

1-1-2008

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### Recommended Citation

Selby, Gary (2008) "The Wealth of the Faithful (The Story of a Sermon)," *Leaven*: Vol. 16: Iss. 4, Article 8.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol16/iss4/8>

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# The Wealth of the Faithful (The Story of a Sermon)

GARY SELBY

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Late one evening last June, I was jarred out of a quiet evening when my phone rang. A call at that hour could only come from one of two sources—either my parents calling with bad news or Jerry Rushford, Pepperdine University’s Director of Church Relations, wanting me to preach somewhere two hundred miles away that weekend. I knew it wasn’t my parents because they happened to be in the next room, so with some trepidation I picked up the phone and the voice on the other end announced, “Gary, this is Jerry Rushford.”

As I prepared my excuse for why I couldn’t go, he said, “Gary, I want you to give one of our keynote sermons at next year’s Bible Lectures.” My heart began to pound but before I could get a word out he continued, “Our theme is the Upside Down Kingdom. We’re going to preach through the Sermon on the Mount.” My mind raced . . . Sermon on the Mount . . . Sermon on the Mount. Please God, don’t give me turn the other cheek, and surely he wouldn’t ask me to do a keynote on divorce and remarriage.

“I’d like you to do the passage on worry, Matthew 6.19–34,” he told me. I thought, “Yes! I know this text. Don’t worry about your life . . . don’t worry about your body . . . birds of the air . . . lilies of the field . . . Solomon . . . seek first the kingdom. Yes! I know it like the back of my hand. I grew up singing it. I’ve preached on it many times over the years. Thank you, Jerry!”

Not only was my text familiar, it also met the true prerequisite of all great preaching: it was relevant. It nailed what have to be the two biggest concerns of our lives, security and wealth. I got on my computer and googled the phrase “financial security.” Over two million hits! We are very, very concerned about security. And that’s exactly what Jesus was offering in *my* text. Even better, my text spoke of wealth, and not just wealth in the future, but wealth *now*. “Look at the flowers,” my text read. “So beautiful, so intricate. Not even Solomon looked this good. And they’re just weeds! If God does this for weeds, how much more will God do for you, his beloved daughters and sons?” “Yes,” I thought. “Amen. It’s the perfect text for a Pepperdine University Bible Lecture keynote address.”

I decided to renegotiate my sermon title. The original suggestion, “Don’t Sweat the Material Stuff,” seemed pretty boring for a text as good as mine. I was determined to hold out for something with a little more pizzazz, something like “Filthy Rich in the Kingdom of God,” or perhaps a title that included words like “extravagant” or “opulent” or the phrase “outrageous fortune.” Too racy for the Pepperdine crowd, Jerry insisted, so we settled on “The Wealth of the Faithful.” “It’s got a ring to it,” I thought.

All the preliminaries were in place. It was now time to dust off my Bible and read my text. I pondered what Jesus was really saying and I thought about how we live, and the setting in which we live and, especially, how we see wealth and security. That’s when the problems started.

## **WEALTH IN THE KINGDOM**

I thought about how we see wealth. For us, wealth is *stuff*. Accumulating wealth means *getting more stuff*. Wealth for us is tangible; we can reach out and grab it. We see it all around in our houses, our cars, our

clothes, our bank account statements, our retirement savings. We look around at all of our stuff and we say, "Thank you God! Of all the nations of the world, we are most blessed!"

"That's not wealth," my text shouted. "You were made for so much more than that. Life is more important than food, and the body's more important than clothes." In the presence of the true wealth of the kingdom, our stuff is cheap, it's tawdry; in our obsession with accumulating more, it's like we are gorging ourselves on stale breadcrumbs when all the while there's a rich banquet awaiting us in the next room. True wealth lies in the kingdom of God. It's the experience of joy in the presence of God, what David glimpsed when he exclaimed in Psalm 4.7, "You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound." (In an agrarian culture, the high point of the year is that moment when the harvest has been safely gathered and stored away, and then you have a party, a feast. Picture two guys sitting across from each other at a banquet table, clinking their wine glasses together, and one says, "Man, it doesn't get any better than this!" David says, "God, somehow it *does* get better than this!") It's the wealth that comes from experiencing community with God's people. It's the joy in seeing the rule of God take hold in the world and knowing that you get to be part of it. It's the anticipation that what we experience of pleasure and joy are fleeting glimpses of what awaits us when we will be in the presence of God, at whose right hand, David says in Psalm 16.11, are "pleasures for evermore." "That's wealth," Jesus says. "Sure, you need to eat; you need a roof over your head and clothes to wear, but that's not where your wealth lies. Look higher! Raise your vision!"

In fact, Jesus said—and this is the part that really scared me—your stuff may actually be getting in the way. Your wealth may be keeping you in spiritual poverty. Remember that scene in the movie *Scrooge*, where Jacob Marley drags himself into Scrooge's room, hauling behind him that ponderous chain with all of the money boxes attached to it? That's exactly the situation Jesus suggests we may well have fallen into.

I thought about all of that, and about all we own, how crowded our lives are, how rich we are in the things of the world, and about how much of our time and energy and focus we put into maintaining our stuff, protecting our stuff, getting more stuff—and I wondered, "What in the world am I supposed to say?" We sing, "Heaven holds all to me" and "This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through." But let's be honest. We're actually pretty comfortable down here. We're prepared to stay awhile. So what is a sermon on this passage supposed to look like for a people so immersed in the treasures of earth?

### SECURITY IN THE KINGDOM

Then I thought about how we look at security. For us, if wealth is stuff, then security is control. I want to be in control, to control my present and my future, to eliminate all risk and uncertainty. Only as I have control do I find freedom from worry.

My mind immediately went to my "quake kit." In the three years since we've lived in California, Tammy and I have been exposed to a steady stream of warnings about earthquakes. We've tried to ignore them, but after three years of hearing "We're due for a Big One," we decided to act. We drove to our local Target and bought a huge plastic tub and filled it with bottled water, food, flashlights, latex gloves (I'm not sure what they're for but if I need them I've got fifty pairs!) and a first aid kit. No sooner was it safely stored in my garage when I started fretting over whether my quake kit was adequate. I've got food for three days, but maybe I need food for a week. Maybe two weeks. (That's appetizing—two weeks of nothing but cereal bars.) I've got one set of extra batteries. But maybe I should have two or three or ten. Maybe I should get one of those wind-up flashlights that I can use indefinitely just in case civilization as we know it comes to a crashing halt in the "Big One" for which "we're due." Not that we shouldn't be prepared, but how readily my quake kit became a metaphor for my entire life.

Again, I thought about what Jesus said to that impulse within me: "You want security? You want freedom from anxiety? Trying to protect your goodies isn't going to work—the things of this earth are transient, they're vulnerable. And if that's where you put your hope, you're going to live with an obsessive fear of losing your stuff. You will never find security."

“Here’s what you do,” Jesus said. “Trust God.” Throw yourself into the arms of the God of the universe. Seek God’s rule. God knows what you need! He’s in charge. He’ll take care of you. I realized what Jesus was doing—challenging us to radically alter the way we look at security, to give up once and for all the pretense that we can be in control of our lives—and I had to say, “I’m sorry, but that’s just not the kind of leap of faith I’m prepared to make.”

I remembered my trip to Africa last summer. I’d spent ten days in Uganda and Rwanda preparing for a new Pepperdine study abroad program. Don’t get me wrong—Africa is a beautiful place, with beautiful people. I had some of the most amazing experiences of my life, rafting the Nile, spending the night out in a village (mud huts, thatched roofs, food cooked over an open fire—the works). I also was given some of the most gracious hospitality of my life. But it was also profoundly disturbing because for the first time in my life, I found myself outside of the security grid that we all take for granted. All of the safety apparatus that I just depend on, that we all assume will protect us—for the first time in my life, it wasn’t there. It hit me that most of the time I live as if I don’t really need God (or other people, for that matter). I’ve got a Visa card! If my car breaks down, I’ve got AAA. If I have an accident, I’ve got State Farm, and if I’m sick, I’ve got Blue Cross and Blue Shield (and if I really need it, Aflac). For my old age, I’ve got a 401K and an IRA. And if, God forbid, things really get dicey, I can call 9-1-1. There I was, for the first time in my life, in a place where none of that existed.

I realized that the conditions that open us up to grace and faith, to the wealth of the faithful, are frightening and embarrassing and frankly, they’re insulting. We don’t want to go there. We sing, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me,” but let’s be honest. None of us wants to be wretched. When I first arrived on the Pepperdine campus in 2005, it was August—a time when no one’s around, and the rest of my family had stayed behind on the East Coast. So there I was, all alone, no friends to speak of, and a month to go before school would start. Halfway through my second week, I got a call from one of the dear sisters at church inviting me to dinner. As I stood there holding the phone, I had a momentary flash of awareness—she was inviting me to dinner because . . . well, because she felt sorry me. “Poor guy’s knocking around in that house all alone, probably not eating well—let’s have him over for dinner.” And for a split second, I felt insulted. Of course, I want you to invite me over to dinner—but only because I’m good-looking, I’m smart, I’m funny, and because an evening with me will dramatically improve the quality of your life. I don’t want you to invite me over to dinner because, of all things, you feel sorry for me! (I did say “Yes”—I was lonely and I wasn’t eating all that well.) That’s the problem. The conditions that open us to grace, to the unmerited favor of God and other people, wound our sense of pride and self-sufficiency.

They’re also frightening. I’ll never forget that night I spent out in the village in Africa, sitting in that tiny house with a man named John Patrick. It was dark; the only light was a flickering oil lantern. I was trying to make conversation, so I asked him, “John Patrick, what do you worry about?” He was quiet for a moment and then he repeated my question: “What do I worry about?” He thought for a moment—our faces were maybe eighteen inches apart—and I’ll never forget what he said: “What do I worry about? I worry about war, and famine and disease.” In that moment, I came the closest I ever had in my life to being among people for whom God and the church were all they have. I didn’t like it one bit. Part of me was processing the theological implications of what I was experiencing, but a big part of me couldn’t wait to get back to the U.S., where things were predictable, safe, and secure.

I came back to this text with a new awareness of what Jesus was calling us to, and it scared me. My mind went to that story of Jesus and the rich young ruler whom Jesus called to sell all that he had, give the money to the poor, and follow him in exchange for treasure in heaven, and I was struck with the chilling possibility that Jesus might confront me with the same choice. Because the fact is, if he said anything in my sermon text, he said you can’t have it both ways. “I want the wealth of the faithful,” I thought, “I want treasures in heaven, but I’m afraid to let go of what I have.” In response, Jesus said, “No man can serve two masters.”

“How am I supposed to preach on this?” I wondered. “What does a sermon on a text that completely overturns our definitions of wealth and security look like for a people who are saturated in a culture of consumption, a culture pervaded by the assumption that if we just try hard enough, we can eliminate all risk, all danger. What does that sermon look like?”

I was about to give up when I began to wonder what would happen if . . .

### A STARTING POINT

What would happen if even in our wealth and security, we started to embrace our own glimpses of poverty? For most of us, those glimpses won't look like what I saw in Africa, but we still have them. My invitation to dinner. My trip to a strange land. Those moments in my work when I feel like I'm in over my head, when I'm in grave danger of looking stupid. (They happen more often than I'd like to admit.) The times when we struggle with our health, our kids, our finances, our churches, when we face situations that we can't fix, when we confront the limits of our ability to manufacture our own security and well-being. Typically, we avoid those moments like the plague. We don't want to lose control or to be vulnerable and undone. (And if we do face them our first thought is “Dear God, don't let the brethren find out.”) But maybe those are the moments when we are most open to grace, those moments when our hands are empty and our cups are empty—maybe those are the moments when we are most open to being filled. What if, instead of running from those moments, we embraced them—those poverty of spirit moments that Jesus promised would make us wealthy?

And what if we celebrated the presence of God, those moments when we sense God's presence not just in our heads, but also in our hearts, in our guts? There's a dramatic episode in Acts 4, when God's people have faced their first real crush of persecution. They immediately gather to pray, reminding God of what he had done in the past, and begging God to “stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (v. 30). After they prayed, the account continues, “The place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (v. 31). Here's what came of that powerful moment: “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had” (v. 32). The believers are filled with boldness and joy and the impulse to engage in extravagant generosity—all growing out of their experience of the presence of God. What if we begged God for that experience? Might we also have that quickening in our hearts that would compel us to say, with Isaiah, “Here am I. Send me”?

“What might happen,” I wondered, “If we started to see the whole of our lives through the lens of the kingdom, that vision of the new heaven and the new earth that Isaiah saw at the end of Isaiah 65?” In that vision, the wolf and the lamb feed together, babies don't die in infancy and people live to a ripe old age, men and women aren't homeless and they enjoy the work of their hands, and all live surrounded by the delight of the Lord. What if we gave our lives to the pursuit of that vision? All of my life I've lived with the psychology of *more*—next year, I'll have more than this year, and more the year after. And it's all more for me. But what would happen if I saw all that I have, my gifts, my money, my talents, my stuff, as resources that God has given me to seek his vision of shalom? What if I made my financial decisions from that perspective? What if I took that vision with me when I went to buy a car or new clothes or when I decided how much money I would spend on entertainment? What if I saw the pressing social issues of my day from that perspective—issues like immigration, health care reform, global warming, or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? Too often have I seen everything from the perspective of my own self-interested desire for protection. But what if I saw everything through the lens of God's reign?

Finally, I wondered what might change for us if we deliberately started investing in heaven by engaging in reckless acts of generosity? “God loves a cheerful giver,” Paul said in 2 Corinthians 9.7. Literally, I'm told, God loves a “hilarious” giver, a giver who is nuts. And in a way, giving away what you have, what you might need at some point in the future, is nuts. For me, that impulse to give recklessly usually comes during times of worship, when I sense the presence of God and when, to use Paul's language in Romans 8, the Holy

Spirit testifies to my spirit that I'm God's son. Those are the moments when I experience reckless impulses to give. Most of the time, I can manage to talk myself out of them. But in those rare moments when I have acted on them an amazing thing has happened. It's as if, in that moment, the grip of money on my heart has been loosened, the chains of possession fall away, and I really do glimpse the freedom Jesus offered.

"What would happen?" I wondered . . .

### **GLIMPING REALITY**

I remembered how, when we were preparing to move to California, we'd had to get rid of so much of our stuff. We had lived in the same house for almost twenty years and were moving to a house half the size of the one we were leaving. We gave away what we could—2005 was a very good year for the local Salvation Army. But much of that stuff just wasn't any good to anyone, so there was no choice but to take it to the county dump. I'll never forget standing by the guardrail, throwing one thing after another over the edge and into the yawning mouth of the dumpster below, each piece something that, at one time, I had thought I couldn't live without. So much of what I once saw as my wealth now lies moldering in the ground in a landfill in rural Maryland. "What Jesus said was true," I thought. "It really won't last."

But then, I thought about those moments when I'm caught up in the work of the kingdom and worshipping the King, and how what I glimpse in those moments is so joyful that nothing else matters. In those moments I'm filled, I'm free, I am the wealthiest man alive—because I've finally found the only treasure that really matters.

Maybe I can preach about that.

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