

## **What's the Danger in Wealth?**

In our study of idols in Men's Fraternity, we learned from Pastor Tim Keller that "idolatry is when we allow anything other than God to become the center of our heart's true happiness, contentment, meaning, identity, or security. An idol is anything besides Jesus Christ that you feel you must have to be happy." Is there anything like that in your life? How about your cell phone?

In 2008 a study was done in the U.K. regarding people and their cell phones. Here's some of what they found:

- People check their cellphones an average of 34 times per day.
- 40% of people said they would start to miss their phone in less than an hour.
- 63% said they fear losing or being without their cellphones (Nomophobia).
- 75% said they use their cellphones in the bathroom.
- 25% said they would physically fight a thief to get their phone back.
- 30% said their mobile device had caused a fight with their spouse. <sup>i</sup>

Could you be happy without your cellphone? Maybe our idols aren't so imaginary?

So we come to the true story of the rich, young ruler. And must notice first what Jesus did NOT teach here...

### **I. Jesus Did NOT Teach That Wealth Is Inherently Evil.**

Yes, Jesus Himself lived a very simple life with very few possessions and yes, He asked this wealthy young man to go and sell "everything he had" and give it to the poor, but we have to be careful that we don't jump to conclusions from those two facts. Jesus didn't teach voluntary poverty as something everyone should practice. For example, Jesus was friends with some very wealthy people, like Lazarus, like Zacchaeus; He didn't require them to give everything away before they began to follow Him.

And secondly, at the end of this Scripture passage, when Peter reminds Jesus that he and the other disciples had left "everything" to follow Him, Jesus tells Peter that they will receive "in this present age" – "brothers, sisters, mothers, children AND homes and fields." So, why would Jesus reward them with "homes and fields" if wealth like that were inherently evil? No, Jesus is not an anti-materialist or a Marxist. But neither is He a Crony Capitalist. When the apostle Paul wrote about what was "a root of all kinds of evil" (please note that he did not say "THE" root, he said "A" root in I Tim. 6:10), he didn't say that money was that root. He said "the LOVE of money" was that root. So, wealth and money and anything that is used to measure a person's economic worth, are not evil by definition.

So then, we come to the next logical question, which is, "Why does Jesus say what He says to this rich, young ruler?" In other words...

### **II. What's the Danger in Wealth?**

First, we need to examine this text closely because it's complicated. Mark simply says that "a man" came up to Jesus. It's Matthew who says he was "young" and Luke who says that he was an *arxone*, some sort of a Jewish leader, possibly a town official or even a synagogue ruler. And what does this young, Jewish leader do? He falls on His knees before Jesus and says:

**"Good teacher... what must I do to inherit eternal life?"** (Mark 10:17)

And Jesus makes a very interesting response, one that I must admit, puzzled me for years. Jesus says:

**"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good - except God alone."** (Mark 10:18)

Has anyone else besides me been puzzled over that response? I mean, what is He trying to say? Is He saying that He isn't as good as God the Father? How else could you read this? Let me show you what I learned about this verse from Dr. J. Vernon McGee. Jesus is trying to get this young man to think about what he just said, because if he understood what he just said, he'd have the answer to his own question. The young man just called Jesus good. But, as Jesus points out, only God is good. So, if Jesus is in fact good, then Jesus must be God. Do you see that? In essence, Jesus is saying to the young man:

Wait! Hold on! You just called me 'good.' Only God is good, so are you calling me God? Do you really believe that I am God? Because if you believe that then you should be willing to do whatever I might ask you to do, right?

Jesus is NOT saying that only His Father is good and He is not. He's saying the opposite of that. He's agreeing with the young man that He is good and He's expanding on what he said to try to help him see that He, Jesus, is therefore God.

But then, secondly, Jesus probes even further. He's performing a spiritual checkup. Jesus is examining this young man's beliefs and behaviors to see exactly at what level of maturity he is. So, Jesus says, "*You know the commandments;*" and He rattles off numbers 5-9 of the Ten Commandments. To which the young man says:

**"Teacher... all these I have kept since I was a boy."** (Mark 10:20)

Really? He's kept half of the Ten Commandments perfectly since he was a boy? Including #9, "not lying?" Really? You know, if anyone tells you he hasn't lied in twenty years, what should you conclude? You're talking to a liar!

But here's what I love. I just love this! What is Jesus' attitude toward this liar?

**Jesus looked at him and loved him.** (Mark 10:21)

Only Mark saw this look in Jesus' eyes. Matthew and Luke included many other details of this encounter that Mark left out but only Mark saw that Jesus loved this liar. Which makes this one of my favorite verses in all the Bible!

"You've kept all these commands perfectly since you were a boy?"

"Yes I have!"

UURRRKKK!!

You know what this reminds me of? It reminds me of when you go to the dentist's office to have your teeth cleaned and the dental hygienist is working away at your teeth for a while and then he or she asks, "How often have you been flossing?" Right? You know what I'm talking about?

Now, is that an honest question? I mean, they're looking at your teeth! They know perfectly well how often you've been flossing! So, what are they really asking? They're asking, "Are you gonna lie to me or tell me the truth?"

The man lies to Jesus' face and how does Jesus respond? With contempt? With judgment? With anger? No. Jesus looks at him and loves him. Jesus loves liars! So, what does that say about how He feels about you and me?

Have you been avoiding Jesus lately, like you've been avoiding going to the dentist because you don't want to hear "THAT QUESTION?" You don't want to talk to Jesus because you don't want to hear Him ask, "How's your struggle with sin going?" He's not asking because He doesn't know. He's asking because He wants to see if you're ready to be honest. But even if you aren't honest, even if you lie to Jesus, you've got to believe Mark 10:21, "Jesus looks at YOU and LOVES YOU."

Which brings us to the first danger of wealth. Wealth can fool us into thinking that we are secure, that we are safe without God. When you're living paycheck to paycheck, what do your prayers sound like - like Ps. 69?

**Save me, O God,**

**For the waters have come up to my neck.**

**I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold.**

**I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me.**

**I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched...**

**You know my folly, O God;**

**My guilt is not hidden from you...**

**Come near and rescue me... (Ps. 69: 1-3a, 5, 18a)**

Yes, there's desperation in that prayer but there's also honesty, humility, and a full realization of our dependence on God. Is that a bad place or a good place to be? Is that a place of spiritual sickness or spiritual health?

With wealth, it is so easy to become proud. It's so easy to believe that "I created this wealth and even if I lose it, I'll just create more!" Our security is in ourselves. But way back at the beginning, God warned us of this deception. He said in Deut. 8:17 and 18:

**You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth...**

When Yankee great, Joe DiMaggio returned from WWII, before he rejoined the team, he took his 4-year-old son, Joe Jr., to a game and sat in the bleachers. But by the 2<sup>nd</sup> inning, people recognized him and began to chant, "Joe, Joe, Joe DiMaggio." Joe looked down at his son to see if he understood the tribute he was being given when his son said, "See, Daddy, everybody knows me!" The first danger of wealth is that it can lead us into thinking that the praise that belongs to God belongs to us. <sup>ii</sup>

But there's another danger regarding wealth that is evident in this story. It is this: wealth can become an idol. What's an idol? It's anything that takes the place of God, anything that we think we need, other than Jesus, to be happy.

Let's put our diagnostic hats back on and look at this young man one more time. When he first meets Jesus, what does he do? He kneels before Him. What does that tell you? He has reverence for Him. He has some level of belief that Jesus is a very holy man. And then what does he do? He calls Him good, which Jesus points out

should be reserved as a description only of God. Then thirdly, what does he confess? He confesses that his obedience to God has been complete. Well, if you have proper reverence for God and your obedience is complete, then shouldn't you be assured of your salvation? But he's not! He asks Jesus:

**...What must I do to inherit eternal life?** (Mark 10:17)

So, what's wrong with this picture? What does all this tell you about the young man's faith? Either his faith is very weak or he has faith in the wrong thing. Jesus, the Great Physician, like any good doctor, continues to run tests until the answer is clear. His final test is aimed directly at where his faith rests. Jesus looks at him and loves him so much that he gives him this assignment:

**"Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."** (Mk. 10:21b)

If his faith were truly in Jesus as God, what would he have done? It might have been hard, but if he truly believed that Jesus was God, then why wouldn't he have given up his wealth in this world to gain greater wealth in the next world? That's what Jesus offered him! "Sell everything... and you'll have treasure in heaven!" He's not asking him throw away his wealth but to transfer it to a bank where it will last for all eternity! Where would you rather have your wealth, in a bank that guarantees its safety for 70 years or in one where it is safe for eternity? If he had believed that he was talking to God, how would that have been a hard decision?

But it WAS a hard decision for him. Verses 22 and 23 say:

**At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"**

In other words, by his response, the young man proved he really wasn't a member of the kingdom of God. He'd never entered it. Why not? Because he didn't know what we learned last week – you can't get in through the adult gate of obedience. The only way into the kingdom of God is through the children's gate. You must receive God's invitation by faith.

This illustrates the third danger of wealth: wealth always tries to control you. Which is true of any idol actually. Pastor Warren Wiersbe says, "Money is a marvelous servant but a terrible master." In a New York Times article on Jan. 19<sup>th</sup> of this year, former hedge-fund trader, Sam Polk, wrote:

In my last year on Wall Street my bonus was \$3.6 million – and I was angry because it wasn't big enough. I was 30 years old, had no children to raise, no debts to pay, no philanthropic goal in mind. I wanted more money for exactly the same reason an alcoholic needs another drink: I was addicted...

Not only was I not helping to fix any problems in the world, I was profiting from them. During the market crash of 2008, I'd made a ton of money shorting the derivatives of risky companies. As the world crumbled, I profited. I'd seen the crash coming, but instead of trying to help the people it would hurt most... I'd made money off it. "I don't like who you've become," my girlfriend had said... Now, I didn't like who I'd become either.

Sam should know whether this was an addiction or not because he's a former drug addict. Through the help of a counselor, Sam eventually could see that the love

of money is just as addictive as any drug. He realized that, for him, the only way to freedom was to quit cold turkey. He writes:

The first year was really hard. I went through what I can only describe as withdrawal – waking up at nights panicked about running out of money. Over time it got easier... but my wealth addiction still hasn't gone completely away. Sometimes I still buy lottery tickets. <sup>iii</sup>

Jesus said:

**It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.**

**The Disciples were even more amazed and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?"**

**Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." (Mark 10:25-27)**

Which brings us to our "take-home" question...

### **III. Could You Be Happy Without Great Wealth?**

Could you? Some of you are saying, "Well, let's do a scientific test. Give me great wealth for a year and then I'll let you know." Or, you could consider what Grant Desme did. Grant shocked the baseball world in 2010 when he announced his retirement from the sport – this was before he played in even one major league game! He'd been drafted out of college by the Oakland A's and won MVP honors in the Arizona Fall league of 2009 where he hit ten homeruns in ten games. The A's management was licking their chops! But before going to spring training in 2010 with the A's, he left to become Brother Matthew at St. Michael's Abbey in Silverado, California. He said, "I love the game, but I aspire to higher things."

Last year, MLB.com sent a reporter to see how Grant was doing. The reporter asked him, "Do you miss playing baseball?" Grant said:

"I don't miss playing professionally, but I've come to enjoy the game of baseball itself more. When I let go of it as my idol, I was enabled to enjoy it for what it's worth. When you're projecting your own designs on something and taking it more seriously than it should be, you don't get what God intended you to get out of it...I wanted to give my life completely to God for love, for everything he has done for me... Something like this is very little in comparison to what he has done for me." <sup>iv</sup>

So, what are you going to do about the idol in your life? In Men's Fraternity, we learned a three-step process for removing idols from our lives. It goes like this:

Admit the struggle

Identify the lie

Replace with the truth

Admit that there is struggle inside you to believe that you can't be happy without great wealth. Identify that that's a lie! It's not true. Money is a great servant but a horrible master. Now, replace that lie with Jesus' truth. Jesus said:

**And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into**

**the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?** (Mt. 6:28-30)

The opposite of poverty is not wealth, but faith. Let's pray...

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<sup>i</sup> Deborah Netburn, "Nomophobia – fear of being without your phone – is on the rise," Los Angeles Times (2-17-12)

<sup>ii</sup> Leonard Mlodinow, "The Triumph of the Random," The Wall Street Journal (7-03-09)

<sup>iii</sup> Sam Polk, *For the Love of Money*, "The New York Times," Sunday Review, Jan. 19, 2014

<sup>iv</sup> "A's Desme retires for priesthood," 01/22/2210 by Danny Wild, MLB.com and Trent Beattie, "Ex-Baseball Phenom Discusses Life in a Norbertine Abbey," National Catholic Register (4-8-13)