

LADY, ARE YOU RICH?

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Psalm 103:1-3

It was thanksgiving morning and in the crowded kitchen of her small home the lady of the house was busy preparing the traditional thanksgiving turkey. It was warm as toast in the kitchen, but even so she felt a chill skip up her spine as she listened to the howling wind whistle through the shutters driving the winter rain against the window panes.

She was just getting ready to baste the turkey for the last time when the doorbell rang. In mild irritation at this disturbance she hustled to the front door... opened it... and saw two small children in ragged, out-grown coats, huddled together inside the storm door on the top step.

“Got any old papers, lady?” asked one of them. I wanted to say “no” she reported later, until I looked down their feet. They were wearing thin little sandals and these had long since become soaked by the rain. Instead I said, “Come in and I’ll make you a cup of hot cocoa. Then I’ll look.”

They walked over and sat down to the breakfast room table. I noticed their soggy sandals had left a row of muddy footprints on my clean kitchen floor, but for some reason or other it didn’t matter.

As the milk was warming I noticed the little boy drawing deep breaths through his nostrils. I could see he was literally tasting the sweet smells that seeped through my oven door. Once, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him run his tongue across his lips in hungry anticipation of a giant drumstick roasted to a golden brown.

When the cocoa was piping hot I set a cup and saucer in front of each of them and filled them

to the brim. The girl held her cup in her hands for a moment, looking at it. And then the boy said, “Lady, are you rich?” “Am I rich?” I laughed. “Heavens no!”

And I remembered my shabby slipcovers which we couldn’t afford to replace this year. I thought about my washing machine which always seemed to go on the blink just when I had an extra heavy load of dirty clothes on my hands.

“Am I rich?” I shook my head in amusement that even a child would have such a thought. The girl put her cup carefully back on her saucer and said, “Your cups and saucers match.” And her voice was hungry with a need no amount of food could supply.

They left after that, clutching their bundles of paper against the wind. They didn’t say “thank you.” They didn’t have to. They had done much more than that. They had reminded me I had so very much for which to be grateful.

Plain blue pottery cups and saucers purchased at the five and dime. But they matched. I tasted the potatoes and stirred the gravy. A roof over my head. A good, faithful, loving husband. These matched, too.

I look down the muddy prints of the small sandals still wet on the kitchen floor. Let them be, for awhile, I thought. Just in case I begin to forget how very rich I am. (Magazine Of The Air, WBBM Radio, Chicago, Illinois. November 22, 1956.)

All of us have had holy moments of great insight like that, haven’t we? Moments when with staggering suddenness we have been made aware of how rich we are. I know I have.

The other day I read an article in the newspaper entitled, “The Richest Man in America.” His name is J. Paul Getty. He has so many millions of dollars even he doesn’t know how rich he is,

he just knows he's a billionaire. But when I finished reading the article, which was really quite interesting, I laid the paper aside and began to count *my* blessings. I didn't have a lot of money. As a matter of fact my checking account showed a balance of exactly 84 cents.

But I had something else. Something money can't buy. A little girl who is strong and healthy. A little boy who is not afraid to approach even the most august individual and say "Got any gum?" A pleasant home in which to live. A challenging job which demands my very best every waking moment of the day. A wife who through the years has never stopped being my sweetheart. And most important of all, my Lord, with all he means in terms of life for today and hope for tomorrow.

As I sat in my living room counting my blessings, I couldn't help but feel the lady who wrote that story was wrong. Mr. Getty with his many millions is not the richest man America. I, John Lavender, Baptist minister, I am the richest man in America – if not the whole wide world!

Annie Johnson Flint put it this way in her poem "The Blessings That Remain."

“For the faith that keeps us patient,
looking at the things unseen,
knowing spring shall follow winter
and the earth again be green.
For the hope of that glad meeting
far from mortal grief and pain --
we thank thee, oh our father,
for the blessings that remain.

For the love that's still is with us,
for the friends that hold us dear,

for the lives that yet may need us:
for their guidance and their cheer.
For the work that waits our doing,
for the help we can bestow,
for the care that watches o'er us,
wheresoe'er our steps may go.

For the simple joys of living,
for the sunshine and the breeze,
for the beauty of the flowers
and the laden orchard trees.
For the night and for the starlight,
for the rainbow in the rain --
thanksgiving, oh our Father,
for the blessings that remain."

There were two or three ideas which came to mind as I thought about that little story entitled:
"Lady, Are You Rich?" One of them is that --

She Had a Cup and Saucer.

We've become so satiated with the fulfillment of most of our wants, we've grown blase' about the fact that all of our needs have been supplied.

The merchants of discontent on television, radio, signboards and printed page have so conditioned us to want more and more of the things we need less and less, we actually become quite indignant at times that God doesn't take better care of his children, by seeing to it that we are the first ones on our block to have the newest model of the latest gadget.

The late senator from Kentucky and former Vice President Alvin W. Barkley, liked to tell the story of a Kentuckian whom he had helped in many ways but who supported an opposing candidate in a certain election. Mr. Barkley went to see him and attempted to point out the man's ingratitude.

"I came to see you in the hospital in France what you were wounded during the war," Mr. Barkley said. "I got your veteran claims all straightened out. I got you a job as postmaster, and a scholarship for your son at the University. Now you turn against me!" "Yes," said the man, "but what have you done for me lately?"

Well, I don't know if that really happened, but it's pretty true to life. Gratitude is a notoriously short-lived emotion. And this seems to be especially true in the attitude many people have toward God. No matter how gracious he has been to them in the past, they whine, "But what has he done for me lately?" Instead of an oratorio of thanksgiving they present him with a cacophany of complaints.

Sort of like the relative of Andrew Carnegie. He had been left a million dollars but instead of being grateful he was incensed because old Andy had left 365 million dollars to public charities and had, as he put it, "Cut me off with a measly million."

Well, no matter how blind we have become through our selfishness, the fact remains that God has been exceedingly good to us. Each of us has our own cup and saucer. We have the things that matter most. The basic essentials of life. In fact, most of us can not only say with David "my cup runneth over" -- we can go him one better and add -- "my saucer is spilling over, too." Indeed, God has been exceedingly gracious to us all.

But this morning I want to point out that all of these material blessings, while wonderful and full of meaning, are not the real reason for our gratitude. They are nothing compared to the

fact that we have God himself That by his grace we have Christ Jesus his son, and in possessing him and being possessed by him we are rich beyond words.

Many of us misunderstand the nature of poverty. We have thought it was economic want, when in reality it is spiritual want. It is the absence of God. But through our faith in Jesus Christ we *have* him. And in having him and him alone the most basic needs and longings of our heart have been fulfilled.

So this year, along with our expressions of appreciation for the lucky breaks, or the tip that paid off, or the good bussiness season we've enjoyed, let's say a heartfelt, deeply genuine, "thank you" to God for God himself. For the fact that we are Christians and have a faith that gives us hope courage... for the fact that Jesus Christ has turned life from a transient, fragile thing into something strong and virile. Something that will last forever.

Let's thank God for God and say with the poet:

"For the tokens of thy presence
within, above, abroad,
for thine own great gift of being,
I thank thee, oh my God."

For in having him we are rich indeed.

A second thing I saw in this lovely story is the fact that the lady not only had a cup and saucer (symbols of her most basic needs) but --

Her Cup and Saucer Matched.

I'm grateful for a Faith which is related to the everyday needs of now. I'm grateful for the God that Christ revealed. He made it plain that God is not "a vague, oblong, blur" up there somewhere. Jesus said God can and will live here in my heart, if I'll only let him.

I'm also grateful that God proves his presence every moment of every day by demonstrating that his power and my problems match!

There was a time when men thought of God as being over yonder. Completely divorced from this world and its sorrows and hungers. Before then religion was a matter of "pie in the sky by and by." If someone was suffering under economic privation and called out for bread he was told, "You are worldly minded. You are crass. You are materialistic. You ought to forget about your stomach and be concerned about your soul."

And then Jesus came along. And he fed the hungry. He cared for the sorrowing. He comforted the sick. And he said,

What I have done for your body, God can do for your soul.

If you give him a chance he will match up his strength with your weakness. His wisdom with your folly. His abundance with your want. His salvation with your sin.

Thank God, my friend, our cup and saucer match. We have a faith that is practical and down to earth. A Christ who is concerned about our every need.. A God who not only numbers the stars but calls us by name.

Lady, are you rich? Mister, are you rich? If you have Jesus in your heart then believe me, you are rich beyond my poor powers to describe. You not only have a belief system... a faith... an anchor... you also have a belief system which works. You have a faith which is related to the needs of now. You have an anchor which will hold, no matter what. Thank God, lady. Thank God, mister. Your cup and saucer match.

The third thing that leaped out at me from our little story and that is the lady wasn't aware of

how rich she was until --

She Shared What She Had.

It was when she prepared a cup of hot cocoa for two rain-soaked kids, that a sense of gratitude really came.

One of the axioms of education is that you never really know something until you can teach it to someone else. And likewise, one of the axioms of the Christian faith is that you never really process Christ until you are willing and able to share him with others.

In other words, giving is living. It was in the act of giving that the woman in our story was awakened to her own great, unsuspected wealth. It's the same with us. We have a cup and saucer. And they match. We have a faith, a God, a loving saviour which relate to our everyday needs. But we will never fully appreciate how rich we are in Christ until we begin to share what we have in him, with others.

Now frankly, that's a costly business. A week or so ago I received a telephone call from a chap who had heard about our church and asked if I would come down to the Loop and have lunch with him. We met at the Palmer House and had what for me was a never-to-be-forgotten meal. Not because the food was so good, but because the bill for the two of us came to \$18.65 plus tip and he insisted on paying. You can't imagine how relieved I was! Then again, maybe you can!

After the table had been cleared and we were enjoying a second cup of coffee my host said, "Dr. John, I live near your church and have attended a time or two I like it very much. But I've also been going to another church in the neighborhood. The other day I had lunch with that pastor, and in the course of our conversation I mentioned you and your church. He said, 'Well, John Lavender is a pretty good man, but believe me, that's a very expensive church to belong to. If you were a member of that church they'd really soak you. In fact," he continued,

“their church is the same sizes ours, but their budget is twice as large.”

My new friend paused for a moment, took a sip of coffee, looked me in the eye and said, “Is that true? Is yours an expensive church to belong to? If I joined your church would you really soak me?” From somewhere deep inside me I mustered up the courage to say, “Yes sir, it is. It’s a very expensive church to belong to. If you join us we’ll really soak you, and if you don’t want to be soaked you shouldn’t even think of joining our church.”

Do you know what my friend said? “Well, I’ll be blessed!” That isn’t exactly what he said, but it will do for now. Then he reached across the table, gripped me by the hand and said, “I’ve been a hitch-hiker to Heaven along enough. When I join your church (!) don’t soak me too much too soon. I’ve got to get used to the idea.”

Now the interesting thing about all this is that our Baptist Church is no more expensive to belong to than any other church. But in *any* church -- of *any* denomination --. Which takes its job seriously is an expensive church to belong to. The challenge of building the Kingdom of God in the lives of people is no nickel and dime operation. It is the most important enterprise on earth! And it makes some mighty strong demands on all of us.

Oh, you can find a church that won’t make those demands. You can go in and out of many churches -- even join them -- and it won’t cost you much if that’s the way you want it. But you will never know how truly rich you are until you start to share sacrificially of your substance so others can have Jesus too. For as I’ve said, giving is living.

That brings us to the very practical business at hand. Next Sunday we will all have an opportunity to pledge a part of ourselves to the work of Christ through our church. And notice I didn’t say “to” our church, I said “*through*” our church. And, although God’s tithe and your offerings have always been needed, they have never been more needed than now.

Dr. Edwin T. Dalhberg tells the story of a farmer who was hauling a Baptist deacon and a load of potatoes into town. It just seemed as if everything went wrong. The mules balked. The rim came off one of the wagon wheels. They got stuck in the mud at least three times. And then, just as they got to the top of a steep hill the tailgate fell down at the back of the wagon and all the potatoes rolled down the hill.

The farmer was noted for his rather “sulphurous” language on such occasions. But as he watched the potatoes roll down the hill, he put his hands on his hips and said, “Deacon, what I am about to say you may have heard before, but this time I really mean it!”

Well, all that I can say about tithes and offerings -- about being a good steward, about making a generous commitment Christ – you’ve heard before. But this time I really mean it.

We are faced with incredible opportunities and wonderful challenges. And, while our people have been faithful, due to the loss of a number of key members through death, retirement or moving out of Chicago to other places of employment, we are thousands of dollars behind in pledged income.

This means that every single one of us must do better than we have ever done before.

There are some who do not pledge it all. If you are among them you must become a responsible Christian.

There are others who give token gifts and, by and-large, they are giving the same amount today they have given through the years. If you are one of them you, too, must do better.

There are others who give sacrificially. Some, well beyond a tithe. I suspect *they*, as always, will be the first to respond to this appeal.

But if each of us will do his or her part, then our needs will be met, and the work of Christ

through this church will flourish here and around the world.

As we approach Thanksgiving Day you may not have been aware of how truly rich you are. But if you take a good look at the cup and saucer God has given you, you will see they match! That materially and spiritually you are rich beyond words. But, in the last analysis it's giving that makes for living. It's by sharing that you really possess.

And so --

for the sake of Christ and the worldwide mission of his church...

for the sake of your children and the spiritual training they are given here...

for the sake of others who through the voice and ministry of this church are being introduced to the joys of sins forgiven and the assurance of eternal life...and for your own sake and an overwhelming sense of gratitude for a cup and saucer which match...

I urge you to give an extra special part of yourself this coming year to the service of Christ through our church.

A few weeks ago I picked up a pamphlet on which was printed a little poem by Bertha Gernaux Woods. There is a message in her few lines which hit me in that part of my heart where it really hurts. Let me pass it on to you.

“Shatter all our dull complacency,
all around us want and blight
when we tuck our dimpled children
into soft, safe beds at night.
Light and joy for us, and music,
millions hunger, can we feast?
Lord God, make our own bread bitter
till we share it with thy least.”