

Please join me in prayer.

Hide me in your glory, gracious and loving God. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my redeemer, and my refuge. Amen.

Burrhus Frederic (BF) Skinner, an American psychologist articulated a behavioral theory called the principle of reinforcement which states that if the consequence/s of an action is bad, it most likely that the person will not repeat the action. In the same manner that if the consequence/s of an action is good, it is most likely that the action will be repeated or the will to do that action becomes stronger. This was the short version of why in operant conditioning, reward and punishment became a huge explanation for people's behavior. Our society is geared towards rewards. In school, we are rewarded with grades and stars as markers of accomplishments. As we start in the workforce, we are rewarded through awards, incentives and bonuses. In different parts of lives, we take the time to reward ourselves for the accomplishments that we have achieved. It could be a yummy desert, it could be a book, could be a vacation, among many other things, because we deserved that reward. Rewards make us feel good, it motivates us to continue what we are doing or do better, rewards are good for our psyche.

Looking at the surface of today's passage, this is the message that we can see. This is evident in different parts of the passage. First, was the conversation of Jesus and the man and the second was that with the disciples. In the ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions, wealth and treasures are reflections of one's goodness and faith (in God). This means that if a person is rich, or have many possessions, then that means that s/he has been living a life of virtue, following the laws of Moses or generally a good person, charitable, honest...and whatever good virtues that a person could have. In this belief, the more wealth the person has, the better s/he is. The same manner for someone's health. A person's health and well-being are directly proportionate to the person's goodness. This is why when someone is sick, forgiveness is sought first before healing to happen. In theological theories, this is the foundation of prosperity gospel. For those who are not familiar with this term, this is the theory that a person's wealth and well-being is a reflection of God's love and blessings for them. There is nothing wrong with this, actually, because in this frame of thinking, a person is motivated to work hard for the self and the family, and also to take care of one's health. As I dig deeper on this perspective, this became problematic for me later on, because I think about Job, a man who's been faithful, but still experienced the heartbreaks of losing his loved ones, possessions, and becoming fatally ill. In the same manner that if we think about prosperity gospel, we are veering away from the notion of God's grace and love is given to each of us unconditionally.

Allow me to pivot a little bit and unpack some of the reflections that I had for today's passage. Wealth, as we know it, is not just the amount of money that we have in our bank accounts. There are other things that we can consider as wealth in our lifetimes. Wealth and abundance are two words that are closely related. Following this line of thinking, we can say that having many friends is considered wealth. Being healthy is considered wealth – which is why we say health is wealth. There are situations where control and power can also be considered wealth. There is nothing wrong with abundance and wealth, right? And, if we look at the different facets of wealth and abundance, really there is nothing wrong with it. To be clear, I am not saying that there is something wrong with being wealthy in all of

the places in our lives that we see ourselves wealthy...whether with material things, with friends, with health, even with power and control. In the same manner that I am not judging how these wealths were acquired. They are supposed to be good parts of our lives. But I think what makes it questionable is how our attitudes have become with all of the different kinds of wealth that we have. What I am saying is this, how have we become as Christians and God's children when we have abundant material things, friends, good health, control and power?

Let us try to relate that to our passage today. There is no question about the character of the man who ran up to Jesus. We can see this in the short conversation that they had. The man knew the law and has been doing all these in his youth. In fact, Luke 18:18 (the parallel of today's story) says, 'A certain ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"'. I personally think that one cannot be a ruler if s/he is not a good person. But the response of Jesus was very compelling, enough to give the man grief as their conversation ended. He did want to inherit eternal life, but Jesus was asking something that the life of him, he can never give. In the same manner that this discourse became confusing for the disciples, which they tried to plead their case. In verse 28, Peter said, 'Look, we left everything and followed you'. As I imagine this conversation, I could hear Peter saying, 'are you saying that after all that we have given up, we still do not inherit eternal life? Are you being serious right now?' Sometimes we get in this position, right? Like we try to give the best that we can, we give the best effort, the most time, all of our knowledge, and feel that it is still not enough. And we are told that we are doing is not enough...not enough time to do the things that we want to accomplish, not enough resources (financial or otherwise) to afford the things that we needed, not enough people to inside the church, not enough leaders to lead, not enough of everything. And these 'not enoughs' bring us to anxiety. Just like the disciples felt - probably. It is easy to feel that we are not saving enough treasures for God's kingdom.

But there is an essential message in what Jesus is saying in our passage today. And this is I think is the important message that we can glean into our passage. Contrary to what the ancient tradition is teaching about wealth, abundance and treasures that should be reflective of God's love and blessing, Jesus is saying that God is the foremost authority on the eternal life of each of us. Our wealth, abundance and treasures does not measure up to God's unconditional love and generous grace for all of us. A favorite reflection of mine after seminary is the part of the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer - thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. As I critically think of this part of our prayer, I am drawn to the contemplation that we do not have to wait for heaven to happen in order for the kingdom to come. Jesus did not say - thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, and afterwards in heaven. Jesus was teaching his disciples that God's kingdom should happen now, here on earth, as it is heaven. I don't about you, but for me, heaven is when we all love ourselves and each other, unconditionally. No requirements, no changing you, no controlling you....well, among many other definitions that I have of heaven.

And I believe that this is what we are being called to do. To surrender our wealth, treasure and abundance to God and let God's spirit work within us. Now, I am not saying for you all to give up all your material possessions or empty your bank accounts to give it to the church, give up on your friends, or not take care of yourselves as giving up of wealth and abundance. But what I am inviting you to do is to not be focused on the wealth and abundance that when not sufficient will cause anxiety, rather to allow God's spirit to flow so that we all can be in God's kingdom. If you ask me, I would prefer to gather the treasures in God's kingdom. May it be so. Amen.