

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, October 18, 2015

## **The Sunday Morning Stickup**

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

October 18, 2015

Mark 10:17-31

Back in June a story on CNN referred to the “Sunday Morning Stickup” referring to ways in which some churches distort scripture to compel people to give far more than is needed for the programs of the church and is often far more than the people can afford to give. They are promised that generous givers will receive even greater financial and material rewards in return.

Consider our scripture reading this morning. In it Jesus tells the rich man to sell everything he has, to give it to the poor, and that he will have riches in heaven --- riches in heaven, not on earth.

Our scripture passage also says, *“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”*

If you ever listen to radio or television preachers like Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar or many other similar preachers, you will be told that financial blessing is the will of God and that by donating to their ministries your personal wealth will increase. Will it? For a few it may but not by the will of God. For the many, it won't.

These ministries are preaching a heresy, one which strikes the poor most severely by encouraging them to give what they can't afford.

These preachers, I won't call them pastors for they aren't giving pastoral care to anyone, these preachers are snake oil pitchmen who have become personally very wealthy at the expense of those who believe what they are saying. They are preaching what is known as prosperity gospel or health and wealth gospel.

Their theology teaches that Christians are entitled to well-being. Are we really?

They teach that the Bible promises prosperity for believers. Does it? If it does I certainly have not read it in any of the many different Bible translations and theological reference books that I own, and I own a lot of them.

Creflo Dollar recently told his congregation in Atlanta that he needed a 65 million dollar jet airplane and, believe it or not, he got it. He got it from contributions of

hundreds of people, many of which could probably not really afford what they gave. I'll bet that Jesus was shaking his head over that.

P. T. Barnum famously said, "There's a sucker born every minute" and that is the kind of gullible soul that prosperity preachers are catering to.

The Protestant Reformation was sparked in part by outrage over how the Roman Catholic Church collected money selling "indulgences". What were these indulgences? They were simply payments made to the church in order to have your sins forgiven.

Wait a minute! Payments for your sins to be forgiven? What? Weren't our sins forgiven when Jesus died on the cross? He made the ultimate payment. No further payment is needed. All that is required is acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior. The Roman Catholic Church was effectively putting a tax on salvation.

October is when many, if not most, churches conduct stewardship campaigns asking members to make pledges or estimates of giving for the coming year. They do this so that the church leaders have some idea of what income to expect for the coming year in order to plan for the year's church programs. Fortunately that has not been necessary in this congregation although, as this year is coming to a close, I do encourage you to consider your giving as you think ahead to 2016.

But, whatever you give don't expect to become better off financially as the result of your giving. God doesn't work that way. I hope that everyone of you becomes more prosperous in 2016 but don't expect it. Nowhere in scripture is that promised, nowhere at all.

We are encouraged to tithe for the work of the church but what is an appropriate tithe? Is it 3%, 5%, 10% or what? The New Testament doesn't specify an amount at all. There are four references in the New Testament to the Pharisees giving one-tenth but there is no suggestion from Jesus or the apostles of that amount.

The ten percent tithe was an Old Testament prescription for Jews but there is no such rule for Christians. It was so rigorous for Jews, and still is in fact, that many synagogues today tell their members how much they are required to give based upon the synagogue's assessment of their income level. Our Jewish next door neighbor when we lived in West Virginia referred to it as his dues and said that he was told how much he had to give --- it wasn't an option.

That isn't the case for Christians. Jesus told us to love God with all our heart,

soul and might and to love our neighbor as ourselves. That takes money in today's world --- money to maintain the church building, to pay the utility bills, to purchase supplies, and to support benevolence programs like the Grandfather and Black Mountain Homes, Lunch Bunch, Presbytery benevolences, and community needs. We each need to assess how much we can afford to give beyond our own basic needs for food, shelter and family. What we can afford may be very little or may be a large amount. It may be minimal or 3% or 5% or 10% or much more than that. There is no hard and fast rule. Jesus doesn't promise you wealth. He promises you salvation but he does expect you to do as much as you can to support his two great commandments.

An article by Cathleen Falsani in the Washington Post a few months ago said, *"Nowhere has the prosperity gospel flourished more than among the poor and the working class. Told that wealth is a sign of God's grace and favor, followers strive for the trappings of luxury they can little afford in an effort to prove that they are blessed spiritually. Some critics have gone so far as to place part of the blame for the past decade's spending binge and foreclosure crisis at the foot of the prosperity gospel's altar."*

*"Jesus was born poor, and he died poor. During his earthly tenure, he spoke time and again about the importance of spiritual wealth and health. When he talked about material wealth, it was usually part of a cautionary tale."*

Lorraine Murray in the Charlotte Observer three years ago said, *"... the prosperity gospel is spiritually bankrupt."*

*"Nowhere did Christ promise his followers opulent houses and glittering jewelry and all the trappings of wealth. Instead, he recommended picking up the cross daily and following him."*

*"... Rich or poor, people who are faithful to God's commandments will indeed be blessed. The spiritual treasures include grace and hope in times of trouble."*

*"But let's not expect God to reward us with sparkling health and tons of material goodies. It goes against the grain of the Lord's Prayer, where we humbly ask for our daily bread --- and not the entire loaf."*

**Amen.**

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011