

“How is it with your Soul? Money, Money, Money!”

by Pastor Leah Rosso

Luke 16: 19-31; 1Timothy 6:6-19

October 12, 2025

For the past several weeks we’ve been looking at the questions that Wesley had his small groups ask one another, including the main question, “How is it with your soul?” One of the reasons this series connects with me personally, is because for the past twenty years I have been meeting with my own covenant group. It all started when I was going to a Lutheran college and attending an American Baptist church, but somehow I ended up at some Christian gathering where the speaker was talking about covenant groups and I was intrigued. That probably would’ve been the end of it- except that a friend of mine was in the crowd and was also intrigued and thought we should try it. And she knew a couple of other people, and I knew a couple of other people, and soon there were five of us who chose to get together once a week and go through questions asking about our lives and then pray together. Y’all, even though I grew up Methodist, I had no idea really that what we were doing was entirely out of John Wesley’s playbook. I only knew that through those conversations I made deep friendships; I got to know myself in ways that were helpful and led me to live out my faith more practically rather than keeping it in my head; and I grew tremendously as a person and in my relationship with God. Of course after college we all went our separate ways, but we kept asking those questions of each other, and now more than twenty years later, I still get an actual snail mail letter with their answers to all of the questions and I write down mine. It’s not weekly, for sure; more like annually if we’re lucky; but the questions haven’t changed. And one of our questions is, “How faithful are you with your finances?”

Money isn’t something I talk about with many of my friends, except perhaps to joke about it. It’s such a personal and private thing. And yet every time this letter comes around, I am forced to really question it. Have I been faithful with my finances? About ten years after college when we all started to actually have some money, one friend wrote how ironic it is that it seems the more money she had, the harder it was to be faithful with it.

It can feel harder, can’t it? It for sure gets way more complicated. Andrew and Alison, now that you have Cooper, I’m sure you’ve figured out that kids are a major money suck. (*Cooper is a baby being baptized today.*) Between diapers and formula and all of the gadgets, what is deemed necessary adds up rather quickly. Or, if you’re a bit older and looking at retirement, it’s hard to know what will be enough; how long we’ll live; what is actually necessary. Our world has created an entire industry making money on showing people how to make more money for every situation we might find ourselves in. All under the guise of being responsible. I’m not here to tear it all down — I am grateful for those who helped me set aside money so I can retire someday; for the wisdom for setting aside college funds now that we’re staring college in the face; for all the things. And yet... the Gospel dares to ask each one of us, what is enough?

How do all of these messages from the world feed into the idea that we're all on our own and there isn't enough and we just need to grab what we can and hoard it for ourselves. Is that the world we want our children to grow up in? Is that the world we want to leave our grandchildren? A world where everyone is just out for themselves? A world with no safety net? Or do we want to create a world where we come together, where we look out for one another, where relationships mean that we won't be left alone? Where we all can realize that we do have enough when we all come together?

Our Gospel story this morning is a parody of extremes. Jesus tells this parable and in some ways doesn't expect us to find ourselves in it— but rather wants us to see how money corrupts and keeps us from each other. In fact, the verse we heard from 1 Timothy would be a great paraphrase— the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Jesus starts simply enough with, “There was a certain rich man...” and then begins to describe him. This man wears the most expensive cloths possible, made clear by the color purple, made only from a specific shellfish of that region; a color that was only worn by the rich or on the holiest of holy days by priests when they went into the inner sanctum of the temple. But it's pretty clear this isn't a holy day. And this isn't a holy man. He wears the wealthiest of clothes every day. He feasts sumptuously daily— the words in the Greek here are words used to describe holy feast days— days when all would gather in a manner not like every day. But this man is feasting that way for every meal. The descriptions are meant to point out how over the top rich this man is and to point very clearly to the fact that he is spending all of his riches on himself. And then, right outside of his gate, we have Lazarus—not a vague poor man, but a certain poor man. This man has a name. He has dogs who know how to find him on the street and comfort him when the humans won't. And when he dies, he is carried to Abraham's side— the favored one of God. This man, despite his lack of owning anything, is known by God.

There are many ironic parts of the story that are very pointed in how money corrupts. The fact that we find out after they both have died that the rich man knows Lazarus' name is telling— Lazarus was not a stranger to him, and yet he let him starve. It's also very telling that rich man, while being tormented, still acts as though he is the one in charge— he is clearly used to having privilege. He asks for Lazarus to wait on him; he asks that Lazarus be sent to wait on his brothers that are still alive; he asks for Lazarus to save his family from the same torment he is experiencing. And Abraham's response, is that nothing will persuade the rich man's family to change their hearts— not even if someone were to rise from the dead. Jesus' followers who were, themselves, quite poor, must've gotten quite a laugh out of this scenario, which is so clearly told for us to be able to cheer on Lazarus. But the parable itself has some clear warnings for us today, warnings that John Wesley had concerns about as well.

In the mid to late 1700's when John Wesley lived, the majority opinion in the Christian world was that honestly earned wealth equaled divine favor. That as long as you were making a living honestly, then your wealth was considered a blessing from God. John Wesley, in immersing himself in the Bible, came to a different conclusion. Wesley grew

up in a household that didn't have a lot of money — his own father spent time in debtor's prison — which grew in Wesley a heart for those who didn't have a lot; and this stuck with him his entire ministry. He was all for helping people earn money — he taught classes on how to manage finances; he worked to change laws so that people were able to earn living wages; and whenever he saw anyone in need he stuck by their side until they found a solution — whether that was through helping them find work or giving them work himself or connecting them with someone who had what they needed — Wesley did not look down on the poor at all, but rather saw it as a responsibility of community to take care of one another. Last week Susie read the passage from Jeremiah where Jeremiah encourages those in exile to seek the welfare of the city — to work towards the good of everyone, even those who had exiled them; and Wesley very much is in that same frame of mind — that we work together to create the community we want to live in, and it includes everyone.

So as the early Methodist movement gained traction and began to transition from a movement of mostly poor people to a movement that was more mixed in its wealth, primarily because of Wesley's teachings, Wesley preached on the dangers of hoarding wealth for ourselves.

First, he said, riches cause us harm in our humility. When we have more than what is essential for living, we begin to think more highly of ourselves and often what follows is to think less of others. I know I've used this example before, but I still laugh at the study done with people playing the game Monopoly. At the beginning of the study they gave one player double the money and then told them that they got double the income when they passed go each time they went around the board. Even though they knew they had more to begin with and were making more during the game, those players who had an obvious advantage quickly fell into making sounds of cheering for themselves; of laughing at their opponents; and of coming up with reasons why they were winning that had everything to do with their own talent. This was just during a Monopoly game. How much more are we likely to fall into behavior and mindsets in life where we can easily convince ourselves that we deserve what we have.

Wesley also said that riches cause harm in our patience. I know it's just a stereotype, but it does bring to mind the person in the sports car in traffic honking their horn. We all know that wealth brings with it a kind of ease in our society, and when people get used to that ease, we can easily become less patient with everyone around us.

Third, Wesley said that wealth harms our meekness. Remember the beatitudes? That the meek will inherit the earth? Wesley described in a sermon on money what we today would call defensive behavior. That when we, as people, have more than we need, we are less likely to see where we are in the wrong; less likely to ask for forgiveness and to offer it to others; less likely to want to see how we are a part of something bigger than ourselves and are contributing to the conditions of the poor.

And last but not least, Wesley says that having a lot of wealth can extinguish in us our thirst for righteousness. In other words, while we all know that money can't buy purpose and meaning and connection; our love for money and the stuff that it brings can erode away our desire to be faithful to God and God alone. It gets complicated, right? And so, we let it be complicated; making excuses for all the ways we cannot be generous. Money corrupts. Which is why Wesley has, as one of the covenant questions, "Do I pray about where my money goes?"

The story of the rich man and Lazarus is an extreme example, and yet not so extreme as we see the rich man thinks nothing of feasting while his neighbors starved. Even in death, the rich man questions his own discomfort rather than asking what got him there; he demands Lazarus bring him water and go to save his family. He treats Lazarus as someone who is there to serve him, and if you noticed he does all of it while still not talking to Lazarus directly! He never once asks how he got there or what he could've done differently. The way he chose to live his life has completely eroded away his humility; his patience; his meekness; and for sure his thirst to be faithful to God, not to mention all of the ways he allowed his wealth in this life to separate him from his own community — from people like Lazarus and even those not as poor as Lazarus.

But even as we read this story and distance ourselves from the rich man, we know in our hearts that it doesn't take being filthy rich for us to be impatient, to give up our humility, to turn away from each other instead of creating the community we long for.

God has given us another way to be in the world. Abraham tells the rich man that his heavens wants have Moses — bringing to mind the ways in which the people of Israel learned to depend on God through the practice of gathering manna instead of hoarding everything for themselves. It brings to mind the Ten Commandments in which God gives the people the gift of rest — that they don't have to work 24-7 and wear themselves out chasing every last dollar. Moses was the one who encouraged the people at the start of the harvest to give 10% of what they had, right off the top, so that everyone could eat together; so that wealth could be distributed; so that all could have enough.

Are we praying about how we spend our money? Do we give to organizations that bring us together rather than tearing us apart? Do we even realize how what we have can divide us, when the very reason God gives us resources, is to bring us together? It can be overwhelming to step outside of a culture that tells us we are only worth what we make; but it's also liberating. May God give us the courage to pray before we spend; to embrace our role within the greater whole; to be generous with all that we have so that this story can be a parody to laugh at rather than a commentary on our world.