

“Blessed to Be a Blessing: Blessed with Money”
Proverbs 22:1-9 & Luke 21:1-4

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Note: It's a common belief that the Proverbs were written by King Solomon who was known to be exceptionally wise¹. This means that the Proverbs would have to have been written during Solomon's lifetime (968-928 BC) which is unlikely. Scholars believe that most of the Proverbs were actually written after the exile to Babylon (587- ~539 BC) because of the vocabulary and structure used, and the way in which even the words are spelled.² The Proverbs were collected and used to teach insights about how to live our lives.

I confess right up front this morning that the book of Proverbs drives me crazy. I much prefer “the anti-Proverbs” book of Ecclesiastes which we'll look at next Sunday.

The Proverbs are often lifted up as a collection of wholesome, some would say “old-fashioned” sayings that teach us how to live. For example: *Do not withhold discipline from your children; if you beat them with a rod, they will not die.*³ Actually, if you beat your children with a rod, they might indeed die. People who live by that proverb today will find Child Protective Services knocking at their door.

Those of us who see life as *a cause-and-effect kind of experience* (if you smoke, then you'll get cancer; if you work hard, then you'll retire comfortably someday) will probably find the Proverbs to our liking. If we see life as *a more random experience* – (we know people with cancer who ate all their vegetables and never smoked, or we know some hard-working people who can't seem to catch a break) then we might roll your eyes when we read some of these Proverbs.

But the purpose of Proverbs is to teach us insights and wisdom in order to have a balanced, reserved, moral life.

There is common wisdom about Friendship: *Do not associate with hotheads.*⁴

There is wisdom about the Perils of Laziness: *One who is slack in work is close kin to a vandal.*⁵

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¹ Proverbs 1:1 begins “The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel . . .”

² See Christine Yoder's book *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*. Walter de Gruyter: Berlin, 2001 or Lamontte Luker's book *Passion, Vitality, and Foment: The Dynamics of Second Temple Judaism*. Trinity Press: Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 2001 if you really want to delve into this subject!

³ Proverbs 22:13

⁴ Proverbs 22:24

⁵ Proverbs 18:9

There are also numerous warnings about Loose Women which apparently was a big problem in those days: *(She) comes toward him . . . wily of heart. She is loud and wayward; her feet do not stay home . . .*⁶ Apparently there were not many loose men. At least there are no proverbs about them.

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One of the big problems with these Proverbs in general is that some of them are simply not true. Or at least they aren't true *anymore*. Like this one:

***The person who lives alone is self-indulgent,
showing contempt for all who have sound judgment.***⁷

All of us know people who live alone and are actually quite lovely and generous souls.

Or how about this proverb from today's lesson:

***The reward for humility and fear of the LORD
is riches and honor and life.***

The problem with this one is that it's also possible to acquire riches and honor and life if you have no humility and you don't fear God. Think Donald Trump.

And what about this first verse?

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches . . .

This is a nice one. Long, long ago when I was a teenager leaving the house on a Friday or Saturday night, my father's last words to me were always this: "You're leaving home tonight with a good name; make sure you bring it back." The author of this Proverb clearly felt the same way.

Unfortunately, there are many who believe that riches are what *make* a name great. Consider these: Buffett, Gates, Hilton, Rockefeller, Mellon.

The Proverbs say many things about money – some ring true and some don't, but before we take a look at the poor widow in Luke's Gospel, there are a couple of truisms in the Proverbs about money and wealth that I want us to consider. Take another look at Verse 2:

***The rich and the poor have this in common:
the LORD is the maker of them all.***

⁶ Proverbs 7:10-11

⁷ Proverbs 18:1

Rich or poor, righteous or unrighteous – God made us all.

Donald Trump and even some of us might question whether or not it is God who creates the *wealth* for people. But most of us would agree that we believe God indeed creates *the people*.

And we can probably all agree with verse 7:

The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender.

Ask anyone who sends big checks to Capital One every month. Debt enslaves us.

But take a look at verse 9. This is a deceptively radical proverb.

Some of us might say that “*Those who are wealthy are blessed*” believing in a theology of prosperity – that if we are rich it’s because we’ve been faithful. Unfortunately, this is actually a dangerous heresy not supported by anything Jesus ever said. (But that’s for another sermon.)

This verse says: *Those who are **generous** are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.* They might be rich, they might be poor themselves. They might have absolutely nothing to share *but* a little bread. But those who are generous – with whatever they have – are blessed.

Which brings us – at last – to the unnamed poor widow in Luke’s gospel.

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The story of the poor widow who put her last two coins into the temple treasury is sometimes called *The Story of the Widow’s Mite* – that’s m-i-t-e. On the cover of today’s bulletin, there is a picture of “the widow’s mite” –two copper coins like the ones that the widow would have tossed into the treasury.

And that toss would have made some noise.⁸

The “treasury” was actually a metal container shaped like an upside-down trumpet – wide at the top and narrow at the bottom, so that there was a big opening for flinging your money inside, but a slender collection area to prevent arms from reaching deep down and stealing the coins.

⁸ Today during the Children’s Story, we introduced a new children’s offering called The Joyful Noise Offering of which 50% will benefit the hospital in Pignon, Haiti and 50% will benefit the A.L.I.V.E. House for women and children in Alexandria. We will collect coins every Sunday by tossing them in special steel buckets, making as much of “a joyful noise” as we can. See Psalm 100.

There were 13 such “treasuries” in the Temple Court of the Women all around the room. And so, we can imagine all the clanging and pinging of the coins as they were tossed into the containers. The Court of the Women would have been a loud place to pray.

Perhaps there were wealthy women who used their skirts to carry their money into the temple because they had so many coins that it was easier than trying to carry the coins in their hands.

Imagine then, this poor widow with only two copper coins in her hand. In Greek, these coins were called “lepta”⁹ and we know that the lepton was the smallest Greek coin in circulation, worth about a half a penny each. If all she had was worth about a penny, then this woman was definitely poor.

We don’t know much about this woman, but we do know this: widows in the First Century were especially vulnerable citizens. Because they were without husbands, they had no income. But later in the Bible, we hear about so-called “true widows.”¹⁰

“True widows” according to Paul were the ones who had not only lost their husbands, but they also had *no* sons, *no* brothers, no other relatives at all who might help them. Chances are that this woman with only two lepta left to her name was a “true widow.” In her poverty, she could have simply tossed her last two coins into the treasury thinking, “What’s the use? My life is over.”

But as Jesus was observing her giving her two copper coins, he clearly saw in her – not despair, not resignation – but faith. She was giving lavishly, extravagantly – far more extravagantly than the wealthy people around her who came in with sacks full of money.

Nobody would have even noticed her, if Jesus hadn’t noticed her. This poor widow would have been invisible to the average worshipper. She didn’t have much to offer.

But in fact, she offered it all.

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There aren’t many churches that require members to give a tithe anymore. That’s 10% of our earnings. And of course, people debate whether this means 10% of our gross or our net income. We get all wrapped up in these details rather than the spiritual meaning of it all.

The Mormons still give 10% of their income apparently. Some Baptists and other like-minded denominations expect 10% from their members.

⁹ One coin would be a *lepton*. Two are *lepta*.

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 5:3, 5, 16.

But very few of us give anywhere near 10%. It sounds like an awful lot, but when Moses told the Israelites to give a tithe – 10% of all their yield¹¹, God was being most extravagant with us.

It's God who gives us the capacity to work. Everything we have is – in some way – due to God's blessings heaped upon us. ***We get to keep 90%*** even though *we owe it all* to God. This is extremely generous, don't you think?

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Will Willimon – one of the great preachers alive today – used to be the primary preacher at Duke Chapel, that enormous Gothic cathedral on the campus of Duke University. He mentioned once, in a sermon, that only 16% of the Duke faculty gave to the United Way that year. And of those, 3% gave *a penny*. It would register that they had participated, but they clearly were more interested in getting their names on a list somewhere than helping all the people served by the United Way.

On that same Sunday, Willimon said that if the congregation present was as reserved as it usually is, they would contribute a weekly offering a comparable to the offering collected at the average 100 member church.¹² Not much extravagance there.

Duke Chapel seats 1600 people and they are usually well-dressed and proper folks, and when Willimon was preaching, the pews were usually packed to capacity. It costs \$2.00 to park there, but most of those gathered would give *less than \$2.00* to assist the church that served *them* and so many others so well.

And in spite of this kind of reserved giving, we have all known people who have felt so passionately about something, so thoroughly blessed that have given amazing amounts toward things they care about.

Where the Proverbs teach us to be reserved and balanced, those who give lavishly are often considered *imbalanced*. Willimon noticed one Sunday that one of his favorite parishioners – an older man who rarely missed a Sunday – was not in worship. He learned later that Mr. Smith had moved into a nursing care facility, which was very strange.

Mr. Smith seemed healthy the last time Willimon had seen him. He seemed to have all his faculties, all his usual abilities to move around. In his retirement, Mr. Smith had volunteered at a soup kitchen sponsored by the church and he was passionate about that program.

¹¹ See Deuteronomy 14:22ff.

¹² From "An Extravagant Lifestyle" by William Willimon, preached at Duke University Chapel on November 9, 1997.

But Mr. Smith's children were so worried about him that they committed him to a nursing home not because he was sick, but because he was generous – so generous, they thought he must be imbalanced. He must be losing his mind.

One day, so overcome by the needs in that soup kitchen, Mr. Smith wrote a check to them for \$100,000. What else could his children do but commit him to a nursing home. He must have lost his mind.

And Willimon closes that sermon with this question: What could I do? Was I supposed to go to those grown children and recite the Bible to them? “ ‘*All of them contributed out of their abundance, but he out of his poverty has put in everything he had, all he had to live on.*’ One must be moderate in these matters.”¹³

The Proverbs teach us how to “be good people” which is the goal of many of us. We want to be “good people.” Obviously you don't have to be a Christian to be a “good person.” Some of the best, most moral people I know are not religious people.

But Jesus was interested in something more. All those coming into the temple that day were probably “good people” in one way or another. But Jesus was interested in making *the world* “good.”

Jesus spent his life trying to make the world good.

This only happens when people don't just sit back and count in their blessings. It happens *when we make sacrifices towards something we are passionate about*. This is not about giving because of guilt or to get our names on some list somewhere. This is about giving extravagantly, lavishly, lovingly because we believe this is one way the world can be changed.

There is so much I want to say about debt here. Many of us cannot begin to give generously because we have enormous debts to pay off. The most wonderful thing about *not* having debt is that we are free to give spontaneously when a need comes along.

A friend is running in the AIDS marathon? We might actually have a couple hundred dollars to support her.

A family is wiped out after Hurricane Katrina? Maybe we can pull together a chunk of money to help fund an apartment for the next year so that at least one family doesn't have to worry for a whole year about where they will live.

My friends, this kind of giving *changes things*. It changes the world.

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¹³ Ibid.

And one final story about something else that changes the world.

Once again we are going to baptize a small child this morning. And who doesn't love to witness an infant baptism? They are sweet and moving and if we are lucky, the child will make joyful noises. But there is so much more to this than a sentimental moment.

Baptism is an extravagant act, the extravagant act of parents and a church. Let me explain with one last Willimon story from his days at Duke.¹⁴

One day, in his study, the phone rang and it was an angry father absolutely furious with Dean Willimon. "It's all your fault!" the father bellowed into the phone.

"Excuse me?" said Willimon.

"It's all your fault! We sent our daughter to Duke to become a doctor! The third generation of doctors in our family. She made the grades. She worked hard. She was well on her way," said the father. But then she goes down to that school and listens to your sermons, and now she wants to be a missionary. A missionary! It's all your fault!"

"Actually," said Willimon calmly, "It's your fault."

"Mine?" said the father. "How could it be my fault?"

"You're the one who had her baptized," Willimon said. "You're the one who stood in front of your church and promised to raise her in the faith."

"But we're Presbyterians!" the father said. In other words, this father was saying that *we do things decently and in order* – like the Proverbs teach us.

My friends, even Presbyterian Christians find themselves so overwhelmed by *their* blessings and *God's* lavish love that *they cannot help* but bless someone else by giving their money, by giving all they have – maybe even their whole lives to ***making the world good***.

We have as our model a loving God who was willing to let us keep 90% of everything he gives us, who was even willing to give his own Son if it would help make the world good. That's what I call lavish and passionate giving.

Let us Pray:

O Lord, who has taught us that to gain the whole world and to lose our souls is great folly, grant us the grace so to lose ourselves that we may truly find ourselves anew in the life of grace. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

¹⁴ Thanks to Rob Ross for sharing this story with me recently.

— Reinhold Niebuhr