

The "M" Word

Luke 12:13-21

"I am frustrated with the church because all they ever talk about or want is money." Have you ever heard someone make that complaint? I know I have. Maybe either verbally or deep down inside perhaps you have even thought it or spoke it yourself.

As a pastor I am not immune myself from receiving letters asking for donations, for financial support and other commitments. "We have an exciting, needed ministry and we could do so much more only if you would give us \$25 to \$100!" I know you receive the same; and it can get tiresome for all of us. There are times when I am going through the church mail and there are so many requests and campaigns and brochures that at times I feel like the local church has become somewhat of a clearing house for all the other ministries going on out there.

To be sure there are some scams out there; but there are also a lot of really good ministries and organizations that are making a difference in the world. It can be hard to draw the line, can't it. We don't want to be so calloused that we don't give or share but there is only so much any of us can do as well.

Does today's gospel help us out? Someone in the crowd said to him, **"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."** Jesus replied, **"Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?"** Then he said to them, **"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."** (verses 13-15).

Jesus goes on of course to tell the parable of the man who had so much that he had to tear down his existing barns to build larger ones to house and contain all of his crops. With so much the man no longer had to worry about what he would eat or who he would have to depend on. He summed up his situation: **"And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" (verse 19).** God's response is clear and dramatic: **"You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.""** (verses 20-21).

The point is clear: do not be stingy, support the ministry of the gospel, give money and lots of it because either wise God will be unhappy with you. It's about the money! It is time to scrape the "mold off the wallet" as the old saying goes and be generous, especially towards God. After all

hasn't God given you everything you have? And everyone dies, what are you going to do with your possessions anyway?

While this might be a simple understanding for some of this text it really misses the heart and essence of the matter that Jesus is speaking about. This text is about the "M" word but that word is not 'money.'

What is Jesus really criticizing in this foolish rich man? Jesus was not condemning him for his wealth. Lots of faithful people have been wealthy. Just think of the great people of the Old Testament. Abraham, David, Solomon, even Job, these were all very wealthy people and they were people of God. God Himself pictures heaven as a place of great wealth and abundance.

Instead of condemning the man for his wealth God is really condemning the man for his self centered heart. What after all was the joy of the man? He was happy that with his barns full he would not have to depend on anyone, perhaps not even God. What was he planning on doing with his life? **"I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.'" (verse 19).** This man's life would be focused only on himself at the expense of others.

It is true that God doesn't need our money, our possessions or anything else from us because God is not served by human hands. (See Acts 17). God doesn't need our works or possessions but other people certainly do. Everyone is here to serve others in the place and in the capacity that God has placed them. The "M" word that Jesus is really talking about in our Gospel is not the word money but rather the word "ministry." The Greek word translated 'ministry' can as easily be translated as 'service.' When people fail to serve others they are really not fulfilling the life that God called and equipped them to live.

A wealthy person can use their wealth in a way that is tremendously faithful and godly. Their wealth does not make them unholy but rather even empowers them to live a life of great service. Another person can be in poverty and in bitterness of heart not help or serve anyone else. This person is not holy or godly because they are impoverished.

At the heart of Jesus' teaching here is that to truly be holy and godly is to live a life of service towards others. This should not come as any kind of surprise. After all Jesus Himself said: **"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."** (Mark 10:45). Jesus' great command to His followers was to love one another; one loves best by serving others.

The man in today's parable was specifically disconnecting himself from others and looking only to his own immediate, physical welfare. In the end what did it get him? **"You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you prepared for**

yourself?” (verse 20). What good is a lot of earthly resources if these things have not gone to serve someone else? The answer is they are wasted and of no value.

The value of today's gospel is not to get us to ultimately look at our wallets or at our checkbook registries but rather to get us to look into our hearts. The simple truth is, is that whenever and wherever the ministry of the church is clear and understood money never seems to be either a problem or an issue. This is true not only for large and wealthy congregations but of small congregations without great resources too.

We do well to remember that when the founders of our synod came over from Europe to this nation they were not the richest, most educated, most connected well to do people of Europe who decided to leave for America. No, in many instances these people were of very limited means, but they had one thing: a clear mission of ministry to be carried out in faith in Jesus. Think about what they did: they founded churches, they built elementary and secondary schools; they built publishing houses and established local and eventually world-wide mission operations. Why? Because they knew they could and that it would have a tremendous impact not only in their own lifetimes but for generations to come. And so it did; and all of us are blessed because of that.

I believe Jesus' words can help us remain faithful and productive as His followers in the area of ministry. Jesus' words help us confront two struggles facing the church today.

The first struggle is the right use of resources. I believe there are many people who become fatigued from giving financially and otherwise simply because they cannot see a real 'ministry' or 'service' behind it. You know what, in many instances they are right!

It has been my own experience to see churches who have had tremendous building projects requiring large sums of money, time and resources and be largely disconnected with any real service or ministry. I have seen congregations unwilling to do even minimal local evangelism or outreach yet get excited about a brand new worship facility for themselves. Yes, there are even churches that are rapidly dwindling away in membership but who want to go forward with large building projects. A valid question is: where are their hearts and intents with God in all of this? In some instances they are not at all different than the rich fool who built up resourced for his own comfort without helping anyone else. The point is that churches like any other organization need to be held accountable. Just because a project is being suggested by a church doesn't mean that it is a valid project.

Jesus' words though speak to the other spectrum of the church's struggle today: people not giving money because they cannot see the value behind the request. Yes, there are many organizations out there looking for

donations, some of them are not good. We do well to realize that some of them do tremendous good and are doing work that we ourselves otherwise could not do.

As God's people whenever we see a request for money we should really be translating that into a request for ministry to be done. We should look at the type of ministry and evaluate it on its own merits. Yes, many requests will not appeal to you but some will. This is where God has placed a good burden on your heart. In short not every request for money is bad—freely we have received and freely we can give back. Oftentimes the best requests are not strictly for money but are requests for prayers and even direct involvement in the ministry.

Jesus says something interesting in our last verse of today's Gospel. Jesus refers to the one who is not rich toward God. What is so beautiful about this verse is that it implicitly reminds us that everyone who is in Christ is rich. Everyone in Christ has eternal life; everyone who is in Christ has the truth of the Gospel which alone can save; everyone who is in Christ has the guarantee that God will not let them go and will work all things together for the best solution. And yes, everyone who is in Christ has God's promise that they can ask for anything and God will grant that request. In short, all of us are rich people. In our wealth and in God's power we can be rich towards God by serving others not because we are commanded to but because we can. Amen.