

God and Money
Luke 12:13-21
Rev. Lorene E. Wunder

Start off with a quick poll:

What is the Bible's attitude toward money? Thumbs up, thumbs down, or neutral?

In the Old Testament, it's a little complicated. On the one hand, prosperity equaled blessing. Jacob and Job, for example, had an abundance of livestock and children and wealth, considered to be evidence of how God had blessed each of them.

And yet, the law commands the righteous to care for the orphan and the widow. And the minor prophets like Amos and Micah cry out against the wealthy who "trample on the poor" and "push aside the needy in the gate" for their own gain. (Amos 5:11, 12)

The New Testament is also somewhat mixed. There is the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30, Luke 19:12-28), where three slaves are given huge sums of money and the ones who double the master's money are rewarded and the one who did nothing with the money is cast out. Clearly, the apostle Paul relied upon wealthy patrons like Lydia as he spread the good news of Jesus Christ around the Roman Empire.

But on the topic of riches, the Gospel of Luke is not neutral. Luke starts out with Mary's song of praise to God as she awaits Jesus' birth, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." (Luke 1:52-53) Jesus himself says in Luke's Sermon on the Plain, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry." (Luke 6:20-21a, 24-25a).

In their Social-Science Commentary on the Gospels, scholars Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh explain that when it came to wealth, "...in ancient Palestine, the perception was...all goods existed in finite, limited supply and all goods were already distributed. This included not only material goods, but honor, friendship, love, power, security, and status as well—literally everything in life. Because the pie could not grow larger, a larger piece for anyone automatically meant a smaller piece for someone else."¹

This led to two beliefs:

- 1) "An honorable man would be interested only in what was rightfully his and would have no desire to gain anything more, that is, to take what was another's."²
- 2) "Profit-making and the acquisition of wealth were automatically assumed to be the result of extortion or fraud, and the notion of an honest rich man was a first-century oxymoron."³

¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992. p. 324

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

This worldview—in which an honorable man was only interested in what he already had and an honest rich man was an oxymoron—was shared by Jesus, his disciples, and his followers.

So when a man asks Jesus to make his brother divide the family inheritance with him, Jesus may have thought the man's request was motivated by greed.

And so, Jesus tells a story:

There was a rich man whose land had a really good year of production, so good that the crop yield was too much for the barns he already had. So, the man pulled down the old barns and built bigger ones, and was pleased that he had stored up so much.

Now, the problem with the rich man was not that he was rich, or that his land had produced so abundantly. The problem was how the rich man responded to this gift. His concern is all for himself: What shall **I** do? **My** grain, **my** goods, **my** barns. There is not a thought in his head for anyone else. He hoards this abundance of food for himself alone, and then, once he has the barn door shut tightly behind him, he thinks that now he can “relax, eat, drink and be merry” because he has everything that he (and he alone) needs. He is selfish.

Enter God, who calls the man a fool and announces that because the man's life is ending that very night, his storing up, his “security through stuff” amounts to nothing.

Jesus ends the parable by saying, “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

To me, this is one of those parables that loses nothing in translation, nor in the cultural distance between that first century world and our world today.

We don't exactly share their worldview that the economy is a zero-sum game, that the pie remains the same size and we just keep dividing it up differently. No, with compound interest, the stock market, bonds, investments that grow and increase in value, we keep creating more and more pies.

But how about the belief that an honest rich person is an oxymoron? Bernie Madoff, the mortgage lending crisis (with loans that never should have been asked for let alone approved), Wall Street. huge banks that are too big to fail and who have been bailed out by the government at taxpayer expense—do any of you find your blood pressure rising as I simply tick off this list?

And yet, I suspect there are very few who share the belief that an honorable person, a faithful person should have no desire to gain anything more in life, but is just to remain satisfied with what ever economic hand life has dealt him or her. To varying degrees, all of us are figuring out ways that we can store up security for ourselves and our families. Right?

If we're honest, I think most of us share at least a few things in common with the foolish man who tried to store up security for himself in his barns.

What I want to do this morning is remind us of two truths wealth and possessions that are woven throughout both the Old and the New Testaments.

First, it's all gift.

As a gardener, I am absolutely aware that whatever produce I bring in from my various plants—they are gift, they are miraculous. Yes, I am responsible for preparing the soil, planting and watering when needed. And yet...it is amazing to me when I sit down to eat the first salad of the season, the first green beans, the first tomatoes; even now, as I catch a glimpse of a beautiful rose bush in full bloom, as everything else is dying back. It is gift. I am filled with wonder and gratitude, no matter how much sweat it took from me. Anybody else feel like that?

But do we feel that way about our paychecks? The income from IRAs? The proceeds from our stock portfolios? That's different, isn't it?

We don't think of that as gift; they feel like something we earned, something we deserve, something we are entitled to. And (sometimes) we grumble because it is not enough, or because too many taxes have been taken out.

But think for a moment—most of us are where we are now because of help we received from others, aren't we?

We may have been blessed with a family that values education, that modeled the importance of reading and learning; teachers who encouraged and nurtured our skills and abilities; parents and family members who helped with college tuition, a downpayment on a house, a job in the family business; a mentor at a first job who helped show us the ropes; family connections and friend networks that led to a job, a better job, or a promotion. Yes, we study hard, work hard, do our best, but so much of success depends on other people who help make the way easier for us. As I reflect back on my life and all the people who helped me get to where I am today, I can see how everything I have isn't really "mine" so much as it is gift from God. Does that resonate for any of you?

Second, God cares how we use the gifts he gives us.

If we're going to call all that we have "gift", then technically, it is ours to do with as we wish, no strings attached, right? Well, yes. But you know how you choose the perfect gift for someone else, only to find that the gift recipient does not share your enthusiasm, so that gift for which you had such high hopes is never seen or heard from again? We can continue to love the person we bought the gift for, but it's disappointing for the giver, right?

So it is with God's gifts to us. Out of God's love and generosity, we are showered with abundance—in the bounty and beauty of the earth, in the amazing ability of our bodies and our minds, the creativity of our spirits, the resources of the people around us in our families and communities. We have, each of us, been given so much.

And God has high hopes for these gifts. Everything that is given, is given for the good of all, to be enjoyed and shared together.

The rich fool called an abundant harvest “mine” and stored it up for himself, to no avail. What a different story it would have been if he had built the bigger barns with the intention of sharing what he had with those who needed it, those in his community whose crop had failed, those who were hungry. And if he had done those things, when his life was taken away from him, would he not have died a richer man?

It’s all gift, and God cares how we use this gift.

Last week, I ran across a description of worship as weekly cataract surgery. We come together each week to have our vision—which has become clouded by what the world tells us about how we should think, and act, and have—restored.

So friends, I invite you this week is to do a vision test.

What is your own view towards money, toward wealth?

Are you able to see your finances, talents and abilities as gift from God, and are you sharing these gifts with God’s world?

Or do you need to have some cataracts removed?

And how about your congregation?

I also serve a church that has a beautiful new building and the mortgage to go with it, so I know how the concern of paying the bills can become the primary focus of everything. But I also know that even in the midst of that worry, we are gifted, and God is calling us to share the gifts we’ve been given with the world and the people God loves. What ministries, what possibilities for reaching out and serving others, is God calling this church to?

May we this day and every day, as individuals and as congregations, recognize the ways we have been blessed and gifted and be rich toward God, as we share what we have been given with others. And as we do so, may we also see how the world becomes ever more God’s kingdom. Thanks be to God for that. Amen.