

Few church members enjoy hearing a sermon about money, the possible exception being the Stewardship-Finance Committee at the beginning of the annual pledge drive. Most are like W. C. Fields. A man made a financial appeal to Fields. Fields responded that he would have to confer with his lawyer. If his lawyer said yes, Fields said he would get another lawyer.

It is, then, with some consternation when we discover how often money and material possessions are mentioned in the Bible. Jesus talked a great deal about money. Sixteen of the thirty-eight parables were concerned with how to handle money and possessions. In the Gospels, an amazing one out of 10 verses (288 in all) deals directly with the subject of money. The Bible offers 500 verses on prayer, less than 500 verses on faith, but more than 2,000 verses on money and possessions.

Money and possessions are important themes in this morning's reading from St. Mark. "Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!... 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." (Mark 10: 23, 25) Their's pretty strong words. What is it about wealth that stands as an obstacle between us and God's kingdom?

First, it is not to say that money or wealth is **inherently** evil. The Bible does not say that money is the root of all evil. It says that the **love of money** is the root of all evil. So, today is not a day that we beat up on the those who have wealth.

When Bob Sitze, was at the national Lutheran headquarters in Chicago, he wrote this three-verse hymn with the camel/needle/kingdom of heaven text in mind. It's called "Give me a Camel, Baby, and I'll Beat on the Rich", sung to the tune of "The Church's One Foundation."

Give me a camel, baby, and I'll beat on the rich,  
Those easy, nasty targets whose lives consist of kitsch.  
They have no place in heaven, nor in the kingdom lore.  
Their dastardliness well-known, their "worthiness" a bore.

How nice to sneer at bad folks so unlike you and me;  
How great to start today's work with justifiable glee.  
How wonderful the promise that those who have too much  
Will find their ample bodies, stuck needled and becrutched.

The rich get marked by Christians who wipe their brows and pray  
That God would never, never enoble them with pay.  
That made them greatly wealthy, encrusted and bogged down  
With worries, toils and pleasures just like the moneyed clowns.

That would be a great hymn if that were what Jesus meant. But, unlike the words of this hymn parody, it is not money or wealth in themselves that that Jesus meant were are evil. It is, rather, the temptations that they bring.

Once upon a time there was a White Knight looking for adventure. He came to a village where legend told of a terrible ogre in a pit. Bravely the White Knight took up the challenge. He would do battle with the terrible ogre in the pit. The people remembered several courageous men had climbed down into the pit, but no one could remember even one of these champions returning.

The White Knight stood looking at the deep, dark hole. The opening was so narrow he stripped himself of armor and unnecessary clothing. He took only a long dagger, which he tied around his neck with a leather strap. After securing a rope at the opening and testing its strength, he gripped it firmly and began lowering himself, hand under hand, letting the rope slip between his feet. Soon he felt the cool, smooth floor of the chamber. It took several minutes for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, but soon he focused on a large mound. Then he realized it was the bones of his predecessors, along with their assorted weapons. A little way off he spotted another mound, but he wasn't sure what it was.

Suddenly he was surprised by the inhabitant of the pit - surprised because he didn't anticipate that the ogre would be only as small as a rabbit. The ogre waved his arms and screeched with its squeaky voice, trying to appear as fierce as possible. The White Knight picked up a sword from the floor and prepared to do battle, but quick as a rat, the ogre ran into a hole near the second mound.

The White Knight followed, and as the second mound became clearer he again was surprised. Before his eyes there glittered balls of gold as big as grapefruits and diamonds as big as plums. With only a small part of that treasure, any commoner would be a prince for life. The little ogre lost its importance in view of this great treasure.

But the White Knight had a problem. How would he carry it out of the hole? He had no pockets. Who would believe him if he didn't bring back at least one piece? He suddenly had an idea. He would take one of the diamonds in his mouth and carry it that way until he had climbed out of the hole. He could always come back later for the rest. Hurriedly he chose one of the larger diamonds. It fit comfortably into his mouth, and he began the arduous climb out of the pit, hand over hand, gripping the rope with his feet. His tongue held the diamond tightly against the roof of his mouth. Higher and higher he climbed until the heavy exertion began to render him breathless. He would have to breathe through his mouth in order to get enough air. As he took in a large gulp of air the diamond slipped and stuck in his throat. The White Knight choked on his treasure, lost consciousness, and fell to his death on the mound of bones below.

You see, the terrible ogre in the pit was not the little troll. He didn't kill anyone. The ogre in the pit was greed - greed in the hearts of men who saw easy treasure and the hope of unearned gain. The glitter of this world had choked him to death.

That story paints a vivid picture of what it means to say that money is a wonderful servant, but a terrible master. A young man ran up and knelt in front of Jesus and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I

do to inherit eternal life?" After a short discussion of what the young man had already done, related to obeying the commandments, Jesus said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the rich man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Money was not this man's servant; it was his master. He did not possess his possessions, but was possessed by them. He loved them more than heaven itself.

It doesn't have to be so. Money is neither good nor evil. It is just a tool, a tool that when used as intended can bring blessing, but when misused can bring a curse. A hammer is neither good nor evil; it is a tool. Used as intended, it can help build a house. Misused it can injure and even kill. Nuclear energy, too, can be good or evil depending on how it is used: good in treating cancer, evil in its destructive power in a nuclear weapon. Money and wealth, too, can be blessing when used for God's purposes, but evil when misused.

Money is a blessing when it helps provide for the physical necessities of ourselves and our families, and when we share it for the spiritual and material needs of others. But it is a curse when it becomes our obsession and the basis of our trust and security. Someone said that something is terribly wrong when we have "In God We Trust" printed on our money, and "In Money We Trust" engraved on our hearts.

It would be dangerous to underestimate the temptations that come with wealth. John Wesley, who was winning people to Christ out of the lower socioeconomic strata of English society, found that those who were converted stopped boozing, gambling, and wasting money; and instead became diligent and hardworking. Little by little, Wesley observed, they crept up the socioeconomic ladder. But the more successful these new converts became, the more they turned away from Jesus, and the more they came to believe that the doctrines that Wesley preached were foolish.

As you can imagine this colored Wesley's attitude toward money. He wrote, "I fear, wherever riches have increased (exceeding few are the exceptions), the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore I do not see how it is possible, in the manner of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality; and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches."

Is there, then, any hope for us, who in the world's eyes, are all rich? Wesley answers, "What way then can we take that our money may not sink us to the nethermost hell? There is one way, and there is no other under heaven. If those who 'gain all they can,' and 'save all they can,' will likewise 'give all they can,' then the more they gain, the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven."<sup>4</sup>

Test your own attitude toward money, if it is for you blessing or curse. Take some time to detail an annual budget over the next twenty years if you were to win a \$10 million lottery. What would you do with a \$500,000 a year? How much would you keep, how much would you spend, and how much and to what or whom would you give away? Remember what Martin Luther once said: "God divided the hands into fingers so that money could slip through."

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.