

# Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, October 13, 2024

“The Last Will Be First”

## *Young at Heart Message*

Who here remembers when Beanie Babies were popular?

It's definitely something that people in my generation would remember, and perhaps many of your kids had Beanie Babies when they were growing up.

We all thought they'd be worth something someday, and now I think they aren't worth much.

Anyway, I had a decent sized collection of Beanie Babies when I was probably Junior High age, give or take.



I tended to be quite attached to things when I was that age.

It could sometimes feel like things I wanted were hard to come by, so when I had things, I wanted to keep them as long as I could.

I can only imagine that if, at that age, I had the opportunity to ask Jesus how I could get into heaven and he told me to donate all of my Beanie Babies to the poor, I probably would have said “nah, I'm good. I'll take my chances.”

I'm being a bit facetious, of course, but it would have been *hard* to make me get rid of my things when I was that age.

In fact, when our bedrooms got too full of things, my sister and I would store our precious items in boxes in the basement.

Those boxes contained toys we no longer used, mostly, and a *lot* of stuffed animals.

I mean, a *lot* of stuffed animals.

Every now and then, my dad would get into a mood and would want to go through those boxes and start just tossing things, donating things, etc.

And of course when he did that, my sister and I would cry and say we *needed* our things!

It was an unjust world when my dad would choose what things he thought we didn't need to keep anymore!

I never understood his seemingly sudden interest in getting rid of all of our things.

Just because we didn't play with them regularly anymore didn't mean we didn't want to keep them!

Maybe we'd go through those boxes and decide to play with those old toys again!

There was a sense of nostalgia, at least, when we would be reunited with our things we hadn't seen in a while.

It was like Christmas all over again!

The reality, though, was that we truly didn't need any of that old stuff.

Essentially, once it was out of sight, it was out of mind until Dad decided it was time to get rid of the stuff.

So, like I said, if Jesus was the one telling me I needed to donate those old toys, I would not have felt much different than when my dad was the one telling me.

Once the items my dad got rid of were gone, though, our little broken hearts soon forgot all about it, and we were content with the things we had and currently used and enjoyed.

The heartbreak was short-lived because our attachment to those things was mostly in our heads, not our hearts.

It was not an easy thing, though, to let go of the things we'd felt we'd waited so long for.

And I will admit today that I have truly turned into my father's daughter.

I completely understand now his need to purge the house of the clutter and the unnecessary things.

I now do the same thing, and I'm sure he's looking down on me and saying, "I told ya so!"

And, if he were still around, I would thank him for teaching me such a valuable lesson.

### ***The Message***

Feeling forced to give up things that were, in the moment, important to me, was difficult as a child.

And, it can be incredibly difficult as an adult too.

As a kid, I wasn't the one who necessarily worked hard to get those things, unless I paid for them with my allowance.

But as an adult? I work hard for the things I have!

And, I imagine that the man who ran up to Jesus and asked him how he could inherit eternal life felt a similar way when Jesus told him to sell the things he owned, give the money to the poor, and follow him.

I can actually picture the man's face when Jesus says this. The passage says the man was shocked and went away grieving.

I imagine his face fell as he began thinking about his possessions and how hard he worked for them.

Jesus then says something that I think is quite challenging for many, if not most, Christians.

He says, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

This is challenging for most of us because it is incredibly easy for people to convince themselves they are *not* wealthy.

Most of us live into the income we make.

I may have used this as an example before, but I'll share my own life's example again.

I used to live on practically nothing.

I was close enough to the poverty line that I nearly qualified for welfare at one point in my life.

At that point, all I wanted was to make enough money that things would be just a little bit easier, and I wouldn't have to worry *quite* as much about money.

Looking back on that time in my life, I have no idea how I survived.

I have no idea how I survived because I *still* feel like I'm barely surviving most of the time, and I make a much better income now than I did then.

But that's part of the problem, right?

We almost always live within our means. The more we earn, the more we spend, the more we desire, and the more we feel like we don't have.

Because most of us do this, we live most of our lives in a perpetual circle of feeling like what we have is never enough.

I am certain I thought I could never have enough Beanie Babies!

And even now, I find myself longing to earn *just* a little bit more, so that things will be *just* a little easier.

I'm essentially in the same mindset I was when I was *actually* poor.

So, it's easy for me to feel like Jesus's words do not apply to me.

It can't possibly be hard for me to get into the kingdom of God, because I'm not wealthy! Whew!

Except that Jesus doesn't really define wealth, does he?

He simply tells the man to sell all of his possessions, give his money to the poor, and follow him.

If I think about it this way, then I am definitely wealthy.

I have plenty of possessions I could, in theory, sell so that I could give that money to the poor.

But boy, is it hard to imagine in today's world doing something like that!

Why?

Well, for starters, I would be homeless.

Actually, in my case, that's not true. I would have a home, but nothing else, and I honestly wouldn't last very long in today's world.

I couldn't effectively do my job, I would be miserable and uncomfortable, and I would have to rely on other people to cover my basic needs.

Not to mention, I'm not sure how I could truly follow Jesus in today's world if I wasn't properly caring for myself.

So, Jesus's words are a real challenge here.

How can we extrapolate something meaningful from this passage without feeling guilty about the life we do live and the things we do own, while still living into the essence of what Jesus is saying?

First of all, much like the passage just before this one that we heard last Sunday, we have to remember the context in which Jesus is living.

In the first century, wealth looked quite different than poverty.

And, there were societal expectations for caring for ascetics and religious practitioners – begging for alms, for example, was common practice at the time.

So telling people to give up their possessions and follow Jesus – a group that likely had most of their basic needs for shelter, food, and clothing met by the generosity of strangers – was not at all the same as doing something similar today.

Today, the only effective way I could see to do that would be to commit oneself to the monastic life – either becoming a monk or a nun and living in a monastery type setting.

And of course, we couldn't all realistically do that.

So, does that mean the kingdom of God is inaccessible to people today?

Of course not. Much like last week's text, we cannot assume that Jesus could even imagine what the world would look like today.

So, as we are thinking through today's passage, it might be helpful to frame it differently.

Certainly, I suspect Jesus would approve of my dad's method of going through the things we owned occasionally and donating those items we no longer needed or used to people who could use them more than we could.

I don't think Jesus would in good faith suggest that the only way we could enter the kingdom of God is to sell everything we own and live on the streets.

If I thought Jesus would recommend that today, I would be a hypocrite myself because I can't conceive of doing that and still being able to serve in a ministry role, or any job for that matter.

I suspect Jesus would recommend we do consider looking at the lives we lead and seeing if there are areas we could be more generous.

Perhaps it's going through the things we have and giving away the things we realistically can part with.

But perhaps it's also taking a look at where and how we spend our time, our money, or our other resources.

Are we giving of ourselves in ways that honour the gifts we have been given to allow us to better serve others?

Are we donating when and where we can?

Do we have a plan for our resources if something were to happen to us?

I think there are many people today who might struggle to give up their worldly possessions, but who are at the same time incredibly generous with their time and the gifts God has provided them.

There are others who feel being generous with their time is difficult, but who are better able to part with their things.

And then there are people who are generous with giving away a higher percentage of their money than others.

And I think most of us are not necessarily able to give of our time, our talent, our resources, our energy, our money, *and* our possessions at any given time.

We likely go through seasons where we can more effectively be generous in *some* of those ways, but most of us cannot give in all of those ways all the time.

And I don't think Jesus would say that if we can't do it all, all the time, we aren't good enough.

Jesus ends today's passage by saying "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Each of us, regardless of our economic position in society, can be generous in a variety of ways.

Those who hoard money, possessions, time, resources, and who seem addicted to accumulating more and more without any thought for other people may be “the first” that Jesus is referring to.

And those who are generous in some of those same ways may be who Jesus is referring to as the last.

It is possible that even a person who has nothing hoards the few things that they do have.

Likewise, it is possible for a person who has nothing to share of the very little they do have with others.

I don't think that only the economically poor are the ones considered the “last” in this scenario.

The “last” are those people who give of themselves in whatever ways they are able while also caring for themselves so they can continue to serve others.

So, as we all head into a long weekend celebrating the things in our lives that we are thankful for, let us also remember to think about the ways in which we give of ourselves.

Most of have what we need to survive, and most, if not all, of us in this sanctuary have what we need to thrive.

There is value in celebrating gratitude, and there is incredible value in celebrating generosity, as well.

So as we leave here today, may we remember to be grateful for the things we have – not in comparison to anyone else, but in terms of our own personal happiness, contentment, and satisfaction.

And, if there are things we can let go of that would not be a detriment to our happiness, our contentment, or our life satisfaction, then may we consider heeding Jesus's advice and giving of those things to others so that we can spread joy, safety, and comfort to our neighbours.

In gratitude for all that we have, we say “Amen.”

Let us pray:

Gracious God, we come before you today in deep and humble gratitude for the gifts you bring to our lives. There are times when we get caught up in our own suffering and forget to remain grateful for the things in our lives that are going well. It can be easy to get caught up in our own woes, but we are grateful for your gentle reminders that all things considered, we have more than enough.

We pray today for your guidance and wisdom. Thanksgiving is a time when we remember to be grateful for all that we have, but we ask that you help us remember to be grateful throughout the year as well. With gratitude, and in your Holy name, we pray. Amen.