



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

2 Poland Manor
Poland, Ohio 44514
330-757-1547

October 23, 2016

A sermon by
Brent J. Eelman

"Commands, Camels, and Coins"

Mark 10: 17-31

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'¹⁸ Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.¹⁹ You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother."'²⁰ He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.'²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, '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.'²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*

23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!'²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another,* 'Then who can be saved?'²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'*

*28 Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.'²⁹ Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,*³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'*

A while back, I was in a conversation with a colleague who was my age. We were talking about our post ministry plans: traveling, fishing, hobbies, and actually sitting in worship with our spouses. In the course of the conversation he said, "Just think, only three more stewardship drives and then I can retire." The comment struck me as funny and I gave it a good laugh. But it was also revealing. It revealed a great deal about how clergy feel about the matter of money and funding our churches. Why are women and men called to the ministry? I have served on committees that examine the calls that young women and men experience to the ministry. When asked, "why do you feel called to become a pastor?" I have never heard anyone say, "I want to become a pastor because I want to run a stewardship campaign."

No, we are called to this profession because we want to care; to pray, to teach; to study; and to lead people in their spiritual lives. The damnable thing about ministry is that in order to do what we are

called by God to do,(preach, heal, teach, care, and pray), we also have to honor the hunger of the institution for financial resources. It is the bane of our profession, and the few who seem to thrive at it.

People in the pew are also familiar with the annual October drill. There are the standard stewardship sermon texts: "Jeremiah Purchases a Field", "the Widow's Mite", and the "Rich Young Ruler". Congregations, hearing these passages read from the pulpit, have a way of bracing themselves thinking, "Here comes the stewardship sermon." The commitment card must be in the mail. When you heard the scripture lesson today, and saw the title, I am sure that some of you must have thought: "Here it comes."

Do stewardship sermons honestly make a difference? I realize that I am committing pastoral heresy at this point, but I am not sure if there is a relationship between the stewardship sermon (no matter how good!) and the amount that is committed during the stewardship campaign.

We have just finished raising a large sum of money for the capital needs of this congregation, and as we anticipate the annual stewardship campaign that will follow in a few weeks, I want to re-examine the topic of stewardship in light of the biblical story I just read. I have three points: 1. We do it wrong. 2. How much we give is not what matters. 3. It is a matter of life and death. Do I have your attention?

I

We do it wrong. The church and religious institutions do a good job of raising funds. Of the total amount that is given to charities, churches and religious organizations receive the largest percentage. Americans also tend to be very generous in comparison to other countries, (although the amount is decreasing.) We do a reasonably good job of raising funds. But merely raising funds is not the stewardship that Christ taught.

I fear that the way we are approaching stewardship has made us one more eleemosynary institution asking for donations to support it. There is the YMCA, the Hospital, the Red Cross, the university or our college, and public broadcasting. (All of these are important institutions that are worthy of our support and contributions.) My concern: are we merely one more fundraising organization out there attempting to get a bite of the charity dollar? That is not what Jesus taught. We do it wrong. Stewardship, the stewardship that Christ taught, is not about setting a financial goal and reaching it. It is about a lifestyle change.

On the verge of retirement, I have vowed to keep myself in better physical condition, and honestly, for me, that means losing some weight. My health care plan provides for nutrition counseling, and during the first visit, she asked, "Do you want to lose weight, or do you want to change how you live? It was the right question. Losing weight was futile... I need to change my lifestyle. The Stewardship that Jesus taught, is not about merely raising funds for the church.... It is about developing a healthy lifestyle regarding our finances and our possessions.

II

Stewardship is not about how much we give. What *did* Jesus teach? When I read the stories of Jesus, I am struck by two things. First, money was his most popular topic. Second, when he taught about money and the stewardship of things, he never gave any direction on how much to give. That did not seem to matter. We all know the story of the widow who gave two copper coins. She gave the least amount of anybody and Jesus held her up as an example of good stewardship. In this story of the wealthy man, Jesus did not give the man a percentage or an amount to give. No. He told him to sell what he had and give it away.

The stewardship that Jesus taught does not center on what we give, but rather what we keep for ourselves. Stewardship is about our lifestyle. We keep a lot. We worry about the future and whether we will have enough. I do. So like squirrels gathering nuts before winter, we store stuff because we fear that we will need it: "Saving for a rainy day." What did Jesus say? "Do not be anxious about tomorrow. Consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air." God provides for them.

Stewardship means asking the hard question of our own lives. "What do I really need?" It is not about how much we give, but rather how much we keep. It is about how honestly we answer the questions, "What do I really need? And what should I keep for me?" When I am honest with myself, I realize that I need a lot less than what I have. The biblical stewardship of which Jesus taught, is a lifestyle. A lifestyle that examines not how much we give, but how much we keep for ourselves. When I think about it like that, I begin to understand why the man walked away dejected.

I wonder, would I? That is the question each of us needs to ask of ourselves. Would I walk away from Christ?

How true is the message of Hebrews: *"The word of God is living, active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints for marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*

I wonder, would I walk away too?

III

It is a matter of life and death. What was the question that prompted Jesus to tell the young man, "Go sell what you own and give it to the poor." The question was, "What must I do to inherit eternal life." Jesus was responding to a life and death question. Eternal life, the good life, the fulfilling life, is determined by what we keep. Why?

Because what we keep often gets in the way of our love for God and our relationships with our fellow human beings. Our possessions are powerful and can control our lives. We begin to live for them and they begin to determine our behavior. We become workaholics, consequently on those days when we are not working we are "play-aholics".

- Where is God in the midst of this?
- Where is the God whom we are called to love with our heart, our soul, and our mind?
- Is our "stuff" squeezing God out of our lives?

Our possessions, and our fealty to them, cause us to keep more time for ourselves and to tend our stuff... and so we give less to others: to our families, to the church, to serving those in need, to building up the community and enabling people to be reconciled to each other.

The question was not "How much should I give?" it was "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus did not give a doctrinal answer: "you have to believe this doctrine and this point of theology." No. He said... "obey the commandments" and "give."

The man walked away dejected because he had a lot, and he wanted to keep it for himself. For Christ, it is a matter of life and death.

Let me conclude by saying, if you love this church and you want to see it continue its ministry; if you love worshipping here, and if Poland Presbyterian Church is important enough to continue to exist, we need to support this stewardship campaign and be generous. There are unpleasant consequences if we don't.

My prayer is that you will be generous supporting PPC because, as imperfect as it is, it does wonderful things. With your new pastor, Paul Anderson due to be here in five weeks, PPC is on the verge of a new era... It is more important than ever. His ministry needs to take off like a rocket.... Not die on the launching pad for lack of fuel!

Christ invites us to go even further in our stewardship lives. To not merely be generous in our giving, but honest about what we need and what we keep for ourselves.

- Generous support is fund raising.
- Honesty in what we keep is stewardship.

This is the Good News.... Challenging, perhaps upsetting, but Good News nonetheless. We can join the rich man and walk away, or we can believe it, follow Christ, and live. Amen.