

1 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” Apparently, British astronomer Patrick Moore had 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.

Do any of you remember this? 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, of course. Ever since Sir Isaac Newton identified what made apples fall to the ground, we have known that gravity on earth is an entirely predictable force.

2 Just as gravity exists in the natural world, *financial gravity* exists in the material world in which you and I live each day. Financial gravity is generated by the culture and economy in which we live, and, like Earth’s gravity, it’s necessary for our existence. Every human being has needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. We generally satisfy these needs with trade or money. But financial gravity begins to be a problem when that force is felt with such intensity that instead of serving us, it begins to control us.

You might notice financial gravity when you open an Internet browser and see sweepstakes offers and ads posted for items that are coincidentally in the styles and colors you like. You might feel it when you go to a shopping center, restaurant, or theater. Some invisible force is constantly tugging your wallet or purse. You might notice financial gravity when you check your bank account, seeing that the balance is lower than you had hoped; when your credit card bill is higher than you are comfortable with; or when you’ve spent the last of your allowance or your Social Security check.

3 {Show Video: “Harness Short” (1:27). Turn video sound off, Pastor Bill will continue speaking during the video} We’re going to see a video now that illustrates the problem of financial gravity. All of us feel the force of our needs. Needs are a normal part of life. At a certain age, we’re expected to be responsible for finding the income that can provide for those needs. Our needs are like weights stacked on a training sled. Needs are things like food, rent or mortgage payments, clothing, and things that allow you to work and live, such as transportation and a telephone.

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. It’s not hard to move beyond our needs and get lost in our wants. For most people, our list of wants is an ever-growing list: a newer car, a faster computer, a larger home, a flatter TV, a designer dress or suit, an expensive hobby. As we add more wants to our lives, on top of our real needs, we begin to feel the added force of financial gravity holding us down. The things we hoped would bring us freedom actually brings us exhaustion and discontent. Like the man in the video, we are harnessed to our possessions in ways that wear us out.

4 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 omnipresent. At the same time that marketing has gone up, the once-esteemed value of frugality has gone down. Even the word “frugality” 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 has formed a black hole of consumerism, where the forces of financial gravity are so great that they threaten to pull us in. You may know that black holes get their name from the fact that not even light can escape their gravitational force. Advertisers promise us happiness, freedom, joy, and comfort, when in fact all too often we suffer by giving into financial gravity. We end up inventing new terms like *house poor* to describe our desperate existence.

5 Our complicated relationship with money and possessions is not really a new problem. One day a young man approached Jesus with a question. The young man asked,

“Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?”¹ He was a good man who came to Jesus because he was attempting to live a devout life. He loved God, yet 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 young man’s mind. And so, he replied, “I’ve obeyed all these commandments.’... ‘What else must I do?’”²

Here’s the thing about Jesus. He knows what you’re lacking before you even ask. So if you ask him, you have to be prepared for the answer he’s going to give you. To this young man, Jesus said, “If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”³

This young man could have heard Jesus teach daily, participated in miracles, and helped form the early church. Think for a moment of the person he might have become. He could have learned to love people deeply. He could have written another Gospel and given us a fifth view of Jesus. 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 could not change his relationship with money. The Gospel tells us, “But when the young man heard this, he went away sad, for he had many possessions.”⁴

He went away? 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 left Jesus. Some Bible 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 could not

¹ Matthew 19:16, New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

² Matthew 19:20, Ibid

³ Matthew 19:21, Ibid

⁴ Matthew 19:22, Ibid

bear to cash in all his chips. He knew what he was passing up, and he wept as financial gravity pulled him back into his old world.

6 Jesus summed it all up for us when he said, “I tell you the truth, it is very hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. I’ll say it again—it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!”⁵

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 this? 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 their mass. That 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 manage them.

In fact, Jesus said that “Humanly speaking, it is impossible”⁶ for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Thankfully, he also added, “But with God everything is possible.”⁷

7 Make no mistake, we’re all wealthy compared with most people in the world. Defying financial gravity is something each of us needs to be freer to follow Jesus. 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. We don’t have to live like that poor guy in the video, trying to pull all those weights, straining under the burden of the financial gravity. I challenge you to lean into growing in this part of your life by making a point of participating in our next three Sundays especially, including our Consecration Sunday on November 17.

I also invite you to try an experiment this week to see how you experience gravity in your life. I’m calling this the clean-out challenge. Clean out a single drawer, closet, room, or area of your home this week- just like we cleaned off the altar this morning- and see how it

⁵ Matthew 19:23-24, Ibid

⁶ Matthew 19:26, Ibid

⁷ Ibid

feels. The ease or difficulty of letting go of things you don't need will tell you a lot about the degree of financial gravity you're experiencing. God knows we need our daily bread, but some of stuff we've squirrelled away is less like daily bread and more like chains, weighing us down. Take a step toward freedom from the attachments you have to your stuff this week, as together we begin to explore God's plan for defying gravity.

**This message adapted from the original sample sermon by Pastor Tom Berlin, in Defying Gravity: Break Free from the Culture of More- Program Tools (Abingdon Press).*



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