out our faith *in* God: by caring for God's gifts.

Now, for these weeks that I've been talking about stewardship as faithful care, I've avoided talking about money. Because stewardship is about more than money. We misunderstand stewardship if we think that it's only about money.

So I've looked at other aspects of stewardship besides the financial.

I needed to do this. *You* needed me to do this. So I have.

I think it warps our understanding of Christian responsibility and faithfulness if we make stewardship only or mainly about money. We've got to see stewardship as connected to our treatment of natural resources, and our care for other people, and even our care for ourselves

...

our bodies,
our minds,
our emotions,
our souls.

Such a fuller appreciation of stewardship is biblical, and living out such an expansive view of stewardship honors Christ, and it blesses others.

But at some point we do have to talk about money. Because even as stewardship is not *only* about money, it surely does *include* money. To ignore that or deny that is just as wrong as making it all about money.

And that is a temptation some have: to exclude some part of our lives from God, to make it "ours," "mine," so we can control it and use it as we see fit.

Yes, let's make wealth something spiritually neutral, our use of it having no impact on our souls ... and being none of God's business! Yeah, that sounds right!

Um, no.



This passage from the Gospel of Mark that I just read, it pushes against the feelings people have about wealth. It calls into question the easy relationship we have with money, or perhaps it's just an uneasy truce. Some people, this passage rubs the wrong way; and others, it robs of their complacent attitudes about their own wealth.

It's important to say, I think, that this passage does not say that wealth is bad. It doesn't say that rich people are bad.

The man who comes to Jesus that day, he seems really nice! And I don't mean that in the totally sarcastic and negative way of saying "He seems nice," you know, when we say that about someone who is rude. Here, I really mean it. This rich man is, by all appearances, a good guy.

Jesus sees that.

Jesus knows that.

He says as much.

The man comes to Jesus. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Well," says Jesus, "You know the commandments."

"I've kept them as long as I can remember," says the man.

And at this, Jesus looks at the man with great love. That's right. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him."

Jesus loved the man. He was pleased with his response to Jesus, which showed that he was a good man, a virtuous man, a God-fearing man. Jesus looked at him and loved him,

 this man who wanted to do right
 and had asked Jesus how to do it,
 this man who sought salvation
 and came to Jesus to find it.

But there was more.

There had to be more.

This man who had so impressed Jesus needed more.

He needed depth.

He needed growth.

He needed Jesus.

So Jesus tells him: "You lack one thing. Go, sell everything you have, give the money to the poor, then come, follow me."

Now, that's actually kind of funny. It's not one thing. It's *five* things: go, sell, give, come, follow.

But Jesus knew what he was talking about. It's one thing in five parts, one whole response made up of five discrete steps.

“You lack one thing. Go, sell everything you have, give the money to the poor, then come, follow me.”

Jesus said this with love.

He said this out of great mercy for this man.

He said it knowing what the man truly needed, and what he truly did not have.

And boy-oh-boy, how that man wished he hadn't said it! It felt to him like a punch in the gut.

“He went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”



Jesus seems to understand this, the man's reaction. He doesn't agree with it, but he gets it. Explaining to his disciples, he then talks to them about the spiritual challenge money poses.

“How hard it will be for those who have wealth 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.”

Now this saying of Christ, you may have heard about it some things, helpful things, comforting things, things like, oh, the eye of a needle, that was the name of a gate in the city of Jerusalem, a kind of small gate, kind of like, you know, Baird Road near Whitney, and this gate was a bit too small for a camel to go through, so you'd have to take a few stones out of the gate and pull the luggage and saddle off the camel and then get on the back end of the camel (watch out!!) and *push real hard* and then **pop** the camel through the gate.

This is wrong. You need to know that this is wrong.

There is no evidence that there was such a gate in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus, and no indication that Jesus is referring to such a gate. All those who say this, well, they're just trying to make these words of Jesus easier: for others, for themselves — easier to accept and believe and follow.

But this doesn't do Jesus any favors.

It doesn't do us any good either, even if it might make us feel better ... for awhile. Because Jesus is really saying that being rich makes it impossible to follow him, impossible to live in the new reality he is bringing about, impossible — as he says — “to enter the kingdom of God.”

Impossible? Really?

Well, let's hang in there a little bit with what Jesus is saying. His disciples did.

Because they heard in what he said something that made it tough on them, too. They saw that if it was impossible for people with riches (and remember, in those days, wealth was viewed as a sign of God's blessing), impossible for rich people to enter the kingdom of God, then in some sense it was impossible for *anyone* to enter the kingdom of God. Including them.

“Then who can be saved?” they asked.

It is impossible, said Jesus. For human beings, that is. It's impossible for *us*, all of us. Entering the joyful new reality that Jesus is making is a human impossibility. But not a divine impossibility.

“Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’”

God overcomes what is impossible for us. God can thread a camel through a needle's eye, and God can carry anyone into heaven:

rich and poor,
healthy and sick,
young and old,
powerful and powerless,
first and last.



I can't speak for you. But I want to admit before you that I have a lot of anxiety about money.

It goes way back to my childhood.

It's one of those areas that has shown me just how patient Tammi is, because sometimes issues involving money bring out all sorts of less than rational responses from me, and she just helps me through it and even out of it.

I know that this anxiety surrounding money, this fear about losing it, this worry about whether there will be enough — it binds me, it controls me, it makes me

less generous,
less loving,
less hospitable,
less *free*.

And I know that this shows that I do not fully trust God, nor do I wholeheartedly follow Jesus.

It shows that I am not all that different from the man in the gospel story.

Because I, too, have many possessions. And the call of Jesus to value him more than they is a call that often sends *me* away sorrowing. Because I'm not sure I can: love him more than they. I'm not sure I can: leave them behind and follow him.

They have a grip on me that I hate, but without that grip, without *them*, what am I?

Sick, I know.

But it's a sickness I share with many. Perhaps even with you.

Wealth has a grip on us. Even when we're not wealthy. But the paradox with money is that there never seems to be enough, and even the more you have the less happy and less secure you may be.

Social psychologists who have researched the intersection of money and happiness find, pretty conclusively, that once you have enough money to lift you out of poverty, maybe just a little beyond, then more money doesn't make you happier.

We know this, of course. Just intuitively, we know it. Money doesn't buy happiness. And yet we have an attachment to wealth beyond the basic wealth we need. It is, I believe a sign of a serious spiritual disorder.

But the good news Jesus brings, his word of comfort entwined with his word of challenge, is that God can do what is impossible for us.

We may not be able, on our own, to extract ourselves from our attachment to money, wealth, and material possessions.

But God can.

We may find it hard to love Jesus more than cars or homes or vacations.

But God can move us step-by-step toward a more complete and more visible love of Jesus.

We may find it hard even to recognize how entangled our hearts are with materialism and consumerism.

But God can reveal to us our entanglement, and move us along in disentanglement.



Financial stewardship means faithful care of the wealth God has given us. Here, as with anything else in our lives in Christ, the news is good, the word is gospel. Christ has born our sins, and the task he gives us ... he himself has already completed.

His yoke is easy and his burden is light.

In Christ, we have the promise of a life of freedom. In few places is our need for freedom more acute than in our relationship with money. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are given the gift of using our gifts, including the gift of wealth,

faithfully,
carefully,
with love and joy and freedom,
for ends wise and merciful,
to glorify God,
to help others,
to be a blessing to many.

My friends, take joy in God's gifts, and rejoice in the powerful love of Jesus, the sign of God's power to do what is impossible for us.