

I am Grateful to be Liberated
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I mentioned last week that, of the four gospel writers, Luke is the one most concerned about the poverty, justice, and the corrupting forces of power and money.

In Luke's gospel that we find Jesus' commentary on tithing such as:

Luke 11:42

⁴² “But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others.

Luke 18:9-14

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Luke 21:1-4

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; ² he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³ He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; ⁴ for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

A Layperson's Approach To Stewardship: My friend Rob Asghar is a freelance writer and author who is published occasionally in the Huffington Post. He shared this with me and other pastor friend.

Hey, if you're at all interested in a layperson's "alternative approach" to stewardship, this is something that BRICK leadership asked me to write.

"For whoever wants to save his life
will lose it, but whoever loses his life
for me will find it. What good will it be
for a man if he gains the whole world,
yet forfeits his soul?"

-- Matthew 16:25-26

Alt...

Luke 9:24-25

*24 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.
25 What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?*

My friend Rob wrote:

A friend recently pointed out that, whenever I become convinced that a particular situation needs to turn out a certain way, I become a different person. I become compulsive, rigid, clutching, humorless. All this, of course, is driven by fear. Will I be a success today? Will I get the things that I think I need? If I do get them, can I hold on to them or will I lose them?

In light of that, I've been pondering Christ's words above, which firmly caution us not to clutch tightly the fragile pieces of our lives, but to

release them, take His hand instead, and walk happily alongside Him. All of the counsel we receive from the world, and unfortunately, even the bulk of the advice we give to one another in our daily lives, goes directly against Christ's principle. Too rarely do we find the courage to call one another to exercise the discipline of losing one's life -- "wasting" one's life, in the eyes of the world -- for Christ's greater purposes.

I can think of three ways in which we can use this year to "waste" our lives and grow closer to God in the process:

1) Instead of saving time, let's waste time. On a frantic morning, as we're racing out the door, let's stop. Let's go sit on the couch. Let's consider wasting a few moments thinking about who God is and who He'd have us be that day. Let's call on His power. And let's believe that His power and purpose will prevail that day. Wouldn't that five-minute "waste of time" would be infinitely more transforming than the moments we might otherwise "save"?

2) Instead of saving money, let's waste money. Let's think about giving just enough to our church and to other Christian organizations that we'll seem like jugheads in the view of "sensible" people (even many sensible Christians). Could we handle the puzzled expressions when they discover that such giving prevents us from having enough left to enjoy some of the luxuries that seem to be absolute essentials to them?

3) Instead of saving our pride, let's waste our pride. Saving our pride keeps us from giving others too much praise or encouragement, lest they turn out not to feel the same way toward us. It keeps us from speaking honestly lest we be laughed at or belittled. Saved pride, self-protective

pride, also keeps us from entering into the heart of Christ in order to become more loving and more forgiving persons who can accept others as they are. Let's remind each other every single week that the taste of selfless and redemptive love is infinitely richer and more filling than all the luxuries to which we become attached.

It's stewardship season, so here's another thought about money. I used to pledge less than two percent of my income to the church, and felt shamed when others tried to badger me into giving a tithe. I did finally decide to tithe for God's sake, not their sakes, and committed myself to eating only grass if that was necessary. He hasn't yet taken me up on the offer to mow the lawn the hard way, but I suppose he reserves that right. I've enjoyed tithing, and now I've actually crept forward to "wasting" twelve to fourteen percent of my gross income on the church and other Christian causes, much to the bewilderment of some who care about me. And I intend to someday double that percentage. This doesn't mean I'm a better person than I used to be -- it just means that I'm happier than I used to be as I grow more aware of who God is.

Psychologists and theologians alike generally agree that the fear of "losing life" is the womb of all other fears. The response of fallen and fragile human beings is to try to "save" our lives by hoarding money, situations and relationships in a feeble effort to construct a make-believe immortality. Yet when we toss our possessions out the window for His sake, many come back to us three-fold, because we can now enjoy them without fear or compulsion; and the rest we find we never needed. It is at this point, as Jesus observes, that we truly "find life" -- the manner of real and eternal life -- that He means for us to drink up here and now.

In the sermons this month, I have been suggesting that when gratitude is welling up in us, what overflows out of us is generosity. Generosity is a spiritual discipline that is nearly impossible to practice unless we are anchored in gratitude. But when gratitude defines our lives, we are OPEN to whatever God wants for us.

The gospel writer so concerned about power and money is the same one – indeed the only one – who gives us the nativity stories we enjoy every Christmas. Those stories begin with Mary being so open-hearted that when the Angel came to her with the offer to give birth to the Messiah she could say, “May it be to me as you have said.” And after consenting to this all-encompassing mission, she sang first of gratitude, born of God’s great generosity, which can only have one outcome: justice.

46 And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers.”

(Lk 1:46–55).

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