

"How to be Rich Without Worrying About It"
Matthew 6:19-33

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It was a cold February afternoon at a country funeral home; I stood beside a widow as she took the first look into the casket of her deceased husband. He had been one of the wealthiest men in the county. They had no children. There were no brothers or sisters, really no family at all. She seemed eerily alone as she touched her warm hand to his cold body. Then suddenly she said to me, "Howard, he's smiling! George is smiling! He always teased me about leaving all of his stuff for me to take care of and now he's laughing about it—even in the casket, he's laughing about it!" That happened nearly 30 years ago now. But I still remember it. I will never forget the look on that widow's face as she faced the facts of tending to her late husband's estate.

On our way to Holy Communion today, may I ask you a question? Do you have things or do things have you? Here in the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives some sound advice about how to be rich without worrying about it and here is what He says:

Choose your values carefully. A great debate is going on in America today about values. Politicians talk about family values. Considering the consistent personal scandals flowing out of Washington, we could use a little less talk and a lot more action.

It is impossible to walk into a business these days without seeing company values posted on a wall. These lofty statements of high idealism and customer satisfaction sound

great. But are they practiced as the bottom line of your business? Individuals write personal mission statements. Stephen Covey encouraged highly successful people to imagine they were attending their own funeral. Then he asked them to put into words what family, friends, and business associates would likely say about their values at their funeral.

Jesus had a simpler method of value clarification. He said, "Show me your checkbook. It will reveal the most important things in your life. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Money talks. It tells us where our passions lie. It reveals the things for which our hearts truly long. If you want to know what is most important to you, review the last six months of your spending habits. Then Jesus offered some warnings. He said, "Be careful." If you try to make temporal things eternal, you're likely to discover that moths have a taste for wool clothing as much as you do. "Things" like people, usually rust out before they wear out. Thieves can do away with a family fortune in one break in. Besides, who ever saw a U-Haul behind a hearse on the way to the cemetery.

The only stock market that never crashes is the one where streets are made of gold and residents never grow old. If you are really smart, you will open a retirement plan over there. The only way to take it with you is to spiritually express it ahead of you. For it's not with people's loud boasting or roll of stirring drums, but with deeds of love and mercy that the heavenly kingdom comes.

Then Jesus said something else. He said, the choice is yours; it's either/or. You've got to decide—you must choose which way it will be for you. We can hesitate making up our minds but we cannot hesitate making up our lives, for our lives get made up one way or the other. Isn't that what Joshua said? "Choose you this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua

24:15) Choose your values carefully for the choices you make determine the nature of your life.

Robert Fulghum, a Unitarian minister, sat down one day to write a creed for life. When he finished, he had written the now famous statement, "All I Ever Needed to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten." When the smoke settled from all his writings, he was a very rich man. An interviewer asked Robert one day, "What has changed since you became famous?" "Not much," said Fulghum. "I'm still living in the same house, I still drive the same car, I'm still married to the same wife and we have the same friends. I do stay on guard against greed though for I'm committed to serving God, not money. I did go out and buy a gravesite. I visit it quite often. Every time I sit there for a while, a voice says: Don't get lost here. Know where you're going." If you want to be rich without worrying about it, choose your values carefully for they will shape your life.

If you want to be rich without worrying about it, make your moments meaningful. "Here's how to do it," said Jesus. "Take a lesson from the birds of the air and the lilies of the field." Birds. Do you ever really take time to watch the birds? Occasionally, I just stop and watch them at work. Are they lazy freeloaders on society? Hardly. Beak by beak, they build a nest for their young in the most unlikely places and often before the nest is finished, a storm destroys it or a boy passes by and wreaks havoc with their orderly ways. I watch birds singing in the rain and I wonder, "What do they really have to sing about?" Their feathers are blowing in the wind; their bodies are shaking in the cold. If I were a bird, I would complain about my lot in life. What does it mean to be as free as a bird? I then remember this poem:

*Said the robin to the sparrow, I would really like to know
Why anxious human beings rush around and worry so.
Said the sparrow to the robin, Friend, I think that it must be*

That they have no heavenly Father, such as cares for you and me.

I have traveled a lot of interstates the last couple of weeks across Tennessee and Kentucky and some of Alabama. I've had a lot of time to think about the flowers of the field that are planted as wild flowers along the interstate highways. They don't primp or shop or go to hairdressers, yet Solomon in all of his glory, was not as beautiful as one of these. Unlike houseplants, these wild flowers get no special watering or tender loving care. They are just there to do only one thing—bloom where they are planted. In Jesus' day, faded flowers were thrown in the oven to start fires for dinner. If the Lord Almighty would make something as beautiful as a flower for its moment to bloom, could He not also make something beautiful out of this transient, temporary life of mine? "If you really want to be rich without worrying about it, consider the birds of the air and the flowers of the field," said Jesus.

What was Jesus trying to say? I think at least a couple of things. Jesus was saying, travel light in this world. Worry is a thin stream of fear that when encouraged, will cut a channel so wide that all our other thoughts will be drained.

I like the philosophy of 86-year-old Nadine Satir. She writes, "If I were going to live my life over, I'd travel lighter. I would make more mistakes. I'd limber up, be sillier, and take fewer things seriously. I'd take more chances, more trips, climb more mountains, swim more rivers, eat more ice cream and fewer beans. Perhaps I'd have more actual trouble but fewer imaginary ones. I was one of those people who would never go anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat and a parachute. If I had to live my life over, I'd travel lighter next time. I'd go barefoot earlier in the spring and I'd stay that way later in the fall. I'd go to more dances, ride more merry go rounds, and pick more daisies." If you want to be rich without worrying, travel light.

If you want to be rich without worrying about it, make today count. Flowers bloom for a moment, and then they're gone. Dolly, in a *Family Circus* cartoon, said, "Today is a gift. That's why we call it the present." Dolly is right, isn't she?

For a long time, I've lived with a simple motto: *I shall pass this way but once. Therefore, if there is any good I can do, any help I can render, any change I can make, let me do it—let me neither defer it nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.* Make today count. You may or may not have tomorrow. We only have this moment, this second, this life—it is God's gift to you. Are you making the most of it? If you want to be rich without worrying about it, make the most of the moment.

"One more thing," said Jesus, "if you want to be rich without worrying about it, **set your priorities on spiritual things.**" So He sums up this teaching with a profound statement. You ought to memorize it. Tuck it in your heart, and better than that, put it into your life. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these other things will be added unto you." Have you discovered in life how to put first things first? If you don't make first things first, the rest won't matter at all.

Florida State football coach, Bobby Bowden, played college baseball, he also loved to tell stories. One of Bobby's stories goes like this:

"When I was playing college baseball, I never hit a home run. Then one day, I hit a ball down the right field line into the corner. I rounded first base and the coach waved me on to second. I rolled around second and he was waving me on to third. Just as I came into third, the coach motioned me toward home plate. I was so excited when I crossed home plate, I could hardly stand it. All of my teammates came

running out of the dugout, patting me on the back, and giving me a high five.

Meanwhile, the pitcher tossed the ball to the first baseman who tagged first base. The umpire called me out because I'd missed the plate. Then the great coach said, "Gentlemen, if you don't take care of first base, the rest won't matter."

I say to you, my fellow Christian, if you don't take care of first base, then forget about the rest. Things will trouble you. They are going to be burdens to you. If you take care of first things first, the rest will find their way in the kingdom of God. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." Seek it with all your heart, your mind, your soul, and your strength.

Years ago, General William Booth founded the Salvation Army, which is still one of the greatest movements in the world. One day he was asked the secret of his success. William Booth said this: "God has all of me. There are people more intelligent than I, and there are people who have had better opportunities than I. But from the day I got the poor of London on my heart and caught the vision of what Jesus Christ could do for them, I made up my mind that God could have all of William Booth there was to have."

Seek ye first the kingdom of God. *I'll live for Him who died for me, how happy then my life shall be.* Have you learned to experience the wonder of that old hymn? I'll live for Him who died for me, how happy then my life will be. If you want to be rich without worrying about it, set your priorities on spiritual things. Make the most of every moment.

As you come to the Table today, cherish this moment; leave your anxieties at this altar. Determine by the grace of God to live your life in the light of eternity. This is my prayer for you. Amen.