

Proverbs 23:4-5, James 1:9-11

“Some people have it all”

For those of you who have been attending here over the past few years you know that every year I preach one sermon on a specific topic that is a topic which makes all of us feel a bit uncomfortable. For me it makes me feel very uncomfortable. What is that topic? Who knows? Play montage of music about money. That’s right, money, our financial stewardship, how do our finances fit into our devotion to Jesus? Well, today is that Sunday. Why today? Because in 2013 we didn’t hear a single sermon on financial stewardship, and wouldn’t you know financially we had an extraordinary year. But our Scripture today requires that we speak about the rich and the poor, and so we will take the opportunity to speak about our financial stewardship.

It’s an interesting time to preach about finances, this time during lent. We’ve seen the redemptive potential in suffering, we saw last week the role of doubt as being inevitable but not embraceable, this week the role of finances in our life. An interesting time as well as tax season is right around the corner where some of us will receive funds back, others of us will be paying well over 10% to the government. These past two months the economy has been in a bit of a slump.

When we think over our financial woes we can’t help but think of some people who have it all. Professional athletes, business people, the list of people that we think have it all which really means they have all the money. And, of course, we equate money with being able to do and to have anything we could ever want. James, and actually not only today but throughout his book, never has a kind word for what he calls the rich.

30% of all of Jesus’ teachings dealt with financial matters, so basically we should be hearing about this topic 17 times a year, and not just once. And so again James, the brother of Jesus, addresses constantly this topic and provides a model for Christian living where there is no distinction between the haves and the have nots. We are going to end today’s sermon by once being reminded of the importance of the tithe which should put into perspective the fact that God is in control of all things.

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The video we just watched depicts a struggle between the cross and money and it is a fair representation of many of our lives. All of our lives it can be a real struggle if we let it become one. One way that we are able to make sense of things so that it does not become a struggle is to

understand that God has complete control over all things in our life, including, or should I say especially our finances. This is where we have to gain an understanding as to the Lordship of Jesus over all things in our life.

And I have shared with you in the past very direct ways in which God has provided to the penny in order to meet needs. A friend of mine who needed \$400 to register for college and received it from an angel the day she was leaving, all bathed in prayer. Or Stacy and I needing \$37 and change to get a car seat for Rachel when she was born and we didn't have it but God had a Sunday School class in New Jersey send their offering to us as a token of appreciation so that it would arrive the day we needed it, without us or them knowing.

At the retreat in January we created an ad-hoc committee to look into the feasibility of hiring a full time youth and young adult director. We didn't know God's timing when an opportunity to apply for a tax break existed for the church because we pay medical insurance and as a result the IRS gifted us \$22,000. That's a miracle enough, but the timing of it as it overlapped with our search for a youth director was more than uncanny, it was nothing short of planned. What I would call a miracle.

In Russia we were \$35,000 short of what we thought we needed to open up our second Soup Kitchen which was part of the vision of the leadership that came out of a very similar process as what we went through in January. But the leadership saw it as something God was calling the church to do and was not willing to let the finances get in the way so they stepped out in faith, \$35,000 short and the next day God gave us the German embassy who decided to partner for us at the tune of guess how much? That's right, \$35,000. We took that as a confirmation that we were doing the right thing. So we can see the presence of finances as a sign of God's approval. That is pretty common isn't it?

But then you have the prosperity Gospel which agrees that money is a sign of God's blessing and poverty, is, well, it's not. Joel Osteen and his ministry who states something along the lines of if you want to live like a heathen then become a Christian.

Our Old Testament Scripture tells us very pointedly that we ought not to wear ourselves out to get rich. We are told that wealth of any kind is like the flowers of the field where it grows and blooms, it is appealing and we think we need it and we go after it but then it is gone. A nephew asked his father how much his rich uncle who had died had left behind, and the father replied all of it. There is a lesson that we ought not to strive after riches because they are

temporary. There is one thing that all have in common, rich and poor, and that is the frailty of life and how that reminds us of where our emphasis ought to be.

It is fairly well understood that Jesus had a preference for the poor. Like James, his brother, rarely, if ever, does he have nice things to say in regards to the rich. There are a variety of Scriptures that clearly favor the poor over the rich, as this Scripture does. Look at Luke 6:20 and then follow it with 24: “Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of heaven.” Then at 24: but woe to you who are rich. Then we find in Matthew 6:24 and the verses preceding Jesus tells us not to be anxious about our provisions, don’t worry about what we have financially. In fact, he states, you cannot serve God and wealth. You can’t make them both your priority as the video portrays. If you try, and you may not even know that you are trying, but if you try, God will be left behind.

Then in I Timothy 6:10 we find the well known: “for the love of money is the root of all evil. And in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. Some people think they have it all, but God says it is harder for a rich man to inherit the kingdom of God than it is for a camel to enter through the eye of a needle.

Throughout Scripture what is portrayed is a love of money which condemns. The rich are assumed as those who love money. When we served in Russia it was by far the wealthiest group of people that I have ever been around. We had a billionaire who was clerk of session, another who drove a Mazerati to church, and then the other who every month would keep us liquid by exchanging \$50,000 in cash for us from the dollars that we had. I would take the subway home with this \$50,000 in my computer bag to pay salaries and our contracted workers. I’m glad to be alive.

But what was beautiful was living out in that community James verses 9 and 10 where the poor, the African refugee who was sleeping in the internet café was raised up in a role of responsibility at our soup kitchen and the rich were constantly brought low as they were humbled by the realization of the responsibility they had to use their resources for the kingdom. The key to these verses is that the lowly boast in being exalted and the rich boast in being humbled.

These verses which speak of the transient nature of material things speak to the truth that riches and financial security provide a false sense of security. Why do we base our well being on our financial security? As Americans we do that more than most. 2/3 of the world in which we live face dire poverty day in and day out. Not the hunger we experience from fasting in lent, or

even the hunger many of our kids face from missing meals, but rather 2/3 of the world faces starvation. So no one in this room should feel secure and safe from the words of James today when he castigates the rich. We are the rich, we are the first in the world.

An example of that is the western thought that financial sanctions will make any difference in what is happening in the Crimea between the Ukraine and Russia. A member of the church in Russia who is the CEO of Barclays Capital in Russia asks for prayers for him because he is convinced that Russia will seize all of their assets. The rich will disappear like the flower of the field. We tend to concentrate our energies upon the accumulation of things which we cannot ultimately retain. Financial security is an oxymoron.

So where do we find our security and what ought to be our priorities, where is our shield and our strength? The more we are able to turn over our material goods to the God of creation then the easier it will be to understand that really our finances were never ours in the first place. Our finances are another aspect of our life that has to come under the Lordship of Jesus and offer that to him.

Once that happens and we find ourselves investing our time in prayer and study then we begin to see the value of investing in people and relationships as Jesus invests his life in us. I hope this doesn't seem unrelated. What happens when we understand all that we have as a gift from God? Our focus turns from inward to outward. What happens when we stop loving money and the pursuit of money? Then we are freed to pursue that which God wants us to pursue, which is relationships.

We have people in the church who are slipping through the cracks. We don't do a good job of investing in those around us to provide them an ability to get to know Jesus. Maybe we are too busy focusing on our own things. When was the last time you asked a visitor, a new member, or someone you don't even know that you saw today in church over to your house for lunch after church? Never? Why not? James will talk about his later but this is one of those areas of our life that opens up when we stop focusing on money, we can focus on people.

We can have it all when our priorities are focus on Jesus. How do we reflect that our priorities are focused on Jesus? That 10% is a reflection of our priority. I've preached on 10% before and it is a great equalizing factor. The purpose is not to increase the church coffers but to give you an ability to focus on Jesus as a priority. Give 10% at the beginning of the month and I

promise you it will change your life. You will make it month by month and not understand why.
It's the way it works. Amen.