

Over the last couple of years there have been reports detailing studies about “distracted driving.” These reports have chronicled the increasing danger to drivers, passengers, and other people due to the increasing number of technological devices now standardly built into automobiles which can distract drivers with potentially serious or fatal results. Today’s Scriptures might be summarized as a warning about “Distracted Discipleship.”

St. Paul in the second reading clearly proclaims for whom and for what we have been saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus—eternal life in the Kingdom of God. Paul urges us to keep this life always before us. He lists a number of “distractions” that potentially can seriously harm or fatally injure the life of Christ into which we have been baptized. The first reading from Ecclesiastes and Jesus’ Gospel parable zero in on one of the potential hazards—greed, in which money and the pursuit of material wealth become the central motivations and goal in life instead of God and the Kingdom—the sin of idolatry.

How should we view money and material wealth from a faith perspective?

First of all, we must never idealize poverty and see wealth as a bad thing in itself. God is rich, not poor, and heaven will not be a place of poverty. Poverty is something to be overcome, eradicated. The poor don’t enjoy being poor. Secondly, we must avoid politicizing both poverty and wealth.

Nowhere in the Bible is the possession of wealth listed as being bad or evil in itself: it is how we use it and what it can do to our hearts that can be bad. Jesus in his teaching makes a distinction between the generous rich and the miserly rich. The former are good, because they imitate God, the latter, like the landowner in today’s parable, are bad. When we are generous particularly in a very prodigious way, riches won’t close our hearts. But the reverse is also true. All miserliness, all stinginess, all lack of generosity not only materially, but also psychologically and spiritually, closes our hearts in ways that make it hard to enter the kingdom of heaven, or genuine human community.

The challenge for all of us who are rich in any way is to continually give our wealth away. We need to do this, not because the poor need what we can give them, though they do; we need to do this so that we can remain healthy. Philanthropy, of every kind, is more about the health of the one giving than the health of the one receiving. The generous rich can inherit the kingdom, the miserly rich cannot. The poor, as Pope Francis continues to remind us, are everyone's ticket into heaven precisely because they have the first claim on our wealth. They are Jesus in the guise of the hungry, the immigrant stranger, the homeless, the sick, the imprisoned, the forgotten young and abandoned old—the poor.

Today's Scriptures invite us to the virtue and practice of stewardship: of divine (the second reading) and earthly (the first reading and Gospel) wealth. What riches we have, material, psychological, spiritual (time, talent, treasure)—is not our own; it's given to us in trust. God is the sole owner of all that is and the world properly belongs to everyone. What we claim as our own; material wealth, talent, time—is lent to us in trust, to steward for the good of everyone. It's not really ours. When we enrich others, we are enriched.

The wealthy landowner in today's Gospel was not a bad person. He is not dishonest or cruel. Yet Jesus labels him a "fool." Why? He became distracted—fatally so. How? First, he was self-centered and a loner. He saw his wealth and good fortune not as something to share with others, but as something to hoard for himself. Second, he believed himself to be the cause of his good fortune; a "self-made individual." He didn't take into account other factors like fertile soil, good weather, his hard workers. Thirdly, he thought his wealth could secure his future. He had no need of others, even God. Ironically, within a few hours, he will have no earthly future at all—he will be dead.

What about us? Where is our treasure? Does it lie in "stuff" or relationships; possessions or people; hoarding or sharing? What is our measure of success: how much we bring in or how freely we share? "If today you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts." Beware of the danger of "Distracted Discipleship."