

It seems there is a dark side to our affluence. According to Jesus, this spirit of unhappiness is the desire to be rich in the things of the world, specifically money. Jesus clearly identifies this spirit when he speaks with the rich young ruler. The story makes it clear that this man is young, and Luke tells us he is a ruler (18:18), possibly a magistrate or a kind of Justice of the Peace. In the parallel account in Mark, we are told that the young man came "running" up to Christ and "knelt" before him (Mark 10:17), indicating a sense of urgency and respect. He then shows submissiveness and a willingness to be taught when he addresses Jesus as "Good Teacher." This young man came to learn something from Jesus.

The man came asking how he might attain eternal life. From this we know that he was not a Sadducee because the Sadducees did not believe in eternal life (that's why they were sad-you-see!). His request is somewhat unusual for someone of his position and age. A man of wealth will often trust his riches and not be interested in what God has to offer. The young do not often look beyond today, much less to the far reaches of eternity.

So we can deduce that this rich young ruler was a sensible fellow. He knew something must be done to attain this happiness; he knew that eternal life was more than a game of chance or blind fate. Romans 2:6-7 tells us that we are rewarded for our works, good and bad, and that *eternal life [goes] to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality.*

Christ's response to all this is interesting. He first establishes that none are truly good except God, and to God goes all glory. Then Jesus tells him to "keep the commandments," specifically listing the last six of the Ten Commandments, the ones dealing with human-to-human relationships. The Jews of the time were well-versed in the mechanics of the first four commandments (our relationship with God), so Jesus lists the ones in which they were weakest.

Which makes it sound so simple! In order to have eternal life, "keep the commandments." Other verses reinforce this directive: *If you love me, keep my commandments* (John 14:15). The young man tells Christ that he has kept the commandments since he was a child. What else should he do? Mark's account says that Jesus looked at him and "loved him." Possibly, this man was adept at keeping the letter of the law, but he was coming up short in abiding by the spirit of the law. Perhaps Jesus saw that he was absolutely sincere in his efforts to abide by those commandments, but he was missing a greater truth.

Whatever the case, Jesus gets right to the bottom line: The young man's love of the world is a stumbling block. Jesus tells him to sell his possessions, give the money away, and follow Him

as a disciple. Faced with this unexpected answer, the young ruler proved unwilling or unable to do it. His treasure was here on earth. His money exerted a stronger tug on his heart than Christ did. Matthew Henry says in his commentary, "When we embrace Christ, we must let go of the world, for we cannot serve God and money."

To the young man's credit, he wasn't hypocritical. He didn't pretend he could do what Jesus asked of him when he knew could not. Christ's high standards and his own ambitions were incompatible; being a man both thoughtful and well-intentioned, he went away "sorrowful."

What did he possess that had such a hold on him as to make him willing to walk away from eternal life? Did he have a fully equipped man cave? Did he have a big house filled with servants? Did he have a villa on the Mediterranean Sea with lots of water toys? Did he have the latest model, most tricked out Desert Utility Vehicle? Did he have season tickets to the University of Jerusalem soccer games? What was holding him back? In what did he place his trust? We could ask those same questions of our own lives.

There is nothing spiritually wrong with wealth itself. The Bible is full of examples of godly men who were very wealthy: great men of God like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job, and David. The problem is in the love of money: because we live in a consumer-driven society, the love of money often holds us back. Ads call to us constantly, informing us of "needs" we did not even know we had. It is difficult to maintain a proper balance while under such an assault. We may not think of it this way, but it could be considered a blessing not to have great wealth because of the additional stress it can put on our spiritual lives.

It is instructive to study what Christ had to say to His disciples after the rich young ruler walked away. *Twice* Jesus tells us how hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God. He's not picking on the rich, he's empathizing with them: the more wealth you have, the greater the temptations of the world, and the more difficult it is to set them aside. The Christian walk is not easy for anyone, rich or poor, but it is sometimes harder for those with more temptations.

What Jesus calls his followers to is a way of life that is so countercultural it's almost beyond our comprehension. Jesus calls us to be free from something in order to be freed for something better. God set the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt so that they could be free for a covenant life with God. Jesus sets us free from sin and death so that we can be free for discipleship. In the story of the rich young ruler, Jesus calls us to be free FROM the money trap, in order to be set free FOR eternal life.

Now, that sounds great when I say it, and it looks good on paper. But it's really difficult to live free from the money trap when the mortgage payment looms large each month, and the credit card bills pile up, and the kids need braces, and the car is dying, and the cost of milk and eggs and bread is rising, and...and...and...

But let me ask you this: How many of you find happiness and contentment when you sit down to pay the bills each month? I sure don't! Money is a big stressor for me. It is for a lot of people. And it was in Jesus' day, too. Which is why Jesus challenges the rich young ruler on this very topic. If we can be set free from the money trap and not let money dominate our lives, then we can be set free for the kingdom of heaven. It's a very forward-thinking viewpoint, a long-term goal not easily achieved, but Jesus challenges us to try.

At its core, living free from the money trap requires trust. If we can trust God for the things we need – not the things we want – we can begin to live freely for God's kingdom. We print the words "In God We Trust" on our money, which is ironic because so few of us really trust God for the things we need. We need that constant reminder every time we pull out our wallets that God will provide for our needs.

I know it's not easy to think or live free from the money trap. But in God's economy, knowing that all we have is ultimately a gift from God might make it easier to begin living free for the kingdom. So start now. Take one small step. When you sit down to pay the bills, write the first check to God. Write out your pledge check to the church or to a mission partner or a charity that promotes a kingdom goal. Writing that check first just might bring a moment of contentment and happiness. Writing a check to God is the first step toward freedom from the money trap and toward freedom for the Kingdom.

Prayer: O Christ Jesus, when all is darkness and we feel our weakness and helplessness, give us the sense of Your presence, Your love, and Your strength. Help us to have perfect trust in Your protecting love and strengthening power, so that nothing may frighten or worry us, for, living close to You, we shall see Your hand, Your purpose, Your will through all things. In your name we pray. Amen. [a prayer by St. Ignatius of Loyola]

Sources: "The Consequences of Affluence,"
<http://www.cgg.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Audio.details/ID/594/Consequences-Affluence.htm>

"Parable of the Rich Young Man,"
<http://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/3873/Parable-of-Rich-Young-Man.htm>

Free From the Money Trap

Sunday, September 27, 2015

The Federated Church Fergus Falls, MN

Luke 18:18-30

Galatians 5:1

The December 10, 2000 *Charlotte Observer* newspaper carried an article by Kathy Bergen (of *The Chicago Tribune*) entitled RICHER, BUT NOT HAPPIER. The subtitle read "Today's Americans are finding that money is *not* everything." Here are a few excerpts from that article which, I think, are very eye opening, and also paint a good picture of our society.

The average size of a new home has expanded from 1,500 square feet to 2,190 square feet. The number of Americans taking cruises each year has risen from 500,000 to 6.5 million. The production of recreational vehicles has soared from 30,300 to 239,300. And the number of amusement parks has leaped 362 to 1,164. We are attending more symphonies, concerts, plays and sporting events, buying more boats, and loading up on electronics (from cell phones, to computers, to video recorders and microwave ovens).

A growing body of research is reaching the conclusion that the country's unprecedented surge in affluence is not spawning a corresponding surge in contentment—personal or societal. Michael Cox, the chief economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, asked this question: 'Every aspect of life is better, so it makes you wonder—is it just human nature to complain, even when things are so good?'

"Looking at data from the post World War II years up through 1998, Robert E. Lane, professor emeritus of political science at Yale University, found 'A spirit of unhappiness and depression haunting advanced market democracies.'"

Just what is this "spirit of unhappiness and depression" that haunts us? Lane points to a rising tide of clinical depression, increasing distrust of other people and institutions, an erosion of ties to family, friends, and community as the major cause of this problem. "We are no happier than we were when our incomes were one-third of what they are now, way back in 1948," says Lane.