

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

The 2018 midterm elections are fast approaching. People are interested in pocketbook issues, we're told, and they vote those interests. Whatever happened to "vote your doctrine"?

Lottery fever is sweeping across the nation with the Mega Millions lottery up over \$1.5 billion and the Powerball a measly \$600 million. I view the whole thing as a voluntary tax. Of course, the odds of winning are not good, and it's true, you've got to play to win. I suppose the fun of it is to dream of what you can do with all those millions when you win. Sadly, the reality is not at all like the dreams, with many lottery winners squander their winnings like the prodigal son and end up in bankruptcy—destitute.

In the church, prosperity preachers live in mansions and jet around in their own personal aircraft, having bilked their hearers out of millions of dollars by preaching the victorious life filled with every desire of your heart, if only you believe enough—like they do. For these crooked preachers, your material prosperity is a measure of your Christianity, God blessing the "on fire" Christian with wealth, while the lukewarm Christian languishes in mediocrity or even poverty.

What a misguided view of money and possessions!

It's October and time for our stewardship emphasis. Actually, our stewardship Sunday won't be until November, but these texts might seem like the perfect opportunity for a sermon on stewardship. After all, most people think of stewardship only in terms of money. But that's thinking too narrowly. Your stewardship is more than what you place in the offering plate or the check you send to the church. It's really about how you live your life as a Christian. And that's more than money and possessions.

Of course, today's Gospel lesson has money and possessions in full view. Today's lesson follows immediately after last week's Gospel, and you'll recall that a young man inquired of Jesus how to inherit eternal life, but went away from Jesus hanging his head, disheartened. Why? Because "*he had great possessions*" Mark tells us (Mark 10:22). Because he was rich. Why did he leave? Because Jesus asked him to "*sell all that you have and give to the poor*" and then, to "*follow me*" (Mark 10:21). Why did he leave? Because the man's earthly treasure was more important to him than "*treasure in heaven*" (Mark 10:21).

If it sounds a bit idolatrous, you're right. It is. And how easy it is to recognize that in someone else—in this rich young man, and not in our selves. Repent!

Luther teaches in the Large Catechism that "to have a God is nothing other than trusting and believing ... with the heart [that from which we are to expect all good and

in which we are to take refuge in all distress].” Again, he says “whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god” (Luther, LC, Part I:2-3).

We need to remember, when it comes to money, your heart is also in play. It’s a first commandment issue, for Jesus reminds us that the “*great and first commandment*” is “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind*” (Matt. 22:37-38). And earlier, Jesus had warned: “*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*” (Matt. 6:19-21). And His warning continues: “*No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money*” (Matt. 6:24).

“Oh, there goes Pastor again, talking about the evils of money. Does he want us all to be paupers?” Not at all! It’s not about the money; it’s about your heart! It’s about your soul.

Money, itself, in fact, is not evil. Jesus Himself commends the paying of taxes with money, even money with a likeness of Caesar and an inscription from him (Matt. 22:15ff). And I’ll bet that inscription wasn’t “In God we trust.” In fact, Jesus exhorted the people to render “*to God the things that are God’s,*” namely, our hearts, our fidelity. Jesus commended the widow for her sacrificial giving, saying, “*this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box*” (Mark 12:43). Jesus is not opposed to money; He just wasn’t consumed by it. So, when He was asked about the temple tax, He sent His disciples out to fish and to take a shekel from a fish’s mouth to pay the tax (Matt. 17:27).

Nor is St. Paul against money. Paul commends churches for their generosity to him (Phil. 4) and to other congregations (2 Cor. 8). Not only that, but he instructs those who have been blessed with earthly wealth to share what they have (1 Tim. 6:17ff). Paul is not so much concerned with money, but the “*love of money*” which is “*a root of all kinds of evils.*” He’s concerned with idolatry, warning “*those who desire to be rich*” of the cravings for money that cause people to wander away from the faith and that “*plunge people into ruin and destruction*” (1 Tim. 6:9-10). That’s why Jesus says it’s so “*difficult... for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!*” It’s why it’s “*easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.*”

Paul’s concern was for the heart and the soul and the mind. After all, “*we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world*” (1 Tim. 6:7). Or as Solomon said it: “*As he came from his mother’s womb he shall go again, naked as he came*” (Eccl. 5:15). In fact, though we don’t wish it on anyone,

sometimes it takes a disaster—hurricane, flood, tornado, fire—to remind Christians that we have something far more precious than our possessions awaiting us.

We have treasure awaiting us in heaven, but to attain it we must follow after the One who set aside His riches and became poor for our sake, taking on our flesh, taking on our sin, taking on our punishment, so that we, by His poverty, might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9)—not rich with silver and gold, but rich in grace and faith and love, rich in the forgiveness of our sins, rich in wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, rich in life everlasting.

We're talking, of course, about Divine intervention. That's what it took for these heavenly treasures to be made available to mankind. It took God becoming man; it took God dying on a cross; it took God taking up His own life again — for the life of the world. And it takes even more Divine intervention to make these treasures our own, to take our hearts set on earthly treasure and redirect them to the heavenly, to take our idolatrous hearts and turn them toward Jesus. It takes Divine intervention to do the impossible, to get us camels through the eye of a needle, to bring us to the point of leaving *“house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for [Jesus'] sake and for the gospel.”* It takes the Holy Spirit calling by the Gospel, enlightening by His gifts, bringing us to faith, and sanctifying and keeping us in that faith. It's not our doing; it's the gift of God.

Jesus is interested in the heart. He does not countenance idolatry. He doesn't ask you to get yourself through the eye of a needle — that's impossible, and He knows it. He doesn't even expect you to believe on your own — that's impossible, too, for man. So He does it. He who saved the world by His cross, saves YOU by sending the Holy Spirit to work through His word, through the waters of Holy Baptism, through His body and blood given at His table, to bring us to repentance for our idolatry, and to trust in Jesus as the One from whom we can “expect all good and in [whom] we are to take refuge in all distress.” That is, to trust in God—not politicians, or lotteries, or shyster preachers, but that we might call Jesus God, Redeemer, Savior, Lord. God grant us that faith.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.