

GETTING GIVING

Come Be Really Rich

Text: Psalm 146; Amos 6:1,4-7; Luke 16:19-31; 1 Timothy 6:6-19

A Word to the Rich

Through the voice of the Apostle Paul, God once challenged a young pastor named Timothy to preach a particular sermon which, if it had a title, would have been labeled: "How To Be Really Rich." This is what he said: **"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life."**

I'm not sure how to preach that same sermon to you today for the simple reason that many of us simply don't think of ourselves as all that rich in material terms. Granted, not too many of us are actually living below the federal poverty income level of \$11,500 for a household of one or \$27,500 for a household of five. The vast majority of us are doing quite a bit better than that. DuPage County has the highest per capita income in the Midwest. Average household income tops \$100,000 in 19 of the towns in our county. A quick study of the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the jewelry and technology we sport, suggests that most of us are earning an income that puts us in the "wealthy" bracket by any standard you'd find in history.

And yet we don't always feel rich, do we? As an article in Fast Company magazine points out: "Money doesn't buy what it used to... Millionaires are a dime a dozen: There are nearly 5 million households in America with a net worth of at least \$1 million... For the average Joe, a garden-suburb mortgage, school tuition, an SUV in the garage, and spring break in Vail can make a six-figure salary feel like almost nothing. Meanwhile, it's impossible to escape the barrage of images of the Rich Life, Supersized for the American Century... [cars] which start at \$200,000, are sell-outs; Vertu cell phones cost almost \$20,000; Johnnie Walker has introduced the \$180-a-bottle Blue label [scotch] and it's going for \$700 in clubs." Now that's living rich, isn't it?

Worldly Wealth Is Uncertain

Or is it? Journalist Polly LaBarre observes that over the last forty years "the average American family received a 16% raise (adjusted for inflation), while the percentage of people who described themselves as 'very happy' fell from 36% to 29%. We are better paid, fed, and educated than ever. Yet the divorce rate

has doubled, the teen-suicide rate has tripled, and depression has soared in the past [several decades]. The conclusion is inescapable: Our lifestyles are packed with more stuff, but we lead emptier lives. We're consuming more but enjoying it less."

Maybe this is part of what the Apostle Paul meant when he urged Timothy to talk to his congregation about the Money Thing: "**Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain**" (1 Tim 6:17). You've learned that, haven't you? [# Lesson 1] You know that worldly wealth is uncertain in its FLOW. It can suddenly stop flowing or dry up to a trickle. If we've built the house of our hopes next to that stream, what do we do when it suddenly stops?

Even where the income stream is fairly dependable, wealth as the world defines is also uncertain in its FRUIT. It's cliché to say that money doesn't buy happiness, but it is true, isn't it? I've lived most of my life among the very affluent and met some who were truly happy people. I've met many more for whom worldly wealth – the chase for it, the effort to maintain it, the distractions and destructions that come with it – had become bitter fruit indeed. As I said last week, the Serpent's lie a-hiss all around us says you can spell happiness "M-O-R-E."

Maybe most importantly of all, worldly wealth is uncertain in its FORCE. How many people do you know whose wealth drove them into the arms of God? It happens now and then. I know a woman who found herself so blessed with material things that she started going to church just because she felt thankful and wanted to gain the spiritual wisdom to use what she'd been given for the best. But how many other stories could you tell of people who got financially fat and became faithless?

Jesus said that material wealth -- what he personified with the word "**mammon**" (Matt 6:24) -- is a spiritual FORCE. It can drive us to think of ourselves as the Owner of life, instead of honoring the God who is. It can drive us to forget the call to be Stewards of the Master and push us instead to bury more and more resources in ourselves, even leading us into a debtor's prison. Wealth can force out of our minds the reality that one day we'll all be evaluated for whether we acted in a good and faithful way with what we had, and not as the world tends to measure by how much we have.

There was a time when the word "Success" was used to describe the benevolent influence of someone's life. Today, we say that Howard Stern is a success, Kim Kardashian is a success, Donald Trump is a success, but the measuring stick is simply fame and money -- worldly wealth glorifying self instead of God.

In our lectionary text from Luke chapter 16, Jesus tells a parable about a rich man named Dives who, after his death, suddenly realizes that he'd been on the

wrong track in life (Luke 16:19-21a). Dives had been given so much but had ignored the plight of the poor on his doorstep. He'd ignored the clear teaching of prophets like Amos who warned of God's judgment on those who display selfish indulgence and complacency in the face of the ruined lives of others (Amos 6:1-7). Dives had pursued success without significance, comfort without charity.

Now, burning in a hell of separation from God, Dives begs for the chance to send his brothers a message. In Jesus' story, God says no to this request, but I bet every one of us knows exactly what the message would have been (Luke 16:27-31). We know what thousands of now-enlightened but no longer living people would cry out to us from the grave if they had a voice. It would be this: **"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain"** in its flow and fruit and force.

God Gives For Our Enjoyment

And then the message would go on – as it does go on through the words of St. Paul: Command them **"to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."** Did you hear that last part? Did you hear the good news in that last part? Some people picture God as some celestial Scrooge on the balcony of heaven, some gray-bearded Grinch, irritated when people are partying it up in this life. But He's not like this.

The text says that God **"richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."** Like any good Father, much less a heavenly one, God wants his children to take pleasure in the possessions He has entrusted to them. Don't forget that the God of the Bible is the one who commanded Israel to throw feasts and parties. He's the one who commanded tithing -- in part to make sure that the widow and orphan succeeded too, but also so that there'd be a cash fund on hand to provide for regular celebrations. One of the reasons that Jesus so irritated the pinch-penny Pharisees of his time, was because he insisted on living it up now and then himself and kept talking about the kingdom of God in such non-stingy terms.

In summing up his mission on earth, Jesus said: **"I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly"** (John 10:10). **"I have taught you all that I have,"** said Jesus to his disciples, **"that my joy might be in you and your joy complete"** (John 15:11; 17:13). Jesus was saying in effect here and many other places: "Come to me and let me help you discover what it means to be really rich!" But here's the key part: The richness God wants to give is not the worldly version of health, wealth, and prosperity.

Real richness comes from drawing closer and closer to Himself – and sometimes certain things have to go because they stand between us and God (Mark

10:21). Real richness is the contentment that comes from trusting God for daily bread, and sometimes that requires begging God to help us get over our addiction to all the Devil's Foodcake out there. In essence, Jesus calls us toward that rich joy that is truly HIS joy. It is the spiritual health, the heavenly wealth, the recession-proof prosperity that comes when, like Jesus himself, you have it all, but choose nonetheless to give sacrificially to meet the needs of others (Psalm 146:7-9).

Why Give?

Do you GET giving? Do you know WHY you give? It's not for the tax break, right? It's not because you'd be embarrassed if you didn't put something into the envelope at the fundraiser or in the plate at church, right? It's not because you're guilty about all the other ways you spend money, is it? It's not because you're trying to tip God or buy Him off? If I am ruthlessly honest with myself, I have to confess that I've probably given for all those reasons at one time or another. But as I quickly get older, and slowly get just a little bit more spiritually mature, my own giving – and I pray yours – is more and more motivated by some other impulses.

In my best moments, I give because I've been given so much and it seems a natural way to express the gratitude I feel. I give because I see other people who have needs that God has given me the power to address and because it brings me joy just knowing that I've been able to help. I give because, in doing so, it moves me closer to God. I become a little bit more like Him. Just like Jesus said, every time I put my treasure where God is working, my heart comes stumbling behind (Luke 12:24). I give because I know that St. Paul was right that **"the love of money is the root of all evil"** (1 Tim 6:10) and I'm trying to break off the affair. Paul says that **"Godliness with contentment is great gain"** (1 Tim 6:6), and I just don't know how I'll ever find out if that's true until I learn to be more content with what I have instead of lusting for the Goddess More.

But there's one additional reason I'm trying to grow in my giving, as I know you are too. I'm reminded of the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Los Angeles, an amazing place, sometimes called "Disneyland for the Dead." You'll find all kinds of graves and memorials there and, over the years, people have been buried there in the strangest of ways. One man had himself buried sitting up in his Cadillac with a cigar glued in his mouth. Observing the burial, a groundskeeper muttered: "Man, now that's really living!"

I so badly don't want to be a "Dives" like that. As St. Paul observes: **"We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it"** (1 Tim 6:7). I want to remember that it's not what I store up here that counts. I can't keep it anyway (Matt 6:19). And so I want to learn to hold it loosely. I want to learn to have **"Faith, Hope, and Love"** be my main treasures here

because, as Paul also remarks, these alone **"remain"** (1 Cor 13:10) -- they are the only things that survive the grave and they are what our life in heaven will be ALL about, forevermore. Giving helps me prepare for that eternity.

So that's why I've preached this message today. It's because I need it every bit as much as anyone. It's why I'm not scolding you but calling all of us to the glory for which we were made. It's why I dare in the name of Jesus Christ to: **"Command [we] who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put [our] hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put [our] hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."** In a world focused on getting, let's be more about giving. Let us resolve **"to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share."** For **"In this way [we] will lay up treasure for [our] selves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that [we] may take hold of the life that is truly life."** Amen.

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Source: HYPERLINK "http://www.familiesusa.org" www.familiesusa.org | 2013 Federal Poverty Guidelines

Source: Wikipedia profile of DuPage County

"How to Lead a Rich Life" Fast Company, Issue 68, February 19, 2003.