

"A Christian Perspective on Wealth"
Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday in Kingdomtide
Lectionary Year B
September 6, 2009
Text: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23
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If we were asked, most of would say that we would like to be wealthy. Some of us *are* wealthy by the standards of our society. All of us are by the world's standards, and, as a matter of fact, all of us are according to John Wesley's understanding of wealth. Wesley maintained that "whoever has sufficient food to eat, and raiment [clothes] to put on, and a place where to lay his head, and something over [that is, left over] is *rich*" [Jennings, *Good News to the Poor*, p. 107]. That definitely would include every single one of us.

As Christians, how are we to approach the issue of wealth? How are we to handle being rich? Our lectionary reading from the Old Testament book of Proverbs certainly deals with this subject. You heard that passage read a moment ago. I think there are three pieces of practical wisdom to be found in this passage. Let me give those to you now, and then I want to talk about each one briefly. The author's three ideas concerning wealth are: reputation is more important than riches, the rich and the poor are both God's children, and the responsibility of wealth is generosity.

First, **reputation is more important than riches**. The writer of Proverbs is telling us that the favorable impression we make on others, the respect they wind up having for us, and our overall popularity as persons are all more important than having money. We are to be persons of good character, persons of integrity, and persons of example. Having a good name ultimately will bring us more happiness than having wealth.

This is the point, I think, of the great classic movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. In the movie, Jimmy Stewart's character, George Bailey, is not a wealthy man. He is not particularly famous. He doesn't even get to leave the small town he has grown up in, something he longs for all his life. But what he has is integrity; what he has is the respect of his fellow citizens; what he has is a good reputation. In the end, he discovers just how meaningful these things really are. For him, it's a wonderful life precisely because of these things.

So how do you acquire a good name or favor? How can you have a good reputation? *You have to earn it*. It cannot be acquired monetarily. Money cannot buy you a good name. Many have tried it and failed in the end. As Christians I think we have to say that *the way to have a good reputation is to follow Jesus*. Here's why I think this is true: A serious and committed discipleship will be other-directed, directed toward the needs of other people. It will involve the kind of

self-giving acts of love that develop the sort of character that finds favor with people. Following Jesus, the name above every name, will give you a good name. The first way we are to approach wealth, then, ironically is to see that it is not of ultimate value in life. *Who you are is more important than what you have.* Are you a person with a good reputation? Do you have a good name? Then you are blessed and wealthy.

Second, the rich and the poor are both God's children. Although the rich and poor do not share a lot in common in the eyes of the world, they do in God's eyes. They have common bond in that they both are created by God and share God's image. They share a common humanity.

There is a message in this perspective for both the haves and the have-nots. The rich need to avoid viewing the poor as second-class citizens. Those who have wealth need to keep from seeing themselves as a cut above the rest. *Having money does not make you a better person.* It certainly does not make you any better in God's eyes, not when you consider that God chose to become human in the form of one who had absolutely nothing and was killed like a common criminal. As you have heard me say before, the ground is level at the foot of the cross.

For this reason, the writer of the New Testament letter of James warns us about showing partiality toward wealthy persons. It seems that churches always have been guilty of that. I remember my dad telling me a story when I was kid about a time when he went along with one of the matriarchs of the First Baptist Church in Gainesville on Monday night visitation. They went to see a couple who had visited the worship service the Sunday before. After spending a little time in their rather modest home with them, Mrs. Powell said to my dad on their way back out to the car, "We don't need to worry about following up on them, Don. They are not 'First Baptist' kind of people. They would fit in better at one of the other Baptist churches in town."

It is ever so easy for the church to become partial to people with professional careers and rather large incomes. I once served a church that considered itself to be extremely open and accepting. One of the prominent church members said at an Administrative Council meeting, "Our doors are open to everyone. It doesn't matter if you are young or old, married or single, white or black, straight or gay. Absolutely anyone with an MBA is welcome here."

While it is rather easy to take potshots at wealthy people, as I said a moment ago, however, in Proverbs there is a message for the poor as well. Rich people are human too. They are loved by God also. Wealthy people have problems and struggles. They have the same

needs as everyone else. *So the wealthy are not to be judged any more than the poor.* Although Jesus made it clear that materialism is a hindrance to personal spiritual growth, he had some followers, such as Joseph of Arimathea, who were quite wealthy and prominent. Having wealth is not a bad thing in and of itself, and is not to be viewed negatively by those who do not have as much.

We have to say one more thing about how we, as Christians, need to understand and view wealth. We need to realize that **the responsibility of wealth is generosity.** The writer of Proverbs has told us that character is more important than money. He has said that all people are God's children, the rich and the poor alike. Now comes the bottom line word to the wealthy: *the right way to deal with money is to share it with others.* After all, generosity is the best indication of the understanding that character exceeds wealth in value and that the poor and the rich share a common humanity. *Wealthy persons are to be humanitarian by nature.* Money is to be used to help people and not to be used for using and abusing them in some way out of a need for power or position. God wants the wealthy to be giving so that everyone may share in the material things of life.

I mentioned John Wesley once already at the beginning of this sermon. Perhaps the founder of Methodism's most famous recommendations concerning wealth were set out in his sermon entitled "The

Use of Money," in which he contended that as Christians, we are to *gain* all we can, *save* all we can, and then *give* all we can.

Interestingly enough, that formula represents not only the way to be good Christians when it comes to money, but good capitalists as well. I hope you had a chance to read Steven Malanga's excellent op-ed piece in Sunday's "Points" section of *The Dallas Morning News* two weeks ago. He begins the article by quoting from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, written in 1835, in which the French author stated his worry that free, capitalist societies might develop so great a "taste for physical gratification" that citizens would be "carried away and lose all self-restraint." Avidly seeking personal gain, they could "lose sight of the close connection that exists between the private fortune of each of them and the prosperity of all" and ultimately undermine both democracy and prosperity [August 23, 2009, p. 1P].

And then in this morning's "Points" section of the paper there is another excellent article, this one by Drake Bennett entitled "Happiness: A Buyer's Guide." In it he mentions the research done by professors from the University of British Columbia and the Harvard Business School showing that the higher an individual's "prosocial spending"—that is, gifts for others and donations to charity—the higher the happiness of that person. In other words, the people who

give money away are significantly happier than those who spend their income only on their own needs [September 6, 2009, p. 5P]

I believe that in this country we have experienced the severe economic recession we currently are enduring largely, if not exclusively, because as a society we have failed to follow Wesley's advice. We have sought to gain all we can, to be sure, but do we save all we can? No. Do we give all we can? Hardly. And capitalism has fallen on hard times in this country not because the government has become overly controlling but because business has forgotten how to exercise self-restraint. As a nation, we almost have abandoned completely the idea of the common good. Unlike our Methodist and capitalist forebears, we have become individualistic to the point of narcissism, and we are paying a heavy price for it today, not the least of which is having less happiness in our lives.

One of the main ways we, as Christians and as church members, can present an alternative way of living to the world around us is by how we view and deal with our money. We have been richly graced by God with prosperity. God has allowed us to become wealthy. And we can be further blessed by God if we will remember that reputation is more important than riches, the rich and poor are both God's children, and the responsibility of wealth is generosity. May this be our

perspective and our practice as we deal with our money—for *God's* sake, for the sake of ourselves, and for the sake of our neighbors.