

## The Investment Counselor

Scripture: Mark 10:17-27

*(PASTOR JONES is seated at a desk or table. RICHARD YOUNG enters. He has a checkbook with him.)*

YOUNG: Hello, Pastor Jones? My name is Richard Young. I called earlier about seeing you.

PASTOR: Yes, come in. I'm glad to meet you. Please have a seat.

YOUNG *(sitting)*: I hear good things about your church, pastor. You seem to be growing, and I understand you are planning to expand your facilities.

PASTOR: We hope so. In the next year we may be starting a capital campaign to expand the fellowship hall.

YOUNG: Yes, well that's why I am here. I would like to make a contribution to your church—a sizable contribution, I might add.

PASTOR: I see. Well, we are certainly grateful for any contributions, but I don't recall seeing you at our church before. What has led you to make this contribution?

YOUNG *(a little uncomfortable)*: Let's just call it an investment.

PASTOR: An investment. I see. Well, I guess that makes me the investment counselor. Tell me, Mr. Young, what do you hope to gain from this investment?

YOUNG: I have always believed in being prudent. I like to look ahead, plan for the future. I've built up a nice little nest-egg, so I am quite secure financially. But I'm not getting any younger. Every time I turn around, someone I know is getting cancer or dying of a heart attack.

PASTOR: You are secure for this life, but you aren't so sure about the next.

YOUNG: I didn't think it would hurt to make a contribution to a church. I am a person of some means. It will not be a small contribution, I assure you. But if I can help you out, perhaps ...

PASTOR: Perhaps the church can help you out.

YOUNG: Well you are in the business of eternal life, aren't you? I should think we could work something out.

PASTOR: In other words, you want to buy a little favor from God.

YOUNG *(indignant)*: I prefer to think of it as an investment.

PASTOR (*pausing*): Mr. Young, has anyone ever done anything for you freely?

YOUNG: What do you mean?

PASTOR: Has anyone ever given something to you or done something for you without expecting anything in return?

YOUNG: Of course. I get presents every year at Christmas and on my birthday.

PASTOR: No, I don't mean that. You expect to get presents at birthdays and Christmas. It's an obligation. Did anyone ever do anything for you unexpectedly, just because they wanted to?

YOUNG: I'm not sure what you mean. I have always earned everything I have. I worked hard to get where I am. I haven't gotten any handouts, if that's what you mean.

PASTOR: You have earned or bought everything you have in this life, so you figure it must be the same in the next life.

YOUNG: Look, I'm not offering a bribe. I just thought we could help each other. I've got a check here. (*He holds out the check.*) If you want it, say so. Otherwise I will be on my way.

PASTOR: Okay, let's have a look. (*She looks at the check.*) Yes, that is a sizable contribution.

(*She hands it back.*) But I'm afraid it isn't enough.

YOUNG: Isn't enough?

PASTOR: For what you want to buy, it isn't enough.

YOUNG: Now look here, this is a lot of money. Okay, I see you intend to get as much out of this as you can. All right, I will write another check. (*He writes another check.*) This is important to me, and I don't want to haggle. There. (*He hands over the new check.*) I have doubled the amount.

PASTOR: So you have. Impressive! It still isn't enough. (*She hands it back.*)

YOUNG (*enraged*): Pastor Jones, I am appalled by your greed. Perhaps I should take this to one of the other churches in town. I am sure *they* would appreciate it. Just how much do you want?

PASTOR: The balance of your account.

YOUNG: The balance of my account! You must be joking. Look, I didn't get this money dealing drugs or manipulating stocks. I worked hard for what I have. Do you know what it's like to work 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, to get a business going? Do you know what it is like trying to make a payroll when taxes eat up all your profits? I put myself through school. I risked

my own money to start a business. I sacrificed for years to keep it going? And now that I finally have some security, now that all my work has finally paid off, you expect me to give it all away?

PASTOR: If you are secure, you don't need my help. It sounds like you have everything you want.

YOUNG (*more subdued*): Yes, I suppose it does. So why do I feel empty inside? Why do I feel a knot in my stomach every time I look in the mirror and see a new gray hair? It's like my life is slipping through my fingers, and I don't know how to grab hold of it. What am I still missing?

PASTOR: What you need money cannot buy.

YOUNG: And what is that? I've done everything a person is supposed to do. Just because I don't go to church doesn't mean I don't believe in God. I have lived by the Ten Commandments all my life.

PASTOR: Really! I don't think I could make that claim.

YOUNG: Well, of course, I'm not perfect. I've made mistakes. Everyone has. But overall I've lived a pretty good life.

PASTOR: Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments in one command. He said, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." How well do you think you have done at that? Remember, Jesus said that our neighbor is not just the person next door but anyone in need, even foreigners. Right now we have people in this city living on the streets. All over the world there are people who have been forced out of their homes by famine or war. Can you really say that you love all of your neighbors as much as yourself?

YOUNG: Well, if you look at it that way, the commandments are impossible to keep. I can't take care of all the hungry and homeless people in the world, even if I write a check for everything I have.

PASTOR: It is just as I thought; your bank account isn't big enough.

YOUNG (*puzzled*): I don't understand. If my bank account isn't big enough, why did you want me to give it all away?

PASTOR: So that you would see that it isn't big enough. Mr. Young, I don't doubt that you have worked hard all your life. But your aim has been misdirected. Your good works cannot earn eternal life any more than your money can buy it.

YOUNG: Then what does God want from me?

PASTOR: Let me put it this way. What you do have that God couldn't get from anyone else? Money? You think the Creator of the universe is strapped for cash? Work? You think God is dependent on business, labor, politicians, or volunteers to get things done? God is quite capable

of managing the world without your help or my help or anyone else's help. God doesn't even need the church.

YOUNG (*half to himself*): Except to keep ministers off welfare!

PASTOR: Maybe so. The point is your money is not what God wants, it's you. "Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God," the Bible says, "then you will be able to know the will of God..." (*Pause*) Don't you see? The one thing God couldn't get from anyone else is you—your love, your respect, your commitment, your gratitude for all God has done. It's like a gift from a child. When your child or your grandchild picks a clump of dandelions and offers them to you in her tiny fist like a bouquet of flowers, are you glad to get them? Of course you are. Why? Because you need some dandelions? Because you can't grow enough of them on your own? No, it's not the dandelions you value; it's the relationship to the child. It's not the gift that God values, but you.

YOUNG: So what does God want me to do? Pick some dandelions? It can't be that easy.

PASTOR: Oh, it won't be easy. It will be very hard. It is extremely difficult for rich people to enter the Kingdom of heaven.

YOUNG: Why is that?

PASTOR: Because rich people are accustomed to earning or buying everything they have. When they need something, they go out and get it. But you can't earn or buy a relationship to God.

YOUNG: So I am out of luck. Is that what you are saying?

PASTOR: No, you are in luck! What is impossible for us is possible for God. You cannot buy eternal life. You don't have enough in your bank account. But you can receive it as a gift because it was paid for by Jesus himself. It's yours free, if you will only accept it.

YOUNG (*reflective*): Let me get this straight. I come here to make a gift to the church, and you want to offer me a gift. I come here to make an investment, and you want to pay me dividends on someone else's investment. You are a strange investment counselor.

PASTOR: Ours is a strange economy.

YOUNG: Well, I guess you won't be needing this. (*He stands up and starts to tear up the check. The PASTOR winces and reaches out to stop him.*)

PASTOR: Well...uh...let's not be hasty.

YOUNG: You said God didn't need it.

PASTOR: That's true. But the church could use it.

YOUNG (*thinking out loud with the check in his hand*): You know, come to think of it, I never have received a truly free gift—something that wasn't earned or obligated or given with strings attached. I haven't given a truly free gift either. I always felt obligated to give, and sometimes I resented it.

PASTOR: In this case, if you do not feel grateful to make the gift, you should probably keep it. God does not need a bouquet of dandelions given in anger.

YOUNG (*holding check*): Is that all this is to you—a bouquet of dandelions?

PASTOR: No, Mr. Young. It is far more than that. It is like the heartfelt gift of a child who has nothing to give except himself. One cannot put a value on a gift like that.

YOUNG: I can tell this giving business takes some practice. Well, there is only one way to start. I would still like you to have this check. (*He hands the check to the PASTOR.*)

PASTOR: I can not promise you anything for it.

YOUNG: According to you the promise was already given to me before I wrote the check. No, let's just call it a down payment on gratitude—a first installment in offering myself to God.

PASTOR: The church is grateful, Mr. Young.

YOUNG (*as he starts to leave*): Yes, I'm sure it is. (*He turns back.*) But not as grateful as I am.

(Exit)

- Ken Onstot  
March 9, 2008