

The Miser's Misery & the Giver's Gift

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Readings: Romans 12: 1-11 & Luke 12: 16-21

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Perhaps you have heard that Jesus spoke about money more than any subject except love. Now, some preachers stuff this fact in your face as if to say: Jesus talked about money, so I can too, even if you don't like it. In other words, they pull rank. Let's not go there. But why money? What is it about money, that Jesus made it his main metaphor for showing people why they are so unhappy and so cruel, and how they might change this. Why money?

Money is funny. If right now someone slipped me a gift in an envelope - of say, one million dollars - I would of course be a rich man. In the moment, however, what would change? I'd still have...same house, same clothes and job, same education and speech. If I suddenly felt wealthy, that sense would derive not from any change in material circumstance, but only from my imagination--how things will change now! (Well, not now, but soon.) This is obvious with such a fantastic example. What's not so obvious is that money almost always works this way. America calls us consumers, but when it comes to money, we are more consumed than consumer. Our imagination is consumed with money. Consider.

If you are retired and have laid up a nest egg, with a plan from your company and Social Security to boot, all say that you are comfortable. But look beneath the surface of this comfort. Comfort means that your imagination is comfortable: apart from the unimaginable happening, you imagine your future will unfold in ways you like. As for that nest egg, unlike every other good egg, you hope it never cracks, not while you're alive. Its main function today is to secure your imagination of tomorrow. If you are working hard with children in or approaching college, the money worries may grow very tight. But they are worries... about the future. The anxiety is here, sure--but the problem is out there somewhere, as you imagine. Millions of Americans have serious credit problems. Some arise from injustices in our medical system or legal system, but most grew from hungry imaginations. Someone wanted an SUV, a pool, a wild cruise. These things didn't drop down from the sky with a bill attached. Souls hungered after these things, imagining themselves unhappy without them. It was a spiritual issue. They dug for gold in the pit of debt to satisfy the imagination.

Money is funny. On the one hand, it is the past, crystallized in hard, dry measure; all our time and labor. On the other hand, it's the future. If we have some in the bank, we don't mean to use it right now. It's for the future, whether near or far. So money catches us off balance, spiritually speaking--not present to the present, but our attention swings from things we don't have (fault of our past) to things we won't have (fear of the future). What a

bold-faced lie is written right here: "In God We Trust." Precisely not when money is our worry. Jesus saw this, how our money-relations re-enact our whole experience of broken relationships - with our self, with others, with God, and he found how to make money talk spiritually, to help a soul bear down on its resistance to growth. What a gift when you realize that day by day, right inside your head, you have a laboratory perfectly equipped for experiments in... spiritual growth. Thank you, Jesus.

Take the parable of the rich man wondering what to do with the abundant yield of his fields. He is caught like a fly in the sticky web of past and future. The summer past is condensed as yields of grain. His sorry present he will spend erecting huge new barns to hold his imagined future, "ample goods for many years." His past preoccupation with wealth consorts with (to him) hidden fears of the future to give birth now... to an empty soul! No one home when God comes knocking. "Fool! This very night your life is required." What misery to knock upon the door of your self one late day, and find no one there, your self all spent in setting up the future and putting down the past. Do you know such a soul? Who of us has never had a mind so divided by incompatible dreams that when the Spirit of God came calling, we weren't home?

Every few weeks, I take part in a group conversation with inmates at Attica. Talk about flying into the web of time, with thoughts stuck to ruined pasts and futures! Yet for the most part, those who attend are so alert to the processes and possibilities of leaving misery behind and accepting spiritual growth. One day, the conversation turned to the gifts of money these fathers send their children. One man's nine-year old had asked him for five dollars, but he sent her fifteen. Suddenly the group was peppering him with questions. Why give her more than she said she needed? Do you see how this might cause her troubles when she goes shopping? What unseen need were you trying to meet? And more. Near the end of our 90 minutes together, I said Shopping is always a spiritual issue. Like fish roiling the waters where food appears, they clambered all over the thought. This idea is way too big to deal with now, they said. We have to come back to this. I am always humbled and awakened by their awareness of inner hungers and fears, and their alertness for the terrible power such hungers have to draw a man out of the present moment into a state of mind from which no good can come. The simple fact is that we are all alike in this weakness. Often, literal prisoners see their pitfalls better than do we whose pleasures and pressures at work and family dull our awareness of how far from spiritual home we have wandered, how spent on past and future our imagination is.

Just as jail time has opened a window of freedom for some in Attica, so Jesus' parable of the rich man and his barns leaves open a great door for all. God calls him "Fool!" But is this as awful as it seems? For God calls him. The rich man turns his attention to God - who now says, "This very night, your life is required of you." This night! There is still time to stop imagining the ghosts of past and future. Still time to come into the Presence of God - yes, bearing

the name Fool, which is not easy on our pride. But, hell, man, consider the alternative: to turn away from the living God, unaddressed, no one home. Now suppose the rich man stays spiritually at home this time; at God's word, says "Here am I!"; flees neither to past guilts nor future fantasies--the favored distractions of churchy religion--but stays in the Presence of the Living God, from now to now to now, unafraid of the coming night, which is coming anyway, soon or late. Suppose, like Scrooge this very night, the Fool decides to render up his body and all his goods: a living sacrifice. What then? Lives not this one man blessed, saved, whole-- humbly, even gladly called a Fool, for Christ?

The blessing of God is always about holding attention in the present. Blessing is about the decision you make now, now, now--to leave misery and fear behind, and choose life; to use whatever tools are in your hands--family, work, prayer, money. The decision you make right now to close with the angel of God in a new wrestling by the river; with past and future in the balance, but you present this night. Peniel! This is how God blesses, by accepting your surrender of wealth and imagination, presenting your body as a living sacrifice; being transformed by this renewal of your mind, now - no, not yesterday's insight, but now!- a new decision, discerning what is good and acceptable and perfect. More than a few of those inmates I meet with have learned the secret of giving themselves to the instant attention of the Present, whenever they feel the gloom gather. For this, they are like monks in their cells, blessed as no average Joe will be who chases after his life in quiet desperation.

Your turn. You too are flying through the sticky web of time, where money matters catch at the chin of your imagination to turn your face away from the Holy Presence. The secret to happiness - the real thing: spiritual blessedness, the rock of your salvation, goodness, mercy, and light - is always in this little Either/Or; the decision between misery or spiritual growth, a decision made only in the present moment. Blessedness is this Binary digit, this BIT of decision for faith. If it lasts ten seconds before the dark waters whelm you over again, what does that prove? That your paralysis is over! You have twitched the big toe of your spiritual body! It is your choice, your freedom to apply your attention - either to the pathos of what's past and the fantasy of the future+ / or to the Present Abundance in Christ. This is the secret of life, which Jesus calls the kingdom of God. It is the secret of prayer, the whole treasure of meditation; the pearl of great price; the treasure hidden in a field; the whole Judgment of God--to slip the shackles of imagination and fear now and come alive.

What has this to do with money and the church? If you give only to "support the church" then your mind is set on the things below, the past and the future - what the Bible calls "the flesh." But when we said that the giver needs to give to live, we meant that when you give the slip to thoughts that are chained to things that pass away, your soul can fly free. Your soul is the first and eternal beneficiary of every gift you make. Liberal gifts render liber-

al benefits to your soul; small gifts, small benefits. It is a spiritual law. For bit by bit, your soul needs to come into the presence of God with everything, with your whole living - which Paul calls "your body, a living sacrifice." Bit by bit, you take joy in declaring and demonstrating to yourself and before your beaming spiritual mother your freedom from the shackles of your imagination. Now, you, who are serious about spiritual experience, enter the laboratory of spiritual growth to work out experiments on your own salvation. Here you can prove why ancients have taught that giving one tenth of your living is a good place to begin - for those serious about their souls. Here, in a single sure, joyful, fearless decision, is the end of the miser's misery; and the abundance of the giver's gift.

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