

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
October 11, 2009  
“THE PURSUIT OF WEALTH”  
Mark 10:17-30  
8:45 A.M. SERVICE**

Nearly everyone in the entire world believes that money would solve all their problems. We think that life would be simpler and relationships would be stronger if we had all the money we needed. But there is no objective evidence to support this. The facts show little correlation between great wealth and true happiness.

This past summer Rev. Ike died. Rev. Ike preached about the gospel of wealth. And he was totally unapologetic for his views. One thing for sure, his “**walk**” matched his “**talk**,” and in the days of racial segregation he was undoubtedly the wealthiest African-American preacher in America. He knew about the evils of poverty, its power to humiliate and dehumanize, its deadly assault on health and hope and the human spirit. Given the ravages of poverty, how could wealth not be a virtue? How could God want anything for us more than prosperity? Over the radio airwaves, Rev. Ike told his listeners to pray for money and Cadillacs and big houses. His message struck a responsive chord in many of America’s poor, but it does not square with the teachings of Jesus.

Many of us who would never endorse a materialistic gospel are deeply committed to a manner of life that is nowhere near the poverty line. As Christians, we may not quite know how to feel about our lavish lifestyles. But if it doesn’t seem to bother others, so why should it bother us? It is impossible, however, to edit out of Jesus’ teachings his consistent condemnation of the rich. The Jewish people of Jesus’ day believed wealth was a sign of God’s favor. Like us, they found his attitude about wealth to be a serious stumbling block.

One man approached Jesus, knelt before him, and asked how he might have eternal life. Jesus referred him to the commandments, and the man said he had been observant all his life. Jesus felt compassion for the man, but knew his problem was his considerable wealth. ***“Go, sell what you have and give it to the poor,”*** said Jesus, ***“then come and follow me.”*** The man could not do it, and went sadly away. Jesus said to his disciples, ***“How hard it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!”*** They were shocked to hear this. ***“Then, who can be saved?”*** they asked. Jesus said, ***“For human beings it is impossible, but . . . all things are possible for God.”***

Jesus offered the graphic image of a camel trying to pass through a needle’s eye. Camels were the largest animals ever seen by most people of that world, and a needle’s eye was easily the smallest opening they had seen. Of course it is impossible for a camel to pass through a needle’s eye, but Jesus was talking about a gate in the walls of Jerusalem called the “Needle’s Eye”. It must have been a sight watching a camel struggle his way through the “Needle’s Eye”. It is not impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom, but it is very, very difficult! And Jesus made the point that for God ***“all things are possible.”***

As children, some of us tried to imagine a God for whom all things are possible. Could God give us super-powers, like Superman? Can God throw a ball from here to the moon? Some of us do adult versions of the same thing. Many people pray, for example, when they buy a lottery ticket. When Jesus said all things are possible for God, he was not saying God will do everything that is possible, or everything we request! He was speaking of the problems people have entering the kingdom of God, and still had ***“the rich, young ruler”*** on his mind. What this man was not able to do, that is, sell what he had and give it to the poor, God could have helped him do. Jesus was not speaking of magical powers, but of the power of transformation.

Saul, conducting a manhunt for Christians, discovered on the road to Damascus the transforming power of God. The conversion of Saul to Paul represented one of the most radical changes in history. The persecutor of Christians became Christ’s Apostle to the Gentile world. After his conversion Paul returned to Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples, but he had been so ruthless against them that they were afraid of him! God accomplished the impossible with Saul of Tarsus, transforming him in a way

Saul could never have changed himself. From Saul to Paul is a new creation.

The truest miracle is not changing stones to bread, or water to wine, or pebbles to diamonds. The greatest miracle is the re-creation of a human life by the power of love. But what are the signs that a person has been transformed by the love of God? Appearance? Sometimes you can see it in the face, especially in the eyes. Attitude? Actions? Yes, of course. But these are relatively superficial changes, and might disappear tomorrow. When you are genuinely transformed, your whole world is transformed.

Consider another of the great conversion stories from Christian history. A government worker amassed a private fortune for himself by defrauding his clients. Because of his shady reputation he had very few friends. One day Jesus invited himself to the man's home, and nothing was ever the same again. How do we know that the change in Zacchaeus was real? There is no evidence that his appearance changed. Apparently he did not suddenly become tall! As soon as Jesus left town Zacchaeus may have resorted to his old habits. How do we know he was transformed? Because he was released from his bondage to wealth. He said to Jesus, ***“Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and anyone I have defrauded I will repay four times over.”*** Jesus said, ***“Today salvation has come to this house.”*** When you are transformed, your world is transformed, especially the part you value most.

Socrates said the people who are most happy are those who need nothing. He once visited the Exchange in Athens where the traders asked him, ***“What will you buy? What do you lack?”*** Socrates surveyed all the things that were being bought and sold, then said, ***“Who would have thought there were so many things in the world which I do not want?”*** Bondage to material wealth can be the worst form of poverty. Freedom from this terrible bondage is well nigh impossible. But with God all things are possible.

Throughout human history the freest and most contented people have been those who had no need of wealth or possessions. Mae West is supposed to have said, ***“Too much of a good thing is wonderful.”*** But too much of some things are deadly! When our love and our pursuit of money get out of hand, everything is under threat - - our culture, our community,

our churches, our families, and our very lives. Jesus knew that only God can liberate some people from their love of money.

Jesus did not teach that wealth in and of itself is evil. He warned that wealth tends to be a barrier to the kingdom of God. Money and possessions can easily become the central focus of life, relegating even God to a lesser concern.

If you feel you have become overwhelmed with the burdens of life. Or if you feel that your life has been diminished by painful or threatening situations, you are in the right place this morning. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.