

Discovering Gravity

Matthew 19:16-26

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On January 4, 2015, Twitter and Facebook posts began to circulate this message:

(NASA) January 4th, 9:47 AM PST, the long awaited planetary alignment will cause a gravitational fluctuation that will leave you weightless for a short period of time
#beready

The story was that British astronomer Patrick Moore predicted that on that morning, an extraordinary astronomical event would occur. At exactly 9:47 a.m., the planet Pluto would pass directly behind Jupiter, in relation to the Earth. This rare alignment would mean that the combined gravitational force of the two planets would exert a stronger upward gravitational pull, temporarily counteracting the Earth's own gravity and making people weigh less. The story added that people could experience the phenomenon by jumping in the air at the precise moment the alignment occurred. If they did so, Moore promised, they would experience a strange floating sensation. People all over the world lofted themselves into the air at 9:47 a.m., only to discover that they could not escape Earth's gravity so easily. It was a hoax. Ever since Sir Isaac Newton identified what made apples fall to the ground, we've known that gravity is a consistent and unfailing force. We're not even aware of how it's ordering our world right now.

Today we're thinking about another force that's working around us all the time. Just as gravity exists in the natural world, *financial gravity* exists in the economic world where we live each day. Financial gravity is generated by the culture and economy we live in, and, like Earth's gravity, it's necessary for our existence. Every human being has certain needs, like food, shelter, and clothing. Like the hunter-gatherers of old, we have to procure these things for ourselves and those we love.

Problems with financial gravity arise when we feel that force with such intensity that it begins to control us. You notice financial gravity when you

open an Internet browser and see ads posted for items that are magically in the styles and colors you like. We feel it when we walk through the big stores like Walmart, Lowes, Target. Or, when we go to a city that has a mix of retail stores, specialty shops, cinemas, and restaurants. When we enter a shopping mall we feel it: something tries to pull us into every store.

We can measure the impact of financial gravity when we examine our bank account, noting that the balance is lower than we hoped, or when our credit card bill is higher than we'd like.

The key to financial gravity is to experience the force in just the right proportion. Take a look at this video. (Show "Sermon Video 1: Harness.") All of us feel the force of our needs. These are normal things of life. As an adult, you have to figure out the income that can provide for those needs. Needs are like the weights stacked on the training sled. A short list would include food, shelter, clothing, and things that allow us to work and live, like transportation and communication.

The problem is that we live in a society that constantly tells us we'll be better off if we have more and better things. *Soon we move well beyond our needs into the zone of wants.* For most people, the list of wants is never short: a newer car in a better model, a faster computer, a larger home, a flatter TV, a designer dress or suit, an expensive hobby. As we add these to our lives, we can feel the added force of financial gravity holding us down. What we hoped would bring us freedom actually brings us exhaustion. Like the man in the video, we're harnessed to our possessions in ways that wear us out.

At the other extreme, when we have too little financial gravity, our world is out of control. Expenses increase with no sense of connection to income. One example might be a college student who doesn't know the difference between *spending money* and *managing money*. They have to call home regularly for a checking-account refill. They're floating in space without enough financial gravity to hold them down or back. Some folks never learn that lesson or outgrow that way of spending.

Financial gravity is especially strong here in the United States. The marketing culture is so well developed that its message of more and better is everywhere. At the same time that marketing has gone up, the once-

esteemed value of *frugality* has gone down. (Even the word has taken on a nostalgic ring, describing the way generations that passed through the Great Depression of the 1920s and 30s lived.) The combination of increased marketing and decreased frugality forms a black hole of consumerism, where the force of financial gravity is so great that it threatens to pull us in. Once there, we can't escape.

Our complicated relationship with money and possessions isn't a new problem. One day a young man approached Jesus with a question. An account can be found in Matthew 19:16-26. The young man asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?" Matthew is signaling that this man is an outsider right away. The young man calls Jesus "Teacher," when all through Matthew's Gospel, true disciples call Jesus "Lord."

He was a good man who came to Jesus because he was attempting to live a devout life. He loved God, but he must have detected the pull of other forces that compromised how he lived his faith. He came to Jesus as a seeker, hoping for wisdom and direction. Jesus told him to keep the commandments. And as Jesus reviewed specific requirements of the law, you could almost hear the sound of check marks being made in this fellow's mind. "The young man replied, 'I've kept all these. What am I still missing?'" (Matthew 19:20 *Common English Bible*).

Now, here's the thing about Jesus. He knows what you're missing before you ask. So if you ask him what you're still missing, you have to be prepared for the answer he's going to give you. That answer's going to be very particular to the person who's asking. To this young man, Jesus said, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (19:21). The word for "perfect" there can mean "complete," "whole," "undivided," "mature." It's part of the goal that's lifted up all through this section. The goal is called "eternal life" (verse 16), "enter into life" (17), "being perfect" (21), "entering the kingdom of God" (23), and "being saved" (25).

The young man was being offered a place among the disciples of Jesus. He could have heard Jesus teach daily, participated in miracles, and helped form the early church. Think of the man he might have become. He

could have learned to love people deeply. He could have written a fifth Gospel! As Peter shared Christ in Israel, and Paul in Asia Minor and Europe, this young man might have gone to Egypt or Asia and changed history there. Instead, all we know about him is that he couldn't change his relationship with money. He waited too long and he couldn't give it up. "When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth" (19:22).

Hearing Jesus' terms, *he went away*. We have to ask, *Why on earth would he walk away from Jesus?* He was obviously serious about living a godly life. He knew Jesus could help him go deeper. What would make him walk away?

It's important to note the young man's emotional state as he declined Jesus' offer. Some translations say that he went away *grieving*. He was sad to leave. The young man was torn between two worlds. He wanted to do something new in life, go with Jesus, and learn how to give his life fully to God. He wanted to experience a deeper righteousness. But he couldn't bear to let go and sell out.

There's an old story about catching monkeys. Trappers will put a piece of fruit in a jar with a narrow neck or a hollow shell with a small opening. The monkey closes his fist around the fruit and can't pull it out of the shell. But the monkey won't let go of the treasure it's holding onto.

This young man couldn't let go and he wept as financial gravity pulled him back into his old world.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (19:24)

Jesus points out that we have a choice between two worlds where we can live: the kingdom of self and the kingdom of God. The first world, the kingdom of self, is the world we see and touch every day. It's the world you've created that includes your family and friends, your work and hobbies, your home and possessions, and your abilities and interests. You

manage this world. That's a good thing. God has given you dominion of it. Some call it your *sphere of influence*. God has made us to enjoy life and have influence in the world.

The problem is that we lose perspective. We often think that *our* world is *the* world. We know this is happening when we hear ourselves using the word *deserve*. We say: "I know it's expensive, but I work really hard and I *deserve* it" or we tell ourselves, "You do such a good job, you *deserve* to enjoy a little more."

Most of us protect the boundaries of our realm fiercely. We can be very self-focused. The reason is that royals in the kingdom of self are innately self-interested. We don't want to lose the power or trappings of our reign. This is the space where financial gravity is felt with greatest intensity.

We get the impression of this young man that, even though he's sincere and respectful, there's a bit of the show-off in his question. There's a little too much weight on the word *I*. "The commandments are for everybody; what good thing must *I* do?" In that culture, people saw his riches and zeal and assumed that God had blessed him and already thought well of him. It's almost like he's asking, "Now, what can I do to clinch the top rank?" (John Hiigel, *Partnering with the King* 187).

Notice that Jesus said it's *hard* to enter the kingdom of God when we feel financial gravity as strongly as the young man did. Why did he say that? Gravity is a force that pulls all matter together—the more matter, the more gravity. The sun has such a huge mass that it can hold an entire solar system together. Money and possessions have their own mass as well. They pull us in. The more we amass, the more we experience the gravity that comes from that mass. This is why serious Christians who are wealthy are often the most disciplined about doing good. They understand that if they don't manage their money, it soon will control them.

Jesus said it's hard for people to escape financial gravity and move into God's kingdom. In fact, he says that, humanly speaking, it's impossible. But he goes on to add, "For God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). We can't do it by ourselves. God is the only one who's truly good, so we all lack something. We need the Lord to search our hearts, to show us what

we're holding onto that's trapping us, to give us grace to trust God and let go, to trust God and enter life, to enter the kingdom of God that's on the move now.

Jesus understood these dynamics, both for the young man in the Scripture passage and for us today. Living in the U.S.A., we're wealthy compared with most people in the world. Defying financial gravity is that one thing needed to accomplish the goal of loving God completely.

The good news is that Jesus offers us a way to enter the gravitational field of God's kingdom. Just as money and possessions can weigh us down, they also can be a part of what sets us free, so we don't have to be like that poor man in the video, laboring under the burden of the weight we've accumulated.

Today I invite you to undertake an experiment to see how you experience gravity in your life. I also invite you to attend worship the remaining three Sundays in this series.

Clean-Out Challenge

The material we're using to focus on stewardship this time gives us some practical ways to experience what we're hearing about. The writer suggests a "Clean-Out Challenge." Clean out a drawer, closet, room, or area of your home this week and see how it feels. The ease or difficulty of discarding things you no longer use will tell you a lot about the degree of financial gravity you're experiencing. Set these cast-away items aside and look for ways and places to donate them or recycle them.