

Rev. Kurt Cockran, Risen Savior Lutheran Church (Basehor, KS), 21st Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24), October 17th, 2021

Against the Secular Pursuit of Riches

Mark 10:23-31

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

What does it mean to be secular? We hear this word all the time, that we're entering into a new age of "secularism." But what does it even mean? It's always thrown out as an opposite to a belief in God or gods – be it the Christian God, Muslim Allah, the Hindu gods, or any religion really. It's also thrown out as an opposite to perhaps anything spiritual, that to be secular is to be focused on what we can see, the materialistic; that this world that we see and perceive is all there is to reality and anything that can be known beyond what we already know will only be discovered by empirical evidence. By science and testing. One way we've identified society becoming more secular is by sociological surveys that ask this question: what religion do you identify as? When asked, more and more people are going down the list: Christian – Islam – Native American – None of the above. It's become popular now to call this category of people "nones," after their response, "none of the above." Today, however, simply "secular" can also be the label.

However, nobody truly is without religion. Nobody is truly secular. No matter how many people may cast off "organized religion" it's typically not too long before one who hates organized religion finds himself organized into a group or groups or *tribes* of people who share at least some of his beliefs about the world and the purpose of this world or the end goal of our lives in this world, even if it's political utopia. *That*, the pursuit of a political utopia (be it conservative or liberal) is religion. Or even if one who is seen as secular were to be consistent and live entirely as an island to himself, that also exposes the weak underbelly of a general

hatred of religion: it's individualistic. All about me. And individualism can quickly turn into isolationism, and the despair that comes with being alone.

In 1985, a researcher conducted a string of interviews and stumbled upon a young nurse named Sheila. When asked of her religion, she was about as honest as you could be, naming her religion "Sheilaism." Given this logic, you could perhaps say that there's 7.7 billion religions in the world, one for each of us. We're all a little secular, for we all have an urge to be our own god, taking whatever ideas we want from the world like a buffet and believing and doing whatever I well want.

But instead, what results is us often having other gods – multiple gods – than the one and only true God. And the primary sacrament of secularism ...is the numbers on our bank account, our god Mammon. Nothing allows us to pursue our own individualistic desires like having great wealth.

Solomon, the preacher in our Old Testament text, he's one to know about the place of money. He calls the rat race after money vanity upon vanity; it's meaningless. **"He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity."** The problem with all false religions besides our true religion is that it can never truly satisfy the soul. It may boast of great peace and contentment, but the promises always fall short. Solomon speaks with wisdom given him from above about the downfall of riches, but also from experience. He had great wealth, quite possibly the richest man of his *secula* – of his era. Hard-earned wealth stacked up for financial security may *promise* peace and stability, but never truly delivers. It can fly away at any moment. The laborer who works because it's simply his calling sleeps well at night, exhausted even from his labors. Not so the rich man who makes

his riches essential to his identity. Though his belly is full, his stomach churns with anxiety as he watches or even just imagines his wealth erode. All it takes is one bad investment, one bum business deal, one drop in the economy, and the promise of peace and stability results in misery and ruin. Solomon himself ultimately even fell to the snare of great wealth, who faced God's wrath for chasing after other gods, of health, wealth, and happiness. As Ecclesiastes reminds us, trust in this world alone, and you'll see at the end of life what you saw at the beginning. Naked we enter; naked we return. \$0 account as we begin the game. \$0 is always the end of the game, in this world at least.

In light of this, Jesus' words in the Gospel always seem to hit us like a ton of bricks, or at least they should, **"How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."** Even if we aren't one of the richest of our society, or even if we are the poorest – we yearn to be the richest. The disciples were astonished, or perhaps better translated as offended. Perhaps you can relate.

It's easy to explain away these words of our Lord, but let's instead consider the plain meaning. First of all, let's note how Jesus' words show that the end goal of the Christian life is **not** a higher amount of wealth or that which the world sees as glorious. This is good. Likewise, the end goal of this Christian life is **not** that God rewards obedience to His Law with a nice home in Overland Park. Or, we can extract as well that God doesn't punish a person with poverty strictly just because of offenses like substance abuse, sexual sins, or even just sheer laziness. There is some connection (after all God says the laborer deserves his wages, and the

Bible **does** say that he who doesn't work doesn't eat). But even if the hardest-working laborer struggles with poverty all life-long, that's not a measure for being outside of God's favor.

“How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Let's consider how the astonished offended disciples respond. On the one hand, it has a mark of great faith. They respond, “well who then who can be saved?” They acknowledge that at the end of the day, even the very next breath we take is a rich undeserved gift from the Creator who gives all things. Therefore, when compared to the nothing that we deserve, *all* are actually rich. Therefore, all have to go through the eye of the needle. But...the question has to follow, “then who can be saved?” It doesn't make logical sense, Jesus. Heaven won't be bare. We even hear how Moses and Elijah weren't perfect with their riches and yet were granted eternal life. Jesus looked at them, loved how they were right where he wanted them to be, and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.” Salvation is impossible with man. Attaining the kingdom of heaven is no man's work. It's all by grace.

Peter's not quite there yet though, and seeking to justify himself like a chest-bumping Pharisee says, “See, we have left everything and followed you.” Peter replies saying “well the camel of **my** poverty can go through the eye of a needle, and really all of us disciples.”

Ironically, since it's Peter the alleged first Pope, this viewpoint that we can earn salvation by our poverty is also the historical position of monastic Roman Catholicism. Jesus rebukes Peter in a rather subtle way: **“Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel,**

who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands.” In other words, Peter, you think by your charity and poverty you’ve done what it takes to merit God’s favor, and you think you can provide evidence of earning heaven by displaying your poverty. But your accounting system is all off, for because you follow me, Peter, you already have the whole kingdom of God; namely, those in the kingdom of God: all who have ever believed in me, Jesus – more brothers and sisters and mothers and aunts and uncles and nephews and nieces than you can possibly number, all who are children of the heavenly father.

And don’t miss the one little word in Jesus’ saying that sticks out like a sore thumb. In addition Peter to the wonderful treasures that come from following me, you will also follow my persecution. That’s a promise. Take up your cross and follow me. Endure hardship for my sake. Endure the shame that I will undergo. Endure the suffering that will be placed upon my head. Even you, Peter, will endure crucifixion down the line in Rome. You think you have poverty now. Just wait. You dress yourself now and walk wherever you want now, but the time will come when you will stretch out your hands, and another will...carry you where you do not want to go.¹

This life does come with many blessings, but it always comes with the cross in this life. And in the age to come, your crosses will give way to the victory march of the Lamb who was slain. But until then, this is the lot for those who follow Jesus. This is the cost of discipleship. Many who are first in the world’s eyes with their many possessions and the quote-unquote “good life” will follow the rich man to the torment of Hades, and they will lift their eyes and see

¹ Jn 21:18

Abraham far off with all of the Lazaruses at his side. They will see those who were last in the world's eyes, those who struggled every time they turned around, those who put their only hope in the Suffering Servant, those who had nothing to give God but everything to receive.

In the kingdom of heaven, there are no transactions. Only pure grace. The kingdom is not earned by our hard work, our merits, our achievements, our money, but by Christ's perfect life, death, and resurrection. He was rich, the eternal Son of the Father, yet for our sakes, He became poor, a beggar on a cross. We're never saved by our own poverty. We're never saved by our own riches. We're saved by having a Christ who was the richest, yet for your sake, became poor. You are saved through His poverty, for in His poverty, we become rich. He takes on the poverty of our sin, our idolatry, our evil desires; and we receive the greatest wealth of His righteousness. This is the religion that truly satisfies, the religion that achieves what is impossible on our own, our salvation, for all things are possible from God.

And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.