

## *Soul Security*

Personal security is a big ticket item for many Americans. The need for security ranges from knowing how one will take care of the bills to providing for the needs of one's family. During the 1980s there were all sorts of pop culture notions regarding one's personal security, mostly marking it in financial terms. The slogan of that time period was the following: he who dies with the most toys wins. I have to admit that I was rather intrigued by the idea of driving a BMW 740i with manual transmission. The car would come in Tanzanite blue, with a heating package that included the steering wheel and front and back seat warmers. Another way of keeping safe is to have a security detail to escort you from one event to another. It is not everyone who needs bodyguards to keep over-zealous fans at bay.

Celebrities and politicians are the ones who may immediately be concerned about having such people in place to provide protection. According to Abraham Maslow, the psychologist who developed the pyramid that described the human hierarchy of needs, all of us crave a sense of having our need for security met in terms of our jobs, bodies, health, family, and property.

In order to purchase a semblance of this security we must plan adequately for the future. You and I are enjoined to save money for a rainy day. This prudent measure has come to bear fruit in the lives of many of our fellow Americans, and indeed in the lives of many people around the world. This has been especially true for those who already were or just became unemployed during our various global

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economic down-turns. Some were able to save the recommended 6-months' amount of money that is required to pay their obligations. Others were not so fortunate and had to rely on filing for unemployment insurance payments. Such a measure is only temporary, and this remains the case even with the extensions that are given to those collecting unemployment. Insurance salespeople marketed a variety of policies prior to the market crash in 2008. There were people who had the foresight or followed the financial advice to take out individual term-life insurance policies.

There have been some bizarre insurance policies sold in recent times. Lloyds of London, the world's leading specialist insurance market, offers its services to both businesses and individuals in over 200 countries. The interesting thing about Lloyds is the specialty items that they insure. This firm prides itself in helping celebrities reduce the financial impact of any loss to the features that help them to sell themselves. For instance, Marlene Dietrich insured her voice for \$1,000,000 and Bruce Springsteen insured his rich, gravelly one for \$6,000,000. Tina Turner's legs were insured for \$1,000,000 while famed soccer star David Beckham insured his legs for \$70,000 0000! It is even rumored that Jennifer Lopez insured her posterior.

Lloyds might be the choice that celebrities have for the safe keeping of their assets, but many others prefer to use safety deposit boxes that are housed either in banks

or in the post office. One may keep birth certificates, gemstones, marketable securities, or wills in a safety deposit box. The bank or the post office may provide people with a place to guard the things that contribute to their nest eggs.

Meditating on today's scripture passage and the issue of financial security made me think about one of my favorite commercials on television. I love these ads because they feature Vikings. Capital One has several scenarios in which the Vikings are pillaging people's homes or chasing after them. Just as they are about to rough them up or throttle the person to death, the individual who is being targeted by the ruffians pulls out a Capital One visa credit card. That action miraculously halts all of the marauding invaders, whose leader then turns to face the camera and asks, "What's in your wallet?"

In a similar fashion those Vikings may even ask what it is that we have placed in our safes or safety deposit boxes. How much do we rely on our material wealth to keep us safe? Our rationale for this is simple: we are employing the motto of the Girl Scouts: "Be Prepared". That way, when we are faced with adversity, we will have the means to engage whatever curve balls life throws our way. Perhaps this is in fact what the man in Jesus' story was doing. Wasn't he preparing for his retirement? He had been farming steadily for years, faithfully and diligently planting, watering, and fertilizing his crops.

This particular growing season yielded a bumper crop. Much more than the rich man had anticipated, and certainly a lot more than his barns could hold. He had to think fast. It would soon be time to bring in the harvest. But where was he going to put all of his bounty? Why, the barns would be bursting at the seams! The rich man decided that bigger and better storage facilities would alleviate his problems. He would then be able to put his feet up because he was a smart fellow who had planned ahead; he could eat, drink and be merry for many years to come. Imagine the rich fool's surprise when, instead of hearing celebratory cheers and congratulatory clapping, he instead hears God's voice telling him that his days of living the good life are over.

Jesus picked quite a story to tell the man who had come to him for advice about his inheritance. This man was part of a crowd of people who were following Jesus in order that the Lord would heal them and teach them God's wisdom. The man shouted out from the crowd, requesting that Jesus serve as a judge between himself and his older brother. It turned out that the man was complaining about the customary division of property. In that culture, the eldest son receives a double portion of his father's belongings, and the rest is shared among the remaining siblings. The law in the land stipulated that if the family only consisted of girls, the property was to be divided among the daughters with the understanding that

they would marry someone within the tribe. That way the wealth would remain in their father's tribe.

The man may have thought that by presenting the issue as a case for justice and equity, Jesus would call for a re-distribution of the deceased man's wealth. The fellow in the crowd was not looking for justice; he just wanted to pad his own pockets so that he, too, might relax, take it easy and party a little with his friends. He may even have been able to retire sooner than he had thought if he got a little more money from his father. However, Jesus saw right through the man's thoughts and knew of his greedy motives for that question. Instead of becoming embroiled in a family squabble based on the need to satisfy the man's greed, Jesus points out to him that the value of life is not measured in terms of one's possessions or personal wealth. The illustration that the Lord used to elucidate that point underscores for us what Jesus had said earlier about those of us, who choose to become his followers when he said,

“What does it profit them if they gain the whole world but lose or forfeit themselves” (Lk 9:25) after asking who people said that he was of his disciples.

Jesus wanted to reorient the crowd's thinking about material wealth to what really counted as a blessing. True blessings are given to those who both hear the Word of God and do it. (Lk 8:21; 11:28).

The parable about the rich fool triggered many associations for the people who were pressing in on Jesus that day. It still does the same for us, even in our modern culture. In Jesus' day, wealth was seen as a blessing of the Lord. While this may be a sign of the goodness of God, the biblical wisdom that ancient Israel received from the Psalms was that the folly of riches led people to boast in their abundance rather than depend on the Lord for their protection as we heard in Leo's reading of Ps 49: 5 – 6 saying <sup>5</sup> Why should I fear in times of trouble, when the iniquity of my persecutors surrounds me, <sup>6</sup> those who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches?

The rich fool did not lose his possessions in some reversal of fortune such as a natural disaster or a stock market crash. The ground had produced an abundant harvest, and yes it would be prudent to gather it in and store it in the barns. What does God want us to do with our resources? If we look further back in the Bible, we find the story of the dream that Pharaoh shared with Joseph. The interpretation was that Egypt was to prepare and store up enough food and grain for everyone. Then when the years of famine came, Joseph not only oversaw the distribution of food among the Egyptians, but they were also able to share Egypt's wealth with the people from the surrounding areas who came seeking food. Being frugal is not what is under indictment in this story. There is nothing wrong with saving for a rainy day. Appropriate concern for the future needs to be balanced with generous

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care for others. The rich man in Jesus' parable sought only to make provisions for his own security. He saw the abundant blessing of the Lord as one that he would keep for himself, rather than sharing the blessing with others in need.

The same remains true today. A while back there was a segment pertaining to greed on *60 Minutes*. One of the show's anchors, Morley Safer, had travelled to Mid-State Correctional Facility, in upstate New York, to conduct an interview with Prisoner 05A4820, Dennis Kozlowski who was the former Chief Executive Officer of Tyco International. Kozlowski was a man who at one point earned a salary of \$170 million per year. Sadly, he was accused of stealing more than \$100 million from Tyco. Some of his excesses included a vintage yacht that he sold for \$17.3 million, a \$2 million birthday party and a \$6,000.00 shower curtain. Although these items were for his personal use, they were billed to the company. In the interview, Kozlowski spoke about his humble beginnings as a boy from a poor family, growing up in Newark, New Jersey. It was a dream come true, a classic Cinderella story, except this time the name of the person who went from rags to riches was Dennis.

In all fairness, I should tell you that Kozlowski still maintains his plea of being innocent of the crime of stealing from the company he made into a multi-billion dollar endeavor. He contends that he was convicted by a jury solely because his indictment and trial occurred in the wake of the financial scandals of people like

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Martha Stewart and of course Ken Lay; he was the son of a poor preacher, who went to the University of Missouri and later became the CEO of Enron. Just as Jesus exposed the inner thoughts of the rich man in the parable, to build bigger barns, eat, drink and be merry, so everything that people do, rich and poor alike, will also be exposed. Making the rich fool's thoughts known brought home the point that Jesus had made in an earlier teaching, telling the crowds that everything we do in secret will become public knowledge and that it is already known by the Lord.

God, revealed to the world in Jesus the Christ, was holding up a mirror to the man in the crowd and indeed for all who were gathered to receive healing from Jesus. The Lord was lamenting the condition of the hearts of the people. God was acting as a loving and caring parent to the people Israel. Jesus wanted to teach them that the opposite of greed is generosity.

Our God transcends all of our human institutions, such as our laws of inheritance and those that govern the death penalty. God wills good and productive lives of the elect, the chosen people. God wants to teach us how to be hearers and doers of the Word. So, what is it that the Lord requires of us? The Prophet Micah tells us that the Lord has already taught us what we should do: to do justice, loving kindness and to walk humbly with our God. What would it mean if Martha Stewart or Dennis Kozlowski were to have had this kind of wisdom in their wallets? How



might they have avoided the wrath of the prosecutors and the judgment handed to them after the deliberation of the respective juries? Or said with the Capital One commercial in mind, how would they have stopped society's raging Vikings?

Having grown up in poverty in Newark and knowing the struggles of people who live in the inner cities of our nation, one might have hoped that Dennis Kozlowski would have returned to the embattled city to offer some assistance. Perhaps instead of spending money on a vintage yacht, he might have purchased a smaller boat and used the remainder of the money to fund afterschool programs in his hometown of Newark. He might have donated the money to Rutgers University as scholarship funds for students from the inner city to get an education. If Kozlowski had asked me, I would have a long list of students from Excel Academy and Remember Niger who would appreciate some scholarships so that they too could attend four-year colleges and universities. Perhaps donating money to faith-based ministries would help in deciding where to best use the pledged funds. Research conducted by Peter Steinke and Edwin Friedman illustrates that money matters in church reveal the true heart of the church's ministry, as well as that which happens in each of our households. One has to ask oneself, "does my commitment to being rich toward God give me a sense of abiding joy or do financial concerns erode my confidence in the grace I receive by living a Christian life? The question is essentially asking us, the saints here at Georgetown

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Presbyterian Church, what is in your spiritual wallets?” Liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino would have us further reflect on the notion of God’s preferential option for the poor. When Mary was expecting our Lord Jesus, she sang a psalm of praise to God. We know it as the *Magnificat*, and the lyrics of the song indicate the liberative actions of God as far as the poor are concerned.

Beloved in Christ, let us check what is in our wallets or security boxes. Are we rich in the knowledge of God? I believe that this church is rich in the knowledge of the Lord because this is a very generous congregation. God is calling us to teach others the many ways in which we can share our resources. The grace of God keeps us out of the grasp of greed and imbues us with the gift of generosity. We share the abundant bounty we have received in terms of our time, our talents and our wealth with those persons who are less fortunate than ourselves. May Christ’s invitation to a renewed relationship that depends on God’s providence lead us to salvation in the sure knowledge that our future is secure in God’s love for us.

*Blessing and honor and glory and power be unto to the One who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever. Amen.*