



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

THE PURPOSE OF WEALTH ... TO LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

Acts 2:42-47; 2 Corinthians 9:6-7

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Dr. Thomas E. Evans

Last week we began our series exploring God's purpose for wealth from a Biblical perspective. We discovered it is a pivotal tool for fulfilling the Great Commandment: to Love God. To love God with our finances is to give with a heart filled with awe, affection, and thanksgiving for the Lord who gives us life, forgiveness, and hope. And when we do it with a generous heart, it levels up our gift because it brings God joy and delight. God has a lot to deal with and certainly God deserves to be delighted, just like anyone.

But Jesus gave us two central commandments and the second is like the first: Love your neighbor as yourself. This week we examine the role of wealth as a tool to express that love.

The first passage we will examine demonstrates how deadly serious Jesus took this command. It is his parable of the rich man and Lazarus:

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented... (Luke 16:19ff)

This rich man had not violated the 10 commandments. We have no indication that his wealth was ill-gotten and yet, his failure to help Lazarus landed him in Hell. Remember the command is to love your neighbor **as yourself**.

We should note that this command allows a healthy love of self. To fail to love yourself is to fail to believe in the God who created you. As a general principle Jesus does not want us to live miserable lives. God wants you to treat yourself, to love yourself, and find ways to spend your money that

brings you joy and delight. Jesus multiplied wine when it ran out at a wedding and heaven is often pictured as a grand feast.

Look at the ways the rich man loved himself. He wore purple, an extravagant color in those days, fine linen, and he feasted sumptuously *every day*. And every day he ignored the man at this gate. He clearly loved himself, for which he is not condemned. But he clearly failed to love his neighbor in the same way he loved himself.

Jesus means to tell us that if we have the means to help a neighbor in need, we must do it. This is not an option. The Bible makes it clear that wealth is not so much a privilege as a responsibility. As Deuteronomy 15:11 says, "*I therefore **command you**, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'*"

The Lazarus story is not meant to lead us to believe that Hell is the literal fate which awaits those who fail to share. Rather it means that without Jesus' sacrifice of love such failures would, on their own, be enough to condemn us.

This passage does not only apply to the wealthy, but to all that have enough to share...which means everyone. Some simply have more to share than others. Sharing is the reason for wealth and failing to love our neighbor with our wealth is as bad as harming our neighbor. Proverbs offers these rather frightening words,

If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard. (Prov 21:13)

In the next passage Paul excoriates those who fail to share, but for a slightly different reason. He is writing to the Corinthian community which has manifested multiple failures.

When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another

becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? (1 Corinthians 11:18-22)

The passage discloses two key failures. Contempt for God and shaming their neighbor. The Lord's Supper is meant to be a moment in our lives in which we all discover our mutual condemnation before God and forgiveness of God. To eat in front of others who have none is a way of thumbing your nose at God. That is why Paul uses the phrase, "...it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper." He is telling them that this act so distorts the purpose of this shared meal that it completely negates its power.

The second one is easier to grasp. Eating in front of someone who has nothing is clearly humiliating! No one should be made to feel less in the kingdom of God. No one should have to beg for food for their children. Last week, Leslie and the Mission Committee conducted a Poverty Simulation in the Gym.

Each person was given so many tickets to use – which represented food, transportation, and more. They found that trying to juggle these meager resources to navigate housing, health, food, shelter, clothing, supplies, bills, and more was complicated, stressful, and well... impossible!

By the end of the simulation every group, except one, was worse off than when they started. The hard work of being poor is the process of having to jump through one hoop after the next, with the meager, Lazarus-like hope that a crumb might find a way to their table. People found it degrading and demoralizing. We must do better as a church and as a town.

Paul makes it clear. Authentic worship is directly tied not only to providing for the poor, but something more. Sharing is not only about "enough for everyone". Sharing is a way for us to forge an authentic community...to truly be together, which means everyone is treated with dignity and respect. The call from Christ is not simply about depositing

wealth from one person to another, but about relationships lived out in love.

Which leads us to our next passage that discloses God's strategy as found in Acts:

Awe** came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they **would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:43-45)

This beautiful passage opens us up to the true power to be found in Christian community. First, people experienced the power of God through the apostles. People were using their gifts to share the good news in word and deed and it powerfully impacted everyone.

In turn, this experience led to a profound sense of togetherness that meant a deep sharing.

Recently, across the country, there has been considerable discussion about equality verses equity. Equality might mean that everyone gets the same. In a classroom setting this would mean all the children receive the same textbook which sounds fair. However, if one of these children is blind, then the book won't do them any good whatsoever. Equity is providing everyone what they need... a braille textbook for the blind child. And this is exactly what Acts portrays when it says they distributed "as any had need."

Need was the only test – not aptitude, not hard work, or attitude, or worthiness – Need. Jesus gives us everything that we need, namely his forgiveness, his grace, and his love. In turn, he expects us to do the same. This early Christian community of Acts lived out his call – powerfully!

This power grew out of something remarkable. Every time I read verses 46-47, my heart soars with the hope of the Gospel. After describing the miracles and the sharing it says,

[They] ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people and day by day the Lord added to their numbers those being saved.

Such goodwill is truly hard to come by.
The goodwill of *all* people.
Everyone!
This is the love of neighbor that Jesus is talking
about
That your hope and your heart is filled,
with a deep yearning,
that your neighbor,
your best friend,
your brother,
or even your worst enemy
lives a life filled,
with food, health, love, and grace.

Even though we have been expelled from the Garden of Eden, this world is a verdant planet that produces more than enough bounty for everyone to have what they need. This means the paradise of Eden is within our reach, if we only we allow our hearts to swell, breaking with goodwill for everyone. It is not the original Eden with fruit on the tree within everyone's reach, but Eden through perfect sharing... and perfect love for everyone. Amen.