

“TALKING ABOUT MONEY”

Matthew 19:16-26; Luke 16:19-31

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Jesus talked about money. Given that he was a Jew, and his country was occupied by the Romans, one wonders why. There couldn't have been many with wealth among his people. But there would have been a few of course. The more robust the economy, the more tax revenue for Rome. And for a variety of reasons, Rome would have seen to it that the wealth was concentrated in just a few.

The economy would have had the appearance of rewarding those who worked hard, but the system would have been weighted to move wealth into the hands of a privileged few. Most of the common people would not have been so naïve as to believe that great wealth was attainable by them. But there were ways if one were willing to play the Roman's game, willing to deal with their own people in an unscrupulous manner. It would be very difficult to pursue wealth while following the commandment to love one's neighbor. And so Jesus warns his followers about the dangers of wealth.

One of the observations that Jesus makes about wealth is that it blinds those who have it to the needs of others around them. The rich man never notices Lazarus until the tables are turned when Lazarus is enjoying life with Abraham and the rich man is suffering. But even in Hades, the rich man thinks of Lazarus as no better than a servant.

This is part of the chasm that has grown between them, a chasm that doesn't just separate them in an afterlife, but keeps him from acknowledging Lazarus' need while feasting at his own table. There is an implied debt to Lazarus as though his poverty resulted from the rich man's wealth.

We see this also in Matthew's story where Jesus tells that rich man to sell all he has and give it to the poor. Jesus isn't endorsing charity here. He's telling the man to pay off his debts. And the rich man can't do it. There is a chasm here as well between his wealth and his obligations to those in need. And the chasm can't be crossed by charity. He will have to give it all away if he hopes to enter eternal life.

Matthew adds something to Mark's and Luke's version of this story. To the list of commandments that the man must follow, Jesus adds, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He seems to be saying, "You can't pursue wealth and claim to love your neighbor at the same time."

These rich men are not bad guys. The one does think about his brothers and wants to spare them his torment. The other at least thinks of himself as following the commandments. But both are blind to the impact that their pursuit of wealth has had on others.

What neither seems to understand is that money is not a private good, but something that operates within a system. They fail to see themselves as part of a community with obligations to the other members of the community. The one is too busy feasting (enjoying his wealth) to notice Lazarus at his gates. The other is too attached to his wealth to part with it, even for the sake of “inheriting eternal life.”

Jesus must have found it uncomfortable to talk about money this way. I can't imagine telling anyone to give it all away. But I understand how difficult it can be to talk about money from the pulpit. One reason it's so challenging is because we think of money as a personal good without recognizing that it functions a certain way in our economic system. It's possible to be responsible about money in one's personal life while at the same time causing harm in the world. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda writes in her book, *Resisting Structural Evil*,

“This land is replete with profoundly caring human beings, motivated by not only self-interest but also by infinite wellsprings of compassion and by desire for justice and goodness. And yet everyday life, a “good life” in the United States, entails consumption, production, and acquisition patterns that threaten Earth's capacity to sustain life as we know it, and exploit vast numbers of people worldwide, some even to death” (p.3).

She phrases this dilemma quite starkly when she asks: “If am professing love for neighbor by feeding the poor and sheltering the homeless, and yet ignoring the systemic factors that have made them hungry and homeless, am I loving my neighbor” (p.57).

Money is not just a personal good with which we can alleviate some of the world's suffering, but it makes the rules and defines the structures of the world in which we live. Those structures are currently wreaking havoc on the earth and in individual lives around the world.

Many, though not all, corporations operate on the principle of maximizing profit without regard to other harms they might be creating. In the early years of this century Coca Cola built three bottling plants in India which provided good paying jobs. But they pumped nearly all the potable water from the ground which destroyed local agriculture before protests were able to close the plants. The Gulf oil spill resulted from a failure to spend the money to build the necessary environmental protections.

I'm not suggesting that any of us are “responsible” for these things, but we participate in a system that allows them to happen. Some people work two jobs and still struggle to make ends meet. Either the company is unwilling to pay a living wage or can't afford to. If they can't afford to, it's because the market won't bear a higher price for their product. You can't get a higher price because people are looking to purchase items at the lowest possible cost. We love bargains! But that means that much of what we own was produced in factories that didn't pay a fair wage, employed children, and offered unsafe working conditions.

What does this have to do with our two rich friends? Well, they were likely good guys, like us, whose wealth depended on the sacrifices of others. They are in some ways victims of that system too. The one, from his blindness, denied the companionship of Lazarus (also probably a good man); the other, from his attachment to wealth, trapped in a system that divided the world into “the culpable and the vulnerable” (Lobeda).

We, too, can either wallow in guilt, or live in a moral oblivion that doesn’t even see others who are also beloved by God. Or we can do the impossible! When Jesus says that all things are possible with God, we are eager to lift it out of context. We use it to encourage ourselves that if we work hard enough, God will bless us. We use it when we pray for healing, when we find ourselves in awkward situations. But we don’t use it when we’re talking about how hard it is for a rich man to enter heaven.

I was sitting in my backyard last week, just relaxing. I noticed the various shades of green in the mature trees that border my property, the garden that is looking just beautiful this year. And even though the house is much more than we need, and the yard bigger than I can sometimes take care of; I was realizing how difficult it would be to leave it. There are many things I’ve come to enjoy in my life that I’d be unwilling to give up. The line between an appreciation of what I have and an unholy attachment isn’t altogether clear.

And I’m not rich! But I am caught up in a culture that values success and that success is often measured by the quantity of one’s possessions and financial resources. The competition that surfaces around these values creates winners and losers, not neighbors.

From a global perspective, I am one of the winners. When I look at the losers, I don’t even have a good enough connection to know how they came to be losers. I can feed a hungry person, but I don’t really know how he came to be hungry. I feel the rich man’s sorrow because I don’t know how to give away my wealth either. This is where a lot of good people end up, wanting to love their neighbors, but not knowing how in this system of a world that places a chasm between us.

But Jesus says that it’s possible! Moe-Lobeda says it’s possible too. The system we have, she says, came about by the decisions and actions of people in a particular place and time. We made it. We can change it. People are already realizing the need to change it. The current economic system is not sustainable. We are using up natural resources at a rate faster than the earth can regenerate them. The devastating effects of climate change are the direct result of the winner and loser economic system currently operating.

But still, it’s possible to change all that, to redistribute wealth more equitably, to create more opportunity for those in the cycle of poverty, to use money for the common good, and to genuinely love our neighbors. It’s possible to be less attached to what we have and more committed to the good we do. Lobeda shares many examples of people doing this and strategies for making change in her book, but I’m going to suggest two things to start with.

Let go of denial. People don't get what they deserve. Very few of the wealthy worked hard for it and very few of the poor are in fact lazy. The economy does not distribute wealth equitably. There are injustices in the way the system works that can't be addressed as long as we deny them.

Denial is the very thing that keeps us from seeing our neighbors as they really are. It's why the rich man took no notice of Lazarus and why the other rich man could not see his debt to the poor. It's why we sometimes make things up about the poor, accuse them of being lazy, of working the system. It's why we say things like; "No one wants to work anymore." If we are going to really love our neighbors, then we really need to know them. And we really need to know them because they, too, are loved by God.

Secondly, think more about money, not less. Lose the attachment to it, but know where that shirt you just bought for a bargain came from. Who made it? What were they paid? What were their working conditions? How does the store you bought it in treat their employees? What about the companies you buy other products from? Do they pay a living wage? Where is your money invested? What sort of environmental record do they have?

You don't have to become an expert overnight, but once a week or once a month, do a little research. We can't stop being consumers, but we can become more informed consumers. We can choose not to support products and companies that are doing harm to people or the environment. By itself, this won't change the world. But without it, the world won't change either.

Jesus warned us against the dangers of money. It can become all consuming. It can make us forget about others. It can hide the suffering of the world around us. But it doesn't have to be like that. It can also connect us more closely with our neighbors. It can supply the needs of others. The rich man might have invited Lazarus into the feast or given him a job, or sent him out a plate at least. The other rich man might have sold his possessions and given the money to the poor. It's possible. And we too, might change the world. It's possible. Amen.

Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia. *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological Economic Vocation*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2013.