

“The Cost of Discipleship”

Scripture: Deuteronomy 3:1-11

Text: Deuteronomy 3:11—Matthew 19:24

I'm the type of person who can spend all day poking around in a dusty attic for hidden treasures. So in rummaging around the cobwebs and the dust in the corners of the Bible I ran across Old King Og tucked away in the attic partially hidden by the shadow of the Joshua and Moses. I dusted him off and brought him downstairs into the light where I could study him a little closer.

Og, King Og, of Bashan. Og-isn't that a lovely name?

I wonder if you remember old King Og of Bashan? You say you never heard of him? Where have you been? Well, it's little wonder because he's only one of many walk-ons in the drama of the Bible.

Actually there isn't much to remember about Og anyway. The only thing that impressed the author of Deuteronomy was the fact that King Og was a big man with a fancy bed—“Behold, his bedstead was a bestead of iron.”

This probably refers to a gigantic and costly sarcophagus or coffin made of black basalt fashioned by the most skilled artisans of the day to receive the body of King Og when he died.

So for nearly 3000 years Og has been gathering dust in a forgotten corner of the Bible when the only noteworthy thing that can be said for him was that he had a fancy coffin.

This seemingly irrelevant reference to Og's iron bedstead raises pointedly the question “ what shall I do with my riches?”

Jesus said, “Go...and give to the poor..”

In a newspaper article, I came across some fantastic statistics concerning riches. It said that if we reduced the population of the world to a village of 1,000 people, 60 of them would be

Americans. These 60 Americans would receive half of the income of the entire community of 1000. The other 940 would have to share the rest.

Only 300 of the 1000 inhabitants of this allegorical town would be Christians, and fewer than 100 would be Protestant Christians. And of these how many would be more than names on a church register?

The 60 Americans would have 15 times as many possessions per person as all the rest of the world. The 940 non-Americans would generally be hungry most of the time.

The lowest income group of the 60 Americans would be better off than the average of the rest of the imaginary town of 1000.

Half of the 1000 people would not have so much as even heard of a man named Jesus of Nazareth. These statistics tell me that I am rich, both in material and spiritual wealth.

In light of these statistics it seems to me that Christ's demand of the rich young ruler is just as relevant today. Jesus said "Go and sell what you have and follow me." However we interpret this popular command at the very least it means we are lousy salesmen.

What good salesman would tolerate advertisement that was so ineffective that half of a small town had not even heard of the product he was selling? More people have heard of Coco-Cola than Jesus of Nazareth.

What business could survive for very long when three-quarters of its employees were continually absent?

The reason why the Christian Church in America is in such sad shape is because we are lousy salesmen.

In the account of the rich young ruler we see what could very well be a very modern man or woman. He/She had lived a good life. He/She had kept all the commandments outwardly. He/She had a good reputation but he/she was unsatisfied with his life as so many rich people may be. Jesus knew quite well because he answered the young man by saying, “If you would be perfect.”

Jesus was not talking of moral or sinless perfection. Rather, the word He uses indicates completeness or wholeness. Jesus realized that the life of the rich young man was missing something and that this man would not be satisfied.

The rich young man went away very sad and distressed, but more sad, he went away incomplete because he was not willing to pay the cost of discipleship.

He was a salesman so in love with his product that he refused to sell it. He had a lot to give but wasn't willing to share it.

The words that Jesus spoke to his disciples following this incident were hard words. “Verily, I say unto you, that a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven..it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.”

The late G.K. Chesterton commenting on this verse writes, “if we diminish the camel to his smallest, or open the eye of the needle to its largest—if, in short, we assume the words of Christ to have meant the very least they could mean, His words must, at the very least mean this--...to be rich is to be in peculiar danger of moral wreck.”

He further comments, “Christianity even when watered down is hot enough to boil all modern society to rags.”

Our society is rich. And the disturbing factor, for me, is that I am rich. You are rich. We all are rich. And moreover, the response of the disciples to Jesus hard words revealed that they, who had given up everything, were also rich.

For “they were exceedingly amazed, saying who then can be saved?”

They weren't pointing their finger at someone else or trying to figure out how much you need to have in order to be rich. Rather, they were aware of just how many ways they were already rich.

Their answer clearly implied that riches cannot always be counted in large bank accounts or great possessions. All of us are rich in one way or another.

In the light of the historical situation of the early Palestinian Christians, by whom the gospel of Matthew was originally read, it is not hard to understand the intent of Christ's command “to go sell all you have, give to the poor, and follow me.”

Those who first read this Gospel lived in a time when Palestinian Christians were few and made up of outcasts, slaves, the poor and dispossessed.

To become a part of the Christian fellowship was many times synonymous with giving away all your possessions.

In Acts we read how the Christians in Jerusalem “sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.”

Today, in America the historical situation has completely reversed itself. Those who are in the church are apt to be among the most prosperous and respected people in the community. No longer is a Christian apt to be poor or disreputable. In fact, the opposite is more likely to be true. There are many people who claim that they are embarrassed to come to church because their clothes are not as nice as ours.

Although the rich young ruler is not one to pattern our life after, and although the rich are placed in a bad light all through the Bible it's mad overwhelmingly clear that God's love and concern extends just as much to rich as to the poor.

So much did Christ identify with the rich that the prophet Isaiah foretold that “he made his grave...with the rich in his death.”

It would be unfair to see Christ’s command out of the context of the rest of the New Testament. Were there any rich men who did follow Christ? Were any of the early Christians rich? And in what way did they pay the cost of discipleship?

First of all Matthew, the writer of the Gospel, and the one who tells us this story of the rich young ruler, was himself a rich man. In fact, after he became a disciple he threw a big party for Jesus and invited many other rich people.

Jesus was criticized by the less fortunate for attending this party. We are often reminded that he was criticized for eating and drinking with the poor, but we often forget that he was equally criticized for associating with the rich.

Zachaeus was another rich man who wined and dined Jesus.

Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish Supreme Court, who risked possible danger by going to Pilate and asking for the body of Christ, in order to give a decent burial, was also a rich man.

The letters of Paul reveal that there were rich Christians in some of the early churches. Surprisingly, he does not urge them to give away their riches.

Rather he warns them not to let their wealth make them feel proud and privileged and cautions them not to set their hopes on uncertain riches. In other words, he was concerned that they not throw their money away in risky get-rich-quick investments.

Finally, he urges them to do good, and to be a rich and generous in good deeds as they are with their money.

The emphasis is not on giving away your money, but on being rich in humility and service. I'm sure Paul urged this because of the danger that we have of thinking that money is a substitute for service and fellowship.

One of the things that grates me the most is to have somebody tell me "well, we haven't been going to church, but we have been keeping up on our dues."

But the Church is not a country club where dues are the basis of fellowship. Rather it is a fellowship where witness and service are the responsibilities of membership.

All of us here this morning are rich. All of us, both young and old, live in luxury when we compare ourselves to the rest of the world or even to a large portion of this town. The question is not, "am I rich", but "What do I have to give" "What do I have to share with others?"

To begin with, in our congregation, you who are business and professional men and women have a lot to give.

Separated from religious or moral principles, business can be no more satisfying than a poor person playing monopoly. But for a Christian who has the vision of the Kingdom of God constantly before him, business and professional men can be effective ministers of the gospel as well as influential advocates and implementers of community, governmental, and social reforms, reforms which may be detrimental to the rich but beneficial to the poor.

There has been a lot of down-grading and ridicule of intellectuals recently. But the man or woman, young or old, who has the courage and ability to think, to question the popular, as well as the unpopular, to observe, and to listen, has a lot to give as Christian.

The poverty of modern thought demands Christians who are willing to exercise the mental discipline that will enable them to share this hope with those wandering in the wasteland of both modern and not so modern thought.

In a past issue of Inquiry Magazine the question is raised “What reason for our hope do we give to men like Freud, who maintained that religion is but an illusion, an erroneous opinion resulting from wishful thinking?

“What reason for our hope will we give to men like Karl Marx, who charged that religion was an opiate for the people, a tranquilizer meant to calm the revolt of the poor against their oppressors?”

“What answer will we give to ourselves, or to your children, when we, or they, begin to ask about the foundation of our hope?”

In other parts of the world Christian businessmen, professional men, scientists, and educators are giving their answers to these questions and sharing their faith and vocational riches with others so that the poor are being taught vocations etc...

I was reading an article in a magazine published by Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship which said that in India, on any given Sunday, in any major city, it is quite common to find scores of Hindus and other non-Christians attending Christian services on their own. The same thing is happening in Singapore, Indonesia, and Africa.

According to the most recent census in India, Christians have gained more than any other religious groups in the country. Within a generation the number of Christians in India may reach 10 to 15% of the total population.

In another article I read that in Africa, Christianity is growing faster than any other religion; even faster than the population.

While this is due to many factors, it is believed the greatest reason is the tremendous shock that science and technology has had on traditional beliefs and values.

Hindus and Buddhists see Christianity as a religion that urges the free inquiry for truth wherever it may be found.

Hindus and Buddhists see Christianity as a religion whose view of the creation has contributed to the birth of modern science and technology. They see Christianity as a religion that has encouraged honest and hard work, as well as a distain for extravagance and luxury all of which, of course, has resulted in prosperity.

Do those in Portsmouth see the same Christianity?

Some of you have riches that I haven't mentioned. Some have riches that you don't even know about, that are going to waste. What are you doing with your riches? How can you share them with others?

When you and I who profess that Christ is Lord, cease to realize just how rich we are and fail to share it with others we become rich welfare recipients in a welfare church.

I'm always hearing fears expressed that the country is becoming a welfare state. By that we mean a country that give hand-outs without demanding anything in return.

But did you ever to stop to think that many talented and able-bodied Christians fail to use their abilities in the Church while receiving whatever benefits church membership may confer.

If you fear the welfare state, how much more should we fear the welfare church?

I am proud and count it a privilege to be a minister in this church. It's a privilege to share in the riches that we have in our members.

We have a rich and living heritage of Christian service in business, in government, in education, in social services, and the arts.

As a result of these contributions, many of you have spiritually and financially have come to share in the riches of the wisdom of God.

But are we living on the riches of others? Are we merely soaking up the prestige of being members of this church, or are we adding to its prestige by sharing with others the riches that are ours?

“...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God!”

We are all rich!

Who then can be saved?

With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible; even the rich may be saved.

Oh! Some of you are probably wondering whatever happened to King Og. That's a good question. Somewhere during the course of the sermon he has gotten lost in the shuffle.

But when you stop to think about it, isn't that what you would expect from someone who had nothing more to show for his riches than a bedstead of iron?