**The Lottery I Want to Win**

As I was working on this sermon I happened to catch a news report that the Powerball lottery prize for Aug. 23 was $759 million. One person in Massachusetts held a ticket with the numbers: 6 7 16 23 26 Powerball 4.

I won’t ask who played Powerball that night, I don’t really care, but let me ask this, *How many here have thought about what you would do if you won such a jackpot?* People do that a lot. They dream and plan and wonder what it would be like to see the same numbers on the TV screen as they hold in their hands.

I always hope my brother will win because he plays and he assures me if he ever wins, so do I. I’m confident he will give me at least $179. Many people have told me their plans if they win. Of course they always include plans to give a healthy portion to the church and to church related ministries. And of course I’m totally impressed with their generous hearts.

I laugh to myself because they’re thinking: *If I were rich I would be generous*. *The reason I’m not generous now is but I’m not rich enough*. I don’t argue with anybody about this but I know it doesn’t work that way. Generous people are generous whether they have a lot of a little. Stingy people are stingy whether they have a lot of a little. That’s the way it is.

I’ll be impressed when some lottery winner gives every bit of the winnings to charity and continues to work and live on what he had before – but then, why would he play?

To be generous or stingy comes from the heart not from the checkbook.

My friend Gary Davis, way back when he was a young lawyer and I was a young minister, told me to be careful when working with families at funerals because if there’s a lot of inheritance money there’s bound to be a fight and they’ll probably try to get me in on it.

In the Gospel by Luke is a story of two brothers who apparently got into a battle over inheritance. One of these two men came to Jesus and said (maybe ordered), *Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me*. Luke 12:13

We can only speculate what precipitated this request, but I’m guessing Dad died left the estate to the oldest, not an uncommon practice in those days.

Jesus refused to intervene, not only because it’s not His place but also because He is opposed to the avarice it represents. Instead He told this story.

*The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, “What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.” Then he said, “This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 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.’ “*

*But God said to him, “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.* Luke 12:16-21

Let’s look at some of the elements of this story: *The ground of a certain man produced a good crop*.

The first thing we see here is that the man didn’t produce anything. His ground did. He probably did things to enhance a crop: he prepared the soil; probably weeded it throughout the growing season; he may have brought water to it. He did his part using the principles of nature that God created. Still it was the ground that produced a crop.

Secondly we see that his ground “*produced a good crop.*” That phrase is actually one verb, . Does that word sound familiar? Euphoria? This was an exciting crop. It was like winning a lottery. *I’m going to need a bigger barn*. You can’t blame him for planning ahead.

Sadly, it seems as the man’s wealth grew so did his ego. *I’m pretty good at this farming stuff,* he thought. *I’m on easy street now*. No thought was given to perhaps sharing some of the wealth that his ground produced?

Jesus added a clever twist to this story. This was going to be the man’s last night on Earth. What’s going to happen to all of that wealth? Who’s going to enjoy the fruit of his labor and his ground? Not him!

Nothing in this story suggests that Jesus was bothered in any way with the man’s wealth. There’s nothing wrong with being rich. There is something wrong with being materialistic, self-serving, and stingy.

Let’s go back and notice how Jesus began His response to the brothers, *Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.* Luke 12:15 It was kind of a subtle way of saying, *Think about what’s most important in life – and it’s not money*.

Money is a real threat to our spiritual lives. Enough so that Jesus emphasized His point with two verbs:

* Watch out –  - keep your eyes open, pay attention to what’s happening
* Be on your guard –  - keep a guard on duty. What is a guard’s duty but to recognize danger and react against it?

No Christian should ever assume that we’re not at risk of falling into self-serving materialism no matter how rich or poor we are. Money is a powerful force. Watch out! Be on your guard always and constantly! We’ll come back to this later but for now let’s move on.

A common problem that people face, Christians included, is that we tend to measure life from the perspective of Earth and forget about the rest of eternity. If we’re wealthy on Earth we feel good about it, and that outweighs storing up treasures for eternity. We assume eternity because were believers. As a result we plan for life on Earth, but often we don’t plan for eternity.

The point of the story as Jesus told it is not to be critical of the man’s wealth or how he got wealthy. The point of His story is that whether rich or poor on Earth, we should seek to be rich toward God.

If the wealth you build is Earthly, a day is coming when you’ll die and someone else will enjoy what you’ve built.

If you build richness toward God, when you die, you will enjoy what you’ve built. *This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.*

The man in Jesus’ story was gifted at producing material wealth. He was rich on Earth, but he wasn’t rich toward God. He foolishly failed to prepare for eternity.

I’m sure everybody here will agree that you can’t take it with you. Nobody’s going to carry his material blessings into the afterlife.

When I lead a funeral, at the close I watch friends and family pay last respects and step out of the room. I stay with the deceased until the coffin is closed. Usually before closing the lid, someone like Bobby Cutler removes the jewelry to give to the family. He often takes glasses to donate to the Lions Club. Butch will take them to Mexico to bless someone there.

We know that anything left in the coffin will only deteriorate with time. No one will ever enjoy it again.

Jesus understood both the blessing and the risk of wealth. There are 38 parables (stories like this one) recorded in the Gospels. Sixteen of them are about money or wealth. In the Bible there are about 500 verses on prayer; less than that about faith, but about 2000 verses on money and material wealth.

God is serious about how we handle wealth. If anything is going to bring a Christian down it’ll probably be either sex or money. We’re talking about money today. The issue of money isn’t about how much we have or don’t have. It’s about whether we trust money more than we trust God.

Being rich toward God is about trusting Him more than money. It’s about trusting God’s goodness and love. Still people, including many Christians spend much more time and effort on money than on being rich toward God. I know that stings, but you do the math. Which gets the most of your time?

Every person ought to decide what really matters.

* Do you really believe that you can’t take it with you? If you do, why do you spend as much time as you do earning and collecting money, especially if you don’t spend much time investing in eternity?
* Does eternity really matter more than your time on Earth?
* Is being rich toward God really better than being rich on Earth?

I’m not sure I want to hear your answers to those questions.

I read some interesting statistics recently. According to the Self-Storage Association (who knew that there was such a thing?):

* In the last 30 years the self-storage industry has doubled.
* One in ten households in America rents a self-storage unit. We rent space to store stuff we aren’t using.
* There are over 60,000 self-storage buildings in America. That’s 2.2 billion square feet of space just to store earthly treasure beyond what we have at home.

Doesn’t that sound like the man in the parable? *What shall I do? I have no place to store all my stuff. This is what I’ll do. I’ll rent a storage locker*.

Now get this, according to the National Association of Home Builders, the average size of house in America has risen from 983 square feet to 2,456 square feet, even though the average size of a family has decreased.

That tells me that in America, a predominantly Christian nation, we are very concerned with material wealth, but we have to ask if we aren’t less concerned with eternal wealth.

There’s nothing wrong with owning stuff. The problem is that all that stuff requires that we use our resources and energy to acquire and protect our stuff, and while we’re acquiring and protecting our stuff we’re ignoring being rich toward God.

It’s not that we don’t like God. We focus on material blessings because we trust our stuff, often more than we trust God.

I want you to listen carefully to this, we can fool ourselves into thinking that we put God first while we’re spending our time and energy pursuing money, but God always knows the truth. He knows what we trust.

God warned in Deuteronomy 8:17f, *Beware lest you say in your heart, “My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth”…It is He who gives you power to get wealth.*

I think we tend to focus on our money, usurping God from His place in our values, because we think we earned it. We need to remember that every resource we have truly is from God.

How does God measure whether we trust Him or money? I struggled with how to answer that in a way that is clearly Biblical. I think the answer is in the fact that God expects us to give some of our Earthly wealth to His service.

When we give we demonstrate faith and trust in God.

* We believe that He will do what He says He will do.
* We trust that He will increase our resource.

Not giving suggests the opposite – that we don’t believe He will do what He says He will do, and we don’t trust that He will increase our resource.

God said to His people, *Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.* Proverbs 3:9f Can you see the connection between our giving and God’s response?

The man in Jesus’ story could have used the abundance of his harvest to care for less fortunate people. No one talked about income inequality in those days but there were very rich people and there were very poor people. This man chose to find more places to store his wealth rather than share with anyone else.

Jesus said when talking about our concerns for material wealth*, Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.* Matthew 6:33 Can you see the connection between our giving and God’s response?

In a discussion about the importance of giving to God’s cause in a generous way the Apostle Paul wrote that if we’re generous in giving…*He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way…*2 Corinthians 9:10f

Can you see the connection between our giving and God’s response?

I’m not sure most Christian believe that but it’s clear isn’t it? God responds to how we give because it proves that we believe and trust Him.

If that’s not convincing consider what Jesus said in Luke 6:38,

*Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.* Luke 6:38

I underlined that last sentence to emphasize what Jesus said. The measure of what we think is fair giving is the measure God will use in blessing us.

The context of that quote is of forgiving people who do us harm. The measure of forgiveness we give to others is the measure God will use in forgiving us. But the principle applies to everything we give whether forgiveness or money.

Do you get the point? Whatever we have is from God. Whatever resource we have, it’s not from ourselves. It’s from God and is intended for us to serve. God is the source of our resource and we should re-source that resource to serve His purpose. And He measures us accordingly.

I want to address a common misconception. Whether we are rich or poor on Earth generally has nothing to do with God’s approval or disapproval. Many Godly men are poor and many ungodly men are rich. Some rich men are generous and some are stingy; some poor men are stingy and some are generous.

I think it’s safe to say that sometimes when a man is faithful and trusting, God blesses him with more because he uses his God-given resource to serve God’s purpose. But not always. I don’t know how He chooses when to bless a man with more and when not to. I do know that what we do with our wealth on Earth has a direct bearing on our eternity because it proves the true nature of our faith and trust.

The prophet Jeremiah offered this advice,

*The Lord says this: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.”* Jeremiah 9:23f

The word “boast” here doesn’t mean to brag. “*Yit-hal-lel*” means to praise. We get “hallelujah” from that verb. In this context it means to worship something as my foundation, what I trust for life.

* *Let not the wise man worship his wisdom.*
* *Let not the mighty man worship his might.*
* *Let not the rich man worship his riches.*
* *But let him who worships worship this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord*

I don’t live by my wisdom. I don’t live by my power. I don’t live by my wealth. I live by God’s grace.

I said we’d come back to Jesus’ warning so let’s do now: *Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.*

Here are three specific perils we should watch out for and guard against:

1. Trusting ourselves rather than God:

God is the source of all that we have. Dr. Kregg Hood, senior vice president at AG Financial Solutions in the Loan and Capital Solutions divisions and a former preaching minister who writes about this issue of the Christian and money wrote,

*He (God) uses a variety of avenues to get these blessings into our lives: circumstances, opportunities, connections, jobs, bank accounts, possessions, intelligence, training, skills*…

He goes on to say that *these avenues are simply His* (God’s) *delivery system*. When you order from Amazon.com, Amazon is the delivery system. The source is the publisher of the book or the manufacturer of the product.

Trusting ourselves is trusting the delivery system. Trusting God is trusting the source. So be very careful.

1. A second potential peril is materialism:

The man in the parable had a lot but he wanted more, just as God predicted of all men. *He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income*. Ecclesiastes 5:10

Materialism is an addiction. Like any addiction it’s powerful. We always want more. This addiction leads us away from generosity to selfishness.

1. One more peril is fear:

When Christians aren’t generous it’s because they fear that God won’t really respond to their generous giving.

* They fear that God will not respond.
* They fear that they cannot trust God’s faithfulness.
* They fear that God didn’t mean it when He said…*whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.* 2 Corinthians 9:6

God wants to bless us, *He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?* Romans 8:32 That’s the lottery I want to win.

When we teach about money and giving it’s not so that we can have lots of money in our church bank account. Certainly we want to be able to afford the ministries of our church.

* We all want a warm dry building in which to worship.
* We all want programs that serve our needs and build us up.
* We all want staff to do the ground-work of ministry.

But that’s not why we teach about money. We teach about money in order to encourage being rich toward God.

God wants to bless us. He wants to bless you. It not about how much we have or don’t have. It’s about our hearts. I encourage you to ask and answer three questions before next Sunday:

1. What or whom do I trust? Be honest. Consider the things we’ve talked about this morning.
2. How much of my time and effort do I give to building wealth on Earth versus building richness toward God?
3. Do I believe that God will respond to what I do with money?

If your life were demanded of you tonight, would you find that you’re rich toward God, that you will enjoy what you’ve amassed? Or will you find that you’re a fool, that someone else will enjoy all that you’ve worked for?