Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,350 words

“How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” Christ exclaims in the gospel. And just two Sundays ago, St. James said something similar: “Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries…”¹ These are not exactly words of comfort! They are meant to shake us – for fallen human nature all too easily finds security and places confidence in wealth, possessions, and property. Thus, the disciples were also shaken when they heard our Lord speak this way: “Then who can be saved?”, they asked – for even the poorest of them found some degree of security in his possessions, whether money, or property, or some other material thing.

Jesus responded that salvation is only possible for God. It is his work in us; we cannot save ourselves. We must not hope in any earthly thing: we must hope in him alone. And even the poorest of us here has to hear this message. Our poverty in this country, in fact, tends to be more of a moral and spiritual nature. When we travel much of the rest of the world we see the sort of material poverty that not even our poorest here experience. Oh yes, there are some – and we still have the duty to help any among us who have need. But the word of Christ should shake us all:

“It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God”, he proclaims. May he free us from any trust in material things.

But how, then, do we deal with the fact that we do tend to have more than a mere sufficiency? How do we free ourselves from that security blanket that our relative material comfort and our bank accounts provide? King Solomon answers in our first reading: “I prayed, and prudence was given me; I pleaded, and the spirit of wisdom came to me. I preferred her to scepter and throne, and deemed riches nothing in comparison with her…” We need prudence, which helps us to apply general principles to our concrete circumstances and choose not only the things that are right but those that most aid our salvation. We also need God’s wisdom, which helps us to see things from his perspective: in the right measure, and not superficially.

Like with many things, the proof is in the pudding. In other words, we ask God for these gifts – these gifts that help us be truly detached and place our trust, our security, our confidence in him alone. But then we have to follow-up with practice. Thus we are called to be generous, to be sacrificial. If we recognize the Lord as the source and origin of all of our blessings – including our financial blessings – then we are more likely to give with generosity and gratitude. But too often, we apply a worldly wisdom to this area of life: “I worked hard for this money”, we say – we see it merely as the result of our own efforts. Yes, you did work hard, but God gave you the strength, he gave you many insights along the way, he gave special graces. Give thanks to him!

A personal note: although I grew up in a mostly non-practicing-Catholic environment, one family member was a very fervent Protestant, and on countless occasions over the years I went with her to the various churches she attended. I can’t recall a single Sunday that they didn’t ask for money – didn’t matter where it was. And more than a mere appeal, they promoted the biblical standard of tithing – giving the first 10% of one’s gross income, which, by the way, was just for the regular collection; all the extras were to come out of the remaining 90%! Their giving, on the whole, puts us Catholics to shame. But are they worse off than us? No, much to the contrary: I think they tend to have more prudence and wisdom in this area than we do.

It’s cliché, but it’s first and foremost biblical: God cannot be outdone in generosity. “God loves a cheerful giver”.² A few weeks ago I asked you to give more of yourselves in the way of involvement and participation in the parish, when I published the list of all our many ministries,

¹ James 5:1.
² 2 Corinthians 9:7.
activities, and service opportunities. I will publish an updated version of that list soon, and I will also post it on our parish web site. This weekend, it’s my duty to ask you – and myself – to review our financial giving. I do so profoundly grateful for the generosity you have regularly shown. In fact, I can report that we do have a modest surplus so far this year, and so this is not a panicky “ask” by any means. But I know that the Lord wants more of us and our parish.

Our giving here at St. Paul’s goes to three main “areas”: the regular collection, which pays for our programs, parish salaries, and many other bills, such as utilities and repairs and the like; the various second collections, some local and some national, but all for important needs; and our capital campaign, which until now has been passive in nature, with just a monthly collection but no formal pledges. I am not going to ask you to give 10% off the top: I know some of your already do – and you experience the detachment and freedom that comes from that approach, and many blessings besides. But I do ask all to be generous according to your means, remembering that no amount is either too large or too small.

Think about the poor widow, who gave the last two coins she had; it was a small gift, but Christ praised her sacrificial generosity – “for she gave all she had”. 3 Will he forsake us if we, too, give with sacrificial generosity and trust? But we need prudence and wisdom to do so. So we pray for those gifts, even as we strive to put them into practice. In this week’s bulletin I’ve included an insert that I hope will help and challenge everyone to give intentionally and generously. Finance has changed a lot in a short time: many of us no longer carry cash; some no longer use checks; banks want us to use plastic or bill payment instead. But to all who have any sort of income: please give intentionally – work your parish into that framework as well.

In the next few weeks I will provide more information about the next steps for our capital campaign and the vision for the future that I have developed after much prayer and consultation, which I hope will enable us eventually to move beyond the fundraising model that has marked our parish’s life for well over 30 years now. A campus like ours, with beautiful old buildings and also a lot happening on it, will always have great needs. But I think there are more effective ways that we can meet those needs; ways that I hope will also help us to overcome the expensive deferred maintenance that has accumulated. There are great signs of vitality in our parish and the Lord has richly blessed us. I pray that we will respond with gratitude and generosity.

Christ’s words this week shake us and challenge us to examine what our true security is, where our hope is placed, and in whom we place our confidence. Riches and wealth promise us a security that they can never fully deliver. Only God can save us! Our means of overcoming any misplaced trust or false confidence is precisely in being sacrificially generous. As Pastor, I thank you for your support of the Cathedral of St. Paul: I ask those who may not be giving to start doing so and to be generous; and I ask those who are giving to increase it, as the Lord provides. Let us ask God for prudence and wisdom like King Solomon of old did, preferring those gifts to any earthly prestige or wealth. Thank you!

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— AN INVITATION —

Your Financial Support of the Cathedral of Saint Paul

WHAT IT MEANS TO MAKE A FINANCIAL COMMITMENT TO YOUR PARISH CHURCH:
Making a financial commitment should be a spiritual decision reached through prayer and reflection. Things to consider — and talk to God about — include:

• Returning to God with gratitude a portion of the earnings that He has enabled us to have;
• Having faith that we can give generously, even sacrificially, as God will not be outdone in generosity;
• Recognizing the present and future financial needs of the church — and the need for every member to support the church in those needs. Everyone can (and should) give!

IF YOU ARE MAKING YOUR FIRST COMMITMENT OR REVIEWING YOUR EXISTING ONE:
This is an essential part of membership in any church community. Your gift expresses your faith in God and your recognition of the parish’s good and responsible stewardship.

This commitment is more than just putting something in the offering plate from time to time; it is a deliberate, intentional decision made with God’s help and then dutifully fulfilled with a sense of gratitude.

DECIDING WHAT IS THE RIGHT AMOUNT TO GIVE:
The biblical standard and strong tradition in our country is that of tithing — giving the first 10% of one’s gross income to God. Everyone, however, is at a different place in his or her faith journey and present capacity to give. Some can give more; some less. What is most important is to be generous, regardless of the amount: to make a regular and sacrificial offering to the Lord.

The Bible points toward proportional giving: those who have more are expected to give back more. However, we must not forget the Parable of the Widow’s Mite (Mark 12:41-44): the poor widow’s gift — just two small coins — was greater than everyone else’s, for she gave all she had.  

(OVER)
PLEASE MAKE AN INTENTIONAL, PLANNED FINANCIAL COMMITMENT TO YOUR PARISH!

Calculate your current level of monthly giving with the help of this chart.

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If your current giving is under 3%, please consider starting at 3%.
If you are at 3% or greater, please consider a step in faith by moving up one or more percentage categories.

WHERE YOUR GIVING IS NEEDED:
- **General Fund** (pays program expenses, staff salaries, and all operating expenses; includes charitable outreach);
- **Capital Campaign** (for the replacement of our quickly-failing pipe organ, structural repair of our historic rectory);
- **Second Collections** (requested by the bishop for national pastoral initiatives and the education of our seminarians);
- **Special Gifts** (many parishioners have wanted to give special gifts to buy particular items for the church, support the Music Fund, and/or memorialize deceased loved ones).

HOW TO GIVE:
- **Cash** (it's best to use envelopes, so that we can track your donation and provide you with an annual giving statement; call the office to receive a set of giving envelopes);
- **Check** (envelope use not necessary);
- **WeShare** (an online giving system that enables you to donate to all of the areas listed – set up or manage your account at http://stpaulsbhm.churchgiving.com);
- **PayPal** (go to http://PayPal.me/CathedralStPaul for one-time donations; or scan the QR code on the bulletin).

Thank you for your generous financial support of the Cathedral of Saint Paul!