

THE GOOD BOOK

PART V: ABUNDANCE

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 18, 2018

Lectionary Reading: Mark 10: 17-23.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lift up Your Seat Cushion

to Find the Cost for Cheap Seats and Expensive Seats

Continuing this series on what the Bible says about various topics, today it's the Bible and Money. I have had the experiences of being both poor and rich — never desperately poor, and never filthy rich. But I have had those feelings of being both poor and rich. I thought about that as I had fun preparing for this day.

Churches have had a fascinating relationship with money. For example, were you to lift up your pew cushion, you would find, at least on most of the pews, written in pencil on the wood beneath you, the suggested donation for the place where you are sitting. The cost ranges from five cents for the cheap seats in the back up to a dollar-fifty for the expensive seats in the front. What

you got for that dollar-fifty must have had people in the bargain area thinking that persons occupying the high-priced seats must have been really pious.

Speaking of suggested donations, our Jewish neighbors had been depending for years upon a scheme that involved guessing your income based upon your profession. Soon after that, the fund raisers would send you a bill for your annual donation to the synagogue according to that guess. Inherently, this was not a good idea! Complaints finally forced the financial gurus to end that practice.

All of Y'All, Come on up!

Oh God! I Screwed It up! And I Practiced All Week!

When I think about the Bible and money, my first thought, and probably yours as well, goes immediately to television preachers.

They are masterful at it; they have it down to a science. How to use the Bible to get money. Billy Graham, may he rest in peace, was hardly the worst offender, but he was fond of saying, “You never see a U-Haul behind a hearse. You can’t take it with you, so you might as well give it to us.”

If you remember the movie *Oh God* (1997), there's a wonderful scene in which God (played by the cigar-smoking George Burns) sends his emissary (the Christ-like John Denver) to the TV evangelist, the Reverend Willie Williams (played by Paul Sorvino), to try to get the good reverend to stop deceiving people. So John Denver shows up at a worship service, and Reverend Willie is really cookin' at this point. He is preachin' up a storm, and he is workin' the crowd as the time for the offering is at hand. In the style of an altar call, Reverend Willie exhorts the crowd to “Come on up! Come on up! All of y'all, come on up! And put into God's hands”

Oh God! I screwed it up! And I practiced all week! [Uproarious laughter.] I'm sorry. You can't know how humiliating this is to All right. Okay.

“Come on up to put into *our* hands what you *would* put into God's hands so that then the whole world will be in *his* hands.” At which point, the organ and the choir all kick into a rollicking hymn, “He's got the whole world in his hands.”

It's choreographed perfectly, and the money is just pouring in. It's a great scene. I apologize for messing it up.

What Does the Bible Say About

Money? 8 Positive Parables and 3 Prosperity Gospels

- **There's the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1-10).** It's a pretty awesome story, a redemptive story. He's a chief tax collector, and he's short and rich. Jesus had dinner with him, and then received a lot of criticism for doing so.

A sidebar: The reason Zacchaeus is rich is because of the Roman tax policy, which is based upon the kind of community and its size. The Roman government would tell the tax collectors how much you must collect, and you've got the authority of the Roman government and military behind you to enforce this collection. Then they tell you how much to collect, and whatever you pull in above and beyond that, is yours. I don't know anybody who can resist that kind of temptation.

Having dined with his host, Jesus apparently persuaded him to repent, we're told, and so Zacchaeus offered fourfold restitution to all whom he had overcharged. Beyond that, he gave half his estate to the poor.

- **Mark 10: 17-22. Here is the story of the Rich Young Man.** This is the one we heard for the scripture text this morning. The story recounted where this guy said, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” They had a bit of a conversation, but then Jesus told him something way beyond what he told Zacchaeus. He said, “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” And then we’re told upon hearing that, his countenance fell, and the Rich Young Man went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.
- **Mark 10: 25. The maxim of the camel and needle.** We read that “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Another sidebar on this is that tradition has it that the eye of the needle is actually the smallest of the gates through the walled city of Jerusalem. It’s big enough to allow a grown person to walk through it. If you’re unusually tall, you’d probably have to stoop down. But a camel? That’s tough. That would be a squeeze. A camel carrying stuff, saddlebags, possessions — no way.
- **Matthew 25: 14-30. The Parable of the Talents.** This is where

Jesus excoriates the man who hid his talent and didn’t invest it to collect interest. That story concludes with this verse. It’s one of the toughest verses. You don’t hear this one preached very often:

“For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

Despite dozens of admonitions to serve, look out for, and help the poor. This passage is generally understood to mean that the rich will use their wealth and their power and their influence to become richer. And the poor, with their lack of wealth, power, and influence, will become poorer.

- **Additional stories from Jesus include:** the parable of the Ten Pounds (Luke 19), the parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16), and the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus (also in Luke 16).
- **Matthew 6: 19-21 (the Sermon on the Mount).** This is perhaps my favorite from Jesus:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where

thieves break in and steal;
but store up for your-
selves treasures in heav-
en, where neither moth
nor rust consumes and
where thieves do not
break in and steal. *For
where your treasure is,
there your heart will be
also.*”

To be fair, I need to mention a subset of all the things the Bible says about money, and trust me, it’s a lot. That subset has to do with what is called the Prosperity Gospel, and here are three of the favorites:

- **I Chronicles 29.** You have to dig deep to find this one. Riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. If you have riches, they came from God
- **Ecclesiastes 10.** “Feasts are made for laughter, wine gladdens life, and money meets every need.” Really? That’s in the Bible? It reminds me of that country song, “There are only two things money can’t buy — true love and home-grown tomatoes.”
- **Psalms 112.**

“Praise the Lord!
Happy are those who fear the
Lord,
who greatly delight in his
commandments.”
“Wealth and riches are in their
houses,

and their righteousness
“endures forever.”

You see what happens if you put some blinders on, and you start looking at this collection. There are probably 20-25 verses just like this, so I chose three good ones. You can’t help but make this connection between wealth and right-teousness, wealth and virtue.

Well, let me think about this for a minute. If I don’t have wealth, that means God is sort of looking down on me. Maybe I’m not as good or as faithful as I probably should be. Maybe I need to give more. That’s what my church tells me to do and to be more righteous in that way. Otherwise I’ll end up being poor and wondering where God is.

The whole gospel is sort of a mess that way. You see, the problem with the Prosperity Gospel is that it’s just not all true. Portions of it are, but not the whole thing. If you add up all the time Jesus is speaking about money, it’s more than when he’s talking about prayer! It’s more than when he’s talking about faith! It’s more than when he’s talking about heaven and hell, all combined!

I'll Share with You Three

Thoughts about Money and Its Neutrality, the Best I've Got

- **The first thought is that money is morally neutral.** Riches and poverty are both morally neutral. Money is a tool. It enables us to do things, things that otherwise sometimes can't get done. If you have money, what do you want to do with it, other than just have it. It's a tool.

Then there's a corollary, if you sort of reverse the thinking about it. I've come to believe this about churches. It's not 100 percent true, but it's much like true. And that is to choose what you want to do, and if what you want to do as a church lines up with what people think ought to be done in our world — what lines up with our perception of what the will of God is — money is never a problem. You don't ask for money and then think, what should we do with it? You have your mission. You have your idea of what needs to be done, according to your sense of the will of God. Then money isn't a problem.

- **The second thing that I would say about money is that philo-**

sophically it feels like a flow. It's like the in and the out. It's like breathing in and breathing out for our circulation system. Our heart pumps the blood, and it goes throughout our body, and then it returns and gets pumped again. The in and the out. The flow.

So we earn, we accumulate, but then we also spend. We pay our bills. We buy the things that we need, and we also buy some things that we just simply want. We also give. We give to our children. We give to our church. We give to the United Way. We give to special appeals like One Great Hour of Sharing. We give to causes that do what needs to be done in our world, according to our approval.

In and out. Accumulating for the sake of accumulating is constipation of the soul.

- **And the third thing. We have the notion that money is morally neutral. It's sort of like a flow.** I would add onto the third thing that it could easily become a false god. It makes a pretty good idol.

One of My Favorite Authors;

No Such Thing as Atheism; the Trick Is Keeping up the Truth

One of my favorite authors of all time is a guy by the name of David Foster Wallace. He is credited with having given the best commencement speech at graduation ever, back in 2005 at Kenyon College. I'd like to read something from that speech, but I'll leave out the context:

“The only thing that’s capital-T True is that you get to decide how you’re going to try to see it. This, I submit, is the freedom of a real education, of learning how to be well-adjusted. You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn’t. You get to decide what to worship.

“Because here’s something else that’s weird but true: In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Ev-erybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship — be it Jesus Christ or Allah, be it Yahweh, or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles — is that pretty much anything

else you will worship will eat you alive.

“If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It’s the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It’s been codified in myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; it’s the skeleton of every great story.

“The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness. Worship power, and you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

“But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they’re evil or sinful, it’s that they’re unconscious.”

In my experience, what Wallace says in his delightful way is simply true. The problem with these false gods is, as he says, they will “eat you alive.” The problem with false gods is that they never show any mercy, whether the false god is money, good looks, power, or intelligence.

The Connection Between

Money and Happiness; Three Deep Reasons for Happiness

Sociologists have long shown that there is a connection between how much money you have and happiness. The poor aren't very happy. The rich are (surprisingly!) not much happier; they have a different type of misery. The happiest are those who have enough money to live on, plus around 15 percent. They can pay their bills plus have a little mad money now and then.

But I think there's a deeper reason for the happiness of people in that segment of the Bell curve. I'd like to offer three reasons:

1. **They have enough not just to live, not just to have some fun, but it is in the human nature to give, to help out, to be generous.** And when we simply can't, it stifles our hard-wired human nature to be there for our kids, for our community, for anyone hit by hard times. We want to give, and we want to be able to give.
2. **For such people, the flow is balanced.** The in and the out, the income and the expense are balanced, and that leaves them then to attend to other things in their lives. Imbalance, one way or the

other, brings many worries. For the poor, the dominant worry is how to make it through the day, how to get more. For the rich, one must attend to their investments, upkeep on the second home, security for your possessions, and people trying to take advantage of you.

3. **But most importantly, those who have enough, or enough plus 15 percent, they aren't owned by anybody.** They aren't owned by a false god who demands attention, worship, and allegiance. They are free and not controlled by a merciless tyrant like Zacchaeus.

Going back to that Prosperity Gospel, it's just like the Bible says, "Riches can be a gift of God." I think it's true. But having enough plus 15 percent can also be a gift of God.

Poverty as well can be a gift of God, depending upon the needs of your soul.

For me, the most beautiful saying is from Jesus, when he said, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

I very much would have liked to listen in on the dinner conversation between Jesus and Zacchaeus because something profound happened at that dinner. From Zacchaeus, clearly his bottom line was affected. Four-fold restitution to everybody being overcharged. That's a lot. But also his heart and his soul were healed. He was no longer a

slave to a merciless god, but instead he became a follower of a loving one.

Amen.