

"Fear of Falling"

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:21).

Matthew 6:25-34 ¹

As I'm sure you know, today is the normal deadline for filing Federal tax returns, but since today is Sunday, this year's deadline falls on Tuesday (If you don't know this, you're already in trouble!). More than eighty percent of people who file tax returns get some sort of tax refund, so this is also the season of deciding how to spend or to invest those refunds.

This situation reminds me of one of Jesus' parables. In this parable, Jesus told of a wealthy farmer whose harvest was so large that he decided to tear down his barns and storehouses and build bigger ones, saying to himself, "*You have many goods stored up for many years. Take it easy, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself!*"

But God said to this man, "You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you. And the things you have prepared—whose will they be?" (Luke 12:14-21).

I don't know about you, but I find this parable to be pretty scary. It's frightening because it's not very hard to imagine myself in a situation like that of the rich man in this story. The scenario is not all that far-fetched.

Think about it: when your basement, attic, and garage have become full to overflowing, how many times have you given all that stuff away, compared to the number of times you've rented U-store-it space, built storage sheds in the back yard, or moved into larger houses? Was that wrong? Maybe so, maybe not.

In Jesus' parable, the rich farmer misunderstood his abundance as being earned and deserved rather than as a gift and a trust from God. He asked the right question—"What should I do?"—but he gave the wrong answer.

Some who have done the calculations tell us that Jesus talked about money and material things more than about any other subject except the Kingdom of God. Have you ever wondered why Jesus talked so much about money, and why the Bible as a whole talks so much about it? And have you ever wondered why it is that believers and non-believers alike tend to squirm when preaching turns in this direction?

There are probably many answers, but I suspect that a central answer to these questions is the fact that talking about money is really talking about matters of the heart. There is hardly anything else about us that reveals our honest-to-goodness, gut-level values and priorities so much as an examination of what we do with our money. And there is hardly anything else in our lives that is so effective in keeping us from experiencing a transforming relationship with God as is our relationship with our money and our stuff.

As I've reflected on the settling of my parents' affairs some years ago, and on the approaching day when Nathan and Anna will settle ours, I've had to come to terms with the reality that our children are not going to want our stuff . . . and neither will your children want your stuff. We kid ourselves when we say that we're accumulating money, houses, and lands for the benefit of our children. With very few exceptions—if there are any exceptions at all—we accumulate all this stuff for our own pleasure and security.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 15, 2018.

It's at this point that I want to introduce you to one of the most fascinating and troubling books I read in graduate school. The book is Barbara Ehrenreich's *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*,² and although the book is now decades old, its argument feels very current indeed.

Ehrenreich defined the “middle class” as “those people whose economic and social status is based on education, rather than on the ownership of capital or property” (12), and I expect that definition includes most of us in this room. Unlike the truly wealthy, we middle-class folk have to work for a living, and middle-class families generally earn enough for home ownership in a neighborhood inhabited by other members of their class; for college educations for their children; and for such enriching experiences as vacation trips, psychotherapy, fitness training, summer camp, and the consumption of “culture” in its various forms (14).

But as nice as this may be, the middle class, and even the professional middle class, is still only a *middle* class, located well below the level of those who are truly wealthy. The “capital” belonging to the middle class is far more slippery than real wealth, and it must be renewed in each generation and in each individual through fresh effort and commitment.

According to Ehrenreich, membership in the middle class is an insecure and deeply anxious membership to hold, because to be in the middle class is to live in fear of a multitude of dangers that could lead to a slide into poverty. **To be in the middle class, then, is to live “in fear of falling”** (15).

According to Ehrenreich, the late 1960's were the last years in which economic inequality among Americans declined, the last years in which the rich and the poor grew closer together. Then, beginning in the 1980's, “*the combination of spending cuts for the poor and tax cuts for the rich have produced a massive, government-induced upward redistribution of wealth*” that has produced a gap between rich and poor that is seldom seen outside of the developing world (202, 8).

And as this upward redistribution of wealth has progressed—most recently during the current Congress—it long ago became the case that what had been considered a middle-class income could no longer support what I just described as a middle-class lifestyle (205). Whole occupational groups – farmers, factory workers, single mothers – began to tumble toward the bottom. Other groups, only slightly better off, found themselves scrambling to remain in place (200).

According to Ehrenreich, this pervasive and persistent “fear of falling” has, over the past forty years or so, tended to cause the middle class to become more self-centered, more selfish, and less supportive of the aspirations of the poor, because *any group that enjoys privileges others do not enjoy tends to try to maintain the inequalities that support those privileges—especially when those privileges appear to be in danger*. This dynamic explains much of the tension we experienced—and continue to experience—in the Civil Rights Movement. It explains much of the current hostility toward immigrants. And it explains a great deal of the caustic divisions that are currently ripping the fabric of our nation to pieces.

For most of our lifetimes, the urban middle class has been withdrawing from public spaces and services—from public schools, public parks, and public transportation—and withdrawing its support for the public spending that makes such services possible for the community as a whole. As a result, schools have deteriorated, parks have been abandoned to drug dealers,

² Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*. (HarperPerennial, 1989). Page numbers in the text refer to this book.

transportation has languished, and public hospitals have regressed toward their ancient function “of concealing the homeless, the disturbed, and the contagious” from the more well-to-do (249).

The children of the middle class, perceiving this visceral-but-unspoken “fear of falling,” have long since shifted their academic goals from the professions and the hard sciences toward a few narrow and speculative paths that lead to quick wealth. Ehrenreich was not the first to note that “*the scent of money intoxicates and clouds the mind*” (246; 1 Timothy 6:10).

A schoolboy was once asked what parts of speech “my” and “mine” are. We all learned in high school that the correct answer to that question is “possessive pronouns,” but the boy answered, “They’re ‘aggressive’ pronouns.” And sadly, the lad was more correct than he knew.

Our American economy—and perhaps much of the economy of the world—depends on our buying things we don’t need with money we don’t have to impress people we don’t like. Our ideas about changing styles and planned obsolescence³ have created a monster that requires constant feeding. Few things are still “built to last,” and we find ourselves in such a state of perpetual discontent that the whole idea of “contentment” has become a negative quality for many of us.

We want to *appear* to be successful, believing that success is measured in houses, lands, clothes, automobiles, and fancy electronics. These things are not evil in themselves, but neither do they bring with them the satisfaction and inner peace that they promise. The world tells us to “get all you can, can all you get, and sit on the can.” But do you know where that can always sits? It sits on sand.

Once upon a time, Linus of *Peanuts* built an enormous sand castle on the beach. His castle had towers, minarets, spires, windows, gates—everything you could possibly imagine. As Linus surveyed his creation, a drop of rain hit his nose. Before long, the drop had become a downpour, and his castle quickly melted away. As he looked at the place where his castle had been, Linus said, “There’s a lesson to be learned here somewhere, but I don’t know what it is.”

Well, here’s the lesson: “*Anyone who listens to my teaching and obeys me is wise,*” Jesus said, “*like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won’t collapse, because it is built on rock. But anyone who hears my teaching and ignores it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will fall with a mighty crash*” (Matthew 7:24-27).

Notice the similarities between these two builders. Both builders were impressed with the need for building a house. Both were resolved to build a house. Both may have built their houses in the same dry streambed. Both persevered until a house was built.

On the face of it, the largest difference between the two houses was probably that one of them was built more quickly and with less trouble than the other. The main difference, their foundations, was out of sight. Later, both houses faced the same test, but the results were very different, and that, of course, is the point.

Our responsive reading began with Mark’s account of Jesus’ conversation with “the rich young ruler” (Mark 10:17-22), which provides another take on the idea of “Get all you can. Can

³ The concept of “planned obsolescence” originated in a lecture by Bernard London during our Great Depression: “Ending the Depression through Planned Obsolescence,” 1932.
http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/27/London_%281932%29_Ending_the_depression_through_planned_obsolescence.pdf

all you get. Sit on the can.” We’re not told how old the man was, but I’m going to bet that he was at least in his late thirties, because it usually takes about that long for us to discover how empty wealth is as a goal for life—though it sometimes takes longer.

Secular psychologists agree with Jesus when their research concludes that **materialism is toxic for happiness**.⁴ Research shows—and life shows—that personal happiness and fulfillment come, not from pursuing them directly, but as the indirect results of living according to the principles Jesus gave us. Happiness is the dividend, not the investment itself.

As an unknown author put it, “Money will buy a bed but not sleep; books but not brains; food but not appetite; finery but not beauty; a house but not a home; medicine but not health; luxuries but not culture; amusements but not happiness; religion but not salvation—and a passport to everywhere but heaven.”⁵

The message of Jesus is that the security we desire for ourselves and for our children—our defense against our fear of falling—is not going to be found in the accumulation of worldly goods. Real security comes from building on a sure foundation and from investing our resources in eternal things. Real security comes from creating a world in which there really is justice for every person on this planet; a world in which God’s Kingdom has come on earth as it is in heaven.

The bumper sticker tells the truth when it reminds us that **“If you want Peace, Work for Justice.”** If you and I want our children and our children’s children to live in peace, we’re going to have to take more seriously Jesus’ command to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, provide hospitality for strangers, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and the imprisoned, both here and around the world (Matthew 25:31-46).⁶

My friends, I submit to you that God doesn’t give us the ability to generate wealth so that we will be wealthy. God makes us wealthy so we can help others, not so we can accumulate a lot of stuff (2 Corinthians 9:6-15). If you and I have financial resources beyond that required for a reasonable and prudent preparation for the future and for the unexpected, then we may take it to be a fact that the *owner* of the resources we steward intends for them to be used to meet human physical and spiritual needs in the Name of Jesus.

Many of us may have observed at least a brief fast during Lent. There are many good reasons to fast, but here’s what God says about fasting: *Isn’t this the fast that I choose: To break the chains of wickedness, to untie the ropes of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, and to tear off every yoke?* (Isaiah 58:6).

Dr. Ehrenreich concluded her book by agreeing with that statement from Isaiah, though she didn’t know that was what she was doing: *“We need a revival of conscience and responsibility in the middle class. But from what ground is it likely to spring? What crisis might inspire it? What exhortations would have the power to bring it forth?”* (251).

You and I know the answer to those questions. The antidote for this present darkness is for us to become passionate about what Jesus was passionate about. As Francis Chan put it, **“People who are obsessed with Jesus live lives that connect them with the poor in some**

⁴ Marilyn Elias, “Psychologists now know what makes people happy,” *USA Today*, 12.9.02.

⁵ *Voice in the Wilderness, Leadership*, vol. 5, no. 2.

⁶ Can you even begin to imagine how different the world would be if the United States spent as much money to build wells, roads, hospitals and schools for the people in the two-thirds world as we do developing weapons with which to kill them? And the reason we need such “defense” is to protect the vastly unequal and disproportionate amount of the world’s wealth that we control.

way or another.” Jesus talked about money and the poor so often because these things were really important to Him . . . and they are still important to Him.⁷

Well, so what can we do? I quoted Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, last week. Another of his famous quotes is that “*The road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.*”⁸ If we’re going to really follow Jesus, we have to “walk the Walk” as well as “talk the Talk,” and here are just a few things we can do:

1. We can open ourselves to the possibility that God may actually want to use us in a significant way to push back the Darkness.
2. We can do our homework and become advocates for the powerless and the exploited.
3. We can support relief agencies both financially and through volunteering.
4. We can become involved in political action and public debate to redress social injustices.
5. We can pray earnestly for the Spirit to demolish Satan’s strongholds in the powers of this world.⁹

My friends, Jesus’ command “to love your neighbor as you love yourself” means that you and I are to love as we would want to be loved if it were our child who was brain damaged from drinking contaminated water in Flint, Michigan; to love the way we would want to be loved if we were the homeless woman sitting outside the café in downtown Washington; to love as though it were our family living in the shack slapped together from cardboard and scrap metal outside Nairobi, Kenya.¹⁰

The point I’m making this morning is not that we should shun opportunities to gain earthly wealth, because abundant earthly resources make possible abundant investments in the work of God’s Kingdom here and around the world. The point I’m trying to make on this April 15th is that it is critically important that we build our lives around the only kind of wealth that really matters when the day is done.

The cure to our fear of falling is to hold this world’s goods lightly and generously, so that God’s Kingdom may come on earth as it is in heaven. As Jim Elliot, one of the missionaries killed by the Auca Indians in South America in 1956 put it, “**No one is a fool who gives that which cannot be kept in order to gain that which cannot be lost.**” That’s the real cure for the “fear of falling.”

While he was in command of the nuclear Navy, Admiral Hyman Rickover personally interviewed every officer who applied to serve on nuclear vessels. The stories of his eccentric interviewing methods were legendary throughout the Navy, and former President Jimmy Carter tells this story about his own interview: “I had applied for the nuclear submarine program, and Admiral Rickover was interviewing me for the job. It was the first time I met Admiral Rickover, and we sat in a large room by ourselves for more than two hours. He let me choose any subjects I wished to discuss.

⁷ Francis Chan, *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), p. 135. See also Marva Dawn, *Unfettered Hope: A Call to Faithful Living in an Affluent Society* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003); and David Platt, *Radical: Taking Your Faith Back from the American Dream* (Multnomah, 2010).

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dag_Hammarskjöld Hammarskjöld was Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1953 until his death in a plane crash in 1961.

⁹ Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of the Christian Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), the Social Justice Tradition.

¹⁰ Chan, p. 140.

“Finally he asked me, ‘How did you stand in your class at the Naval Academy?’ I swelled my chest with pride and answered, ‘Sir, I stood 59th in a class of 820!’ I sat back to wait for the congratulations—which never came. Instead, he asked, **‘Did you do your best?’**”

“Then he asked me one final question, which I have never been able to forget—or to answer. He simply asked, **‘Why not?’**”¹¹

When all is said and done, my friends, and you and I are face to face with God, two of the questions God will ask are going to be, “Did you run the race I gave you to run with focus and with passion until you crossed the finish line?” and then, “Did you manage my resources in the way that I asked you to manage them?” And then I think God may ask me, and may ask you, **“Why not?”**

So what *will* you do with your tax refund?

¹¹ Jimmy Carter, *Why Not the Best?* (New York: Bantam, 1975).