

Rich Toward God | Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 13:13-21 | LUMC | 7/31/2022

Dear church family and friends: we have been on a journey with St Paul learning how the Colossian church responded to the Christian challenges of their time. This church had overcome racial differences with members of two ancient main races—Jewish and gentiles—worshipping peacefully. Their main challenge was socio-economic imbalance, social and political apathy and wrong Christian teachings.

Today we hear Paul teaching the Colossians to avoid being bogged down by the secularistic tendencies of people outside the realm of God. The affluent Colossians and rich people in other ancient cities often amassed their wealth by depriving poor people. They enslaved the poor people and forced them into hard labor, sometimes even selling them at a profit. The unchristian or ungodly (secular) people's lives were defined by their possessions; they became means unto themselves. St Paul proffered new standards derived from Jesus' perspective about possessions.

St Paul encouraged the Colossian Christians and all believers in Christ to set their "minds on the things that are above" because they and we are new creatures in Christ. Like the Colossians, we buried our old self, and resurrected with Christ to a new self that is living the practical Christian life. Neither St Paul nor Jesus is saying that "setting our mind on things above" is to restrict our ability to have possessions such that we remain poor. Neither do they mean we give out everything to the poor or feel poorly judged because we have possessions that are fairly acquired and justly used. The Methodist teaching and theological approach is to encourage hard work, fair use of our gifts and prudent savings methods.

Jesus lived in a corrupt society that was depriving others, including inheritance rights. When a grieved man approached Jesus to assist in settling an inheritance dispute, Jesus did not want to get into interfamily squabbles because those persons involved were perhaps not genuine. Jesus was not willing to be a judge or arbitrator to this family. Jesus would have solved the dispute, but he did not want to. Instead, he wanted to use the incident to teach his hearers the difference between a Christian believer and an unchristian person.

Jesus says the unchristian person is greed-guided. His heart is in his possessions. Modern science has proven Jesus' right because those whose lives are defined by their belongings often suffer self-induced ill-health conditions because of worrying about their belongings, sleep deprivation because they torture their bodies. Their whole focus is on worrying about their lives and their property. It is true darkness and is their worst enemy. Such people are in over their heads worrying that their business model may be stolen and sold on the black market. They require their employees to agree in writing not to seek a job from certain rival companies, or to not seek work in a similar field for a time, etc. This type of "illness" can be caused by other means, but research

largely says that most of these uncommunicable illnesses are generated by some human preventable factors.¹

St Paul also says those unchristian allow anger, lust, evil desires, revenge, idolatry and impurity to control their lives. He says those who have become Christians do not allow themselves to be run over by these vices because they are aware of them and can restrain themselves through the power of the Holy Spirit. Being in a new life means allowing Christ to control your anger, envy and malice. It is easy to appear judgmental when you are comparing your old self with the new self. But, unless we do, we may not be able to distinguish who we are in Christ. Being in Christ means one has put away all the past evil practices and adopted the new way of seeing the world. A NEW way that defines the new person's worldview.

It is only Christ who can influence our decisions when it comes to helping other people who need help. It is only Christ who can take away the desire to self-promote and brag of our ability to have amassed what we have. Being guided by the flesh is dangerous, and you have heard those in the flesh saying, "I worked my butt off to save enough while so and so wasted their income in bars", etc., or, "I cannot give my hard-earned possessions to my lazy kids", etc., or, "I wonder why people ask for my help; why can't they work like I did?"

Honestly, those are genuine excuses, and we cannot be judged by expressing them. However, if you pay close attention to these responses, you will not hear that the praise is to God but to me, and to myself. This is what Jesus was warning about by explaining the story of a man he calls "rich fool" whose heart was taken away just when he thought he could enjoy his hard-earned wealth.

Jesus does not condemn hard work, nor enlargement of our savings, investments, and property, or increasing our estate value; what Jesus is concerned about are our focus on self-praise and self-glory. Jesus wants us to recognize that we are mortals and cannot live fully on our own. We cannot manage our possessions without God-given wisdom, and we should not ascribe God's glory and praise to our own efforts.

In today's readings Jesus reminds me of my parents. They were not rich but were able to provide us kids with breakfast, lunch, and dinner. They did not have a lot of possessions but the little they had, they taught us early how they wanted us to share it. During dinner time they joked about us sharing the property. Each of us was asked our preferences while in kindergarten and grade school. We did not understand what we were being taught until in middle school. We slowly realized we would inherit the

¹ World Health Organization defines 10 top affluent diseases related to richness: The diseases of affluence, previously called diseases of rich people, is a term sometimes given to selected diseases and other health conditions which are commonly thought to be a result of increasing wealth in a society. THESE ARE: ischemic heart diseases; stroke; Alzheimer's disease and other dementia; trachea, bronchitis and lung cancer; chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; lower respiratory infections; colon and rectum cancers; diabetes kidney diseases; and breast cancer. Read further from Bird Y, Lemstra M, Rogers M, Moraros J (2015). "The relationship between socioeconomic status/income and prevalence of diabetes and associated conditions: A cross-sectional population-based study in Saskatchewan, Canada". *International Journal for Equity in Health*. 14 (1): 93. doi:10.1186/s12939-015-0237-0. PMC 4603875. PMID 26458543.

estate. My parents were open about their mortality and our inheritance. We came to understand them and started appreciating their openness. When they died, we began implementing their will and there have been no “family feuds”. Hopefully we shall not disagree when we divide up the last of the estate. My husband and I have also started talking with our kids like our parents did. We pray for our family to overcome inheritance squabbles.

According to Ministry of Justice, inheritance disputes in high court in 2016 were 158, in 2018 – 128, and in 2019 – 188, rising almost 50%. The recent figures might even be higher. We are talking about disputes that reach high court, the majority ending at the lower courts or in mediation. There might be even more disputes that, that don’t end in court but leave families devastated. As our community becomes more secularized and less Christian, families’ dirty laundry is being exposed in the public arena. Last week I mentioned that the church has been a moderating factor in society for centuries, but that influence is in its sunset days. The most affected by decline of the church is the family. Jesus knows that family dynamics can be complicated, especially when inheritances are involved.

There are many reasons inheritance is being taken to court. In a blended family fragmentations can easily occur, giving rise to inheritance disputes when some family members feel they are not getting their fair share. The market value of property has gone through the roof, making everyone in a family want a share. Beneficiaries who have been driven by the disease of greed will often raise disputes.

No wonder Jesus cautioned us about possessions. I would wish we pause and search our lives and the lives of those who will benefit from our estate when we pass on. No pastor can advise a member how best to share their estate, or suggest who is the best lawyer. Our best advice is that we commit our possessions to God and let God shepherd us and our wealth. Let us not “store treasures for ourselves that are not rich toward God”.

May we be good stewards: people who care for what God has blessed us with, that include wisdom, good health, good leadership skills, material wealth and money. We are given these blessings to promote the reign of God by serving one another as good managers of the grace of God in its various forms. If we speak, let it be as it were the very words of God. Being a Christian believer means a total turn from old self [a sinful life] to living in the new life of the Spirit. Amen.