

What Lutherans Believe . . . About Wealth

Proper 13C | 2 Corinthians 8.1-15; Luke 12.13-21

Introduction

We're in the home stretch of our summer sermon series "What Lutherans believe about . . ."

There's still time to share your responses to the statement; however, at this point we'll weave them into sermons later this fall.

This morning's topic:

What do Lutherans believe . . . about wealth?

As soon as we bring up the issue of money at church, it seems to me we're faced with at three challenges:

The Credibility Challenge

The first challenge is the **credibility** challenge.

Usually, if churches are talking about money, it's because they don't have enough of it.

"We've got bills to pay and deferred maintenance to take care of – we need **more** money!"

Another aspect of this credibility challenge is the perception, at least among some, is that "all the church talks about is money" or "all they want from me is my money."

I'll confess – we don't help ourselves any if we confuse "stewardship" with "fundraising" or link our fall stewardship emphasis with building our budget for the next year.

Another aspect of this credibility challenge is the perceived conflict of interest for pastors

who depend on congregational giving for their salaries, to preach about how worshipers spend their money. Of course we want members and attenders to give more, we just want bigger salaries!

A final piece of this credibility challenge are the financial and moral scandals that have rocked many public Christian ministries in the past 15 years. Every time a Jimmy Swaggart or a Ted Haggard or a Roman Catholic diocese experiences a public failure a little bit of our trust in Christian institutions is eroded.

The Cultural Challenge

If that's not enough, there's a second challenge for us as we talk about money in church: the **cultural** challenge. Society is infected with a disease called "materialism." What does this mean?

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines *materialism* as "a theory that physical matter is the only reality, and that all being and processes and phenomena can be explained as a manifestations or results of matter."

Two other definitions flow from this one:

- (1) A doctrine that the only or the highest value lies in material well being and in the furtherance of material progress," and
- (2) "a preoccupation with or stress upon material rather than intellectual or spiritual things."

Materialism begins with our beliefs –

not just what we say we believe in our doctrinal statements, but the outlook on life by which we actually live and act.

Materialism is first and foremost a matter of the heart. It's exemplified by the Michael Douglas character in the 1987 movie *Wall Street* who said: "Greed is good." It's exemplified by some rather interesting statistics:

- ✓ More people visit the Mall of America in Minnesota each year than Disneyland, the Grand Canyon, and the Grand Ole Opry, combined.
- ✓ By age 20, the average TV viewer has seen one million commercials.
- ✓ Recently, more Americans have declared bankruptcy than have graduated from college.ⁱ

Instead of getting stuck on these two challenges, I'd like to focus on something else.
I'd like to focus on . . .

The Biblical Challenge

For people who follow Jesus, our money matters. Jesus has something challenging to say about how we handle our wealth.

This is true whether

we are John and Susie Smith living on Social Security or Bill and Melinda Gates living off of multi-gazillion dollar trust funds.

Money and possessions matter;
and how we use them matter, too.
In Matthew, Mark, and Luke,
1 in 6 verses deals with money.
Of the 29 parables Christ told,
16 deal with a person and his money.ⁱⁱ

According to my computer bible concordance,
of the key words that are used in the Bible,
the word "believe" is used 320 times;
the word "pray" is used 214 times;
the word "love" is used 701 times;
the word "give" is used 1143 times.

God is a giver and God wants us to become like Him.
What do Lutherans believe about wealth?
For me, the fundamental faith position is this:
Don't let my possessions possess me.

In our Gospel reading this morning,
the rich fool in the parable Jesus told
was just that – he was possessed by his possessions.
He was a rich farmer who had been blessed
with a bumper crop, and he didn't know what to do
with the abundance of the harvest.
That his heart was greedy and self-centered is clear
from his first and best idea of how to handle the surplus.
It wasn't to give it away to someone in need.
It wasn't to store it away in case of a future famine
(like Joseph encouraged Pharaoh in Genesis).
No, it was to build a bigger barn
so he could eat drink and be merry.

He already had enough to live comfortably.
With this bumper crop,
he had MORE than enough to meet his needs.
And yet his first impulse was to grasp, to hoard.

He could probably relate to the gentleman who was
contacted by a fund-raiser from the community charity.
“Sir,” said the fund-raiser, “our records show
that despite your wealth,
you’ve never once given to our drive.”

“Do your records show
that I have an elderly mother who was left penniless
when my father died?” fumed the tightwad.
“Do your records show that I have a disabled brother
who is unable to work?
Do your records show I have a widowed sister
with small children who can barely make ends meet?”

“No, sir,” replied the embarrassed fund-raiser.
“Our records don’t show those things.”
“Well, I don’t give to any of them,
so why should I give anything to you?”ⁱⁱⁱ

Humans aren’t the only animal
whose first impulse is to grasp and hoard.
Those who trap animals in Africa for zoos in America
say one of the hardest animals to catch
is the ring-tailed monkey.
For the Zulus of that continent, however, it’s simple.
They’ve been catching this little animal easily for years.
They know their prey well.

Their trap is nothing more than a melon growing on a vine. The seeds of this melon are a favorite of the monkey. Knowing this, the Zulus simply cut a hole in the melon, just large enough for the monkey to insert his hand to reach the seeds inside.

The monkey will stick his hand in, grab as many seeds as he can, then start to withdraw it. This he cannot do. His fist is now larger than the hole. The monkey will pull and tug, screech and fight the melon for hours. But he can't get free of the trap . . . unless he gives up the seeds, which he refuses to do. Meanwhile, the Zulus sneak up and nab him.^{iv}

What distinguishes us from the ring-tailed monkey, though, is our ability to make other choices. The monkey's choices may be driven by nature's instinct. You and I are driven by something else; or, at least, we can be if we want. The apostle Paul shows us what this might look like when he writes to the Corinthians,

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ; rich as he was, he made himself poor for your sake, in order to make you rich by means of his poverty.

2 Corinthians 8:9

Jesus' poverty, his self-giving sacrifice, makes us rich in ways that the self-centered rich fool could never appreciate. By the power of the Holy Spirit let loose in our lives, we are empowered to make other, faithful choices with our wealth. We are transformed by the Holy Spirit to have other priorities for our lives and for our resources.

When the world says "Look out for number one"
we respond "Do for others what you would have them do
for you."

When the world says
"The one who dies with the most toys wins,"
we embrace the opportunity to help others through our
first and second mile gifts.

From Paul and the Book of Acts, the Biblical challenge
is of a church that generously shared their resources
with each other so that those who had little or nothing
had enough.

In 2 Corinthians 8, the church

*begged us and pleaded for the privilege
of having a part in helping God's people in Judea.* (vs 4)

In Acts 2, the believers gathered in Jerusalem after
Pentecost where they

*continued together in close fellowship
and shared their belongings with one another.
They would sell their property and possessions,
and distribute the money among all,
according to what each one needed.* Acts 2:44-45 (GNT)

And later in Acts 4,

*The group of believers was one in mind and heart.
None of them said that any of their belongings*

were their own, but they all shared with one another everything they had. There was no one in the group who was in need.

Acts 4:32-33 (GNT)

And interestingly enough, those who shared from their abundance in Acts still had enough after they shared with those who started out not having enough.

That's what Paul's saying at the end of our first reading,

*I am not trying to relieve others
by putting a burden on you;
but since you have plenty at this time,
it is only fair that you should help those
who are in need. Then, when you are in need
and they have plenty, they will help you.*

In this way both are treated equally.

As the scripture says,

*"The one who gathered much did not have too much,
and the one who gathered little did not have too little."*

2 Corinthians 8:13-15 (GNT)

Materialism says "There's never enough."

It creates a false sense of needs and wants,
and it sends us to the wrong places to fill them.

Our faithful generosity trusts that

God will always provide enough.

God's been providing enough to Adam and Eve;

to Noah and his family after the flood;

to Abraham and Sarah;

to the Israelites in Egypt and in the wilderness;

to the people of Israel in the promised land;

through the Judges and the Kings and the prophets;

and to us now through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. By faith we claim that God provides enough; that we live in a world of sufficiency, not scarcity.

Author and sociologist Tony Campolo writes,

A church that is more interested in providing for itself than in giving itself in service to a needy world is not the kind of church our Lord had in mind on Pentecost.^v

Thankfully, we're not that kind of church, either. I believe we're the kind of church God had in mind on Pentecost. Not perfect, perhaps, but faithful. Growing. Giving.

And for this, we can truly say,
"Thanks be to God!"

Amen

ⁱ Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003), 31.

ⁱⁱ *10,000 Sermon Illustrations*. 2000 (electronic ed.). Dallas: Biblical Studies Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Landon Parvin in *Leaders*, quoted in *Readers Digest*, May 1996, pp. 67-68 and retrieved from *10,000 Sermon Illustrations*. 2000 (electronic ed.). Dallas: Biblical Studies Press.

^{iv} *10,000 Sermon Illustrations*. 2000 (electronic ed.). Dallas: Biblical Studies Press.

^v Tony Campolo, *Can Rich People Get into Heaven?* from *Twenty Hot Potatoes Christians are Afraid to Touch* (1988), 101.