

By Chris French

When I was growing up, my father was a Methodist minister -- he has since retired. But I remember when I was young that he often expressed frustration that his congregation seemed so put off whenever the subject of money came up in the church. People would ask why money had to be brought up in church so often, when church was supposed to be about spiritual things. And I remember him pointing out that money is mentioned an awful lot in the Bible, and so money must somehow be a spiritual matter. Today's gospel reading is a great example of this. For the rich young ruler, money is precisely the thing, the one thing, as Jesus says, that separates him from the abundance that Jesus wants him to have: the "treasure in heaven."

For this rich young ruler, money was a problem. He had obeyed all the laws that Jesus mentions, and probably a good deal more. But he must have known something was lacking in his life, or he wouldn't have come and asked Jesus the question, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" There are probably a thousand good sermons that could be preached on this question alone, and its implicit assumption that there's something we can do to inherit eternal life. Now Jesus does cite six of the Ten Commandments -- namely the six commandments that pertain to our relationship to each other. So in Jesus' response, we see that he does call us to obey those commandments. He is by no means abolishing the commandments. But for the rich young ruler, that wasn't the problem. He had obeyed the commandments, but something was still missing.

Let's take a look at Jesus' next response to the rich young ruler. He says "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." Now the commentaries I looked at were very quick, perhaps a little too quick, to point out that wealth was a problem for this particular man. While I would add that wealth and the love and the seeking after of wealth is a problem for a lot of people, I would fundamentally agree with that observation. I don't see this passage as necessarily representing a commandment to each and every one of us as Christians to go and sell everything that we own and give the money to the poor. Nevertheless, I do think this passage is an important commentary on our relationship to wealth. Look at what Jesus says next, after he tells the rich young ruler to give his riches away to the poor. "Then, come follow me." Now we get the reason. Now we're told why this wealth was a problem for this rich young ruler, and can be a problem for each and every one of us. Because he could not give up his wealth, the rich young ruler could not follow Jesus. Because he was so in love with the treasure he had in the world, he could not obtain the treasure in heaven; he could not even obtain the treasure of following Jesus in this life.

Now I'm going to suggest that there's a danger of misreading this passage; there's a danger of thinking that this passage suggests that by giving up our wealth, we can obtain or earn or buy God's love, that we can buy God's acceptance. I don't think the rich young ruler was asked to give up his wealth in order to buy God's acceptance. The rich young ruler was asked to give up his wealth not because his wealth was blocking the way between him and God, but because his love of that wealth was preventing him from following Jesus.

Let me back up a bit, and look again at how Jesus wanted the rich young ruler to solve this problem, because I think there are a few interesting things to be said here. Notice that Jesus does not say, "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the church ..." There are other places, such as the story of the widow's mite a couple chapters later in Mark, in which Jesus does suggest giving money to the church, but that's not what he says here. Here he tells the rich young ruler to give what he has to the poor. So, our current text should not be viewed as a story having anything to do with the need to support the church. It would be somewhat more plausible to view this text as supporting a more just

distribution of wealth among God's people -- the rich should give to the poor in order to relieve the poor from their suffering. This would fit well with a lot of Jesus' teaching, particularly if we were studying the gospel of Luke. But here in this passage, Jesus seems most concerned with the rich young ruler himself. The text explicitly says, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him". Also, he does not tell the rich young ruler to give to the poor to relieve them of their suffering. He tells him to give everything he has to the poor, and *he* "will have treasure in heaven."

Perhaps part of our problem when we talk about money in the church might be that we focus so much of our discussion about money on stewardship -- giving money to the church. We tend to be silent about the subject except when the stewardship campaign rolls around and we're asking people to give money to the church to support its operations. So, let's instead focus today on what follows in the text before us -- it's got nothing to do with giving money to support the church. In the text, Jesus says, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." The disciples seem amazed at this, and no wonder -- so much of the teaching in the Old Testament talked about how God blessed those He loved with riches; the disciples must have thought of someone's wealth as a sign of God's favor. And yet here Jesus is suggesting something that is radically different, different at the root -- wealth can distract us from the kingdom of God. Now while I don't like to think I have too much problem with the love of wealth myself, as I grow older, I notice the disturbing trend that the list of things that I think I can't do without is getting longer. When this sort of thing happens to us, we're becoming like the rich young ruler -- unable to follow Jesus totally, because we are encumbered by what we possess, or more specifically, by our own perceived need of what we possess.

We can at least be comforted by what comes next in our text. When the disciples ask, "Then who can be saved?", Jesus responds, "For mortals, it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." Of course this doesn't let us off the hook -- it's not like Jesus is saying to the rich young ruler, "never mind everything I said -- go ahead and let yourself get addicted to your wealth. You don't really need to follow me, because God will save you." What he's saying is that God can help to free us from whatever it is that is preventing us from a complete life. We can look to the things that hold us back from God, and ask that God help us not to be controlled by them.

Now as I said, wealth might not be the thing that's a problem. But I do think each of us has things that have the potential to hold us back from God. These might even be good things. Notice that in the text, Jesus says, "there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life." House, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, fields. Your home, your family, your work. We're supposed to give these up? Jesus is saying that even these things, these things that seem so fundamentally good, can be preventing us from following him. The disciples had put all of these things aside in order to follow Jesus.

I think for a lot of us it's our work, far more than our love of wealth, that gets in the way of our following Jesus. If we're always thinking about our work, even when we're not at work, isn't that preventing us from following Jesus? Some of us, if we can, need to take time not working. And how often do we think as we go into work, "Today, in what I do, I will follow Jesus" -- whatever that means to us individually, to follow Jesus in our workplace. If we don't, let's try to make a habit of that.

Yesterday, about eight or nine of us came out and worked on the church, doing various tasks. I have to admit that when I woke up, and saw the snow coming down, I didn't feel so much like coming. I came more out of a sense of duty -- I had been the one to set this up, so I felt sort of obligated. I myself

didn't do a great deal -- I painted a few of the walls in the breezeway to my right. As I did this, I started thinking of some of the cathedrals that I've had a chance to see -- great massive buildings, but with fine details, each of which was put there by someone, sometimes many centuries ago. Some of these details are rarely seen, being in some hidden corner of the building, but someone worked on them. Just so, I was painting some walls that I hadn't even noticed needed to be painted. And for me, it was a small but surprisingly joyful offering. I know it sounds trite, but in the sense of a worshipful experience that I got here yesterday working on painting that breezeway, I got back more than I gave.

So what's my point in this? The rich young ruler didn't want to give up his wealth. But if he could have given up his wealth, he could have had so much more. I sometimes don't want to give up my time. I would have rather stayed in bed yesterday morning, and read a book. But I gave up a little of my time, and I was surprised at what came back to me.

Now I don't know how to segue into this, but part of my task this morning was to explain why we're going to have a congregational meeting after church today, here in the sanctuary. As many of you know, we've had to put some of our big plans for the church on hold. In vestry meetings, we've had some discussions about some smaller things that we wish we could do, and that many of you have expressed concerns about. Some of these are maintenance issues, the most pressing being the windows at the back of the church. There are issues about our plumbing that some of you can probably explain better than I can. But we'd also like to do a better job of advertising our presence here in the community -- we'd like a more visible and attractive sign that indicates when our worship services are held. But at the same time, we've been dipping substantially into the church's savings over the last couple years just to run our operational budget, so we've been reluctant to borrow even more from our savings on some of these other issues.

Some of us have made pledges toward the capital campaign a couple years ago. Last I checked, we had taken in somewhere around \$15,000 of the \$150,000 pledged, and we've spent about that much on things like soil testing and architectural planning. So I'm guessing that with what happened with the markets, some people aren't able to fulfill their pledges. Perhaps others can, but are reluctant because we don't seem to be doing anything toward a kitchen or a parking lot. We need to have a conversation as a church about our priorities. Do we want to ask of ourselves that we take care of the maintenance issues around the church, such as the windows, or that we purchase a sign for the church? Perhaps some people who pledged capital contributions would be willing to fulfill them in order to pay for some of those things. On the other hand, some of you may be hoping that the economy will soon improve, and we can get back on track with our original capital plans, like the kitchen and a parking lot. So you may disagree with the idea of having us spend money on other issues. Our annual meeting in January tends to be filled with routine business, so we wanted to have a congregational conversation about these issues apart from the annual meeting, and we thought this would be a good time of the year to do this. It's important that we hear from each other, so please do come.