

## "The Rich Young Man"

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church  
Durham, NC

10:55 a.m. Sunday, September 24, 2006

Text: I Timothy 6:3-10      Mark 10:17-31    NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, open our hearts and minds to receive your words of truth for us today. Amen.

### CALLED TO DO SOMETHING

Dr. Robert Ludlow of Princeton University wanted to know why generous people are generous. So he began researching. He discovered that generous people do not necessarily come from good families. Through his interviews he learned that generous people have experienced generosity in someone else. That encounter serves as a model for their generous lives.

Jack Casey was a teenager who needed his wisdom teeth surgically removed. This was back during the time when they would place a mask over your face and sprinkle ether to put you to sleep. Jack was frightened. Before the surgery he was scared to death. A nurse in the operating room tried to reassure him. Then she told him something that she shouldn't have. She said, "I'm here with you. I will not leave you." Jack went through the surgery. Sure enough, when he awakened hours later in the recovery room, the nurse was sitting beside him.

Jack Casey went to college. He later became a paramedic. One day he responded with an ambulance to an accident scene. A tractor-trailer truck had overturned. The driver was injured and trapped inside the cab. They were using the

Jaws of Life to remove him from the cab. Gasoline was dripping onto his clothes. A spark from a cigarette or anything else would set it all on fire.

The truck driver was panic-stricken. He was yelling, "I'm going to die! I'm going to die!"

Then Jack did something he shouldn't have. He climbed through the broken windshield of that truck and curled himself next to the driver. He told him, "I'm here beside you, and I'm not going to leave you."

The next day Jack visited the truck driver in the hospital. The driver said, "Man, you are crazy. We could have both been killed yesterday. Why did you crawl into the cab with me?" Jack replied, "I don't know. It just seemed like the thing to do."

Jack crawled into that cab and risked his life because years ago an operating room nurse expressed love and a generous spirit to him. Generous people are generous because someone was generous to them. Who is more generous than God? Because God is generous to us, we can be generous. Jesus commands us to put God first in our lives.

A rich, young man ran up to Jesus. He knelt before him and asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:17) This is perhaps the most important question there is. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" In their conversation the man reveals that he has kept many of the major commandments since his youth. He has honored his parents. He has refrained from murder and adultery and stealing.

Jesus loved this man. Jesus wanted him to have eternal life. Jesus replied, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (10:21) Jesus realized that this rich man cared more about his possessions than about God. Jesus wanted this man to put God first. Jesus wanted this man to act on his faith, to do something.

The rich man was shocked. He would not do it. He turned away, grieving, for he had many possessions. (10:22)

Jesus never said, “Where your heart is, there will your treasure be.” He said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be.” (Matthew 6:21) Jesus was a realist. He knew that our affections and values are tied up with our financial commitments. People have got to do something before they change.

When Jesus said to the rich young man, “Sell what you have and give it to the poor,” do you think he said it simply because the poor needed help? No. He said it because he knew that the rich young man would undergo a spiritual, psychological change in that process.

Learning to give is one of the greatest things we can ever do, because we are transformed in the process of giving. It’s true that God loves a cheerful giver, but the reverse is also true. Giving makes people cheerful. What we do transforms our thinking and our feelings.

## TITHING HELPS ORDER OUR LIVES

God calls us to tithe our financial resources -- to give 10% of our income to God’s work in the world. God is also very interested in how we spend the other 90%. God wants us to be good stewards of the rest of our money. God wants us to be wise.

Consider these biblical stewardship principles: Get out of debt. Refrain from extravagant luxuries. Avoid wasting money on credit card interest rates. Be generous with our children. Learn to be content with less.

The apostle Paul wrote his younger helper Timothy: “There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with

these.” (I Timothy 6:6-8)

I have a responsibility to provide food, clothing and shelter for Melody, Andy and Sarah. That is part of my responsibility as a husband and father. Since Andy was eight months old, Melody and I have saved money, so that we could help Andy and Sarah attend college. I invest a portion of my time, energy and money in caring for my mother. That is part of what it means to honor your father and mother.

The Bible teaches us that God’s people are not to be mere consumers. That is the reason for the tithe and the Sabbath. We’re to depend on God and trust God to provide. While other nations worked seven days a week, Israel was to work six days and trust God for the seventh. We are to consume less than we make. We hear a contemporary cry at every Ralph Nader rally: “Consumerism is crushing America. There must be more than birth, consumption, and death.”

In our lifetime, debt has become the norm. It’s not uncommon for many young adults to have student loans, credit card debt, a cell phone bill, and a big car note and insurance premiums. Many young adults know more about moving their debt between multiple no-interest credit cards than they know about God’s view of money. When I counsel young couples preparing for marriage, I tell them the unnecessary pressure and burden that excessive debt places on a marriage. It doesn’t have to be that way. God doesn’t intend that.

In the context of biblical stewardship principles, tithing is not so much for the church as it is to order our lives. A person who says he can’t give, but who has a car payment, a cable TV subscription, and thousands of dollars in credit card debt needs a new, biblical attitude toward money. Once you start tithing, once you starting doing it, you soon realize that you can live off 90%. It is really a shift in thinking. If I have a dollar, I don’t have to spend 100 pennies. I can spend 90, and that’s still a lot. Better

yet, I can tithe 10 pennies, save 10 pennies and spend 80 pennies.

Money is a tool that helps us accomplish God's will in our lives. Money also helps us accomplish God's will through our church. One of the core values of our congregation is practicing stewardship of our resources. Our church's proposed mission is sharing Christ from the heart of Durham. We are able to fulfill that mission when you and I practice stewardship of our resources.

## WE CAN BE GENEROUS

I am convinced that most people want to be generous. Consider what generosity does. When you are a wise steward, it honors God. It relieves tension and gives you self-confidence. It eliminates guilt, enhances your Christian witness, and enables you to give more generously.

The secret to generosity is found in a song titled, "Give Thanks." Part of the lyrics are: "Let the poor say I am rich, because of what the Lord has done for us." It comes from this scripture: "You know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." (II Corinthians 8:9)

We are all rich because of what God has done for us. When we view ourselves as rich, we can be generous.

Joan Smith will never forget Easter of 1946. She was 14. Her younger sister, Ocy, was 12, and her older sister, Darlene was 16. They lived at home with their mother. Her father had died five years earlier, leaving Mom with seven school children to raise and no money. They learned what it was like to do without many things.

By 1946 her older sisters were married and her brothers had left home. A month before Easter the pastor of their church announced that a special Easter offering would

be taken to help a poor family. He asked everyone to save and give sacrificially.

When they got home, Joan and her family talked about what they could do. They decided to buy 50 pounds of potatoes and live on them for a month. This would allow them to save \$20 of their grocery money for the offering. Then they thought that if they kept their electric lights turned out as much as possible and didn't listen to the radio, they would save money on that month's electric bill. Darlene got as many house and yard cleaning jobs as possible, and Darlene and Joan babysat for everyone they could. For 15 cents they could buy enough cotton loops to make three pot holders to sell for \$1.

They made \$20 on potholders. That month was one of the best of their lives. Every day they counted the money to see how much they had saved. At night they would sit in the dark and talk about how the poor family was going to enjoy having the money the church would give them. They had about 80 people in church, so they figured that whatever amount of money they had to give, the offering would surely be 20 times that much. After all, every Sunday the pastor reminded everyone to save for the sacrificial offering.

The day before Easter, Ocy and Joan walked to the grocery store. The manager exchanged all of their change for 3 crisp \$20 bills and one \$10 bill. They ran all the way home to show Mom and Darlene. They had never had so much money before. That night they were so excited they could hardly sleep. They didn't care that they wouldn't have new clothes for Easter. They had \$70 for the sacrificial offering. They could hardly wait to get to church!

On Sunday morning the rain was pouring. They didn't own an umbrella, and the church was over a mile from their home, but it didn't seem to matter how wet they got. Darlene had cardboard in her shoes to fill the holes. The cardboard came apart, and her

feet got wet. But they sat in church proudly. Joan heard some teenagers talking about the Smith girls wearing their old dresses. Joan looked at them in their new clothes, and she felt rich.

When the sacrificial offering was received, they were sitting on the second row from the front. Mom put in the \$10 bill, and each of the children put in a \$20. As they walked home from church, they sang all the way.

At lunch Mom had a surprise for them. She had bought a dozen eggs, and they had boiled Easter eggs with their fried potatoes! Late that afternoon the pastor drove up in his car. Mom went to the door, talked with him for a moment. Then she came back with an envelope in her hand. They asked her what it was, but she didn't say a word. She opened the envelope and out fell a bunch of money. There were three crisp \$20 bills, one \$10 bill, and 17 \$1 bills. Mom put the money back in the envelope. They didn't talk. They just sat and stared at the floor. The sacrificial offering had been for them.

They had gone from feeling like millionaires to feeling like poor white trash. They knew they didn't have a lot of things that other people had, but Joan had never thought they were poor. That Easter she found out they were. The pastor had brought them the money for the poor family, so they must be poor. Joan didn't like being poor. She looked at her dress and worn-out shoes and felt so ashamed. She didn't even want to go back to church. Everyone there probably already knew they were poor!

They sat in silence for a long time. Then it got dark, and they went to bed. No one talked much during the next week. Finally on Saturday, Mom asked the girls what they wanted to do with the money. What did poor people do with money? They didn't know. They had never known they were poor.

They didn't want to go to church on Sunday, but Mom said they had to. At

church they had a missionary speaker. He talked about how churches in Africa made buildings out of sun dried bricks, but they needed money to buy roofs. He said \$100 would put a roof on a church. The pastor said, "Can't we all sacrifice to help these poor people?"

Joan's family looked at each other and smiled for the first time in a week. Mom reached into her purse and pulled out the envelope. She passed it to Darlene. Darlene gave it to Joan, and Joan handed it to Ocy. Ocy put it in the offering. When the offering was counted, the pastor announced that it was a little over \$100. The missionary was excited. He hadn't expected such a large offering from our little church. He said, "You must have some rich people in this church!" Suddenly it struck them! They had given \$87 of that "little over \$100."

They were the rich family in the church! Hadn't the missionary said so? From that day on, Joan was never poor again. She has always remembered how rich she is because she has Jesus!

We are all rich because we have Jesus. This week I invite you to pray about your commitments for 2007. Pray about your commitment to pray, and to attend our church. Pray about the areas in which you will serve. Pray about how you can sacrifice to give to the mission of Jesus Christ. We can all be generous when we realize that we are rich because we have Jesus. Hallelujah! Amen.