

**Mark 10:17** As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>18</sup> Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. <sup>19</sup> You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” <sup>20</sup> He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” <sup>21</sup> Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” <sup>22</sup> When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

**Mark 10:23** Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” <sup>24</sup> And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> 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.” <sup>26</sup> They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?”

Do any of you like to go to your high school reunions? Ever since my 20th reunion, I have enjoyed them very much. I invited a guy from school to attend, and he refused. I asked why he never came to any of our reunions, and he paused, made a little face, and said *“I won’t go to a reunion until I have a big house, a big car, and a big job.”* I said “You’re missing a good time!” Then he changed the subject.

I thought to myself *how sad it was that he was missing out*, and how sad that, in our culture in particular, many people seem to have been raised to believe that you are actually only worth the value of your possessions. Your possessions define you. Your possessions ARE you. The worth of an individual is strangely tied to real estate or bank accounts. *Really?* Does this mean that the poor are worthless, and the rich are the best of us all? Especially within these walls, we cannot believe that. Anyone who does is in a very strange prison. We cannot let possessions determine the

value of any person, or suggest the value of one's life or soul. God does not see things this way. And God would like us to see things His way.

This morning we have a famous story about Jesus getting questioned by a wealthy young man. We've heard this one before, and possibly we have squirmed a little. Jesus recommends shock therapy, and complete detachment from this man's many possessions, at least for this particular man. BTW there is actually a problem that we don't recognize because we are so used to the question. In the time and culture of Jesus, no decent Jewish person in their right mind ( or soul ) would ask the question "How can I guarantee that I will have a place in the World to Come?" This makes it sound like a stock acquisition. Only God has the power to provide anything good for us after we die. So, for any human to be asking about how he can have any control in this is actually offensive. But Jesus answers him anyway.

And BTW again, this guy tried to butter up Jesus by calling him "good teacher." Jesus wasn't really letting that get by. So Jesus asks him about how he lives regarding Mitzvoth or commandments, even though there is nothing in Judaism that talks about good deeds earning your afterlife. Well, this man says he does great. So Jesus looks at him lovingly and recommends shock therapy. *Give your possessions to those who have none, and follow me, and you will have life.* The man shakes his head and walks away. He will not and cannot do this. In his mind, it would be like giving away his very life.

Now, before anyone panics, Jesus does not recommend this to all people... *give away everything you have*. But he does say it to this one man. It would probably be a good thing to dig into this more deeply. So, we will.

I read a magnificent book back in seminary that I believe was life changing, by a professor named Luke Timothy Johnson. I had the joy to visit in his office in Atlanta about 18 years ago. His Ph.D. dissertation was entitled “On Sharing Possessions” and this was the great book I read. And it was basically about what does the NT say about Christians and possessions. Luke Johnson points out the following things in this great book.

First of all, Bible scholars are quick to point out that the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts (both by the same writer), this part of the NT has more to say about wealth and possessions than any other place in the Bible. Now, if we look just at Luke and Acts, we get at least 4 different messages. 1) In the 1st chapter Luke suggests that God loves the poor and that they are actually blest, while it states plainly that the rich will be condemned. That is pretty harsh! 2) In another place we get the same story as we have in Mark today, give away everything. 3) A bit later in the story, with short Zacheus, who climbs the tree to see Jesus, we are told that people should give alms to help the poor. 4) In Acts 2 & 4, we are told that the early Christians had all things in common, no private ownership, frankly, some type of religious loving communism!

Now, when we look at all 4 of these things, they contradict, or at least conflict. If you give everything away, how can you then give

to help others in need? So we do not have a single message here about what to do with possessions. We should know this anyway: The Bible is not the magic rule book that allows us to follow the correct rules. The Bible is filled with stories and poetry, not lists of rules. Besides that, Christianity is not about following the rules. It is about something else entirely. And this is where it gets really good.

It should be asked: Is there a connection between being a Christian and the way that we own and use things? I believe there is. We should understand that the ways that people regard owning things says something about how they view life itself, and how they view God. To be a Christian involves your eyes... Being a Christian involves a set of perceptions and attitudes, it involves how we see ourselves, our world, and our God. Our actions flow from our attitudes. The way we use, own, acquire, and disperse material things symbolize and expresses our attitudes and responses to ourselves, the world around us, other people, and most of all, God.

Let me ask this: Do we have any idea what we really are? What is the **ESSENCE** of **ME**? Are we created in the Image of the God of the Universe, breathed into by the Source of all Life? We should believe this. Here's a fancy phrase for us: According to Christian belief ( and Luke Johnson ), each one of us in this room is a *somatic spirit*. Σομα ( Soma ) is the Greek word for a body. To be a somatic spirit means that we are spirits that happen to live in flesh bodies. We have bodies, actually better than that, we are bodies. That word **HAVE** is a key here, and sadly a big part of our

problem. In fact it is because we are somatic spirits that the issue of possessions is a spiritual matter.

Let me slow down with this. Think about this. Because of our bodies, each one of us is a living symbol. And because we seem to possess our bodies, we try to extend our lives beyond our bodies. Our possessions, especially our nice ones, start to function as if they are a true extension of our own lives. We look at our big house and deep inside we might think “That is me.” But if we try to extend our lives into things, we are guilty of having something at the center of our lives that does not belong there, something that is not worthy. This is what the Bible calls idolatry. *What is idolatry?* Answer: Having something in our lives that acts like a god for us, but is not the Living God.

How many people in our nation ( or world ) build their lives around their possessions, their portfolios, and their Porsches? How many? Their lives are built around these things. And they believe that they, as a person, are worth something, because of these possessions. But these possessions tend to take control of one’s life. No matter the possessions, they are never enough. They become what is most important, and whatever is most important in someone’s life is truly their god.

The way that a person responds to the Living God determines all other responses to the world and to other people in the world, because God alone is most real. If we do not see God properly, we are not going to see anything else properly. We might believe that it is more important for us to have a \$2,500 set of golf clubs,

even though a kid across town really needs some medicine that would cost \$25. Idolatry leads to distortion of reality and distortion of relations between people in the world. That is why humans let other humans die of hunger and illness, even when they could help very easily.

What is the solution? This is a big one, and it starts in our head and our heart. Do we HAVE a life? Not really. We ARE a life, our life is a gift from God, our children are a gift from God, they are never ours. In fact, we are never our own. As Paul once brilliantly said *“You are not your own...you were bought with a price.”* Our life is not really our own. Not one of us signed up for this thing. We cannot make our own hearts beat. One day they will stop, and we won't be able to do anything to stop it. Life is beyond our control. Exactly! We are somatic spirits.

God has placed a supernatural life in each one of us, and if we don't see that, we can go off track trying to make our own existence have worth by what we can own and possess! But that is doomed. We can never have enough. We can never possess enough. *Our life is worth more than all the world, so no amount of things will top that!* And usually the more we have, the more we want. There is no magic shutoff switch. We just need to realize what we are. We were not born to be enslaved by things that are in this world. Those things are to be enjoyed, but they are not to rule our lives. That is why Jesus told that one young guy, *“You need to break free, because what you think you have is really having you!”*

Why does my life have worth? Because I am made in the image of the One who made the stars. Why do your lives have value and worth? Same reason. And, because Jesus died for all of us. We are worth it in His eyes. It certainly will never be because of possessions that we cannot take with us anyway. So why do we let them have control in our lives now? Be set free. Enjoy what God has provided. But also share it, give it away. Don't become a prisoner to it. We are somatic spirits, and we were created for something better than any big house, or big car, or big job. So, we can all go to our reunions, and see our old friends. If they want to be hung up on those things, that will be their problem. Figure out your real worth, and the source of the value. Know that it can never come from this world. I've said these things in the name of Jesus Christ, who came to set us free to live as children of God. AMEN.