

"THE DEAL OF A LIFETIME"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 20, 1991

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INTRODUCTION

We have a number of "financial types" in this congregation who pride themselves on being solid business people. Just suppose for a moment that someone approached you with the following offer:

"Come into business with me. It's going to be expensive, but I guarantee that it will be well worth it. So, dig up whatever cash you can...perhaps take out an equity loan on your house...cash in the value of your life insurance, pay the penalty. Also, take the money out of your IRA. Come up with cash in whatever way you can. And then, if you work hard and follow my instructions, the manual...sacrifice and give your very best, I am promising you that you will get back 100 times whatever you invested. Raise \$10,000 and you will get back a million. If you raise \$100,000, you will get back 10 million. Do it. don't delay!"

Now, are you tempted? Is there anybody here who would not listen to such an offer, who would turn his back on that kind of opportunity?

DEVELOPMENT

Listen carefully to the words of Jesus in our lesson from Mark's Gospel that Sam Wilson read earlier.

"Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or land, for My sake and the Gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time...."

You've got to admit - that's quite a promise. Whatever you invest will be returned a hundredfold. Nobody could make such a promise except Christ and He did it in a most interesting context.

One day a young man...wealthy...came to Him seeking the way to eternal life. "Keep the commandments" said Jesus. "I have...since my youth" said this well-to-do young man. Jesus loved him. "But you lack one thing" said Jesus.

"Go, sell what you have, and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven...."

The young man turned away...sadly! Jesus said to His disciples,

"Children...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God".

The disciples ...well they were astonished at the harshness of His word, His teaching, but He went on to reassure them. "All things are possible with God" He said. Peter then said to Him, "Lo, Lord...we've left everything and followed You". They had. It was at this point that Jesus made His manifold promise. The deal of a lifetime. But you know, this rich young man turned it down, turned away...sadly. Why do you suppose he did that? Let me offer three ideas as to why. Perhaps you can add your ideas to mine. Why?

WHAT HE WAS GIVING UP...NOT WHAT HE WAS GAINING

First-off, perhaps this rich young man could

only see what he was giving up and not what he would be gaining.

He was accustomed to fine clothes from Jerusalem's Fifth Avenue. His cupboard was probably stacked with the finest wine. His home was richly appointed. He was accustomed to the best of everything...always going "first class". We might picture him as something of a First Century Yuppie. He'd fit right in and feel at home with many of the young urban professionals of today.

Some recent nationwide studies pointed up the fact that in 1980, 53% of college graduates in this land said their number one goal was "being very well-off financially". By 1990, that number had jumped to 93%. In 1980, over 65% of college graduates were concerned about a "philosophy of life". By 1989, only 43% felt that a "philosophy of life" was important.

If these studies are correct, and I assume they are...we've produced a nation of money grubbers and that's not good. Remember Jesus said that "the love of money is the root of all evil". So be careful. If you're among the 93% who value financial success above all else, your chances of getting into the Kingdom of God are equal to that of an eight foot tall creature with a hump on his back squeezing through the eye of a needle. And those are slim odds indeed! Why? Because forced to decide between Jesus and your wealth, you will only see what you are giving up...not what you are gaining.

Consider the opportunities this well-to-do young man had. He could have made a difference in the world, perhaps inscribing his name next to that of Simon Peter or St. Paul. He could have been the Albert Schweitzer or the Mother Teresa of his day...spreading circles of influence that would still be rippling to this day, but he turned away - sadly.

I like to listen to Robert Schuller on a Sunday morning at 7:30...maybe some of you do, too...but I doubt it. Anyway, Robert Schuller once asked Coretta Scott King where she got the dream that kept her going. She replied,

"It was while I was attending Antioch College...I heard a quotation that deeply motivated me. Horace Mann said to his first graduating class at Antioch in the late 1850s....'Be ashamed to die until you've won some victory for humanity'"

The rich young ruler could have "won a victory for humanity". He could have made a difference with all that he had been blessed with. He could have known what it was to "walk with Jesus". There are those who will give their very lives to "walk with kings"...with those whose star is going up. But this young ruler was given the opportunity to walk with the "King of Kings", but all he saw was what he was losing and not what he would be gaining. I wonder...is this the way it is with us?

OVERESTIMATED THE VALUE OF MATERIAL POSSESSIONS

In the second place, he overestimated the value

of material possessions. Please understand. We are not deluding ourselves about the value of money in a society like ours. Wasn't it Woody Allen who once said:

"Having money is good...if only for financial reasons."

A third grade teacher was asking her class to solve a math problem. Suppose you had .99 and your friend had \$99.00 - what would the difference be? One third grader replied, "The dismal point". "Dismal" And she's right, poverty is something of a dismal condition. Sophie Tucker once said,

"Having money is better....."

Still, money is only one element in a good life. We know that. And if it becomes an end in itself, then life tends to get out of kilter. Someone has said that "Money is a great servant, but a terrible master."

The ancient Greeks understood this. Remember the myth that has the God, Dionysus, offering King Midas whatever his heart desire. Without hesitation, King Midas exclaimed,

"I wish that everything I touch be turned into gold!"

And so it was and Midas was overjoyed. He drew up a handful of sand and it turned into gold dust. He picked up a stone and it turned into gold. He touched a leaf and it was gold.

"Ah, I will become the richest man in the world, the happiest man in the world."

And he danced all the way back to his home and announced to his servants, "Prepare a banquet....We will celebrate my good fortune". But as the bread touched his tongue it turned into gold and as the wine passed his lips, it turned into gold. The king became more dismayed as he became hungrier and hungrier. And as he reached out to his beautiful daughter for solace, she, alas, too was turned into gold. And Midas cursed his gift and himself for his foolishness.

Andrew Carnegie was one of the richest men who ever lived. He was also very generous. Perhaps he was explaining his generosity when he said, "Millionaires seldom smile". We're told, incidentally, that Carnegie practically became allergic to money as he grew richer and older. He was offended, he said, just by the sight and touch of money and never carried any. And once because he had no money with him with which to pay the fare, he was put off a London tram!

Did money solve the problems of Howard Hughes or Aristotle Onassis? They died two of the world's richest men. Why invest your life in something that will only rot or rust...in something that will someday be left behind? Why invest in something that cannot of its own self bring you peace of mind?

Money is not the key to happiness. Study after study supports that claim. In a recent study of 52,000 men and women, most of whom were in the upper economic brackets, money ranked 13th out of 16 possible sources of happiness for married women. With married men, money ranked 10th. With single women, 9th. With single men, 7th. A marriage is a better investment than your bank account. So are your children, your friends, your health. And there is one investment, however, that pays bigger dividends than all the rest put together

ON BEING RICH TOWARD GOD

I think the final error made by this rich young ruler lay in the fact that he failed to see that the only "rich" that counts in the long run is on being "rich" toward God.

They say that an old mountaineer was on his deathbed. He called his wife to the bedside and whispered, "Elviry...go to the fireplace and take out that loose stone under the mantle". She did as instructed and behind that loose stone she found a shoe box crammed full of cash. Returning to the bedside she heard her mountaineer husband whisper,

"That's all the money I've saved through the years. When I go, I'm goin' to take it with me. I want you to take that box up to the attic and set it by the window. I'll get it as I go by on my way up to heaven".

Again, the wife followed the instructions. That night the old mountaineer died. Several days after the funeral, his wife remembered the shoe box. She climbed up to the attic and there it was...still there...the shoe box, full of cash, sitting by the window. "Oh" she thought to herself,

"I knew it....I should have put it in the basement instead of the attic."

As someone has put it, "We can't take it with us, but we can send it ahead."

I think the great test of our faith is whether we really believe in the promise of Christ. He has promised that if we hold on to Him, He will never let us go. He has promised that anything we give to Him will be returned - a hundred-fold. "Treasurers in heaven" He has promised us. Are we willing to take Him at His word.

Christ has promised each of us that we will be rewarded a hundredfold for our faith and our devotion to His service. Some may wonder...does that mean that if I tithe, some day I will be rich...as some tele-evangelists have suggested. No, I don't think it does. Although I can remember...at the age of 14 when I first began to work...how my parents taught me to tithe...the 10% for "the Lord"...and I've done it ever since. I've never had to worry...the Lord has always blessed me with work and sufficient income. Some of you can testify to that out of your life.

No, it means that the rewards of following Christ far exceed the costs. And I believe that with all my heart. It does mean that you will be making investments that are eternal that will be paying dividends long after all your material blessings have depreciated into dust. It does mean that you will be rich toward God and have treasures laid up both in heaven and on earth.

An ancient source says that Alexander the Great gave instructions that when he died his body should be placed in the coffin in such a way that his hands were visible. He wanted it to be seen that his hands were open...and empty. All of us move from this world to the next with empty hands. If the promises of Christ are to be believed, though, our hands are empty so that we can receive from Him a hundredfold more than we left behind. Being rich toward God. A deal of a lifetime. Our hands are empty that we might receive blessings untold.

PRAYER

Move in our hearts in these moments, dear God. Wrestle with each of us in the deep places of our lives. Tempt us to make this deal of a lifetime with Him whom we call Lord. Help us to see that as we give, we gain. Help us, too, not to overestimate the value of our worldly possessions. And then to see that the only rich that really counts is being rich in the things of Christ. In His spirit, we once again would pray. Amen.

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