

## Gratitude Flow

Wayne Waibel – 07/31/2022

The bible proclaims over and over and over again the perils that befall those who put their trust in riches of any kind. Why does God so favor the poor and the marginalized? What is so bad about attaining some measure of monetary success in this world?

Fair questions, both – and perhaps more to the point, what has that to do with us? We work hard and do our best to provide a nice home for our families. We engage in productive activity for which we should be paid. The work we do benefits others either in service or merchandise. What is so bad about that?

The quick answer is that the work we do in and of itself is not flawed. What motivates us can be less than pure. Beyond that – what the silver we are paid does to us is the dividing line. No one expects us to work for free. The Lord does expect us to be good stewards with the plenty to which we are entrusted, however.

The parable in this morning's Gospel lesson is often referred to as the Rich Fool parable. And there is a wealth of understanding in this very short story. Probably the most compelling notion it introduces is that a capacity to trust in God can deepen only as other matters lessen their grip on our lives.

The seduction of wealth – especially in a capitalist society like ours is powerful indeed. Even more so in a land riddled with poverty and oppression such as first century Palestine. To be poor is a form of exile. You are outcast and routinely dismissed as irrelevant. Who wouldn't choose riches over poverty?

The key to maintaining a right relationship with God in time of plenty is to share the wealth. Even more than that – understanding the traps that can befall you when your coffers are full. This is where so many have inadvertently become seduced into putting riches above well-being. It is a form of idolatry that sneaks up on you and grabs a hold before you realize what you've become.

That is why Christ was so adamant about the difficulty rich people have in securing a place in heaven. We naturally want the best for our families, and ourselves - and I'm not saying that's a bad thing. It's just the drive we have for security so often misses the fact that God alone is ultimate. Only God can secure us, ultimately, against the need to be secured.

There are a thousand reasons to trust God, and still we rely on our own efforts to attain that which is freely given. We can't help ourselves really. It's kind of in our DNA.

Let's approach this from a different angle. Perhaps we should be examining the kind of riches that are pleasing to God. He did after all instill within us a desire to prosper, and it is His greatest pleasure that we live life abundantly.

However, when we take something out of its rightful place and raise it to the status of ultimate, we break the harmony of life. We displace the natural order of things. We take a perfectly innocent treasure – elevate it above all else – and there we are. Breaking the very first commandment.

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To be poor can mean that you have learned what it is you can live without. It doesn't have to be hardship and misery. It can be as simple as the appreciation for a warm coat in the winter – stylish or not. It can be argued that to be poor is to be rich in God.

Gratitude is essential to the spiritual experience, both expressing and extending. Your first best move when you find yourself on the receiving end of a windfall should always be gratitude. And your first action should be finding where you could share that bonus to serve the greater good. That is how you stay ahead of the trappings of wealth.

When I was first discharged from the Navy, I spent the first couple of years in a sort of intentional retirement. I'd accumulated a pretty vast array of stereo equipment, so when I did run a little low on funds, I simply sold a piece of equipment.

I also used that equipment to produce a couple of albums. How God's providence and our actions interact is one of life's mysteries of faith. Eventually I decided to find a real job and start my normal life. I used to joke that the minute I started making more than a couple hundred dollars a month, I stopped having fun. And it really wasn't a joke.

More recently as a slew of bills and taxes and unforeseen expenses bore down on me, I bemoaned my situation and thought to myself that I needed to make more money somehow. Almost within the same breath, I recovered my senses and realized that I had accumulated too much. I didn't need more – I needed less.

The standards are different now than they were when I was young, but the attitude remains – from time to time I need to be prodded back to enjoying life. And that is not something you can buy.

If you were to write out all the things in this life that matter most to you, I submit there would not be a single item on that list that you could attach a dollar amount to.

The Psalmist reminds us that God's favor is not the result of repentance, or a reward for obedience. It is the permanent gift that makes judgment bearable, repentance likely, and obedience possible. It doesn't seem to fit naturally, but the fact of the matter is that God does indeed give grace freely. We don't earn it. It is not received. It is given.

Remarkably – God lovingly accommodates to our capacity. We are such puny beings that he has to. God's wrath is the fire of His love, ordered toward restoration, not destruction.

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Our actions should flow from our gratitude for God's gift in Jesus Christ. With that at the forefront of our movements, we put ourselves in right relationship with God. And from that vantage point, all things flow in His direction. In this way we not only circumvent a lot of the pitfalls that obstruct our worldview; we insulate ourselves from the seduction of wealth.

New life as a Christian is not merely a matter of putting away vices and picking up virtues. You have to walk the walk, and to be poor is one of those journeys. That is where we learn the gratitude flow. Amen.