

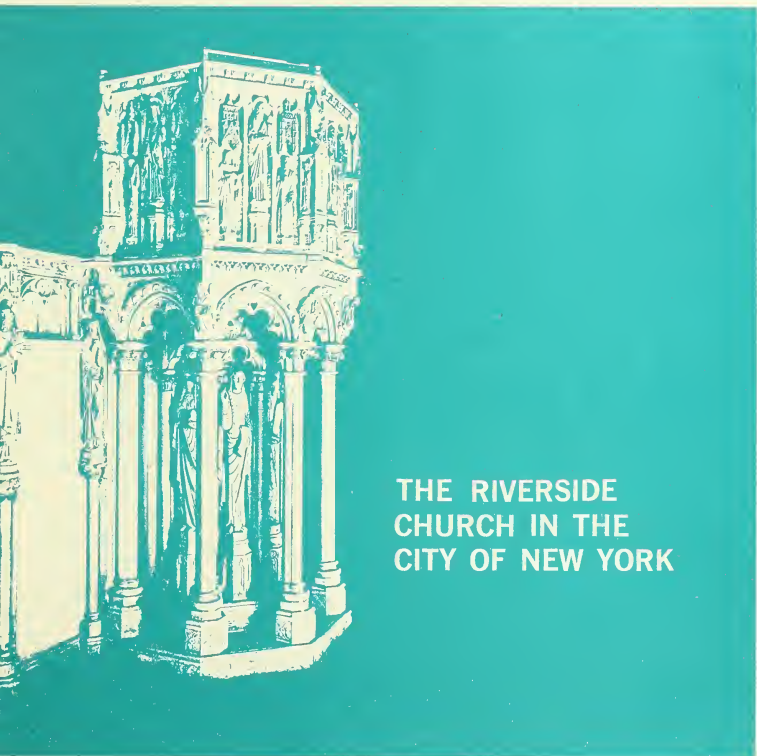
SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

"THE TROUBLE WITH SUCCESS"


*"How hard it will be for the wealthy
to enter the kingdom of God." (Mk. 10:23)*

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From of old man has tried to twist the sword of the gospel into a butter knife. Rather than open himself to its thrust he has sought to use the gospel to spread a layer of divine approval over his devious and demonic ways.

But there are some words of Jesus' that simply will not bend. Their meaning is too clear for comfort, their force too strong to permit any re-direction. One such word forms our text today. It comes in the shape of a startling exclamation: "How hard it will be for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God."

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Jesus delivered this shattering observation to his disciples. It was considered important enough to be given place in each of the synoptic gospels. It was spoken at that dramatic moment when the rich young ruler turned his back on Jesus and went away sorrowful.

The failure of Jesus to land this man of means for his cause must have grieved the disciples, for this man could have opened a few doors for them. He could have funded their enterprise and eased the pinch of want.

If only the Master had come down a little in his demands. If only he had shown a willingness to negotiate. But no! Without so much as a hint of compromise Jesus tossed out three imperatives and made them stick: "Sell what you have. Give to the poor. Come and follow me." (Mk 10:21b) As the rich young man trailed off into the distance, clutching his purse, Jesus, in an aside, turned to his disciples and commented: "How hard it will be for the wealthy to enter

the kingdom of God."

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We might find it attractive to fasten on these words of Jesus and use them to launch an attack on the rich. In every society there smoulders deep resentment against the financially powerful minority. Class warfare exists even in a democracy. The Robin Hood spirit is at least latently present in most of us in the form of a desire to take from the rich in order to give to the poor.

But to use Jesus' words thus is in effect to abuse or mis-use them. His words are really a judgment on those who aspire to wealth as well as on those who possess it. Bear in mind that it is not money that is the root of all evil, but the love of money. And one can love money just as much when he is without it as when he has it. There is another way of rendering our text. "How hard it will be for those who are in pursuit of wealth to enter the kingdom of God." The American Dream is as much at variance with the Galilean vision as the rich young ruler was at variance with the kingdom of God.

Besides, wealth is a relative matter anyway. Most of those who are within sound of my voice would be considered wealthy in comparison with two-thirds of the brothers and sisters who share this planet with us. Jesus' word is for us, no mistaking it. "How hard it will be for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God."

Jesus was not imposing a judgment on wealth. He was rather exposing a judgment that is inherent in wealth. He was not pronouncing on the subject from the outside. Rather he was recognizing the dynamics of damnation that are inherent in the pursuit of wealth. Let us keep it before us that the rich young ruler sought Jesus out. Jesus did not seek him out. He sought the Master because he already felt the judgment. "What lack I yet?" Something was wrong. Something was missing. He knew it, and so do we.

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It might be well to meditate for a few minutes on the question: "What are the negative dynamics at work in wealth that make it so hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God?" For one thing, wealth -- its accumulation, its protection, its augmentation -- tends to absorb the soul. It becomes virtually a full-time business. Wealth, or the pursuit of wealth, is a tyrannical lord, a demanding God. In the pursuit of money men and women have neglected their families, grown hard to need, shut themselves off from history, and even forgotten God. When one engages in this pursuit without restraint life gets sadly out of balance.

Some years ago when Richard Cabot was counselling with distressed individuals at Harvard, he would frequently suggest that life is made up of at least four parts. There has to be love. There has to be work. There has to be play. And there has to be worship. Frequently he would suggest that those four parts of a man's life might be expressed in the form of a cross. When work, for example, was out of all proportion to the other three that arm of the cross would extend far over the page. Visually then, the counselee could begin to see the disproportion of his emphasis -- so much of his life spent on work, so little on play, so little on love, so little on God.

Moreover, there is wisdom in Jesus' word because wealth, whether in prospect or possession, usually diverts us from creativity to consumption. When we are on the prowl for more we tend to think about what we can gain, rather than what we can give, what we can extract from life, rather than what we can contribute, what we can enjoy, rather than what we can produce.

I still recall that pathetic story that broke a few months ago out of Los Angeles concerning a family that had suddenly inherited something like a quarter of a million dollars. All of their pent up cupidity was allowed to find expression. Hence, they bought

the second and third car, the large house, the fancy jewelry, the new furniture, the new clothes. They bought themselves trips around the world. At the end of one year the money was exhausted and they were found quarreling with each other about why they had spent their fortune thus. The pity of it all lay in the total absence of a single thought for anyone beside themselves.

Wealth has a distressing way of turning creative people into perpetually restless consumers. I met the other day a transplanted Riversider on the west coast who told me of the freedom that he felt when he finally sold the automobile that he no longer needed. No one told him any more that he had to check his tires, his oil, or his shocks. No more deadlines for inspection. No queuing up for a license. Somehow the encumbrance of this possession once lifted gave him a new sense of freedom and a chance again to be creative.

Next time you come home at day's end feeling that you had a good day, ask yourself as a check-point whether that feeling of satisfaction centered in the fact that you were creative that day, or only in the fact that you were an inordinate consumer.

James Michener in his little paperback, The Quality of Life, is getting in a lick for the city as well as a word for creativity when he notes: "The city for me was an awakening so vast that I would have been cheated of one of the best parts of my life had I missed it. The other day, in comparison, I went to one of our good shopping centers and found the enticing stores immaculate but depressing and sterile. I toured the whole area and found only consumption, not a hint of creation. A child today could tour a dozen shopping centers throughout the year and not encounter one great idea such as the city gave me in abundance." 1 There is that at work in the pursuit of wealth that tends to move us from creativity to consumption.

Finally, wealth, whether we have it or pursue it,

tends to make us measure life more by possessions than relationships. On the job, the man who is in pursuit of wealth finds that relationship is absorbed in function. He cares very little about the person next to him, the secretary that waits upon him, those who serve his food in the cafeteria. All relationships tend to get absorbed in function.

Witness the spate of highly paid athletes who have quit professional football recently because they did not wish any longer to be absorbed in function. I have known such players over the years. Some of them have told me how they went for months without the coach giving so much as an indication that he knew their names. They were just so much meat executing K-75.

At the level of the home, relations are fulfilled in terms of possessions. Many a father and mother ruefully ask, "Did we not give our children everything they wanted?" And the answer comes ringing back across the gulf, "Everything except yourself."

When it comes to the needs of the world outside wealth has a way of enabling us to buy distance and thus to effect separation. Dives always manages to have a large lawn in front of his house and a huge gate at the foot of the lawn to keep the Lazarus types at bay.

And when it comes to God, when a man is intoxicated with the pursuit of wealth, who needs God? Karl Barth suggests that the reason why the rich young ruler couldn't quite make it despite his morality and his fidelity to Jewish law, lay in his refusal to become a covenant partner with God in history. We speak occasionally of one who is independently wealthy. What a fiction this is. Independent of whom and what?

I find it hopeful, however, that even though Madison Avenue inundates us with the notion that our life is to be measured by our possessions, when we are pressed to establish our identity, we refer to relationships not

things. Down deep, we really do not buy the line that encourages us to prove to our friends that we have finally arrived by driving a particular car.

Every so often when travelling by plane I find myself striking up a conversation with a total stranger. After he has walked on your shoes three times to get to the aisle, you feel that you sort of know him anyway. And after his lamb chop has skipped over into your lap and you've handed it back to him you feel a sense of fraternity. Finally you realize that both of you are behaving like adolescents -- sitting there side by side without really meeting. The moment comes when the man finally decides to let himself be known. And he doesn't ever start by saying, "I'm a \$50,000 a year man. I live in a \$75,000 house. I have a \$6,000 car free of any indebtedness. I have on my wrist a \$350 watch. We have in our home the most expensive furniture." He never starts there. When he wishes to identify himself he speaks of his relationships. "My name is Smith, Tom Smith, this is the family to which I belong. I come from Columbus, Ohio, that's the town where I am known, where I have my relational roots. This happens to be my wife, and these are my children." And if he suspects that his fellow passenger is a minister he might go so far as to say "I belong to the First Methodist Church in that place."

This is hopeful, because we are constantly exposed to the American Dream that would teach us to define ourselves by our possessions. In our flashes of sobriety we know the truth of what Jesus said, "that a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things that he possess." (Lk 12:15)

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In a question and answer session last summer on the west coast a somewhat indignant lady raised her hand and asked, "Is it sinful to be rich?" I could only think to answer "No, but it's dangerous." It really is. This is the trouble with success. It

tends to absorb us in the getting. It tends to reduce us to the level of mere consumers. It urges us away from relationships and causes us to put our stress on things.

This is the stewardship season, not just for this church but for most churches around the country. What is at stake in every case is next year's budget. But the budget is not the most serious matter at stake. I may be fired summarily by the canvass committee for saying this, but if we don't make our budget, somehow we will scrounge and scrape and cut until we do. What is at stake is whether the members of this body will learn through stewardship to come to terms with their wealth. This is what is critical!

I heard a layman the other day in Denver, ask his fellow members in a great church, "If God were to give you back a dollar for every dime you gave him in a year, could you live on it?"

"How hard it will be for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God." Carry that word of Jesus with you into the celebration of communion. As you receive once again the bread and the cup, check your values against the values of the crucified. Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Michener, James A., The Quality of Life, p. 27
Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, Conn. 1970

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