

**DISCERNING OUR CONGREGATION'S FUTURE: BY TAKING A CLOSE LOOK AT
OUR PERSONAL ASPIRATIONS AND DESIRES**

Jeremiah 32:1-3A, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

National Cathedral
"Isn't it interesting that the terrorists didn't attack the National Cathedral in Washington, the symbol of our religious life?" A friend said that a few days after the attacks. Another friend responded, "But they *did* hit our national cathedral." I blurted out, "What! They hit the National Cathedral?" "What I mean," he said, "is that for many Americans the World Trade Center is our national cathedral." Was our National Cathedral the World Trade Center? Are our aspirations and desires driven primarily by our love for money?

Luke speaks of money
Let's talk about money. The Bible says a lot about money. Listened to what the Gospel of Luke says about money. The Virgin Mary sings, "God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." In his first sermon Jesus preached, "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." In Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." Jesus told would be followers, "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near." Again Jesus said, "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." He told the parable of the Rich Fool. Last week we heard Jesus say in the Gospel lesson, "You cannot serve God and wealth."

What Rich Man & Lazarus teaches
Today's Gospel lesson, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus clearly teaches that societies sharply divided between rich and poor are destined for ^{destruction} ~~damnation~~. At its noblest, America has believed that the best measure of national health is how we deal with the extremes

of wealth and poverty. Alexis DeTocqueville warned that our democratic republic will survive only as long as there's a rough equality of opportunity and wealth. Extremes of wealth and poverty are incompatible with the traditions of our democratic republic. Nations as well as individuals have gone to hell in a hand-basket when those who are relatively rich ignore the poor at their gates. Unfortunately, like the Rich Man, too many Americans believe that poverty will be alleviated by the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table.

What Saint Paul taught about money choices

Saint Paul wrote, "Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." Again he writes, "In their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." Furthermore, he writes, "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith."

We need money

Notice Paul doesn't say that money is the root of all evil. We need money to pay the mortgage. We need money for cars and gas to get to work. We need clothes. We need food. We have utilities bills. College costs are astronomical. Medical insurance is sky high. We also need money to buy presents for loved ones and to give to charitable causes.^{Some for charity} We need money. If we don't spend our money people are thrown out of work, factories shut down, recession deepens. The Bible doesn't say that money is the root of evil. The love of money is the root of all money.

Signs of the love of money? When pursuit of increasing wealth leads us to become blind to poor,

What are some signs of the love of money? When money becomes our passion, our consuming desire, it's a sure sign of our love of money. One pastor was talking with a colleague starting a new church in a large suburban area. "A good many poor people lived near there," the first pastor said. The second pastor in new church development said, "Well, with my education I really don't think I could minister well to poor people." He said, "I really want a first class

church made up of top business and professional people." The first pastor responded, "Well, I hope you have a long and successful ministry. In fact, you may even have the opportunity to continue that ministry in hell."

Money need not be a curse, but blessing
Be content
But money need not be a terrible weight that takes us down to hell. Instead of being a source of anxiety, worry, and stress money can become a source of blessing and joy. Saint Paul tells us how money can become a source of joy. First, he says, be content with what you have! Enjoy what you've been given! Don't live beyond your means! This doesn't mean we should turn down a raise. But Paul knows that if we don't enjoy what we have today, we won't enjoy more of it tomorrow. Are you content with what you have -- your home, your car, your possessions? Do you think another house, or car or boat will make you happy? Do you look at your neighbor's boat or car or house and get depressed because you don't have as much? Be content with what you have!

How hard it is to be content illustrated
It's so hard to be content with what we have. Years ago Macey's Department store in New York would choose some kids at Christmas and give them one minute in their toy department. As a boy, I wondered how I could be chosen. I strategized as to how to maximize my acquisitions. A buzzer would sound and the kids would run down the aisles and fill their shopping carts with toys. The rules were that they had only a minute and they couldn't keep *anything* if they didn't return to the check out counter within a minute. It was so hard to get back before time ran out. They'd try to get one more thing before time was up. Isn't this what we so often do. It's so hard to be content with what we have.

Make investments that last
Secondly, Paul tells us is to make wise investments. Make investments that last. Don't invest your life, your savings, your time, your energy, in things that don't last, that don't have eternal value. *Only one life, 'twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last.* Do good! CROP walk; Peacemaking; Disaster Relief; NSC; money can be the means of doing good.

Paul says. Be rich in good works! Be generous and ready to share, Paul says. Have you made an eternal investment? Are you spending money for things that will *not* last and do not satisfy?

Can you see the poor man at your gates? Are you ready to share?

Sharing illustrates

Did you hear what happened in Yankee Stadium last year. A nine year old boy, baseball glove in hand, was sitting on the third base side of the stands with his mother. A foul ball was hit his way. It came right toward him. He stood up with his glove. It was right there. Then a man sitting ten feet away got up, ran over, stuck out his hand and grabbed the foul ball right before it reached the boys glove. The boy was crushed with disappointment. The man took the ball and smugly returned to his seat. People started shouting, "Give the boy the ball." The angry mother screamed, "Give the boy the ball." The whole stadium began to chant, "Give the boy the ball." Finally the man felt so ashamed that he handed the ball to the boy. The whole stadium gave him a standing ovation. Another foul ball was hit into the third base stands. Somebody else caught the ball and gave it to the man who caught the first ball. Another foul was hit and caught by still another and he gave it to the nine year old boy who already had one. So the nine year old boy saw a kid he didn't have any and gave it to him. (From a sermon by Tom Tewell, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, NYC)

wealth - can be
a curse or
blessing.

What a wonderful illustration of what Christians are called to do with our wealth. On the authority of the Word of God that came to Timothy from Saint Paul I command you who are rich (and most of us are), do not be haughty! Do not set your hopes on the uncertainty of riches! Set your hope on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment! Do good! Be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share!

Eternal God, open our eyes to see your hand at work in the splendor of creation and in the beauty of human life. Touched by your hand, our world is holy. Help us to cherish the gifts that surround us, to share our blessings with our sisters and brothers, and to experience the joy of life in your presence; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.