

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Des Moines, Iowa

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Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Luke 16:1-13

“Cannot Serve God and Wealth”

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The Gospel writer was confusing, but he is trying to put across something that is as applicable today as it was 2000 years ago – and that is – how do we handle our wealth? Before I can go into that, I need to explain a little bit of the history of the Church of the period of that time, so that we can get around to, what in the world was that Gospel writer was talking about.

First, 2000 years ago in Galilee, and in Jerusalem, the people – almost all of them – were very poor. The only way a person in Israel, who was a follower of the Jewish faith, would have much – if any – money was whether they somehow dishonestly stole it, or if they were dupes of the Roman Empire. Either way they were frowned upon, and so they looked at wealth very differently than we do, because they looked at the wealthy as thieves and as political hoodlums; as people who were denying their faith, to support the Roman Empire. That is why they saw wealth as evil. That’s why, in that weird parable, it became shrewd to mismanage somebody’s money; because the person who had the wealth – the manager – the person he called “master” had stolen it to begin with. But 2000 years later, it is kind of hard to read that into the parable.

So, today, we shouldn’t just take that last little part, in verse 13, that says you cannot serve God and wealth, and quote that phrase like it has perfect meaning. It is not that simple, and the faith rarely is. What they were saying is, we have to be careful in not making wealth an idolatrous symbol. When we do that, we have sinned – and we can do that whether we have very little, or whether we have a whole lot of money.

I will give you an example. I was raised in a home with a mother who was wonderful in so many ways, but like all of us, she had her area that she struggled with, and for her that was money. She was so embarrassed in the month of October that, even when she was an Elder, she wouldn’t go to church in October. Why? Stewardship month. Stewardship month was so embarrassing to her, because our house had wheels. And the old joke was, the car had blocks.

We didn’t have a lot and we lived in a mobile home, and it was one size and very small. She felt so embarrassed that she didn’t have more to give, so she felt condemned when the minister talked about money. She got it so wrong. It took me years to figure that out. It isn’t how much you have; it is how you use it. And, even if you give very little, you can still do great things with the little bit God gives you.

I will give you one more example, then I’m moving on with the sermon. I had a very wealthy man in one of my churches. (Not this one. I’ll only talk about you guys if I ever go to another church.) [Laughter.] This guy was so proud because he tithed, and I was smart enough to let him think that was great, because you know, hey, we needed to meet our budget for the year.

But, I wanted to shake him, because he had almost as much money as God. Ask him, he would have told you. But he gave 10 percent out of his wealth, and he was so proud of that. Then he would go around, and be this and that for the finance committee, and chastise everyone else for not giving their 10 percent. If you have a million dollars and you give your 10 percent, you still have 900 thousand dollars to spend on whatever you want.

But, if you were like my mom and made \$16,000 a year, and you were raising two kids and you had a mobile home payment, and a car payment, and a car that was breaking down all of the time, and you gave your \$1600 dollars, what are you left with? One person's tithe is not another person's.

My mother should have been thrilled with the few dollars she withheld from what the family needed to give it to the Church – but because it wasn't the same amount as the \$100,000 over here. She didn't feel worthy. That is her fault. She was turning money into an idol, because she didn't feel she was valid or worthy as a person because she couldn't give as much; but, in many ways, she was giving more than my friend over here, who gave \$100,000, because he didn't really even miss it that much. We missed it. We were eating macaroni and butter at the end of the month, so that we could make those few dollars to the church; but she never understood that. That is the one thing I always felt bad about. Money isn't always what it appears, and it is very hard to know how to figure out how to handle that. Also, just because you have a lot doesn't make you any happier.

Now I know, if you are like my mom, you are sitting there making \$16,000 a year. You're going, "Yeah, right. I would like to give it a try" [skeptically]. But I would like to give you an example of why that might be true, and try to do it from a scholarly standpoint.

I really like Malcomb Gladwell books. You know, he did "The Tipping Point," and a bunch of other books. And, there is one called "David and Goliath." In there he talks about how David, being smaller – not being able to be real successful, not being respected – he was the youngest of the sons, so he was the least acceptable of the sons; and, ended up being the King.

It all started with his battle with Goliath, who was supposedly so much bigger, so much stronger, and so much more powerful, and you know the story. David whipped it up, knocked him between the eyes, and he was dead – and David was lifted up.

But how, there are David and Goliath stories all around us, and Malcomb Gladwell went to scholars who evaluated not only happiness but wholeness, and they looked at things from a financial perspective. And the scholars, when they did their sociological study, put happiness on one curve, and then evaluated people over a period of years, and the struggle, and how much they made.

Now, not surprisingly, the level of happiness was down at the very bottom, when they made no money. If you are homeless, the chances of you having much happiness – especially with your children and this one was related to raising children – was horrifically difficult. There were a few examples of homeless people who actually raised healthy children, who ended up becoming very productive, healthy, happy adults. They were few and far between, because they had housing

issues, not enough food to eat. They were continually being abused or abandoned. They struggled and it was really hard. Not surprisingly, the more money you had the happier you became. But what surprised scholars, was that it leveled off, and it leveled off – and I think the book was written 2012, so you know inflation, but not that much in the past 7 years – it leveled off at about \$75,000 dollars a year, for a family – and they were shocked.

It was what economists talk about with minimal results after that. There were not many opportunities to get that much better. So Malcomb Gladwell gave the example of the difference between a family who made \$100,000 and those who had \$75,000. There was no difference in happiness. Sure, the family in the neighborhood who had \$100,000 drove a nicer car and probably got to go out to eat a few more times, but other than that there was no difference in happiness.

What surprised them the most, is that after a certain amount of money, raising your children became *more* difficult, and it became a loop, and when you got into major millions of dollars, it became *horribly* difficult, and they were shocked.

So they went around and interviewed very wealthy people. For example, there was a Hollywood mogul (they didn't give his name – they just called him the Hollywood mogul in the book). He was originally from Minneapolis, Minnesota. He was raised in a home with three other boys, in a middle-class home, in a mixed neighborhood. His dad was a blue collar guy, but he worked hard. All three of those boys were successful, and he said, "The reason we were all successful was, we knew how to work hard. We knew what was expected of us and we knew that a tough life was a good teacher. Nothing was going to be handed to you in life." And, he said, "Now I'm worried, because I have so much. How am I going to share those same values with my child?"

Malcomb Gladwell said – and gave this example that I found interesting. He said, "When you don't have a lot of money, even \$75,000 when your child asks for something, you will often have to say, 'we can't afford it. Just because your buddy has one, we can't afford it.'" And you ask him again and again, and after a while the child begins to understand we are just not in that bracket.

He said, for the very wealthy – like the Hollywood mogul with hundreds of millions of dollars – you can never tell that child, "we can't afford it." Because they just look in the garage and dad is driving a Porsche and mom is driving a Maserati. You can always afford it.

So, the difficulty was the truly wealthy, who is constantly having to say, "I won't give it to you," and then you have to explain, for which good parents you can raise very wealthy, very good children, but it requires more from you. It is harder, because every single time they ask for something that you don't want to give them or you don't think it's right, you have to explain why you are not giving it to them.

Sometimes it is easy, and sometimes it is easier to just say, "No." And, the more times you say, "No," without explaining it, the more bitter, the more frustrated they become, and the more they act out.

Both sides – you can be homeless and raise good children, you can be the third wealthiest person in the world and raise good children. It is harder on both extremes, according to Malcomb Gladwell. I found that so interesting, because it is not about the money, in the end – about what you have or don't have. It is about talking to your children about money: why you need it, why you don't; and, the most healing aspect of making that a wonderful healthy choice, is showing them a broader perspective.

That is why I believe that the church is one of the most “less” places in which to raise your children, because if you are very poor, the church is the avenue where they can show you a world you can't imagine living – sitting in your mobile home without a TV.

You can't vision beyond your little “lot” over here, with the extraordinarily wealthy [on the other side]. You are sitting there with your own vision of the world, and all you see is the people who have as much, or even more than you do, and [you ask], how do I get that? The church provides you an opportunity to envision – to see – those over here [in a different economic scale] that you wouldn't have the opportunity to before. In both cases, the Holy Spirit lifts this one up to see that they are valid, and worthy, and not based on how much their parents make but they are a child of God. Over here [conversely], they are brought low – not humiliated – but seen as worthy, not because of how much their parents make, but they are a child of God and they were just fortunate, perhaps, to not have been born over here [on the other side], and that they have a responsibility to lift up brothers and sisters, because we are all one, in the Body of Christ.

That doesn't happen many places other than here in the church. And, I think that is what the Gospel writer in his own (and it probably was a him), in his own inept way, in this parable was trying to say. It wasn't bemoaning money, or even the lack thereof. It was saying, “Be honest about that money.”

How many marriages have ended because they couldn't handle the struggles with money? How many children have become at odds with their parents over money, because it is the one thing – like my mother – a lot of people feel uncomfortable talking about; and, if spouses talked about it more, and with less anxiety, and if they shared these talks with their kids, and took the extra time, it would heal a lot of pain and it would drive people closer together as they talked, and as parents and children listen to each other.

It's not about the money. It is about how we communicate. It's about what we value, and how we share those values. And as people of faith, we have a way to share that through the lens of a loving God who created us all equal.

That was what was intended and I hope we follow that message. That's why we don't have to be overly googly-eyed about those who have so much more than we do, and why we never have to look down on those who have less. We support, we overcome and we love together in Jesus name. Amen.