

Luke 18:15-30  
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### **Myrna and Monopoly**

We're now in the third week of our worship series entitled "Games People Play," and this week's game is Monopoly. It's not a game I grew up playing, but it has become a central part of our family's beach vacation every summer. Whether it is only the three of us or our group expands to include one of our daughter's friends, most summers the Monopoly board has been set up early in the week and one game extends over several evenings. I play along so to speak because it has become a tradition, but if I'm honest, it is one of my least favorite parts of the trip because of what it does to my family. I asked Abby and Dave if they were alright with my talking about them and Monopoly this morning, and they gave the ok. On our family text thread Abby said, "Sure, you can talk about the tyranny I am always subjected to." And Dave added, "You mean the domination." Yep. Things get a bit testy at times depending on who has all the houses (usually Dave) or multiple hotels (again, Dave) or most of the money (you guessed it, Dave). I can get very competitive when it comes to sports or other games, but for some reason I don't seem to have what it takes to succeed at Monopoly. I'm just happy to move my little dog piece around the board, hoping to get an occasional "Get out of jail free" card and not go broke before making it around once. That said, I am more like the ruler in Luke's text than I like to admit. He's in it to win it, whether he's clear on what "it" is or not.

I once heard a speaker at a stewardship conference talk about people's money stories and the impact those stories have on giving in the church. We all have a story or multiple stories around money. Maybe your parents scraped and saved to survive the Great Depression or a personal financial crisis. Maybe your family has always had enough or more than enough. Maybe you have worked all your life

to make a living and put food on the table and now you're savoring your hard-earned retirement. Maybe your family has endured stony silences about who inherited how much or none at all. Maybe your family has barely been able to keep your head above water financially. Maybe your family is or was up to their eyeballs in debt. Maybe your family has given abundantly to the church or to benevolent causes. Maybe that giving has been a source of stress. Or maybe giving money away has been easy, second nature even. Money stories are woven into our larger stories as individuals and families, which means these stories are woven into the fabric of the church, as well.

The ruler has a story, too. We don't know everything about him, but Luke tells us quite a bit. This story also shows up in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. In Luke's telling, the ruler asks his question on the heels of Jesus' declaration about our needing to follow the children's lead in welcoming the kingdom. The ruler—a public official perhaps, approaches Jesus and asks how he might get or obtain or inherit or deserve eternal life, depending on the translation you read. Jesus points the man to the basics of the Law—be faithful, don't cheat anyone or on anyone, don't lie, don't murder, don't take what isn't yours, look out for your elders. Check, check, check, check, check, and check. The man insists that he has "kept" these things, obeyed these laws since he was young. Jesus then tells him to sell all he owns and share it with the poor and follow him. And the man has no words. Luke tells us simply, "The man became sad because he was extremely rich."

We don't know how the man became wealthy. We simply know that he is. That may not be his entire story, but his wealth is clearly a significant piece of who he is. And the thought of parting with his wealth makes him sad. In other gospels the ruler walks away. In Luke, he stays. We don't know how he responds in the end. We don't know if his life changes course; we don't know if he does what Jesus asks. We don't know if he gives up his wealth and follows Jesus on the way. We aren't told.

Jesus goes on to state that it is easier to thread a camel—the largest animal known to his audience’s imagination—through the eye of a needle than it is for a wealthy person to enter God’s kingdom. I’m guessing many of you have heard the explanation about there being a gate in Jerusalem known for camels’ needing to be unburdened by their cargo before they can pass through. Some scholars suggest that there’s an ancient typo of sorts in the text and that the word is *rope* rather than *camel*. Regardless, the point holds, there is no squeezing ourselves into God’s kingdom. We cannot buy our way in, nor can we make ourselves fit. And our stuff—our money, our houses, our hotels—if we use the vocabulary of Monopoly, may partially be why.

This is not to say that God has a grudge against the wealthy, nor does Jesus. Yes, there are concerns, warnings, and judgments throughout the whole of scripture about wealth being built on the backs of the poor. Dominating others for profit and power are not part of God’s vision for the beloved community. And yet God loves us all and wants a good, full, abundant life for everyone, rich and poor, young and old, of every race, nation, gender, culture, and creed. The early church blossomed and spread largely due to the benevolence of wealthy patrons such as Lydia. God also knows that clutching our stuff can get in the way of our trusting God and loving our neighbor.

Most of you know by now that I am a child of the 70s. I was raised on a steady diet of Saturday morning cartoons, *Free to Be You and Me*, *Sesame Street*, *Mr. Rogers*, and *The Electric Company*. One animated short from *The Electric Company* was intended to teach me about possessive names. It has in fact lingered with me and taught me much more. It’s entitled “Myrna,” or that’s at least how I found it with the help of Google this past week. This Myrna is very different from other Myrnas I have encountered in real life. This Myna stands in the middle of a room surrounded by her stuff. She begins by saying, “Hi. I’m Myrna, and this is my plant.” The narrator says, “Myrna’s plant,” and we see an

apostrophe and an S added to the end of Myrna's name while Myrna picks up her plant. The pattern repeats as Myrna goes on to pick up her lamp, her free-standing, groovy 70s fireplace, her chair, and her whimpering dog. She never puts anything back down. Instead the floor eventually caves beneath her feet and she winds up in her basement, Myrna's basement.<sup>1</sup>

My brother is 26 months younger than I am. I can remember how it felt for him to mess with my stuff. Sharing was not my favorite thing. Watching Myrna plunk down into her basement made an impression, however. I don't know whether I immediately became any better about sharing, but I do remember not wanting to clutch everything tightly enough to make me break through to the floor below. Our basement was dark, dank, and creepy, and I did not want to spend too much time there. Clutching my stuff was not worth it.

I now know that I am not literally in danger of dropping through to the basement clutching my stuff. There's no way I could pick up and hold everything—far too much stuff to grab—and besides, most of our current house has a crawl space underneath it. That said, I am attached to my things. I like the comfort and the feeling of security. So, I can relate to the ruler, at least initially. I, too, have played by the rules—for the most part—and have done my best to be faithful. It is easy for me to get defensive in the face of Jesus' words or to try and rationalize them. *You don't really mean everything do you, Jesus? You're just talking to that one man, right?* Whether Jesus is strictly speaking to the ruler alone or not, my reaction should tell me something.

The gospel of Luke is especially focused on wealth and poverty, so Jesus has a lot to say throughout the gospel about the danger of possessions and their power. Alan Culpepper insists:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://youtu.be/9ZwXV4Vlag8>

The rich find it difficult to experience God's sovereignty because their wealth turns them away from people in need and blinds them to their own need of salvation. Wealth easily becomes a pursuit that displaces the priority of serving God and thereby excludes the rich from the opportunity to experience God's grace.<sup>2</sup>

It's not that Jesus is challenging the ruler—or me for that matter—just for clutching his stuff; Jesus wants the disciples and the ruler to understand that by clutching so tightly to his possessions, the man misses out on participating wholeheartedly in God's kingdom. Rather than reacting defensively, can I find a way to hear Jesus' words as an invitation rather than a finger-wagging? Can I hear Jesus' concern that if I insist on clinging so tightly to my wealth, I will miss out on the genuinely abundant life God wants me to enjoy? If I put my faith in my stuff and devote my energy to managing and holding on to that stuff, I risk missing the extravagant grace that God keeps lavishing upon me.

You and I know plenty of stories where money is not the hero, where money does not and cannot save us, where money is wielded as a weapon, where money poisons and destroys some of our most precious relationships. Families have been torn apart over inheritances and investments. Churches have fought tooth and nail over how much to spend and how much to stash away, turning parishioners against one another and turning away from the world God so dearly loves. As maddening as it is, there are still any number of things—addiction, disease, heartbreak—that money cannot cure. Money cannot save us. Yes, money makes safe housing and the best in health care more accessible. Money still cannot save us. And I don't mean something as simple as a "get out of jail (or hell) free" card. God's saving work is about more than what happens when I die, and it is just that—God's work here and now. If I cling too tightly to my stuff—like Myrna, I wind up alone in my basement clinging to

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<sup>2</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol IX (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 348.

all the stuff I can grab to keep me company, not exactly how I would describe the kingdom of God or life abundant.

I don't believe that everyone is called to become Mother Teresa. I do believe that we are all called to love God and to love one another and to share generously so that every child of God can have a safe place to call home, enough food to eat, clean water to drink, and a chance to thrive, learn, and grow. By the grace of God, I hope to cling a little less tightly to my stuff and to cling a bit more tightly to the God we meet in Jesus Christ. After all, he is the One who gave up everything—not just his stack of Monopoly money, not just houses or hotels—but everything, so that we could see the depth and breadth of God's love for us up close. In the words of Paul:

Though he was in the form of God,  
he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.  
But he emptied himself  
by taking the form of a slave  
and by becoming like human beings.  
When he found himself in the form of a human,  
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,  
even death on a cross.<sup>3</sup>

The least I can do in response to God's extravagant saving grace in Jesus Christ is to loosen my grip on the stuff that cannot save me, open my hands and heart to share with others, and hang on more tightly to this One who can and does save me, the One who absolutely refuses to let me go.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Philippians 2:6-8, CEB