

The Ethics of Gratitude & Money

Mark 10: 17-31 1 Timothy 6:6-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Remember back in March of this year, when as an expression of gratitude on the occasion of my 10th anniversary as your pastor there was a special event that included a wonderful catered dinner? I was presented with a very generous financial gift from you, the congregation, with the suggestion that I attend one of my favorite places in the world, the Benedictine Monastery of Christ in the Desert in northwest New Mexico. Well, that is where I was from Tuesday through Friday of last week. It was a deeply meaningful time of silence and reflection, and of course, lots of photography.

The specific timing of this trip coincided with a weekend workshop I wanted to attend at nearby Ghost Ranch Education & Retreat Center, located about 60 miles northwest of Santa Fe. That is where I was from last Friday morning through Sunday afternoon. While you were being inspirationally led in worship by the Rev. Sheri Curry, a co-partner in our recent Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry (TMM) sponsored trip to Jerusalem and the West Bank, I was sitting in a comfortable room with 20 other people talking about the implications of living a life of gratitude. I appreciated the juxtaposition of taking a trip based on your gratitude to delve deeper into the issue of gratitude itself.

The workshop was led by **Diana Butler Bass**, the author herself of her 2018 book, **Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks**. I very rarely recommend that anyone read any particular book. This is an exception. Buy and read this book. I can all but guarantee that it will make a big impact on how you live your life. I'll admit, like a majority of books written on the topic of gratitude, it sounds simply like a nice touch-feely kind of thing. Well, that is part of it, but as we learned, it's much more involved than just a sentimental or joyous emotion. **Personal gratitude involves not only an emotion of being grateful, but also the response that comes in the form of an action following that grateful feeling. In other words, there is an ethical component of being grateful.** And while most books on gratitude end there, Diana expands that from the personal to the corporate, from **me to we**. Whether it be a nation, or fans of a sports team, or even a congregation, there can be **a communal sense of being grateful, both as an emotional feeling and as an ethic of action.**

However, Diana discussed at the workshop, as she does in her book, that we are unfortunately living in a particularly difficult time in our nation's history, with so much polarization, divisiveness, and a sense of entitlement and privilege that it is often a struggle to feel grateful. And yes, we talked about current presidential politics, supreme court confirmation hearings, and the like. I will go into it more deeply at another time, but there does exist a **politics of gratitude**. Let me briefly explain.

Whether it be the ancient Egyptians with their hierarchical **pyramid system** of the pharaoh at the top down to the slaves at the bottom, or a similar structure in the Roman Empire with Caesar at the top, or to governments with a president or dictator at the top, **gratitude turned into something that folks at the lower rung of the ladder owed or were obligated to express to those higher up. It was a system of benefactor and beneficiary, a relationship of patron to client.** Expressing any number of forms of gratitude to those who bestowed gifts of some kind to those lower down in the pyramid were expected,

sometimes by law, sometimes by penalty of exclusion or prison or death. As gifts flowed down the pyramid, like protection, money (usually in the form of taxes) and acts of loyalty and devotion flowed up. **The greatest sin of a receiver of a gift was to not express appropriate gratitude, in other words, to be an ingrate.**

How many times have we heard the current president of this country tweet about those who are not sufficiently grateful to him for his benevolence. To be at the top means not being obligated to anyone. After all, when you think you have everything you are not put in the position of being a beneficiary, of being obligated or indebted to anyone else. In this context, Diana Butler Bass suggests that's why our president calls the Russian collusion investigation a witch hunt, because it would imply that he was obligated and beholden to someone else who held power over him. That's something beyond the comprehension of his pyramid worldview, with himself at the top. Something to think about.

Historically, gratitude became a form of reciprocity, where one has a duty to do something in return for the person who does something for you. In legal terms, that called *quid pro quo*. We fall into this in common ways ourselves. For instance, there may be those who invite others to dinner with the expectation that those invited are obliged and indebted to return the favor in some manner or another. **Let us look, then, at our own motivations for giving or offering favors and gifts to others.**

What I have been discussing, therefore, is the exact opposite of grace, which is a system where a gift is *freely given with no strings attached and no obligation or expectation of being repaid.* And this is where we see how God works in a way not dictated by a hierarchical pyramid. Diana Butler Bass, much like John Pavlovitz, who are mutual friends, encourages us to **replace the pyramid structure with a circle. In particular, a table, a bigger table where everyone is welcome and is treated as equals, not where some see themselves as benefactors and others as beneficiaries.** Again, this can be done as individuals and as an entire community. This is certainly a goal here at College Hill.

Well, what does any of this have to do with today's scripture passages concerning wealth, and a sermon entitled, "The Ethics of Money"? Well, anywhere from a lot to just about everything. Remember, much of the Old and New Testaments were written by those on the lower rungs of the ladder, those much further down in the pyramid structure. Therefore, when we read scathing passages condemning the rich for their oppressive ways, think about the pyramid and the oppression that comes when those who are not rich do not properly "repay" their benefactors to their satisfaction. For instance, the Old Testament prophet Amos offers a stern judgment against the rich who exploit the poor. He warns:

"Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain [that's gratitude flowing up the pyramid], you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know your transgressions, and how great are your sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate" (Amos 5:11-12).

You know, those ingrates. Without question, an indictment runs throughout our scriptures concerning the injustice and inhumane treatment of the poor and needy at the hands of the wealthy. In scripture, therefore, the "rich" are most often pictured in a metaphorical way not a wonderful people who simply have money, but as those who give in order to receive even more in return, or those who refuse to give at all. Perhaps,

then, and again this is a tough suggestion, we should evaluate our motives for giving. **Do we do give as a response of gratitude based in grace, or primarily to get some benefit for ourselves?**

I hope you can see that when scriptures declare such things like, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil," as the apostle Paul does in his first letter to his young missionary friend, Timothy, (1 Tim. 6:1), **it's the motivation of obsessing over the acquisition of money that is criticized, not the fact of having money itself.** In an **ethics of money**, of what we do with the money we have, remember that money is morally neutral, being neither good nor evil in and of itself. For we are all aware how much good can come with the financial support necessary to accomplish great things. Philanthropy with no strings attached is indeed something for which we should be deeply grateful.

Jesus, as you might imagine, had much to say on this topic of the ethics of money. He was particularly concerned about the potential negative effects on one's ability to serve as a disciple. That includes *our* discipleship, our lives as followers of the ways of Jesus. This is an important point made in this morning's Gospel Reading in Mark 10, the story of a rich man, who was a faithful follower of the laws of Moses. We're told that he asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Interestingly, Jesus turn's the focus away from questioner's concern for his own salvation toward gracious behavior that should be extended to others. Jesus tells the rich man to sell all he owns, give the money to the poor, and then come and follow him – the biblical call to discipleship. The man was shocked by Jesus' response and went away grieving, for he had many possessions and was not willing to part with them.

Mark 10 includes the difficult sayings: "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God" (v. 23), and "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" (v. 25). Yet, let me again reiterate: **Money isn't evil or sinful. Money is just money. What we do with it – our ethics – and how we let it affect our priorities can, however, be damaging to ourselves and others**, and oftentimes to those to whom we are closest. Here's the reasoning according to biblical commentator James J. Thompson:

As we accumulate riches, we are tempted to trust in our own possessions and our powers of acquiring them, rather than in God, for our ultimate security and comfort. Even honestly acquired and generously shared wealth can thus lead to pride... It is hard to let go of the immediate basis of our security and comfort – and the more we have, the harder it gets.

I think this is part of the tension in which those of us not living in extreme poverty must wrestle. What we learn is that the realm, the kin-dom, of God, is not economic 'business as usual.' Rather, it's about compassionate caring and generous sharing – and done through grace, not on a pyramid system of quid pro quo, where something is expected in return for one's generosity. In other words, **our gifts to others, including the church, like God's gifts to us, especially the gift of life itself, should be pro bono – gifts truly free and not given to make another obligated or indebted.**

This is the vision of living in true gratitude, of the entire community sitting together around a bigger table where everyone is welcome and treated as respected equals.

Amen.

Resource:

Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*, HarperCollins, 2018.