

For God All Things are Possible

Second of three sermons in the
2022 Stewardship Commitment Series

“Becoming Richer”

by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

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2 Corinthians 9:10-12 (CEB)

¹⁰ The one who supplies seed for planting and bread for eating will supply and multiply your seed and will increase your crop, which is righteousness. ¹¹ You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous in every way. Such generosity produces thanksgiving to God through us. ¹² Your ministry of this service to God’s people isn’t only fully meeting their needs but it is also multiplying in many expressions of thanksgiving to God.

Matthew 19:16-26 (NRSV)

¹⁶ Then someone came to [Jesus] and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” ¹⁷ And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” ¹⁸ He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; ¹⁹ Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁰ The young man said to him, “I have kept all these; what do I still lack?” ²¹ Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²² When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. ²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, 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.” ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.”

As you probably have seen by now, the theme for our church’s 2022 Stewardship Commitment campaign is “Becoming Richer.” That simple phrase “Becoming Richer” is not advocating for the misleading notion sometimes called the “prosperity gospel.” That’s the misguided belief that God will reward you with riches and blessings *if* your faith is strong enough *and* you pray for the right things in the right way *and* you do enough good deeds *and* give enough in offerings. The so-called “prosperity gospel” mostly benefits the prosperity of the media ministers who promote it.

Our theme “Becoming Richer” arises from verses in 2 Corinthians Chapter 9 that describe how God enriches us with faith because we live with trust in God. Living with trust in God requires us to surrender some of our precious sense of power and control and, as the camp song says, “leave it in the hands of the Lord.”

But the subject of today’s gospel story seemed reluctant to do that. Rather than leaving it in the hands of the Lord, the biblical figure often referred to as the “rich young ruler” or the “rich young man” wanted to control every aspect of his life, including his eternal future with God. The story pivots on a point when Jesus counseled the young man to divest himself of riches and give support to the poor.

This is a Bible story that can make us squirm. Really. In preparing this sermon, as I read this passage from Matthew's gospel about the fabulously wealthy young gentleman, on my legal pad I found myself jotting the word "squirm." After all, we don't like to think of ourselves as "rich." We can always think of others who are richer. But when we hear Jesus saying, "Sell what you have and give to the poor," well, it makes us squirm.

In this story it sounds like Jesus told an upstanding, faithful, religious young man that he still hadn't done enough to earn credit in heaven. Overhearing this exchange, even the disciples were worried – they looked at this accomplished, well-spoken, religiously observant young man and said, "If he hasn't earned God's approval, what chance does anyone have?"

Let's take a moment to examine a few puzzling features in the Bible story.

The subject of the story had a lot going for him, but he wanted to nail down his future in eternity. So he asked Jesus what he needed to do to be assured of satisfying God with the life he was living. Jesus responded, "Keep the commandments." Although it sounds like a blunt reply, Jesus was actually encouraging the young man. In the original Greek, the verb tense suggests that Jesus was saying to him, "Keep keeping the commandments" or "Keep on observing the commandments."¹

So the young man replied, "Which ones?"

Jesus mentioned five of the Ten Commandments about ethical behavior toward others. Then Jesus added an instruction from the Old Testament book of Leviticus that was as familiar then as it is now: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."²

None of that was news to the affluent young buck. He said to Jesus, "I'm following those already. What is it that I'm *not* doing that I need to add?"

That's when Jesus said something puzzling. "If you want to be perfect..." Jesus started.

Stop right there! What about the word "perfect" in this story? When Jesus challenged the young man to be "perfect," it didn't mean what we think it means. When we hear something or someone described as "perfect," we picture one without fault or flaws, something complete, lacking nothing, something ideal. I don't know why biblical translation issues have to be so confusing sometimes, but the New Testament's Greek word that's been translated into English as "perfect" really means "completely devoted." So when Jesus challenged the rich young man to strive for perfection, what Jesus was asking him to do was to be *completely devoted* to God's way. Completely devoted. Certainly that sounds more reasonable than trying to achieve perfection.

So Jesus continued, "If you want to be 'completely devoted,' sell your possessions and give to the poor." What are we to make of Jesus telling the rich young man to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor? Did Jesus have a bias against anyone who was wealthy? No. In his ministry Jesus engaged with rich and poor alike. From Luke's gospel we know Jesus dined with Zacchaeus, the tax collector who had attained his wealth dishonestly. When he got to know Jesus, Zacchaeus was inspired to repent of his selfish, dishonest ways. Zacchaeus pledged to repay those he had cheated four times what he'd taken them for. He also pledged to give half of his wealth for the sake of the poor. There's no indication that Jesus shamed or coerced him into doing that. It's hard to imagine Jesus discriminating against anybody, including the rich.

In fact, the New Testament speaks appreciatively about some people of means. For instance, consider Joseph of Arimathea, a follower of Jesus, was also a respected member of

¹ Matthew 19:17 (note). *Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

² Leviticus 19:18

Jerusalem's Temple Council. The gospels indicated that Joseph of Arimathea could afford to give away his brand-new family tomb so the crucified Christ could be properly buried.³

Other examples? Luke's gospel tells us that Joanna and Susannah were women of means who provided material support to Jesus and the disciples.⁴ The book of Acts describes Lydia, a woman owning her own business dealing in exclusive, purple-dyed textiles. Lydia opened her home to Paul and Silas so it could serve as the meeting place for a new fellowship of Christians — what became the first Christian church on European soil.⁵ So in addition to showing great concern for those who were poor or disadvantaged, the New Testament showed appreciation for those who were well-to-do.

Another thing I want us to realize is this: Jesus did not tell the young man to sell all of his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. Jesus didn't specify an amount or percentage. Jesus probably envisioned that some amount of the young man's wealth could be redirected, put to work to help the less fortunate, rather than sitting idly, benefitting no one. Who knows? Maybe Jesus was inspired by Aesop's fable of The Miser, a story that was already well over 500 years old by the time of Jesus.⁶ Have you heard that fable?

A Miser had buried his gold in a secret place in his garden. Every day he went to the spot, dug up the treasure and counted it piece by piece to make sure it was all there. He made so many trips that a Thief, who had been observing him, guessed what it was the Miser had hidden, and one night quietly dug up the treasure and made off with it.

When the Miser discovered his loss, he was overcome with grief and despair. He groaned and cried and tore his hair.

A passerby heard his cries and asked what had happened.

"My gold! O my gold!" cried the Miser, wildly, "someone has robbed me!"

"Your gold! There in that hole? Why did you put it there? Why did you not keep it in the house where you could easily get it when you had to buy things?"

"Buy!" screamed the Miser angrily. "Why, I never touched the gold. I couldn't think of spending any of it."

The stranger picked up a large stone and threw it into the hole.

"If that is the case," he said, "cover up that stone. It is worth just as much to you as the treasure you lost!"⁷

As the stranger wished the miser had done with his treasure, Jesus encouraged the young man to give life to his wealth by putting it to work, aiding people who struggled daily just to survive.

The Bible says that when Jesus counseled him to sell and give, the young man departed "grieving, for he had many possessions." Was he emotionally attached to each thing he possessed? Was he overwhelmed by the work involved in liquidating some of his assets? Did he resent the idea that people without the advantages he enjoyed could benefit from something they hadn't earned? Was he just disappointed that Jesus didn't give him a simple task to complete and check off his list, securing for himself the certainty of having earned God's blessing?

³ Matthew 27:57-60

⁴ Luke 8:3

⁵ Acts 16:13-15, 40

⁶ [Aesop - Wikipedia](#) accessed 10/12/2021

⁷ [The Miser and His Gold - Fables of Aesop](#) accessed 10/12/2021

When the young man departed, Jesus then turned to his disciples with the picturesque warning, “It will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” That’s quite the image, isn’t it?

There have been attempts to “explain” that extreme illustration.

- There was a legend that the walls of ancient Jerusalem included one gate called “The Eye of the Needle.” That gate through the city walls was designed so that a camel laden with cargo and driver could not pass through, but stripped of its load and driver, with quite some difficulty the camel could “crawl” through the low and narrow portal. It’s a nice story, but it isn’t true. Such a gate never existed.
- Another attempt to explain the illustration is based on the similarity of the Greek words for camel and rope. Both are pronounced “kamilos” but differ in spelling by just one vowel. But even if one chose the word for rope over camel, who could get a rope to pass through the eye of a needle?

Since those “explanations” fall short, most biblical scholars believe that Jesus is just using a master storyteller’s hyperbole: a ridiculously exaggerated image to make the point that neither connections, nor power, nor even wealth enable us to attain God’s promised reward. As Jesus said, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.”⁸

That familiar phrase — “For God all things are possible” — is the key to the whole story.

The young man trusted in the power and comfort and control provided him by his possessions, his wealth. He was reluctant to let go of any of it. Like the miser in the fable, he just kept his treasures rather than putting them to work for the benefit of others.

We can be like that, too. We can clutch the treasures God has made available to us through our work and wisdom. We imagine that our future, our eternity will be the result of our actions, our choices, our decisions.

But Jesus pointed to the ultimate futility of depending on things rather than on God for peace, security, well-being.

Jesus wasn’t condemning assets or the people who have them. Jesus just wanted to caution that our earthly riches not become a burden, a stumbling block keeping us from seeing and serving the opportunities for compassion that are all around us.

As Jesus told the disciples, “For God all things are possible....” By God’s grace we can even discover what a blessing it can be — a blessing for others, and a blessing for us — when we elect to surrender some of our power and control and treasure. As we do, we find that we are “Becoming Richer” because our trust is not in the things of this world, but in the Omnipotent and Eternal God.

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⁸ Matthew 19:26 NRSV