

## What Is The Purpose Of Our Money? – Judy Cox

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

Let me tell you a story about Cliff. A “child of the Depression” of the ‘30s, he never quite recovered from it. Like besieged Jerusalem in our Jeremiah text, he had tasted the despair of great want and near-starvation. Perhaps you too have known someone like Cliff, from that generation? He seemed constitutionally incapable of spending money on himself. Muffler repairs involved jury-rigging an empty Pepsi can with a piece of wire rather than taking his car to the shop. Driving for blocks to save two cents a gallon on gasoline seemed sensible, not counterproductive! His lifestyle was so humble that acquaintances sometimes wondered if he could afford to eat.

By God’s grace alone, he insisted, Cliff had actually accumulated wealth; you can imagine how vulnerable his personality was to outright miserliness! Some shielding from that temptation came through Scripture. He often pondered our Timothy text: the warning that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil and the command to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, ready to share. Yet as an admittedly obsessive “child of the Depression,” his most pressing concern was providing financial security for the present and future of his loved ones. No ostentation though, or even moderation, from anyone else’s perspective. He certainly couldn’t spend money on his lifestyle!

What is the purpose of our money? How do God’s people view it? Is wealth inherently bad? Old Testament teaching on the one hand emphasizes wealth as God’s reward for obedience; on the other hand, it clearly presents the God Who cares passionately for the poor, and demands that God’s people also do so, linking justice with mercy. We Americans deal with the same tension—or do we? I’m afraid we’re all vulnerable to closing our ears and hearts (la la la la la). We’d rather bask in the self-justifying misinterpretation of prosperity theology.

When we dare to sit under the authority of Scripture, it will ruthlessly interpret both us and our lifestyles! But oh, we are so good at wriggling out of that—we humans have been doing that for a long time! The Pharisees in Jesus’ audience here were mocking him, mocking his insistence that one could not serve both God and wealth. Luke shows Jesus prefacing his parable with a response upholding the validity of the Law and the Prophets, not denying them. Rather, he critiques the Pharisees’ self-serving, one-sided interpretations of Scripture,

Then he counters with the story of a certain man who is wealthy. In Deuteronomic theology, wealth proved God’s favor, as God’s blessing on the righteous; beggars, then, were sinners receiving their just punishment from God. With this parable Jesus critiques and reverses those theological assumptions. He follows familiar cross-cultural themes on the reversal of fortunes in the afterlife. And he clearly sides with Old Testament proclamation of the God Who stands for the poor—wealth is for God’s people to share, not spend on themselves!

Both in food and in fashion, conspicuous consumption and extravagance characterize this wealthy man. The purple of his clothing comes from an amazingly costly dye reserved for the powerful, the wealthy and the royal; the linen he wears is the most luxurious fabric in his world. His daily “sumptuous feasting” underscores his self-indulgence. The breads falling under his banquet table aren’t the crumbs we might assume, but pita-like loaves used as napkins, then tossed on the floor—more conspicuous consumption.

We know about the exclusiveness of gated communities—his mansion has a gated wall. These walls separated and protected the insiders, the “urban elite,” from the expendable riff-raff outside. At the same time, we hearers are alerted by this mention of a gate. This interpretive clue is to evoke for us an Old Testament place of decision, where the prophets called for justice rather than injustice!

In contrast with the anonymous rich man, his foil has a name, Lazarus, which, significantly, means, “God has helped”. This naming too alerts to something unexpected; here the “faceless poor” are individually known while the more typical “individuating” has no impact. The anonymous rich man counts on his riches and status to help, while God knows, and God alone helps, the desperately poor man.

The desperation of Lazarus’ poverty shows in several details. He doesn’t sit at the gate, but “is laid”—perhaps he’s crippled as well as impoverished? He longs, without fulfillment, for even the garbage on the rich man’s floor. Too weak to protect himself, he is fed upon, by mongrel dogs—not only physically vulnerable but also thereby religiously & socially outcast. Lazarus receives no comfort from these dogs—instead, they prey on him!

In Jewish tradition, the bosom of Abraham was the highest place of honor at the great banquet in the afterlife. The “Hades” of the other man probably refers to a temporary abode of the dead awaiting the final judgment, although the Jewish first-century understanding of the hereafter was more fluid than codified. But attending to details of the afterlife completely misses the focus of this parable! In the harsh reality of life this rich man had it good, and the poor man didn’t. The point is that a startling reversal occurs! The poor man finds himself in close intimacy with Abraham—Abraham, the Old Testament paradigm for wealth combined with generosity. And so we can’t simplistically assume that either Jesus or Luke here condemn wealth in itself. The example of Abraham underscores God’s call for generosity, not self-congratulations, from those blessed with wealth.

The once-rich man in Hades, calls out to “Father” Abraham. Back in chapter 3, as our Luke Sunday School class has just discussed, John the Baptist proclaimed that religious heritage cannot by itself gain us salvation. No, it is active compassion to others that shows we are responding to God’s covenant! John there told the crowd, Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Here in ch. 16 an ax has fallen. This once-rich man lays claim to “Father” Abraham, and then condemns himself from his own mouth. He has not been unaware of the need at his gate. He could have been generous, and met that need as God’s agent. Rather, he chose to indulge his own appetites while ignoring the need of this beggar whom he knows by name! Dead, he continues in his arrogant indifference, implying that Lazarus should be at his beck and call. Although Abraham calls him “Child,” his request is refused. Next he demands that Lazarus warn his brothers, as a miraculous resurrection proof to convince them! Abraham responds that Moses (the Law) and the Prophets are adequate for the understanding that the arrogant man has missed. The brothers, presumably also living a self-satisfied, self-indulgent lifestyle, already have means by which to take warning; they will not attend, any more than their brother has.

What of us Americans? We are the powerful, the wealthy, the “royal,” of our globe. Our Scriptures proclaim God’s imperative to care for the poor with wealth entrusted to us. Like the scoffing Pharisees we can (mis)interpret away the convicting call of Scripture! How many times have we heard that our national wealth comes as God’s blessing on our country—with no implication of consequent responsibility? Is our wealth seen as a trust for the poor of the world? Or does it go, personally, toward the latest, coolest I-phone—even to spending a day standing in line to get it? Corporately, our politicians just voted, on our behalf, to cut \$40 billion from the poverty-focused nutrition assistance program SNAP, while trying to protect defense spending. Apparently our priority is our power, not our poor.

Then there’s our other Christian dodge: the same Jesus who told this parable also said that we would have the poor with us always, we remind ourselves, and thus avoid our responsibility!

Yes, this parable critiques the political/religious system of first-century Judaism. It exposes any system, including ours, that dares to claim that it is enough for the poor, whom God both favors and helps, to receive justice only in the age to come!

Remember Cliff? When he passed away, he left more than enough for his loved ones’ long-term needs, designating as much again for the work of the Kingdom. Despite his brokenness, Cliff did know that his money was not an end in itself, but a means to God’s ends. Our forerunner in faith, John Wesley, might not have approved wholeheartedly of Cliff. Wesley thought it shameful to leave any money at all behind at death, exhorting his early Methodists to earn and save all they could, that they might give to the poor as much as possible. Yet both Cliff and John Wesley clearly understood the purpose of money—as a means to serve the ends of the Kingdom. Neither was satisfied to accumulate wealth, as the Pharisees apparently did, thinking it an end in itself, simply a blessing and reward for obedience. Cliff and Wesley both saw money as entrusted to them for the sake of others.

In our Old Testament text Jeremiah models for us this use of money for the sake of others, with a thought-provoking twist. Beyond all common sense, he invests his own money in land that has already been occupied by an invading army. He will never take possession of this land. So why? Because he believes God’s promises of faithfulness and restoration, promises to be

realized not by his peers but by a future generation 70 years down the road; obediently, radically, he invests in hope, for their sake!

As I have sat with these texts, I keep encountering this possibility, that we can invest our God-given resources in hope for the sake of a future generation. Not for me and mine, but for others' children. I have heard, at our Free Methodist headquarters, of the amazing difference child sponsorship makes around the world. At yesterday's Ministerial Alliance project, well attended from across Greenville, we together packaged food for orphans around the world. I have also heard of the partnerships, past and present, of St. Paul's with the Simple Room, serving Greenville's youth. Then 4 days ago, out of the blue, a friend looked at me and said, "You need to know this! Here in little Bond County there are 75 more children in the foster system than homes to take them!"

What do these intersections of life with text mean? What is the Spirit up to with us? I don't know. But I know there are questions we are being asked: How do we view our money? Are we ourselves, with all our desires, its end, its purpose? Or will we allow these Scriptures to interpret our lifestyles; hearing, will we turn, to invest in hope? Will we care for the Lazaruses we might see if we stay near the gate of justice and mercy?