

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Pentecost 22 (Proper 24B), Series B
Saturday, October 20th, 2018
Sunday, October 21st, 2018

Sermon: Saving Rich Men's Souls
Text: Mark 10:17-31; Ecclesiastes 5:10-20

Focus: The love of money is an idol that robs our hearts and kills our faith.
Function: Only by God's grace can the wealthy be saved.
Structure: Story-Applied
Locus: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things" (SC, 1st Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Today's Gospel lesson is hard to hear for many of us. Our ears grate when Jesus says, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God" and "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:23, 25, ESV).¹ After all, for those of us who live in Douglas County, Colorado, whether we realize it or not, we are (on average) among the most privileged people in the world. We may not be in the so-called 1%, but according to *Forbes* magazine, we do live in the fifth richest county in the wealthiest country in the

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

history of the world, with a median household income of \$109,926.² Of course, being in the fifth richest county in America does not guarantee that I'm the fifth richest pastor or that you're the fifth richest teacher, small business owner, or store manager. But it's hard to deny that, on average, we're doing better than most Americans. God has blessed us abundantly, although we are often tempted to credit ourselves for our financial success and luxurious living.

In the 1st century, popular Jewish piety believed that if a person were rich, it was likely because he was a righteous man—a good person—and God rewarded him for his righteous deeds by showering him with wealth. No wonder, then, that the disciples were dismayed when Jesus told them, in reality, how difficult it is for rich people to be saved. “Then who can be saved?” they asked (v. 26). Jesus replied, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God” (v. 27). Rich people cannot merit salvation any more than a poor man, and wealth is not necessarily a sign of righteousness. After

² <https://www.forbes.com/pictures/5963ed594bbe6f269f7f2e9d/5-douglas-county-co-media/#2a19c6032cb9>

all, many rich people come by their wealth in dishonest ways (recall Zacchaeus the tax collector or King Ahab). Even Andrew Carnegie's steel workers had wished rather that he pay them better wages and give them a day off than build libraries for them.

But Jesus doesn't hate rich people. In fact, last week's Gospel says that when Jesus met the rich, young man, he "loved him" (Mark 10:20). Jesus was not a Socialist. The Bible says, "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10, NIV). Laziness is a sin. God wants us to work so that we have something good to share with others (Eph. 4:28).

But Jesus was also not a crass capitalist. While we believe that "money makes the world go 'round" and "God helps those who help themselves," God, in fact, helps precisely those who *cannot help themselves*. "He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty" (Luke 1:52-53). That's not liberation theology... That's the *Magnificat* of little Mary from Luke 1. The Gospel brings about a great reversal. It turns our ways of thinking

upside down and inside out. That's what grace is all about! And so, while we may be financially rich, we can still be spiritually bankrupt.

Jesus pitied the young rich man. He felt sorry for him because he was trapped and enslaved by his great possessions. Rather than giving him the freedom, power, security, or influence he desired, "he went away sorrowful," because his money had entrapped and enslaved him. While he believed he had kept God's commandments, he had neglected the first table of the Law—indeed, the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21). Martin Luther says that whatever you put your hope and trust in is truly your god (Large Catechism). As human beings, we can make an idol out of almost anything. And because the young man's heart was set on riches, he could not let go of them to go after God instead.

Like the rich, young man, we all have strong emotions tied to money. In my pre-marriage classes, I give couples an assessment called "The Meaning of Money" (*Prepare/Enrich*) to determine how they view money: status, security, enjoyment, or control. In other words, what is

their emotional reaction to money? Do they see it as what defines them as a person? Does their wealth promise security for when things go bad in life? Is money simply for enjoying the good life? Or does money give them power over other people in their lives? Each of these is a sinful attitude towards money. I must admit that I have a tendency to view money as security. My parents both came from blue-collar, working class families. And I grew up in a lower-middle class family where I always worried if I would have enough money. So for me, the false promise of wealth is that if I just earn or save a little more money, I won't have to worry anymore about my car or furnace or a catastrophic illness. In this way, I make money my god. This, of course, is foolish. Because how do you know when enough is enough? And as the tech bubble burst of 2001 and the housing crisis of 2008 prove, all our wealth can evaporate in a moment.

Somebody once asked the oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller, America's first billionaire, how many millions of dollars are enough? His reply: "The next million." (*Aside: I would be okay with the first million!*) We may laugh, but it's an apt illustration of the point made by

King Solomon in our Old Testament lesson: “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity” (Eccl. 5:10). People who put their trust in money never have enough. We always have this idea that we’ll finally be happy or safe or secure if we could just get to X level of assets or income. But it’s a trick! Because we discover, once we arrive at that level of wealth, that it’s not enough. We still want more, more, *more!* But more is never enough.

In his excellent book, *Counterfeit Gods*, Pastor Timothy Keller writes about our obsession to “keeping up with the Joneses:

“Once you are able to afford to live in a particular neighborhood, send your children to its schools, and participate in its social life, you will find yourself surrounded by quite a number of people who have more money than you. You don’t compare yourself to the rest of the world, you compare yourself to those in your bracket.... You say, ‘I don’t live as well as him or her or them. My means are modest compared to theirs.’ You can reason and think like that no matter how lavish you are living.... But the rest of the world is not fooled.”³

³ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009), 52-53.

And neither is God. As he said to the rich man who tore down his barns to build bigger ones so that he would have more room for his stuff:

“Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (Luke 12:20).

The tricky thing about the sin of greed is that it’s very difficult to identify in yourself, as Timothy Keller points out:

“In Luke 12 Jesus says, ‘Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed’ [v. 15, NIV]. That is a remarkable statement. Think of another traditional sin that the Bible warns against—adultery. Jesus doesn’t say, ‘Be careful you aren’t committing adultery!’ He doesn’t have to. When you are in bed with someone else’s spouse—you know it. Halfway through you don’t say, ‘Oh, wait a minute! I think this is adultery!’ You know it is. Yet, even though it is clear that the world is filled with greed and materialism, almost no one thinks it is true of them. They are in denial.”⁴

Dear friends, *we* are in denial! Even Ebenezer Scrooge, the poor, old miser from Charles Dickens’s classic, *A Christmas Carol*, did not regard himself as greedy. He was just a good businessman who worked hard for his money and earned the right to do with it as he pleased. Do you begin to see...?

⁴ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 57-58.

During more than 11 years of ministry, I have heard people confess all kinds of sins: adultery, stealing, pornography, drug and alcohol addictions, anger, gossip, and tax fraud. But never—not once!—has somebody ever told me, “Pastor, I have to confess that I’m really struggling with greed.” We just can’t see it in ourselves, which is what makes it so dangerous. The Bible warns that greed and coveting are forms of idolatry (Col. 3:5; Eph. 5:5). They steal our hearts away from God and kill our faith. They cause us to trust in our treasures and rely on our wealth instead of fearing, loving, and trusting in God “above all things” (SC, 1st Commandment). God graciously gives us “all things” to support our body and life (SC, 1st Article), but when we start focusing on things instead of God and his grace, our hearts wander from our real surety: the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matt. 6:33).

Being rich is not a sin. Some of the Old Testament saints were extravagantly wealthy, including Abraham, Job, and King David. “Accumulated wealth or large incomes are not evil in themselves. Yet of those to whom much has been given, much will be required. The rich

are stewards of their wealth, not owners of it.”⁵ The Bible doesn’t say that money is the root of all evil. It says that “the *love* of money is a root of all kinds of evils...” (1 Tim. 6:10). There’s nothing wrong with money, in and of itself. It’s what we *do* with it and how we *feel* about it that matters most. Do we view money as a gift from God for us to bless others with? Or do we see it as something to hoard or spend on ourselves for our own benefit?

The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10). And because it is buried so deep in our hearts, there is only one way to get rid of it: uproot it! Only, we cannot do it ourselves. It must be done *to us* (and *for us*) by God. Only Jesus can save us from ourselves and the deadly sin of greed.

Only the Gospel, the Good News of God’s gift of salvation in Jesus Christ, can free us from our chains to the love of money and the false promises it dangles in front of us. Jesus knew that even though we may have a big house, a fancy car, and a boat to boot, we still suffer

⁵ Timothy and Kathy Keller, *God’s Wisdom for Navigating Life: A Year of Daily Devotions in the Book of Proverbs* (New York: Viking, 2017), 289.

terrible poverty in our souls. And so the Son of God gave up his throne in heaven and came down to earth in the poor trappings of a carpenter's son in order to die on the cross and save us from our sins. As St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Christ was rich and made himself poor, so that we could become rich in grace, not in greed. Martin Luther calls this "the glorious exchange." Christ gave us his righteousness and took our sin so that we could be called the righteousness of God (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21). We have nothing, but Christ gave us everything—gave us himself!—so that we could belong to God.

And so we come back to the disciples' question: "Then who can be saved?" By ourselves, of our own efforts, all of us are damned. "With man it is impossible," Jesus says, "but not with God. For all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:25). Even the salvation of Zacchaeus the tax collector and the rich, young man is possible. Even the salvation of you and me! Why? Because Jesus died and rose again. Because Jesus, who possessed all, gave up everything and made himself *nothing* so that

we could belong to God. Jesus was first and made himself last. Truly, he has given up everything for us (cp. Mark 10:28). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.