

Losing Your Grip to Find Your Life

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[0 : 00] No. Sell what you have, give to the poor, and follow me.

Those words, words spoken to the rich young ruler, landed on a young Egyptian man like a stone through glass.

! The young man's name was Anthony.! But his name was Anthony, and those words which have troubled and transformed generations of Christians would come to change everything about his life. The son of well-to-do parents, Anthony, lived inside the tensions of the Roman Empire. His Coptic Christian parents had counted as their descendants the mighty ancient Egyptian pyramid builders, and yet his family, now faced discrimination at the hands of Romans.

Anthony's parents had died young, leaving him with resources and land, and a clear path forward. Live off the inheritance.

[1 : 13] Maintain what has been built. Secure what can be kept. And one day he walked into a church and heard those words as if the room had gone quiet.

Go! Sell what you have, give to the poor, and follow me. Anthony immediately disposed of his property, gave proceeds to the poor, and began a life of radical poverty and prayer.

A life that was so compelling that communities one day would gather around him. He became known to history as Anthony the Great, the father of Christian monasticism and a key influence on St. Augustine.

He eventually became one of the most searched-out people in the world at that time. Somebody who owned absolutely nothing and yet possessed something that could not be exhausted.

Now, as we begin this morning, don't worry, I'm not going to tell you you have to sell everything that you have. I feel like as I was even reading those scriptures, some of y'all were like, that is not my ministry, that's not my ministry.

[2 : 33] I hear that. But scripture does have enormous things to say about money and possessions, and no series on stewardship would be complete without exploring the complicated and for some of us uncomfortable topic of how we might steward resources that we find in our hands.

So this week and next week, we're slowing down to consider in this series, everything we carry, the weight of our possessions and our money, and to examine the commitments that stewardship requires.

See, now I believe more than ever, this conversation is one in which the Church of Christ must be invested.

Over the last 40 years, due to increasing privatization, deregulation, and unequal global arrangements, many of us have felt, in the most personal ways, the creep of something sinister, the rabid wealth disparity, the fracturing of community, an ever more and more overwhelming commodification of every single part of our lives.

It's no wonder that the question of what to do with what we have can feel so crushing. The calls of scripture to generosity are, they're clear, piercing.

[4 : 12] Yet in a system in which government and social safety nets always seem to be getting thinner, we instinctually know that we cannot rely on them to provide for us.

I know this heaviness from my own family's history. On my father's side, I come from several generations of black farmers in North Carolina who slowly accumulated land and then fought to keep it in our family.

Land that was often the case at the time in the South. Land that white folks tried to trick my family out of. As a kid, my parents would often take us to visit my grandparents' house, their farm.

And I can still remember the way it felt to sit on this giant porch in front of their house with all of our extended family. And we would see a car drive up in the distance.

Turn up the long drive. And if we saw white folks in the car, everything would go quiet. And the men would leave the porch and go see who the person was or what they wanted.

[5 : 29] And even then, I understood it as a protective gesture. Our land was everything. Because for generations, it had been the surest thing shielding my family from the whims of the Jim Crow South.

To release that land in any way, even today, is unthinkable for much of my family. Because they know also that they cannot rely on them to provide for us.

And yet, y'all, the scriptures are wonderfully challenging. And the need of our world is shamefully great.

And the dream that God hands disciples is so incredibly big. Feed the poor, clothe the naked, shelter the unhoused, and free the prisoner of every sort.

And while you're at it, free the prison guard too. Express what you need honestly and receive what you need unselfconsciously.

[6 : 36] Enter into the Trinitarian life of God that is dependent on self-donation. Because Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit is this flow of winsome and wild wonder that can only be described as a dance.

Here at the table, we're trying to enter a little bit more into that dance. Today, as you've already heard, is the first of two commitment Sundays. And along with preaching about how we steward time and gifts and privilege and the joy of alternative community, the last few weeks we've also been inviting the community into this commitment campaign in the hopes of launching our church into its next six years.

A little bit later in the service, I am going to invite you to specific commitment to giving \$35 a month to this community, for staff and ministry resources, for investment in our neighborhood and city, to broadcast the more beautiful gospel, to sustain our church while we do that.

And for some of us, \$35 may seem like a modest amount. For some of us, \$35 may seem like a modest amount that we still can't afford. In either case, the question underneath it is anything but modest.

When I was thinking about what scripture to preach on today, I came across this one verse that I think we have to grapple with. It states something that is so simple and yet so profound.

[8 : 20] I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord, my God, that cost me nothing.

That verse occurs at the end of 2 Samuel with David in trouble, which of course is so often the case with David if you've read his story. He's ordered this military census, he's numbering the people, and God counts it as sin.

Maybe the census is this kind of grasping and impulse to quantify what he thinks is his, to treat as God's holy nation, as a resource to be inventory and deployed.

Whatever the precise transgression, judgment falls and David is given this chance to intercede for his people. He goes to Arunah, this man, the Jebusite, to buy his threshing floor as a site to make intercession on behalf of his people.

So that judgment won't fall. And Arunah, with the extravagant generosity, offers to give him the threshing floor for free. All of it. Take it. David refuses, saying those stinging, ringing words.

[9 : 34] I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord, my God, that cost me nothing. One of the most compressed and clarifying lines in all of David's story, he understands something about the nature of giving, and an offering that requires nothing of the giver is not an offer.

It is a transaction with nothing at stake. A surface level gesture dressed up as devotion. To give in a way that costs you is to be changed by the giving.

The sacrifice and the self cannot both walk away intact. And later, that threshing floor, the one that David purchases, becomes the site of Solomon's temple.

A place that structures the worship of the Israelite people for hundreds of years. Now, that's a beautiful story.

Yet, in the world that we live in, if I'm honest, it strikes me as not quite enough. To talk about the idea of costly giving is to confront a deeper issue.

[10 : 49] One of self-diminishment, self-expenditure. To give is to face real loss. To enter into a state of neediness.

To give in a costly way is not simply a financial decision. It's an existential confrontation. Theologian Arthur McGill writes about this with astonishing clarity.

He says it this way. Too often in churches, we hear the gospel of love without the gospel of need. Too often we hear the lie that love is to help others without this help having any effect upon ourselves.

Churches speak of love as helping others, but they ignore what helping does to the person who loves. They ignore the fact that love is self-expenditure.

A real expending, a real losing, a real deterioration of the self. It's not pessimism. It's the honesty of what love costs.

[12:00] To give truly, to give in a way that moves you into neediness, is to brush up against the thing that we are most afraid of. It is to deal with the anxiety of self-preservation.

The dread of diminishment. To deal with our mortality. Underneath the compulsive drive toward possession.

This is desire to matter. To persist. And to refuse to disappear. But we can't begin to talk about costly giving until we become aware afresh of the words of Jesus in Matthew's gospel.

These are words that Brittany read. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break in and still, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes, and where thieves do not break in and still, where your treasure is, there your heart will be.

So. Here Jesus is not giving a financial seminar. He is performing a diagnosis about the location of our identity.

[13:19] He is saying that where you place your security, your hope, your sense of who you fundamentally are, that is where you live. That's the neighborhood that your soul inhabits. Miguel uses a term that I think is really helpful.

He calls it an identity of possession. I am who I am because of who I own or control. My income, my property, my reputation, my carefully constructed identity.

Miguel, one more time. We define our identity in terms of a reality which we can have and which we can securely labor with our own name. We live under dominion.

We really want you to take that in. We live under dominion of dispossession. We live in terror of death, of having this little bit of reality which we call ourselves taking for us.

Our whole existence is controlled by that terror. And this is why Jesus' next move is so genius.

[14:26] Here's what he says like a couple verses later. Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you'll eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will wear. Is that life more than food and the body more than clothing?

Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet your heavenly father is them. Are you not of more value than they?

And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? And seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you.

I'm in KJV there. Sorry. So after exhorting against an identity built on possession, Jesus with barely a pause moves to that deeper concern of anxiety.

How we're driven to define our identities. How we fear loss and failure. How it is so difficult to confront self-expenditure. That the disciples, their worry along with our own isn't a character flaw.

[15:39] It's the predictable outcome of a self built on things that can be taken. Money and possessions, when we let them monopolize our goals and colonize our imaginations and quietly become the things we are really living for.

The lawyer, theologian, and activist William Stringfellow tells a story that gets to the heart of the map. One day as he was rushing out the door to catch a flight, Stringfellow's phone rang and to his annoyance because he was rushing.

And on the other end of the line was this pastor who was concerned about a woman who didn't have money to pay her rent. And he was asking for Stringfellow's advice. And in his annoyance, Stringfellow, he's rushing to the airport, he says, well, sell one of your tapestries and just pay the rent.

And then he rushes out the door to the airport and when he gets on the plane he kind of wonders like maybe that was a little rude, maybe it was a little aggressive. But then after thinking it over for a while, he realized that his advice had been pretty sound.

Reflecting on that experience in his book, Stringfellow writes, on the contrary, exactly what he and the people of his congregation, which does have several beautiful and valuable tapestries, must be

free to do is to sell the tapestries to pay the rent, to pay somebody else's rent, to pay anybody's rent who can't pay their own.

[17 : 17] If they have that freedom, then, but only then, does the tapestry have religious significance. Restraining, the point was not rather than, you know, whether the church sold the tapestries, sorry, Restraining, the point wasn't whether the church sold the tapestries.

The heart of the matter was if they were willing to. The key question for us as for them is, what do you own that owns you back?

What do you know yourself not free to give up? I'm going to be honest here. This is, I'm going to be honest. For me, that's my house.

My wife and I have had such a struggle since 2020 with houses. We moved three times in four years due to circumstances mostly out of our control. and we lost a ton of money and a lot of sleep. And now it's easy for that sense of settledness and calm that my house gives me to become an idol. The thing that owns me back. And on some days I feel hopeless to fight that.

[18 : 35] But then I realize that we all have an alternative to this identity of possession. and it's found in grounding our identity in the God of kenosis, the God who empties himself.

In Philippians 2, Paul exhorts the church at Philippi to that kind of kenotic self-emptying that Jesus demonstrates. And he does that because he wants that church to be a church of deep love.

let the same mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus who though he existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped but emptied himself taking the form of a slave assuming human likeness and being found in appearance as a human he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross.

this is the kenotic identity the identity of self-giving. It's the same thing that Jesus says in Matthew if any of you wish to come after me let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. The denial of self here is not about the erasure of personality.

[20 : 03] That is not the point it's not about self-hatred or not being who you fully are. Jesus is asking the disciples to deny a particular way of building the self of grounding the self one that is not built on possession or on anxious accumulation that can be lost.

Here's how Richard Beck says this and I think it sums up the whole point. Jesus rejects an identity grounded in gaining and Paul rejects an identity rooted in grasping.

Salvation is found in losing to use Jesus' term and emptying to use Paul's both pointing to the death that leads to life. Now some of y'all might be fans of Victor Hugo's masterpiece Les Misérables.

Okay, or not. Sorry. Thought there were more theater kids. I'm sorry. Okay. So in that novel if you've seen even like the TV adaptation the bishop is known to his people as the enchanter which means welcome and then the main character Jean Valjean goes to the bishop's store and Valjean is this man basically the world has been you know has decided to be done with.

He's been cast off. He did 19 years in prison and now he can't get a job. He has a yellow passport because of that and he goes around and is constantly rejected.

[21 : 43] But the bishop opens his door to Jean Valjean. He feeds him. He sits with him. He gives him a bed with clean sheets. Yet in the early morning Valjean steals the silverware from the bishop's house and he runs.

He's caught before dawn and he's dragged back. The police expect the bishop to confirm that Valjean is the thief. But instead the bishop tells them that the silverware was a gift and then turns to Valjean with a gentle reproach and tells him that he forgot the candlesticks too.

What's easy to lose in that story is that the candlesticks had belonged to the bishop's family for many decades. His act was not painless. The enchanter had built his identity somewhere other than on what he owned.

He was free. Free to give at cost, free to love extravagantly, free to be in that cold pre-dawn moment a living imitation of Christ.

Not grasping, not gaining, but emptying himself for someone who the world told him did not deserve it. And Valjean carried the candlesticks for the rest of his life.

[23 : 06] They were the mark of what grace had done for him and of what it had cost someone else. So as I begin to wrap up, I ask again, what do you own that owns you back?

And what would it cost you to loosen more? Y'all, letting go of a life that's built on gain and grasping rarely happens in a single dramatic moment.

It is a thousand small daily decisions about what we hold and what we release. The same love that enabled Jesus to empty himself and become human is the same love that invites us to share a meal with a stranger that the world despises, despises, to give away a coat, or even, surprisingly, to commit to a monthly gift at a church.

Where we locate our identity is tested in the mundane register of resources. And here is the good news that we need to take to the bank.

We are not talking about grim, depleting sacrifice. We are talking about an economy of grace. A different arithmetic altogether.

[24 : 39] One where the logic of the kingdom of God inverts the logic of the market. Remember that Jesus tells those who have left behind their families and their possessions and all those things that they will receive more than they ever gave up.

And the writer of Hebrews tells us Jesus endured the cross for the joy, the joy set before him. That's always the test, the joy set before you.

There is joy on the other side of giving, not because loss is not real, but because the self that does the losing is not the self that was built on keeping.

the joy of the Anthony the Great walked into church one morning and heard words that shattered the future he had planned. David opened his hand and paid for ground he could have taken for free. A bishop pressed candlesticks into a thief's hands before the sun came up. None of them ended up poorer in the ways that finally mattered.

[25 : 45] where your treasure is there your heart be also. Amen.