

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 16
September 25, 2022
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
What money cannot buy

—Luke 16:19-31

Boeing. Bombardier. Dassault. Embraer. Falcon. Gulfstream. Those are just some of the manufacturers of jets that are owned by wealthy people. Some of the people are celebrities. Some of them are businesspeople. Some of them are royalty and nobility. They all possess vast wealth. They don't dress in purple and fine linen, but they do enjoy the finest things that money can buy. Good food. Comfortable living. And a private jet. Now, a private jet is not an evil thing. A private jet doesn't have a brain; it doesn't have a conscience. It doesn't make moral choices that are right or wrong. It's just a thing. Sometimes it's even more of a necessity than we might realize. (As an example, I don't think we would expect the President of the United States to fly commercial, would we?) At the end of the day, a private jet is just an inanimate object. So is money and so are other material things.

In fact, money is a blessing from God, and it can be a very good thing. Money can be a tool God gives us to meet our needs and solve problems. Do your kids need shoes? Money will let you buy them. Did your air conditioning break? Money gives you the means to fix it and stay cool. Do you need some time to relax? Money can pay for your vacation and let you get away. Are you sick or injured? Money can pay for a doctor. Do you want to build a Ministry Center or a church or a hospital or a homeless shelter or a library? Money is a means to make that happen. This past week we came back from our trip to Germany, where we saw beautiful, ornate churches. Those houses of worship were built with money, and they were built to the glory of God. Money is a blessing.

But it's also precisely because money is so powerful in this world that it can cause so many problems. Money and things can own you. They can be your master and you, their slave. A very prominent source of conflict in many marriages is money. It causes trust issues, power and control issues. Money can become your god. You can worship it. You can trust it to solve your problems. You can love it. You can fear not having it. You can envy those who do have it. And then money drives a wedge between us and God. Then money and things cause us to stumble and sin. And then, if left unchecked, money and things will drag us straight to hell. And the slavery to things and the worship of Mammon can be so subtle that we don't even realize when we've been consumed by greed and materialism. Like a drug addict hooked on an addictive substance or an alcoholic hooked on booze we might have ourselves convinced, "I'm not hooked on money and things. I can let go any time." And just like the druggie or the alcoholic we're fooling ourselves, because we're so addicted to the good life—to all the pleasure and things that money can buy—that we don't even realize our focus is no longer on Jesus, repentance is not on our radar, and hell is waiting.

At first glance the moral of the story that Jesus tells seems quite clear: Rich people go to hell, and poor people go to heaven. Simple, right? No, that's not at all what Jesus is teaching us. After all, there is another rich person in the story: the patriarch Abraham. Abraham was very wealthy in his day, and Abraham is in heaven. So not all rich people are enemies of God, and not all poor people are faithful servants of Jesus. Scripture says, "The *love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). Last week we heard Jesus say, "You cannot serve both God and mammon." Today Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, who "loved money" (v. 14) and were sneering at Jesus. The difference between these two men is not about their wallet, it's about their heart. The rich man was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day; those were just outward indications of what was on the inside. He loved the good life. He loved his stuff. He loved the things money could buy. His heart was consumed by his luxurious surroundings. The condition of his heart is revealed by his attitude toward the beggar who was laid at his gate. The rich man couldn't spare the money to set a meal before the poor man or to buy salve for Lazarus' wounds.

The contrast between these two men is stark, and it's not just the contrast between rich and poor. The rich man was all about *now*, today, this life, this existence. The poor man Lazarus had nothing to hold onto in this life. Life itself was not worth clinging to. His health failed him. His present existence was miserable. He could only hope for a better life in the world to come. Poor Lazarus was so crushed by this life that he had only one way to look: up, to his God, his Savior, his hope, his confidence for deliverance. The wealth of the rich man was all a superficial façade, for on the inside this man was spiritually destitute. The poverty of the poor man was only temporary before his trust in his Savior God brought him out of this miserable, temporal existence into the glory of heaven. It was only a matter of time before each of these men crossed the threshold of death, and their true condition was revealed.

Death is real; it awaits every one of us. Judgment is real; it too awaits us all. Then comes the verdict upon each human being and the sentence that will be meted out to each person and carried out forever. Heaven is real, the destiny of those who are righteous in Christ. Hell is real, the destiny of all who die in spiritual poverty.

The miserable earthly existence of Lazarus the beggar came to an end. "The time came when the beggar died, and the angels carried him to Abraham's side." What a beautiful moment for this man! All his suffering was over, and it would never be repeated. The pain of a decaying body, the hunger in the pit of his stomach, the shame and reproach, the sorrow he had experienced in this life evaporated like a fading dream. In the words of the hymn:

A moment's space, and gently, wondrously released from earthly ties,
Elijah's chariot comes to carry me through all these lower skies
To yonder shining regions, while down to meet me come
The blessed angel legions to bid me, "Welcome home!"

Jesus calls it "Abraham's side," this place of eternal peace and rest. It's another name for heaven, the home of the faithful servants of God who fought the good fight and died in the faith. Lazarus was faithful to the point of death, and he was given a crown of life to experience joy and ecstasy and bliss that will continue forever.

"The rich man also died and was buried." The rich man who loved and served mammon is clad in purple and fine linen no longer. Now finds himself standing naked before the Judge. His master Mammon cannot save him, and the God whom he brushed off in this life now stands as his Judge in the next. He is cast into outer darkness, the fiery lake of burning sulfur, the place of everlasting torment. His situation will never change. There is no escape from the eternal fire. There will be no parole, no commuting of the sentence, no get-out-of-jail free card that will ever release him from his horrific suffering. He cries out in anguish, seeking only a drop of water to cool his tongue, because he is in agony. But there is no reprieve. It's too late. This life's time of grace has passed, and an eternity of God's wrath is all he can ever expect—torment that will never end.

Money can buy a lot of things, but money cannot buy a ticket to heaven. That's because we ourselves have fallen into the trap of greed and selfish ambition. We have loved God and our neighbor less, and we have loved money and things and ourselves more. We have wanted and worried and fretted about money. We have held onto it greedily and we have spent it foolishly. We need a Savior to wash away our sins, otherwise our sins would condemn us to eternal fire. We need Jesus, who redeemed us from our sins not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death. Jesus carried our sins in his body on the tree of the cross. He himself suffered the horrors of hell, so that we don't have to. Repent of sin, let go of your tight grip on money and things, and hold on tightly to Jesus. With him you have forgiveness, a place in heaven, eternal life.

Some people say that wealth changes people, but I'm not sure if that's true. What I have seen is that money is like a magnifying glass that amplifies the character of the person who controls it. More or less money makes you more or less of who you already are. A person who is poor and is greedy, stingy or foolish with their money—that person won't change when they become wealthy. Scripture says, "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income" (Ecclesiastes 5:10). That's why so many people who win big lottery prizes end up back in poverty a short time later. On the other hand, someone who is giving and generous with the little bit of wealth he has will become even more of a philanthropist and find new ways to demonstrate generosity with greater wealth. That's the joy of being a Christian: we get to be generous, kind, giving. We get to use what God has placed into our hands to help others. Learn to give! Learn to be generous. Give, and give, and then give some more. Don't give until it hurts. Give until it feels good! Give until you find joy in your giving! Use what you've been given to honor God and to help your neighbor.

There's one more lesson for us to learn from Jesus' story. The rich man cries out to Abraham that he has five brothers, and he wants Lazarus to go visit his brothers—to come back from beyond the grave—and warn them, so that they won't also come to the place of eternal torment. Abraham's response is simple: "They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to them." "Moses and the Prophets" refers to Holy Scripture. God's plan of salvation, the path to eternal life is clearly laid out in the Holy Bible. It's all right here in black on white, spelled out clearly for everyone to read and to appropriate. God doesn't promise some miraculous sign from heaven. He's not going to send an apparition from the beyond the grave to teach people spiritual truths. God speaks through his holy Word, the law that convicts us and the gospel that saves us. It's all right here. And the truth is found nowhere else but right here. It tells you about God's love for you, his forgiveness through Jesus, and his gift of eternal life. Those are things money cannot buy. Amen.