

Jim Bakker Was Wrong

When I finally decided to answer the call into ministry, I was a partier working at the post office. I worked afternoons so at midnight we would go to the bar, and then when the bar closed, we would go to someone's house and continue until the early morning hours. I would go home, sleep until it was time to get up for work and do it all again.

So it was good that when I finally decided to answer this call on my life, I went to little Wilmore, KY where there was a curfew at 11 and the doors were locked at the dorms and I had to be inside.

I loved living in Wilmore because it was a sheltered existence. Everyone who lived there was a devout conservative Christian. We went to church Sunday Morning, Sunday Evening and Wednesday nights. I soaked up everything and really fit in with those around me. But I worried about going home on Thanksgiving break.

I had made a clear break with those friends I hung out at the bar with and I knew I didn't want to go back to that lifestyle, so I sheltered in place. No one knew I was home as I hung out at my parents house.

The one saving grace I found was watching a tv show called the PTL club. If you aren't familiar with it, it stands for Praise the Lord. it was founded by Jim and Tammy Bakker, maybe you've heard of them. There is a movie out called The Eyes of Tammy Faye that I'm excited to see because it shows how Tammy Faye really embraced the LGBTQ community when it wasn't an acceptable act in the church.

Anyway, for those of you who don't know about Tammy Faye and Jim Bakker, let me give you a brief overview.

Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker began working at Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network in Portsmouth, Virginia that had an audience in the low thousands at the time. The Bakkers contributed to the network's growth, hosting a children's variety show called Come On Over that used puppets in comedy routines.

Because of the success of Come on Over, Robertson made Bakker the host of the a new prime time talk show, the 700 Club which became CBN's flagship program. The Bakkers left CBN in 1972 and the following year, joined with Paul and Jan Crouch to help co-found the Trinity Broadcasting Network in California.

When they left Trinity, they moved to Charlotte, North Carolina where they debuted their own late night style talk show the PTL club.

Throughout the 1970s, Bakker built a headquarters for PTL in the Carolinas called Heritage Village. To fund his enterprise, the Bakkers hosted telethons and asked viewers to sign up for monthly pledges to become "PTL Club" partners. Instead of running a commercial and being paid for that commercial, they just went directly to their viewers and said "if you like what you

see, help us.” The money started to pour in. People would send money and more, mink coats, diamond rings, deeds, all sorts of donations. Bakker famously said, “I believe that if Jesus were alive today, he would be on TV.”

The income from that helped the Bakkers to buy a total of 2,300 acres of land for a new venture – a 500 room hotel and waterpark complex they called “Heritage USA, located in Fort Mill, South Carolina.

Bakker had always been fascinated by Walt Disney. He sat back and said, “Why can’t we have a Christian version of Disneyland?” And so Jim Bakker asked followers to give \$1,000 for “lifetime partnerships” that would entitle them to an annual three night stay at the Heritage Grand hotel, but this would be one of the first of many cracks in their empire.

The problem was there were way too many people giving \$1,000 not nearly enough hotel rooms. He sold more than 66,000 lifetime partnerships in the Heritage grand, which amounted to more than 100 percent occupancy in the hotel.

They began to preach prosperity gospel where God will bless you if you do this and that. At the same time, the Bakkers were reveling in an extravagant, go-go life style more like Dynasty than Christian ministry. Tammy wore mink, Jim drove luxury cars. They cruised about in one of three black Cadillac limousines, bought a houseboat, a vintage \$62,000 Rolls, a Corvette, an \$800 Gucci handbag and vacationed in \$350 a night hotel suites in Hawaii. They built that famous heated and air conditioned house for Tammy’s dogs.

But it all came crashing down. There was Tammy on air admitting to drug dependency and a sex scandal. Jim Bakker resigned after the scandal and was imprisoned due to his illegal misuse of ministry funds. Unfortunately he is now back selling miracle cures for COVID.

Which brings us to our scripture for this morning. Jesus is walking down the road and a man runs up to him, kneels down before him and asks “Good teacher, what must I do to get eternal life? He states that he has followed all of the commandments from the time he was a young man. Jesus then extends to the man to join his circle of disciples. But to do so, he must sell what he owns, give the money to the poor because the disciple possesses only the basic items of clothing. Jesus is saying that a disciple cannot be a rich person with all the accompanying complex socioeconomic ties and relationship.

In a culture where blessing from God was often correlated with the getting of wealth, for Jesus to tell the man to give away his possessions challenges that idea, doesn’t it. Jesus makes sure that the man does not leave thinking that the wealth he has is a product of his following the commandments.

People respond to this story differently, depending on their socioeconomic status. For some, the story is discouraging. If someone who had been committed to living justly and had experienced Jesus’ love walks away sad, who can follow Jesus?

For others, the story is encouraging. It explains the difficulty they have in dealing with wealthy people regarding some issues of Christian social teaching. Even well-meaning wealthy persons may balk at taking stands on behalf of the poor or oppressed if it costs them power or prestige.

It reminds me of the commitment of unusual people like St. Francis of Assisi, who stripped himself of every stitch of the rich clothing his cloth merchant father had given him. Or Mother Teresa, who gave up a comfortable life in a religious order to help those abandoned to die on the streets of Calcutta.

Most of us more moderate and liberal leaning Christians would be quick to address the limitations and problems of the prosperity gospel approach to God – one that suggests God's ultimate will for us to be individually happy and that the only thing that stands in the way of health, wealth and pleasure is faith and effort – it is good to look at the scripture's challenge of our own economic theologies.

Jesus is pretty clear about a few things: wealth is not a sign of divine blessing, the Kingdom is not inherited like property and we cannot live into the goodness of God's way while we benefit from economic exploitation.

These are all showing me that Jim Bakker and Joel Olsteen are wrong! It goes against those preaching the prosperity gospel where wealthy pastors invite you to give donations to them who will then pray for and guarantee monetary riches.

This may sound crazy, but how different, really are the culture/theological norms we are swimming in – even within liberal church life?

We may not believe God hands out wealth as blessings, but we sure find it easy to question someone's life choices when they ask for a dollar on the street as if it is an obvious and clear indication of their moral choices.

If we are questioning their character instead of the economic realities of their lives that lead vulnerable people into poverty, then that is an indictment of our own wealth, privilege and theology.

Don't we do that in the church, gauging the success of a church or ministry by its income or its size as if that shows God's blessing or not.

There is no way to get around the hard truth of this text. Jesus' metaphor couldn't make it any more clear – there is no fitting that camel through a needle's eye. Remember that the Kingdom is not some mere post life reality. This scripture is not about life after death, but our collective life now. It's not whether we have it or not but all the systems and exploitation it's attached to and therefore, those with money are attached to.

God is adamantly committed to ending economic injustice, unwilling to excuse people or systems that provide comfort and security from some at the expense of death, struggle and exploitation.

The only solution is a togetherness committed to a radically different way of being together where the wealth gap is removed altogether and resources are shared. This isn't a path that can be created individually, in isolation and no one should be left to struggle on their own, like so many are today.

God's economy will be lived out in community. The love Jesus expresses towards the rich man and the love Jesus practices with the disciples all lead in the same direction – shedding whatever commitments we have to systems of destruction and trading them in for the belief that the impossible can be accomplished together.

You, know this is the only time in all of the gospel of Mark that Jesus expressed love towards a particular person. Was it this man's sincerity? Was he feeling affection for him as the man struggled to wrap his mind and heart around God's vision for the world, so much bigger and more radical than following rules for their own sake?

Whatever was moving Jesus, it led him to call the man more deeply into the heart of God, where the man would be set free from his own compliance with destruction and others would be able to live more freely too.

The man's grief at what he must give up in order to live into the heart and mind of God doesn't necessarily mean he chooses not to do it. When we are forced to address the ways we are exploitive, it should fill us with grief! We are all connected to systems that are doing deep harm to those who labor.

The food we eat is connected to exploitation of people, land and animals. The technology we use and the clothes we wear – connected to exploitation.

We may not all have the same power that this man has to make significant changes, but it's not hard to imagine the heaviness of the task Jesus sets before him – for his own sake and the sake of others.

God truly does love us and calls us to live more deeply into that love by doing the hard things, things that my grieve us, things that seem utterly impossible.

Dorothy Day said “We need always to be thinking and writing about poverty, for if we are not among its victims, its reality fades from us. We must talk about poverty because people insulated by their own comfort lose sight of it.

Was Jim Bakker wrong? I believe he fell into the trap of wealth and loved money more than God. May we do well to learn from his example and work to build the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.