

October 11, 2009

Mark 10:17-31

A Radical View of Money

This is the second sermon of a series on the 10th chapter of Mark's gospel.

In this chapter Jesus talks about Marriage (last week), Money (today's lesson), Mission (next week), and finally Miracles.

When we think about Jesus' teachings on, parables, sermons and prayers, we assume that Jesus spent most of his time talking about God and love and salvation.

Wrong! The two subjects that Jesus focused on the most often? 1) The kingdom of God and 2) Money.

When Jesus told the rich man to give away all he had, he was simply speeding up the process that each of us must go through in our lives. We have no choice but to give it all away.

Unfortunately, some have an economic attitude that is nicely summed up in the statement, "The one who dies with the most toys wins."

Yet, none of our "toys" are coming with us. The only choice we have in this matter is deciding to whom we shall give the things in our lives.

Even if we plan on leaving everything to the kids, we are still giving it away.

Jesus stipulated that the rich man in today's story should give all he had "to the poor," not "to the kids."

The trouble with this tale when told today is that few of us would identify ourselves as members of "the rich."

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But the economic divisions we live with today are a little different than they were in the first century of Jesus' day.

The crucial division today is not between us and the "poor," but is between those who are "making it" and those who are not "making it."

Jesus' admonition to the rich man to give it all away was not just to certain "rich" people. Jesus requires us all to give it away.

Giving to "the poor" means giving in a way that makes a difference to those in need. Our giving should be done in such a way that it glorifies God by changing others' lives for the better.

Consider two different attitudes about giving demonstrated by two very successful entrepreneurs.

Media mogul Bob Buford, who has invested his fortune in the founding of the influential Leadership Network, encapsulates his whole philosophy of giving with one line: "I want to bounce my last check."

Responding gleefully to Jesus' reminder that we aren't taking it with us so we'd better decide where it's going, Buford believes that dying penniless is the point, not the problem.

To Buford, who along with his other numerous gifts also matches the total contributions of his employees to their local churches, "bouncing his last check" symbolizes that he has successfully passed along all the good gifts he has received from God.

Warren Buffet is one of the richest men in America – his net worth is somewhere over \$62 billion dollars.

Buffet is known for his ironic observation that, "Wall Street is the only place where people who are driven to work in limousines take advice from people who come to work on subways."

Yet, despite the enormity of his wealth, Buffet is not engaged in "giving it all away."

Buffet is not stingy or hard-hearted or operating under the erroneous assumption that he will somehow be able to take it with him. Buffet gives to charity.

What Warren Buffet believes is that he has been given a gift from God -- the gift, the talent, for making money.

This billionaire feels he is honoring this gift by continuing to do his best to make money throughout his lifetime.

He continues to use the wealth he has already accumulated to help him gain more.

Buffet's plan is that upon his death a foundation will be established and a whole team of people will then spend their lifetimes giving that stockpiled wealth away. He will give 85% to the Gates Foundation.

It is a nice idea, Mr. Buffet, but bad theology.

Buffet is caught up in the vision of a profound half-truth, and the problem with every profound half-truth is the other half.

Recall how Jesus looked at the earnestly seeking rich man "and loved him." It is this love Jesus feels for us that makes him urge the man to "give it all away."

Jesus doesn't want that man to be poor -- he wants him to experience joy. The joyfulness that giving can bring to our souls is the "open sesame" key to the kingdom of God.

Buffet's decision is not wrong because he is keeping his nose to the grindstone. It is wrong because that is not where Jesus wants us to be, that is not what Jesus wants us to get out of life.

A rich man came to Jacob, the local baker, and asked him, "When others turn to me for help ... what should I say?" "Say, thank you," Jacob replied, as he kneaded a loaf of bread.

"What?" said the man, "Why should I say thank you?" His voice grew louder as if to boost his confidence. "What can the poor give me?"

"Have you ever met a man whose success is not also a burden?" said the baker. "Charity allows you to lessen your load. In this way having less can add to your life!"

Now the rich man's voice took a new tone. "I feel like a fool," he said. "No," responded Jacob the baker, "a fool is one who knows too much to learn anything"

Remember the first time you made or bought all the Christmas presents for your parents and siblings by yourself? Remember how good it felt to know you had been able to give them something?

That is the kind of childlike delight Jesus wants us to feel every day. Once you start giving things away and experiencing that joy, one of the greatest gifts you will receive is discovering how much more "disposable income" you have than you thought.

Without the weight of possessions and the burden of a lifetime of "stuff," slipping through the "eye of the needle" into the kingdom of God becomes possible.

We all must give it all away. We have no choice. The question of life is when and to whom. One day, God will hold each of us accountable for when and to whom we "gave it all away."

Henry David Thoreau said, “Be not merely good; be good for something.”

That was Jesus’ challenge to the rich young man and to us today. Like him, we are good at making money, we try to be morally upright and keep the 10 commandments.

But that is not the ultimate good: we must also give of ourselves and what we have to others. We need to realize that the gift without the giver is bare.

John Wesley proposed an excellent guide to goodness. Wesley said, and practiced what he preached:

“Do all the good you can, By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can, At all the times you can, As
long as you can.”

Wesley’s words should make us proud to be Methodists.

Amen.