

A recent study concluded that North Americans are, on average, exposed to 360 advertisements every day. Ads on billboards and bus shelters, on our computer screens and TV screens, ads we hear on the radio and ads we see on the subway. 360 a day. Ads that try to sell us things often by telling us that we're not thin enough or rich enough or fit enough or cool enough, but that if we simply buy this product or that service, our lives will be more complete and we will be more happy and more fulfilled. Twenty-two times an hour while we are awake, we are given these messages that we are not good enough.

There was nothing like this barrage of advertising in first-century Palestine, of course. Yet then, as now, people who had more stuff, more wealth, more possessions were generally the ones who also had more power and more influence. Being affluent and influential, well-behaved, socially responsible, aren't those the things we're supposed to aspire to? In Jesus' day, the rich young man was all those things; in our day, the so-called Canadian 'middle class' is given this image all the time. So what's the problem?

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.

Yeah, that's kind of a problem.

It's important to remember here, of course, that Jesus was almost never talking about the afterlife when he used the phrase "kingdom of God." In those times, he almost always talked about "in the resurrection" or "to be with Abraham" or phrases like that. For Jesus, the kingdom of God was about a reality that could be entered into in the here and now of life. He told his followers, the kingdom of God is among you. It is an alternate way of understanding the world and live in the world rather than a way to escape the world. It is a way of living in and growing in love and peace and joy and justice in this life.

So when the rich young man comes to Jesus ask about entering this kingdom, Jesus was being asked what it was that was getting in the way of him living this alternate reality. I'm doing all the right things, obeying all the rules, but this kingdom of God is still elusive. It's the money that's in the way, Jesus says. Get rid of that and the kingdom of heaven will be yours.

You've probably never heard of Julia Wise and her husband Jeff Kaufman. They're a young couple who have been married about six years now. She's a social worker, he's a software engineer. They live in the Boston area. And they give away over 40% of their pre-tax income to charities at home and around the world. 40%. They've chosen to live

in a small apartment, to live simply, and to make giving a core part of who they are. And they do it because they have discovered that it makes them happy to know that in doing this they are literally saving lives.

It's an interesting contrast to me, that the young man leaves Jesus grieving because he is asked to give his wealth to the poor, and this young couple who find such a deep joy in giving their wealth to the poor. And the only difference I can see in what might be causing their different emotional responses is that Julia and Jeff are actually *doing* it, while the young man is only *thinking* about doing it.

See, we think that more money will mean more happiness. All the lottery ads tell us that it will. And more money will mean the ability to have bigger homes and nicer cars and maybe even paying someone to look after our bigger homes and nicer cars and that's creating a job for someone so that's got to be a good thing, and more money will mean more prestige in our culture and more money will mean we won't have to work and all those things mean more security and therefore less worry for us, right? More money must mean more happiness!

But it doesn't. Psychologists have shown that, as long as people have enough money for their needs for food and clothes and shelter plus a bit extra for pleasures, additional income doesn't equate to additional happiness. Houses in North America have, on average, doubled in size while family size has shrunk, income has risen significantly, and yet measurements of happiness show that we are, as a society, less happy than were people in that era. In one 2008 study at the University of British Columbia, researchers gave participants \$20 each, and told them either to spend it on themselves or to spend it on another person, and those who spent the money on a gift for someone else were happier as a result. People who win a lottery actually are happier in the weeks and even months after their win, but by the time a year has passed, their happiness has returned to their pre-win levels.

Jesus wasn't a psychologist. But perhaps he got this anyway. Perhaps Jesus understood the human heart and mind and got that money, far from causing us to be happier, often gets in the way of our happiness. Because when we own more stuff, we have to worry about that stuff. If you don't own stuff, you don't need a burglar alarm and you don't need to buy insurance and you don't have to update the stuff.

Jesus loves us. Jesus loved the young man who came to him that day. And out of love, Jesus wanted that man to experience the richness of living life in God's ways, in God's kingdom, with peace and love and joy. And that can't happen when we're depending on money for our fulfillment, or our sense of identity, or our peace. That can only

happen when we're free of money's lure, of the seduction of wealth, the temptation to believe all those ads that tell us that we're not good enough, and to instead believe that we are loved and cherished as we are, to live instead for God and for the people around us.

This Thanksgiving, we are often urged to look around us at all the material things we have and give thanks to God for those things. And yes, it is true that we are blessed with many possessions. But we also are called to remember this day that actually, God's greatest gifts to us are our life, the ability to love and care, and the other people around us, for God blesses us in order that we can bless others.