

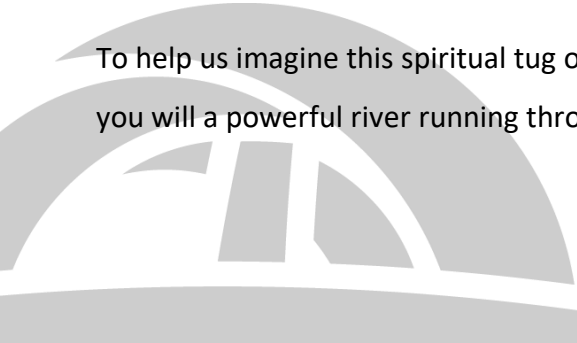
Swimming Against the Current
Pastor Peter Strommen

Luke 18:18-30 NRSV

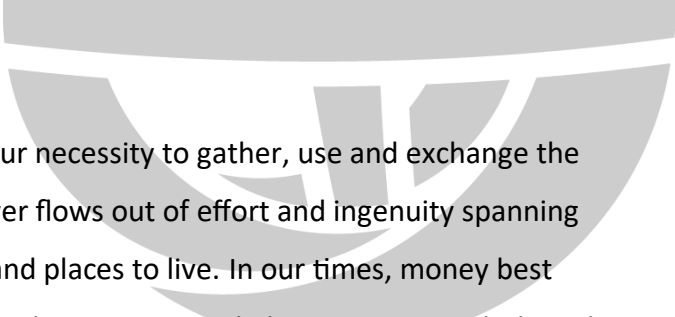
¹⁸A certain ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁹Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ²⁰You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.'" ²¹He replied, "I have kept all these since my youth." ²²When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." ²³But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. ²⁴Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵Indeed, 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." ²⁶Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷He replied, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God." ²⁸Then Peter said, "Look, we have left our homes and followed you." ²⁹And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, ³⁰who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life."

Jesus is approached by an earnest young seeker who is very rich. What stops his seeking is a painful self-discovery. He wants eternal life, but the invitation Jesus gives is too costly. He walks away very sad—his wealth is too precious. He cannot let go of it—even for eternal life.

Our focus this morning is on the relationship between our desire for wealth, and our journey following Jesus. Jesus talks a lot about this in scripture, as the value and security of money sings a captivating siren song, often seducing our heart's devotion.



To help us imagine this spiritual tug of war, I'd like to borrow an image from author Richard Rohr. Picture if you will a powerful river running through most every person individually, as well as through all of us as a




society. This is an important river, because it flows out of our necessity to gather, use and exchange the earth's resources in order to live and thrive. This mighty river flows out of effort and ingenuity spanning thousands of years, shaping our very lives and economies and places to live. In our times, money best represents this river, because of its power to buy and create, but in times and places past, it might have been cattle, furs, or gold. This river runs through us because everyone needs it to live. And Jesus never rejects money for its own sake: "Your heavenly Father knows you need these things," he says in the Sermon on the Mount.

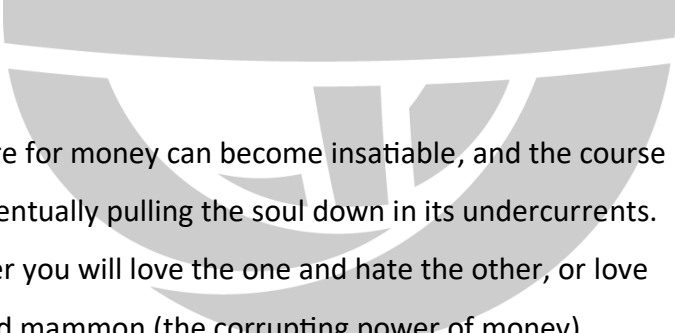
But here's the challenge: This great river has POWER. For good, yes, but also for evil. When it becomes our "god," it rages over its banks and floods the human community—benefiting some and diminishing, even destroying others. When the river of money has this kind of power, it's undercurrents pull our souls under the surface. We wouldn't dare swim in certain currents of real rivers, but humanity often is swept away by the undercurrents of money and the love of it.

But Rohr's analogy includes a second river. This river is underground and less noticeable at first, but as we mature, we begin to realize its power—the river of our soul. As Christ followers, we symbolize this river right here in our sanctuary. It begins and ends with God's grace. Its source symbolized in the waters of baptism, and winding its way as our journey of faith, through both blessing and suffering, toward the hope of the resurrection, and sustained by the promises of God through Jesus Christ.

This river has a different currency—God's grace, the forgiveness of sins, the gifts of faith, hope and love, the work of the Holy Spirit and promise of eternal life. These can't be bought with our money. They are gifts given. And when received in faith, our life journey is shaped. Nothing has a greater influence on the course of life than what we believe and value.

HERE IS THE CHALLENGE. GOD MUST BE GOD. Only God can give life. At the heart of scripture—its very heart—is this conviction: the key to life begins and ends with God as God. What flows from the love of God is love for others and self, and a respect for creation. The river of soul, directed by God, puts a stamp on all other rivers, including the mighty river of money.





But in our world, that's often not the way it goes. Our desire for money can become insatiable, and the course of our lives pulled along by currents of money as "god," eventually pulling the soul down in its undercurrents. Jesus put it like this: "you cannot serve two masters....either you will love the one and hate the other, or love the other and hate the first. You cannot serve both God and mammon (the corrupting power of money).

Let's now turn to THE STORY in Luke.

The rich man is sincere - -Matthew and Mark's telling even insert that Jesus "loved him."

"GOOD MASTER", he asks, "WHAT SHALL I DO TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE?"

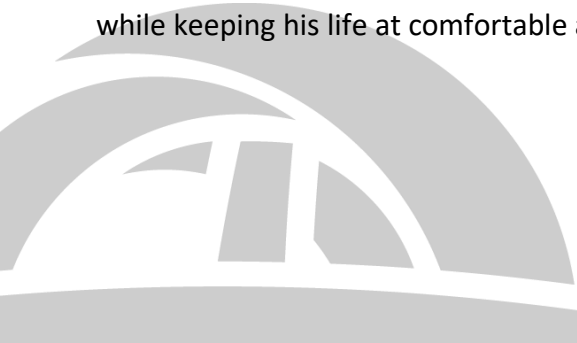
In some ways the question is oddly phrased. If you inherit something, it's a gift given. You don't have to do anything. But this man asks: what must I DO to INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE?

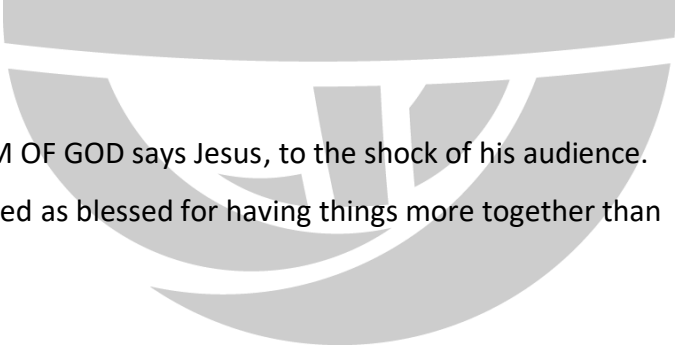
When Jesus asks about the commandments, the man quickly says in effect, "been there, done that" - -I've done them since my youth. Does he see himself as coming without blemish? So what is he asking then? He keeps the law. It almost seems like he wants to learn the secret of knowing what to do, as if there is something he can do, all within his control, to secure eternal life.

JESUS' ANSWER SHAKES UP THE RICH MAN AND THE LISTENERS. You lack one thing," he says, "go sell everything you own, and give the money to the poor and you will have treasures in heaven, and then come follow me."

(Let's understand here, this is not a formula for salvation. Jesus did not ask this of everyone, nor should we see it as a formula for being a Christian. He asks it here, out of what he perceives in this man's heart.) His invitation to follow seems to get lost in the "go sell and give to the poor." It's the selling part that everyone hears, and it's upsetting to listen to, (I think) because if we put ourself in his position what would we do?

Suddenly his face is downcast, and he is filled with sadness. This young man, who is very rich, discovers something about himself: his riches are more important to him than the eternal life he is seeking. He can't acquire eternal life without it changing him. And like so many of us, he seems to have wanted eternal life, while keeping his life at comfortable arm's length from God.





HOW HARD IT IS FOR A RICH MAN TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD says Jesus, to the shock of his audience. THEN WHO CAN BE SAVED? They reply. The rich were viewed as blessed for having things more together than most.

FOR PEOPLE THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE, BUT NOT FOR GOD. FOR NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR GOD.

Ok, now we get a glimpse of what's going on. We humans can't engineer eternal life ourselves, even if we are rich and powerful. In fact, the hubris that often goes with greed, a common corollary of wealth, actually blinds the soul to its need for grace. Only God can save the human heart.

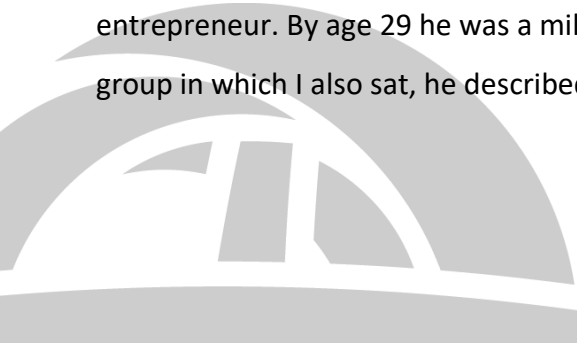
PETER points out, "WHAT ABOUT US? We have left everything?" And here comes A SURPRISING TWIST. Jesus not only promises eternal life, but also adds many earthly blessings as well!

This conversation is not about whether God gives blessings. God does. It's about their place in the order of things. If we are talking about the soul's journey—our "spiritual journey"—this can only be given by God. Other "gods" won't do. We are showing up at the wrong address for life's purpose when we knock on their doors.

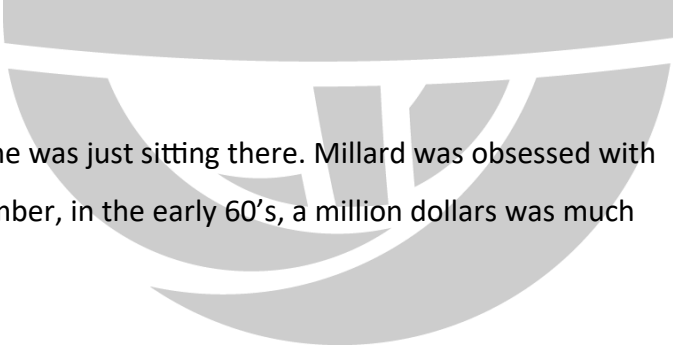
In our faith, all the other powerful rivers that can dominate our human existence flow in their proper course only when they are not made into our heart's obsession. They can be our loves, but not our highest love. Only God can be God, and only in God can the other things fall into proper place in this "underground river" of our souls. The most important river that runs through us is our journey following Christ Jesus.

A TRUE STORY

Millard was his first name, born in Alabama during the depression. His family barely eked out a living, and young Millard hated being poor, and resolved to become rich someday.



Bright and likable, he managed to work his way through college, later law school, but soon found his gift as an entrepreneur. By age 29 he was a millionaire, married and living in a nice home. When he told his story to a group in which I also sat, he described how each night after supper, he would sit in his living room and actually



calculate the money he was making that very night, while he was just sitting there. Millard was obsessed with his success and being rich and becoming richer. And remember, in the early 60's, a million dollars was much more money than it is today.

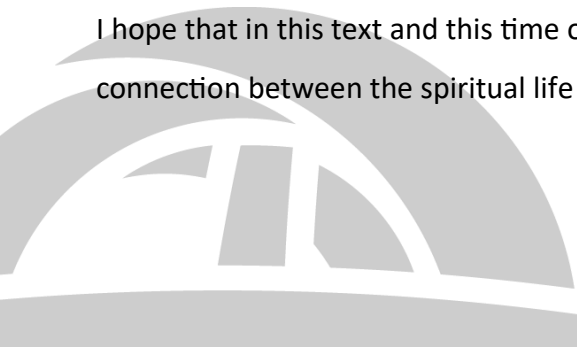
One night when he came home from work and went into his bedroom to change clothes, he noticed that his wife's clothes were not there. Going into the kitchen, yelling out her name, he saw a note on the kitchen table. "Dear Millard," it read. "I'm leaving you. I'm now living with my parents. You are not the same man I married. I can't stand living this way anymore."

He was devastated. Here he was living the dream of his life, and had lost the love of his life. He quickly began to realize though, that his heart and mind had indeed drifted to another place. He was consumed by money. But now, as he was shaken to the core, he recognized what an illusion this all was. He hadn't been attentive to his wife, or the God of his youth. He was lost.

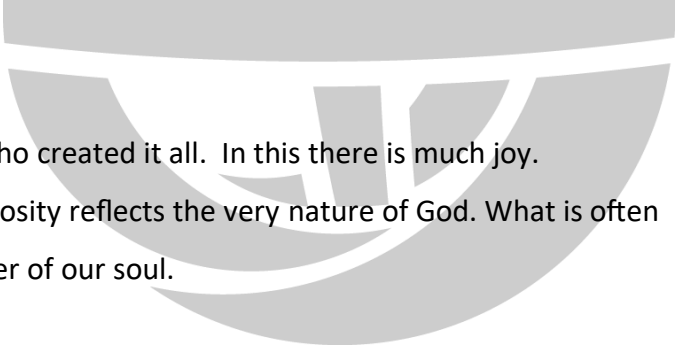
Millard prayed that night for his own reclamation, and began a journey back to finding himself. Money was now too toxic for his focus, and his journey took him to a place called Koinonia Village, led by Clarence Jordan of Georgia—a Christian community seeking a better way. He was joined by his wife. They gave away their wealth.

Then in the early 1970's he invented a way to help poor people afford to buy a home—this began Habitat for Humanity. As a pastor in Duluth, there was a large Habitat build, and that is when he visited and told his story.

What struck me about him was his joy, his warmth, and the conviction behind Habitat's work that by then had spread over the whole world, had impacted an untold number of people, and had the support of former U.S. presidents. Millard Fuller had been blessed to an astonishing degree, just as Jesus promised Peter. In a way, he may have felt like he had millions of homes and millions of friends to go with a generative and life giving purpose. He and his wife lived together joyfully until his death in 2009.



I hope that in this text and this time of Zumbro's stewardship emphasis, we can appreciate the deep connection between the spiritual life and our day-to-day lives. Many things can consume us, but they only



take their proper place under the leadership of our God, who created it all. In this there is much joy. Stewardship of our lives and resources is a privilege. Generosity reflects the very nature of God. What is often not realized is its connection to that deep underground river of our soul.

So I must confess that I now disagree with the title of my sermon printed in the bulletin. It reads, “Swimming Against the Current.” The idea here was that when we catch the spirit of Jesus Christ, God’s generous gift of self, we are challenged to see life differently than so many of the messages about money from our culture. And, yes, there is a sense of swimming against that current. This is true. But as this sermon took shape, I began to realize a deeper truth, greater than the challenge of swimming against the current: the joy and privilege of **SWIMMING IN GOD’S CURRENT.**

