

## Purses That Don't Wear Out

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on August 9, 1992, the 9th Sunday after Pentecost. Scripture Lessons: Luke 12:32-40.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

One night when I was about four years old my parents tucked me into bed. My mom sat on the edge of my bed and my father stood silhouetted by the light behind him. They had something to give me. My father held in his hand a leather bag with a silver draw string. He told me how his mother had given it to him when he was a little boy. Her parents had given it to her. It was an ancient purse. It looked nothing like the purses we have today. It was out of style and yet it showed no sign of wear.

My father turned it over in his hand, examine it with great care and then he handed it to me. "This is the most valuable possession I can ever give." He spoke very solemnly. "Never lose it. Never let anybody take it from you. Open it and see what's inside." I loosened the silver string and reached inside. There were no gold or silver coins inside. Instead there were promises. My father detected my look of disappointment. "Don't be disappointed. These promises are more valuable than money", he whispered. I took out a promise and gave it to my father to read. It said, "Fear not, little flock. It is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." He said, "There'll come a time when some people will tell you that there's nothing more real than money and possessions. They'll tell you not to trust anything you can't touch or eat or see. They'll tell you that there's no kingdom and no king, but you must not believe them." It was very long ago when my father said these things and I was very, very sleepy and sometimes wonder if it was all a

dream.

Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem where he had a rendezvous with death. He told his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it's your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that don't wear out, and an unfailling treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Money and possessions are two of the most powerful concerns in our lives. What can fill us with more fear than the thought of losing our money and possessions or going bankrupt or having our car repossessed? Can you think of anything that's the source of more fear than money? "How'm I going to pay these bills?" "How will I ever afford to send my kids to college?" "I hope that check doesn't bounce." "How'm I going to pay my workers?" "Where'm I going to get money for food and the mortgage?" "I hope the car doesn't break down?" "Will I have enough to live on when I retire? Will I become a financial burden to my children in my old age?" Our fears about money and possessions are two of our most powerful fears in our life.

And in the face of all these fears, Jesus tells his disciples, "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailling treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys."

Now let's face it. None of us obeys this command. We're all too afraid to obey it. In fact, I've been taught to interpret it in such a way so that nothing

would be said that would require our conversion. We comfort ourselves by telling ourselves how difficult this passage is to interpret.

1. We say, "Jesus doesn't give this command to everyone. He gave it to his disciples back then or to a few extraordinary people today like Mother Theresa. He doesn't mean it for everybody." But somehow, I feel like I'm wiggling out from under the command of Jesus.

2. We say, "Jesus didn't mean these words to be taken literally. He really meant that we should give *some* of our money and possessions to the poor, maybe 10%, but probably whatever we can spare. We should make a pledge to the church and take our worn out clothes to the Neighborhood Services Center. But somehow I say to myself, "Is that really all Jesus meant?"

3. Or we say, "Jesus really meant that we should only be willing to give up all our money and possessions if we have to choose between them and Him." But somehow I feel I'm faced with that decision every day and often don't make the right choice.

4. Or we say, "He can't mean what he says. It's so impractical. What would happen to the gross national product. We'd all be on relief. We'd become a burden on society." So we say, "Jesus, your command is impractical and intolerable and were not going to obey it."

The amazing thing is that some idiots have actually taken these words literally and obeyed them. The disciples gave up all to follow Jesus. The early church obeyed this for awhile. Around the year A.D. 300, Anthony, an Egyptian

*to sell ... give*

came to church one Sunday and heard these words of Jesus being read. He walked out immediately, not even staying for the sermon. If he had stayed for the sermon he probably would have heard the minister say, "Jesus really didn't mean what he said." Anthony went out and sold all that he had and gave it to the poor. At that time the Church had become wealthy and corrupt and had begun to lose sight of their mission. Anthony bore witness to the reality of the Kingdom of God and inspired a great revival of faith in Christ and obedience to his word.

Around A.D. 1200 Francis, a selfish, wealthy Italian met a poor leper on the road. The sight of this unfortunate man filled Francis with a kind compassion that he'd never felt before for the poor. He felt compelled to get off his horse and embrace this leper and kiss him on his disfigured lips. Francis then became so concerned for the poor that he went and sold all that he had and gave everything to the poor. His life and testimony brought new life to a dead church grown wealthy but spiritually weak. Through his preaching many men and women came to know and obey Christ.

~~But~~ Anthony and Francis lived long ago. But is it possible, today, to be set free from the fear of losing everything? Is it possible that there really is a God who has come to us in Christ and given us a kingdom? Is it possible that God wants to make of us a congregation which bears witness to the reality of the Gospel? *or the Kingdom* Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could really obtain for ourselves purses that never wear out, treasure in heaven which can never be taken from us? — *Then we would have courage to obey*

A couple of weeks ago our family went to the ocean for the day. I saw some

people just plunge into the cold surf. That's not for me. I got my toes wet for a while. Then I walked in up to my knees and stood there for a while. About fifteen minutes later I was up to my waist. Finally, I took the plunge. Maybe that's the way we have to deal with this difficult saying of Jesus. There may be a few Anthonys or Francises who plunge right in and obey. Most of will want to get our toes wet first. How do we begin to obey what Jesus says?

Maybe we could get our toes wet by writing up our wills in such a way that we include the poor, along with our children, as our heirs. Maybe we could leave at least a portion of our estate for a ministry of the church that focuses on the poor.

And then maybe we could go in a little deeper and get our knees wet by making a concerted effort to get to know some poor people personally. I prefer to get to know people who are like myself. It would be very difficult for many of us to get to know a poor person really well. Wouldn't it be a wonderful testimony to the power of God if we were as concerned to bring the saving gospel of Jesus Christ to the poorest people in our community as to the more wealthy?

And then maybe we could go up to our waist by raising our mission giving right when we need money to complete our church? What a testimony to the power of God to see headlines screaming from the Oxford Tribune: Oxford Presbyterian Church significantly increases its pledge to mission giving despite not having enough money to complete their new church. This money will be used to bring the gospel of Christ to some of the poorest people in the world." *wouldn't that be great?*

I have a friend who use to pastor the Eastminster Presbyterian Church in

Wichita, Kansas. It was back around 1976. They were going through a multi-million dollar building campaign. They had raised over a million dollars. Then an earthquake hit Guatemala, destroying homes, villages and churches in a nation that's already poor. The minister went to the session and congregation and said, "Let's give our million dollars to our brothers and sisters in Guatemala to rebuild their homes and churches." The idiots went along with him.

Is it possible that Jesus has come to save us from our always wanting more and never being satisfied with what we have? Wouldn't it be great to become a community of disciples where it's safe to be poor; where you don't have to feel worthless and unwanted and undesirable if you're poor or unemployed or bankrupt. Where you can go to church and know that you won't be made to feel ashamed because you're struggling financially?

Jesus wants us to know that God is trustworthy. Jesus wants us to know that God is a great God, and a great King above all gods. God is greater than Mammon. God is greater than our money and possessions. And the greatest fear that a Christian should ever fear is not the fear of losing our money and possessions but losing our hold on the reality of Christ and his kingdom.

Jesus didn't come to make people more religious. The Bible portrays the whole human race as being already incurably religious. We're all so religious that given the chance we'll worship just about anything and foremost among the things we worship is money and possessions. When Jesus gave us this commandment he wanted us to know that the chief human problem isn't secularism but idolatry. He

makes a frontal attack on this power that money and possessions have over us. He says to us, "Your value doesn't lie in how much money you have or how many possessions you own." *William*

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it's your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that don't wear out, and unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Let us pray: Righteous God: you have taught us that the poor shall have your kingdom, ~~and that the gentle-hearted shall inherit the earth.~~ Keep the church poor enough to preach to poor people, ~~and humble enough to walk with the despised.~~ Never weigh us down with too much cash on hand. Save your church from vain display or lavish comforts, so that, traveling light, we may move through the world showing your generous love, made known in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

#### Pastoral Prayer

*Other Bill*  
Lord God, we praise you, we worship you, because by our baptism into the body of Christ you have given us anew beginning, a new kind of life. We know that much of our life - our thoughts, feelings, and actions - has not yet been touched or changed by the new life you have given: help us to see the claims of your love in every part of our life and having seen them to accept them, so that everything in us may be remade by your love.

*Blessings always*  
Eternal Father, you sent us your Son so that as he obeyed you perfectly your kingdom on earth could begin. Now that you have sent us the Spirit, help us to obey you as Christ did, so that your kingdom begun in him may be spread in us.

We pray, Lord God, for your Church throughout the world: that it may share to the full in the work of your Son, revealing you, reconciling the world to yourself; that Christians may learn to love one another, as you have loved us.

We pray for our country...

We pray for those who are anxious and frightened...

For those who are tempted to the breaking point...

For those who want to do your will but don't have the power...

For those who want to believe, but are filled with doubt...

For those who want to be filled by your Spirit and don't know how...

We pray for our community... especially for those who are on financially on the ropes... for the unemployed and under-employed...

We pray for those who have lost loved ones (Hansens, Bromleys)

We pray for the sick and dying...

And now as Christ has taught us, hear us as we humbly pray...