

Wealth, Worth, & Worship
16th Sunday after Pentecost
September 29, 2019
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

[Luke 16: 19-31 \(Passion Translation\)](#)
[I Timothy 6:6-19 \(CEB\)](#)

As I was listening to the TED radio hour on NPR this week, I was struck by a very simple statement that one of the speakers made. He said, “I think we have this huge problem where we think that what our salary is, is what we're worth to the world.”¹ This idea – and the related one, that what you have is what you're worth – are really quite old ideas that never seem to go away. Before we dive into this, I just want to make something very clear: You are a beloved child of God, and you are worthy of love. No matter your income, no matter your savings, no matter your real estate, or lack there of – you are worthy of love, of dignity, and of living your best life.

We've talked about the idea that today, people try to “win the game of life” by accumulating wealth. The old ideas of dividing society by class based on their bloodlines has given way to dividing society by class based on their net worth – so, when we hear talks of “middle class” and “upper class,” we tend to think of them as separated by the amount of money available to them, rather than who their ancestors were. Except, of course, that wealthy families tend to stay wealthy, passing on privileges and power and finagling the financial system for their own benefit. This, too, is nothing new – but its antiquity does not, and should not lend it merit.

After all, in the Roman Republic, the classes of society were clearly marked by net worth and bloodline. The Patricians, originally, were those who had descended from Romulus, the mythical founder of Rome. Plebeians were land-

¹ David Burkus, Associate Professor of Business at Oral Roberts University. From the episode “Transparency,” part 1: “David Burkus: Would Work Improve If You Knew What Your Colleagues Get Paid?” on [TED Radio Hour](#) from National Public Radio (December 1, 2017)

owning citizens who were not descended from Romulus, and Proles were the landless citizens. Within each class were subclasses, too – and those were based on net worth of the family. For instance, the patricians (noble, upper class) were divided into *equites* (knights) and *senatores* (senators) – with *equites* needing to prove that their family had accumulated wealth greater than a hundred thousand times the daily wage of the lowest class, while *senatores* needed to prove two-and-a-half times as much – though *senatores* were also traditionally forbidden from dealing in commerce or taxation, instead expected to live off the wealth of the land they owned. In order to participate in politics, you had to be at least wealthy enough to be an *equites*, though you couldn't stand for the highest positions unless you were a *senatore*.

This was the way that the Apostle Paul's society worked – as both a Roman citizen and a Jew, he could understand both cultures as an insider-outsider. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul writes a very memorable statement about money: “The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.”² He backs this up with the idea that “people who are trying to get rich fall into temptation – they are trapped by many stupid and harmful passions that plunge people into ruin and destruction... some have found themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal”³ It's clear that social advancement and wealth were just not important to Paul – and he advised others to “run away from all these things. Instead, pursue righteousness, holy living, faithfulness, love, endurance, and gentleness.... Tell people who are rich at this time not to become egotistical and not to place their hope on their finances, which are uncertain. Instead, they need to hope in God, who richly provides everything for our enjoyment. Tell them to do good, to be rich in the good things they do, to be generous, and to share with others.”⁴

Note, then, that having money is not evil in its own right – it's the pursuit of wealth that provides the greatest challenge. Paul encourages the wealthy and poor

² I Tim 6:10a

³ I Tim 6:9, 10b

⁴ I Tim 6:11b, 17-18

alike to be generous, sharing with each other. To be happy with what you have, and to use the good gifts that God has given you to likewise do good in the world. This is enduring advice, and is applicable to everyone. Your net worth, in Paul's mind, is about the good you have brought into your network of friends, family, and even strangers, rather than the accumulation of wealth.

And so, when we look at Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, we can see these same themes at work. Jesus doesn't name the rich man – he's just surrounded by opulence, even wearing the incredibly expensive purple cloth, which tells us that he clothes himself like a patrician. In contrast, we have lowly Lazarus, whose name is the Greek version of the Hebrew name *Eliazar*, meaning "God is my help." Instead of opulence and wealth, Lazarus experiences the dumps of poverty and societal worthlessness. He is "left at the gate" of Old Richie Rich, who ignores him throughout life. Only when the story moves to the afterlife do we learn that Wealthy McWealthypants knows Lazarus' name – and even then, he still thinks that Lazarus is only worthy enough to be a servant – and won't even ask him for help directly, instead talking over him to "Father Abraham." No wonder Abraham tells him that a "chasm that cannot be bridged" is between them!

Still, Mr. Moneybags is a stock character, and not supposed to be emulated. Jesus parable is supposed to serve as a warning, to act with humility and humanity, helping those in need especially when there is no earthly way to be paid back. The parallel between the Rich Man begging for mercy, compassion from the very person he chose not to have mercy on or compassion for highlights the problem of inaction from a position of power or wealth. Jesus – and Paul, later – are urging us to give what we can, to care for one another no matter the circumstances. Unlike the modern myth, we are not meant to be self-made people. We need each other, and we need to help each other wherever possible. In that way, we worship God through our actions.

Worship, you see, is a fascinating word in English. Unlike in Greek or Latin, where the root of the word used for worship means "to fall down before something" in reverence, our English word "Worship" means "to give worth, to proclaim

worthy.” When we worship God, we proclaim God’s worthiness – and honor the worthiness of God in each other. In a service of worship, we intentionally praise God and lift up God’s worth. When we live according to God’s path for us – through following the commandments and Christ, through Spirit-driven generosity and love – we are showing God’s worth in our lives, or worshipping God in action.

So, go! Practice your worship skills on Sunday, and spend the rest of the week in active worship of God by, as Paul reminds us, doing good, generous, sharing things. Fight against the corrupting influence of the love of money by refusing to give in to judging others by their wealth – and instead see their infinite worth as beloved children of God, the same God who loves you, and me, and the whole world. You and they are equally made in the image of the Worthy One. You are both Lazarus and the Rich Man, for God is your help, and you can likewise help others. May you be blessed to be a blessing. Amen.