

**“Be Rich: Part I”**  
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**Trinity Lutheran Church**

I felt rich, as I held that \$50 bill. It was perhaps the first year I was old enough for my parents to let keep and totally decide what to do with the \$50 my grandmother gave us each Christmas. I knew what I held in my hand was a big deal. Grandma came from a humble background, having worked the laundry at Sioux Valley Hospital before retiring. I can't imagine that her pension and social security combined were much. But I can picture her still, walking down to the bank (for Grandma never learned to drive), and requesting 7 crisp \$50 dollar bills—one for each grandchild—and walking away with pride and a smile, at the thought of giving them to us. I don't remember what I spent that \$50 dollars on that Christmas, but I do remember this: the generosity of grandma and that I felt so rich, for that moment, that year.

I wonder, is there a time in your life that you have felt rich? I wish I could tell you that \$50 bucks still fill me with that same sense of possibility, but the truth is, I just dropped that much filling up my gas tank this morning on the way to church. And yesterday, when I went to Target—for cotton balls and toothpaste—I came out with a bill almost as large (I don't know how does Target do that to me every time, but it does).

This morning we are beginning just a two-week stewardship emphasis for 2014. Normally we'd do about four weeks, but this year. Just two, and our focus will be on these questions: 1) What does it mean to be rich? 2) What does it mean to be rich towards God?

This week, looking at 'What does it mean to be rich.' We will use I Timothy as our faith lens, to come to a place where we recognize that: 1) We are rich. 2) Generosity counterbalances the subtle temptations of being rich 3) Trust in God frees us to live lives that richly bless others.

A few weeks back, I took time to ask the experts about this topic of being rich. I'm not talking about David Ramsey of Financial Peace or Pastor Kurt with all his Money Talks wisdom. I asked our kids here at Trinity two questions on the topic, Let's watch: **[Video is played of Trinity kids answering the questions, “What does it mean to be rich?” and “Do you know anyone who is rich?”]**

In addition to very strait forward definitions of what it means to be rich, did you notice, how our kids answered the second question I asked: “Do you know anyone who is rich?” In total, for 23 of the 25 I interviewed: they didn't know *anybody* who was rich. Rich most certainly wasn't *them*.

This was not surprising. It coincides with a poll conducted by Gallup to see how different socioeconomic groups defined “rich.” According to Gallup, every person had a *different* definition and nobody thought they fit it. For each person, “rich” was roughly double the amount possessed by the person defining it. When they interviewed people who earned

\$30,000 a year, that group defined 'rich' as someone who earns \$60,000. When they interviewed people who earned \$50,000, the magic number was \$100,000.<sup>1</sup>

Rich is a moving target. And largely a matter of perception, I think we know that. As Christians, we are forced to ask: What is our awareness relative to our own wealth? Is our viewpoint in line with God's OR does is our perception skewed in some way?

It reminds me of a story: The case of "Miss A." Miss A was a patient of Dr. William Gull in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century. She came to him visibly stricken, with a low pulse, reduced motor skills, sunken cheeks; yet a nervous energy about her that suggested high hormone levels and her organ function was normal. Dr. Gull could see that Miss A was dying. But in 1866, they didn't have modern diagnostic tests and psychology was just emerging as field of study. Nevertheless, by closely observing and patiently working with her, Dr. Gull recognized that the main issue with Miss A was a distorted perception of herself fueled by the need to fit into the clothing trend of the day: the corset. In the end, Dr. Gull nursed Miss A back to health, and introduced for the first time the term, *anorexia nervosa*.

Now I have known several people personally who have struggled with this disease, who are among 8 million in America who suffer from it today. The thing I've seen in them is this same skewed perception of self as Miss A. As I observed, these beautiful women who were my friends and teammates, were so absorbed in the effort to *get* thin they no longer recognize when they were thin, to sometimes dangerous results.

Where am I going with all this? The richer we have become as a nation our perception-- our awareness of ourselves--has become distorted in a different way. When we look in the mirror, we too see altered versions of what's really there. We're so absorbed in the effort to live our best life; caught up by "comparonomics" amongst our neighbors; and so busy striving to *be rich* that I'm afraid we don't recognize that *we are rich*, already. Financial issues aside, there is wealth, security, and comforts at our fingertips unimaginable to our ancestors like my grandma who lived through the depression, and to millions around the globe. As Abraham Maslow said: "What is necessary to change a person is to change his awareness of himself"

**Rich is us, right now.** Can we see that—what's in the mirror—and accept that fact, even just for the morning, just long enough to ask: *Ok, if in fact we are rich, how can we be faithful, God? Is there a way of being good at being rich?*

The apostle Paul was facing that same question, when he wrote a letter to Timothy in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. Timothy was a young minister working in a context where for the most part, riches could only be acquired through continuous cooperation with the Roman administration. Those who were rich, therefore, usually supported a system that oppressed the vast majority of the population for the benefit of only few at the center of the Empire.

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Stanley. *Be Rich.* , pg. 31.

Being a counter-cultural movement, early Christians opposed this system and envisioned a more equal distribution of material resources. At the same time, wealthy people were appreciated as “benefactors” in early Christianity. So early Christians like Paul did not all out criticize or reject material wealth. Instead, what comes to light as being crucial is the attitude of the person owning it.<sup>2</sup>

*“But those who want to **be rich** fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 1 Timothy 6*

Despite the tone right here, it is believed that the writer here was most likely addressing not people enthralled by the prospect of riches, but rather people who already have ample resources. The problem, according to 1 Timothy, lay not in riches themselves but in people's determination to accumulate wealth rather than use it to bless others.

*“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.” (1 Tim 6)* Notice, what is being criticized is “the love of money” and “the eagerness to be rich” rather than material wealth as such.<sup>3</sup>

Being good at being rich begins with awareness followed by attitude, for it seems, **there have always been specific temptations to those who have things in abundance**, such as the people being addressed in this letter, and such as us.

These temptations today can look like: letting wants turn into needs and needs into stuff and stuff into debt, Pr. Kurt said a few weeks back. 2) the growth of an entitlement—“I earned it mentality”—which fails to recognize all as a gift from God. 3) the propensity to constantly compare ourselves to others, instead of measuring ourselves by God’s grace alone. These temptations, lead to a life that may have comforts, but ironically is a life of *less than* what God wants for us.

1 Timothy continues: *But as for you, [people] of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.*

Step one is to see accept that we are rich. Step two is resisting temptations that come with that wealth in a systematic way, or as 1 Timothy puts it, “to fight the good fight of faith.”

Feeling guilty about having more than we need when the rest of the world strives for just enough? Is not productive. What does help us pursue righteousness in this realm of our

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Eberhard. “Commentary on 1 Timothy 6:6-19.”

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1770](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1770). Accessed 28 October 2014.

<sup>3</sup> A.K.M. Adam, “Commentary on 1 Timothy 6:-19.”

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=731](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=731). Accessed 28 October 2014.

finances is this: **generosity**. As John Wesley said: “When I have money, I get rid of it quickly, lest it find a way into my heart.” Generosity. Many of you are very generous. The challenge is to learn a way of giving, that goes beyond the spontaneous--that sees a need and throws some dollars (and comforts our consciousness). **Christ challenges us to grow into people who not only shine in moments of charity, but who possess souls shaped into postures of generosity** – wherein receiving and giving as normal as breath.

To help us do that, we are blessed with alliteration, with the **3 P’s of Generous living**:

1) The first P stands for *priority*. There’s a tendency to think that generosity is for when you have extra money, when the mortgage and the braces are all paid off, when you’re where you want to be financially, or rich. What if generosity wasn’t dependent on your finances at all. Generosity begins wherever you are. The time to start doing could be when it seems to make the least sense. It takes foresight and courage to make being generous a priority, to stay on course even when everything inside you is screaming to go in the other direction. But when you make giving a priority, something happens inside of you. Giving to God—not the leftovers--but off the top, you are declaring: “my hope is not in riches but in God who richly provides.” By this trust, your soul begins to be shaped. Priority.

2) The second P stands for *percentage*. Everybody is entrusted with a portion in this life. Despite hours worked or degrees earned, we aren’t all compensated the same. So it doesn’t make sense to measure generosity based on the ability to give a certain dollar figure. I found myself rolling my eyes at celebrities, who during the ice bucket challenge would do the challenge and say something like – here is my \$100 for ALS. Good for me.” And I was like “\$100, to you? You spend that on a bottle of wine!” When it comes to growing ourselves into generous people, percentage matters more than the sum. 10% is what the wisdom of the ancients suggests in the Bible. That could sound extremely uncomfortable for some of you. The most important thing is to start somewhere, even if it’s just 1%. And hear this—I’m not saying giving that all 10 percent need go to the church --giving to things outside of your own family agenda which further the kingdom of God is what’s critical. That could be church—a big part yes—it could also mean homeless shelter, or a non-profit, or individuals in need.

3) The third P stands for *progressive*. This means, that over time, it’s wise to increase your percentage. Maybe only ½ a percent at a time. So that if you currently give 2% of your income away to others out of your love for them and God, then your challenge is to slowly raise that to 2 ½, then 3, then 3/12 percent and so on. Here’s why: It’s kind of like when bacteria become tolerant of antibiotics, rendering them ineffective. As you systematically and pragmatically take steps against the negative effects of wealth, the same preventative measures don’t have the same effect after a while. Increase in giving is a challenge and sign of trust/faith—that giving to God first and generously, the rest will work itself out. And it does! It’s hard to find someone who misses money that they gave as a gift to help someone else.

To give as priority, by percentage, progressively is to ‘fight the good fight o faith’ and be intentional about, with God’s help, forming ourselves into generous souls. The Bible is

about helping us perceive ourselves realistically. The Bible doesn't say we are not to be rich. If we are, we are to be good at it. To have this discipline of generosity is an act of faith. A practice in trusting God. Every dollar we spend is a vote as to who we put our trust in. The beauty of giving is twofold: we bless others with what we give—and at the same time our souls are shaped into beautiful posture of generosity. That is a God-thing: as you live the way God intended, in an outpouring of yourself, you come into an abundance you might have never known.

My prayer for you this morning is the same that Paul had for Timothy: that you would “do good, **be rich** in good works, generous, and ready to share, storing up for yourselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that that you may take hold of the life that really is life.” (1 Tim 6:18-19 paraphrased)

I don't know what the witness of Trinity will be in 50 years, or the legacy of this congregation a few centuries from now. My hope? Is that what people will know of is: the generosity of its people; and that this is a congregation that *richly* blessed its community, and the world.

Amen.