

But it's only a story

Why Jesus told stories about money
and why we should too

*He is rich or poor according to
what he is, not according to
what he has.*

– Henry Ward Beecher

Stories of wealth: Lord, make me a philanthropist!

Dwelling in the Word – Mark 10:17-27

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; Honour 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.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is 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.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Monday

Read Mark 10:17-27

In this week's Scripture lesson a young man (whom Luke's gospel calls a ruler – Luke 18:18-30) runs up to Jesus, asking what he must do to have eternal life. Jesus loves this man, but still tells him the truth – that he has to divest himself of his power and give his wealth to the poor in order to enter the kingdom, but offers the encouragement that with God nothing is impossible. This shocks everyone within earshot, since the rabbis taught that wealth and power in this world are signs of God's blessing. (From *Your Treasure Your Heart*, Faith and Life Resources, Harrisonburg, Va., 2008)



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For your reflection

- Why do you think some people can handle wealth well and others cannot?
- As you read these words, consider the responses and confusion expressed by those involved in this scene. Who do you identify with?
- In the list of commands stated by Jesus there is one glaring omission. Can you identify which one? Is it coincidental? We will get to this later in the week.

*Tuesday***Read Mark 10:17-27**

In the 1950s, there was a daytime television show called *Queen for a Day*. On stage before an audience, the host would interview weeping women telling hard-luck stories. The audience would vote by applause to select the woman who would become “queen for a day,” which meant she would receive special gifts from the sponsors of the program. The gifts included things like automatic washers and dryers, refrigerators, stoves, dishwashers and vacation trips to Florida or Hawaii.

Today, it is difficult to find a home in North America without these appliances. It is almost as hard to find couples where the adults have not vacationed in Hawaii or Florida. Does this mean we live like royalty compared to 60 years ago? Are we all in some ways similar to the young, wealthy man in the Scripture reading? Would we be quick to sell our amenities, give up our vacations, and give our money to the poor? Jesus tells us that wealth and power are not necessarily signs of blessing; they may even be a serious impediment to a healthy relationship with God.

For your reflection

Go to www.globalrichlist.com to get a realistic perspective of where you stand in light of the other seven billion citizens of planet earth.

- Do you think of yourself as wealthy? At what point would you consider a person to be wealthy?
- In what ways does Jesus bring the conversation about money and wealth together with an emphasis on our faith and relationship with God?

Have you heard the story about the two people who went to heaven? One came from poverty, the other from wealth. Both, were given identical “mansions.” The poor person danced in front of the open fire of the thatch roof hut, praising God for the mansion. The wealthy person left on their way to the “office” of heaven to inquire about the mistake.

For your reflection

- What is the message of this story?
- Who in this story might you most likely identify with?

*Wednesday***Read Mark 10:17-27**

The young man in this week’s Scripture tells Jesus that he has kept all the commandments listed by Jesus since he was a child. Jesus loves this man, so attempts to help him recognize a spiritual obstacle in his life. The man fails to understand that merely honoring the commandments is not enough; this superficial obedience must be accompanied by spiritual depth, which can only come from knowing the heart of God. This man relies on his wealth and the worldly power to protect and sustain him when he should, instead, have a sense of reliance and dependence on God as the provider for his needs. The “sin” is not the wealth itself. It is what wealth can do to us if we are not connected to the heart of God. What other obstacles can create this barrier in our lives to the heart of God?

For your reflection

- What was the missing commandment left out by Jesus in this Scripture? You shall not covet (Exodus 20:17).
- Why do you think Jesus doesn't mention, "You shall not covet?"
- Was Jesus setting a trap for the wealthy young man?
- What does coveting have to do with our view and use of money?
- Do we have a tendency to view persons with considerable financial means differently than those of modest means? Why can this be a danger in the life of the church (James 2:1-9)?

*Thursday***Read Mark 10:17-27**

One question that comes out of this story is, "Why was it so difficult for the man to sell his possessions when invited to become a follower of Jesus?" The man clearly had a high regard for Jesus. He ran to Jesus, he knelt before him, he even honored him with the title, "Good Teacher."

How do you think you might respond in a similar situation? Do your possessions have a hold on you so strong that it would cause you to choose them over Jesus? Understanding the difference between our needs and our wants can be an important way of distinguishing between what is life giving and what is simply a life accessory.

The Apostle Paul makes it clear God wants our needs to be met: "God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work ..." (2 Corinthians 9:8).

The challenge is determining what is a true **need** – and what is a **want**.

One common definition of a need: everything we can afford. But just because we get a raise, does that mean we actually **need** a newer car?

A better way to define needs is to go back to basics: food, shelter, transportation, insurance, household needs. And ask: "What do I need to fulfill God's call on my life?" That could involve developing job skills, getting an education, having transportation, raising a family or participating in a ministry.

Then ask: "How much food and what kind? How large a home? How much education? What kind of transportation?" These questions should be answered based on how they support you in or distract you from meeting core needs and living out your faith values.

Evaluating a purchase

Spending money is a daily routine in our lives, like eating and sleeping. Sometimes we give little thought to whether it makes financial sense to splurge on a new coat, spend an evening out, or even buy a muffin from the corner bakery.

Here are a few questions to ask ourselves about our purchases:

- Is this the right item, at the right place, and at the right time?
- Are there other more important uses of my money right now?
- Does this purchase support my faith values?
- Will doing so hinder my long-term goals for saving and giving?
- What are consequences of not buying this item? If I wait a week or a month will I still **need** it?
- If I do make the purchase, will there be additional financial obligations as a result? (i.e., storage for a boat, insurance and registration for the new car, dry cleaning for the new coat, etc.)

Once you are clear about what determines a need, then you can more easily decide when “enough is enough.” See *Creating a Budget: How to align your money with you true needs and values* at Everence.com

Friday

Read Mark 10:17-27

We have spent time reflecting on some of the dangers of wealth. This is not only a challenge for the man in Mark 10 we have been following this week – it is a challenge we all face as citizens of the richest nation on earth. Let’s consider the good that can be done with the resources that are at our disposal.

For your reflection

- Who are people you know who have been good models of how they use their wealth?
- What “assets” besides money do you possess that could become an obstacle to your ability to connect to the heart of God?
- What have you done this week with the resources at your disposal to reach out to the needs of others?
- Harry Emerson Fosdick said, “Money is you in portable form. It can go where you cannot go, speak languages you will never speak.” In what ways does this speak to the good that money can do through us?
- Consider some ways you can work to do good with your wealth by living below your means so that you can enhance the lives of others.

Learning together

Would you rather be poor or wealthy? I don’t know of many who have been poor who would prefer it over the alternative. On occasion, my wife and I imagine the fun we could have being wealthy philanthropists: Wouldn’t it be great to give away a large part of your income or estate?

Our views of wealth reveal many complexities about our lives such as how we make our “wealth” and how generous we should be if we were among the very rich. The other side of this is – if we live in North America – we are among the wealthiest in the world. So what are we doing with that wealth? What makes us think we might actually be able to handle even greater wealth better than how we are managing our current wealth?

To begin this discussion, those who went to the website www.globalrichlist.com as part of Tuesday’s reflection time are encouraged to discuss what they learned from that exercise. How do you feel about your wealth ranking among the other seven billion citizens of planet earth?

Wealthy people in the New Testament

Most of Jesus’ followers were not wealthy, but below are the names of a few notable exceptions. We can learn a great deal in the New Testament from Jesus’ interactions with wealthy people. Many were very humble and were recognized by Jesus for their acts of generosity and service. Divide the texts and stories below among the class. See if there were any common characteristics in how Jesus related to them and/or how they related their faith to their wealth.

For group discussion

- But these are only stories – does Jesus really expect us to take them seriously today?
- What kinds of socio-economic differences come into play between first century and 21st century discipleship and our relationship with money?

Person	Use of wealth	Lessons to be learned
Zacchaeus , tax collector (Luke 19:1-10)	Before faith, cheated citizens and abused the poor. After faith, repented and made restitution.	Ill-gotten gains must be repaid. God saves and changes us – all the way down to our pocketbooks.
Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27:56-61; Mark 15:42-46; Luke 23:50-53)	Pre-paid his own funeral. Donated his tomb for the burial of Jesus.	Forsaking treasures on earth for the kingdom will be rewarded.
Women supporters (Luke 8:3; 23:55-24:10; Mark 15:40; 16:1)	Supported Jesus' work. Assisted in his burial (probably donated expensive perfume).	Generosity characterizes those who follow Jesus.
Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5-13; Luke 7:5)	Showed kindness toward the Jews. Paid for the building of a synagogue. Showed compassion for his ailing servant.	When we love people it shows in the things we do and the projects we support.
Rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30)	Unwilling to part with his wealth when tested by Jesus.	Those who cling to wealth have difficulty getting into the kingdom. Righteousness cannot be earned, but must be received as a gift. "Many who are first will be last, and the last first."
Philemon (Philemon 1)	Owned slaves and other property. Forgave a runaway slave, both morally and financially.	How we use our wealth is as important an issue as how much wealth we keep for ourselves.
Joseph, called Barnabas (Acts 4:36-37)	Sold land and gave the proceeds to believers.	Partnership in the Gospel may mean putting your money where believers hurt.
Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11)	Sold land, lied to the Holy Spirit, and tried to deceive the church about their gift.	God is not fooled by gracious appearances but sees the heart and acts accordingly.
Lydia (Acts 16:13-15, 40)	Hosted the first church in Europe in her home. Generous to the poor.	We should use our resources and homes to accomplish God's purposes.
Cornelius the Centurion (Acts 10:1-48)	Sought out Peter concerning the faith.	Fear of God should prompt us to admit our own need for a Savior.
Ethiopian treasurer (Acts 8:26-40)	Nurtured his belief in God by traveling to Jerusalem. Invited Philip to explain more about the faith.	Stewardship of money and study of Scriptures go hand in hand – as do business trips and worship services.
Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:9-25)	Longed for spiritual power and thought it could be bought and sold.	The gifts of God cannot be bought.

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A modern story: Miss McCarty's gift

Oseola McCarty donates \$150,000 to Southern Miss.

Oseola McCarty's lined, brown hands, now gnarled with arthritis, bear mute testimony to a lifetime spent washing and ironing other people's clothes. Less evident is how this quiet, 87-year-old black woman came to donate \$150,000 to The University of Southern Mississippi.

"I want to help somebody's child go to college," Miss McCarty said. "I just want it to go to someone who will appreciate it and learn. I'm old and I'm not going to live always."

McCarty's gift establishes an endowed Oseola McCarty Scholarship, with "priority consideration given to those deserving African-American students enrolling at The University of Southern Mississippi who clearly demonstrate a financial need."

Bill Pace, executive director of the Southern Miss Foundation, which will administer McCarty's gift, said, "This is by far the largest gift ever given to Southern Miss by an African-American. We are overwhelmed and humbled by what she has done."

Miss McCarty has done laundry for three generations of some families. In the beginning, she said, she charged \$1.50 to \$2 a bundle, but, with inflation, the price rose. "When I started making \$10 a bundle – I don't remember when ... sometime after the war – I commenced to save money," she recalled. "I put it in savings. I never would take any of it out. I just put it in. It just accumulated."

When Oseola was in the sixth grade, her childless aunt had to go to the hospital, and, McCarty said, "I had to go and wait on her. McCarty never returned to school."

"All my classmates had gone off and left me," she said, "so I didn't go back. I just washed and ironed." Meanwhile, McCarty washed and ironed and lived frugally. She has never had a car and still walks everywhere she goes.

McCarty, who never married, said, "After my aunt died, I began to think, I didn't have nobody. I began to think about what to do with what little I had."

McCarty's arthritis in her hands forced her to retire from washing and ironing in December 1994, at the age of 86. "I can't do everything," she said, "but I can do something to help somebody. And what I can do I will do. I wish I could do more."

This is an excerpt from the 1995 story written by Sharon Wertz.

For group discussion

- How does this story redefine terms like wealth, work, generosity, etc.?
- How does this story challenge us in our view of money and wealth?
- Do you know others like Miss McCarty?



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