

Discovering Gravity  
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia  
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Matthew 19: 16 - 26

16 Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" 17 And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." 18 He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; 19 Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 20 The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" 21 Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 22 When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 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." 25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" 26 But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

For the next four weeks, the sermons and scriptures are going to follow along with the text of a book called *Defying Gravity: Break Free from the Culture of More*.

In sermons entitled *Discovering Gravity*, *Breaking Free*, *Tethered to God*, and *When We Get It Right*, we're going to explore one of the places that many of us struggle to live faithful lives, when it comes to money and possessions.

There are many aspects of finance and faith that we should, as a church, discuss.

- The wealth disparity in this nation,
- Gender and race pay gaps
- the shrinking middle class
- the challenges many families have on making ends meet
- the reluctance to let go of minimum wage in favor of minimum wage
- Is Capitalism even theologically compatible with Christianity?

I want to be clear about what *Defying Gravity* isn't intended to do.

It isn't intended to be a way to get more money.

It isn't about learning to let go of the injustices of the world.

It's about learning to give, because what you give cannot possess you.

Because money is not good and money is not bad, it is just money.

Stuff is not good, stuff is not bad, it is just stuff.

What I often tell people when I tell the story of my own giving, the move to giving 10% of all that I receive, is that it didn't mean that I got more money, giving money away helped me realize that I hadn't needed it in the first place.

But we fight an uphill battle in the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States, to have a healthy relationship with our stuff, with our money.

Now these sermons may not be for you. You may have this all figured out. You give your 10% tithe to the church and your offering to God above that. Your home is uncluttered and you have a strong sense of wholeness, purpose, and God's presence. If that applies to you, I invite you to help me, by sharing your story, by using this time, this season, to teach and mentor others.

Because most of us struggle with financial gravity, with that disease of always wanting more. And that's what this book hopes to get us talking about.

We start with discovering gravity.

Gravity, in terms of the physical world, is something we need, of course. It provides order. In his book, Berlin recounts a time<sup>1</sup> an astronaut at the International Space Station made this point by showing us how hard it is to cook in space. When you cut an onion. The outer peel goes in one direction, the diced pieces fan out before you, the liquid from the onion forms tiny drops that float above the kitchen "All these particles would threaten the sanitation of the space station as well as its electronic equipment. Magnus overcame these obstacles by using a collection of plastic bags, Velcro, duct tape, and a small paring knife. She attached peels to duct tape on the counter and chopped ingredients inside plastic bags that would corral the pieces until they were added to the dish. A dish that would take minutes on earth required hours in space." Gravity orders your world, making everything easier and more dependable."

We need gravity.

We need financial gravity, too.

Berlin writes what we all know- we all have needs. Food. Shelter. Clothing. He writes, "*Financial gravity* exists in the economic world in which you and I live each day.

But when gravity goes to extremes, it isn't healthy or faithful.

Zero financial gravity-spending without connection to income, irresponsible stewards of what we are given. When credit cards equal cash and interest rates border on usury.

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<sup>1</sup> Berlin, Tom. *Defying Gravity: Break Free from the Culture of More*. Abingdon Press, 2016. Kindle edition. Page 12 · Location 64

[https://www.nasa.gov/mission\\_pages/station/expeditions/expedition18/journal\\_sandra\\_magnus\\_6.html](https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/station/expeditions/expedition18/journal_sandra_magnus_6.html)

Or when financial gravity is Jupiter-like<sup>2</sup> and you can't ever lift your feet off of the ground. When all you see when you look around are things you cannot have, your bank account balance is never enough, your credit card bill is always higher than you plan.

A few years ago (who am I kidding, it was more than 15 years ago) there was a PBS reality series that I loved, called "Frontier House"<sup>3</sup> In it, three households went and lived in 1883 Montana for several months. Homesteading. They were tasked with getting ready for winter as if it was 1883. No cell phones. No telephones. No television. And the families, as you might expect, struggled. The children as well as the parents had to work, physical labor, side by side to stay fed and to get prepared.

And when it was all over, before they went home, the producers sat and talked with the families to see how they felt about the whole experience. What stunned me the most were the children of one particular family. The Clunes. A wealthy family from California whose children had left all of their electronics and comforts of home, to go and work and sometimes be hungry and sometimes be cold. And when it was all over, these children said that they preferred their lives in 1883 Montana. Because they had grown stronger as a family. They had to talk to each other- to deal with their problems- eat what was available- live together in a small home. And they resolved, parents and children, to not let that get away from them when they went back to their big home in California.

But how strong is the gravity of stuff, the gravity of money?

Two months later the producers checked in, again, with the family, and they had gone back to their old ways. In the big house, each person in their own space. Dad working overtime. Kids with their own TVs and games. This family knew. They KNEW what would make them happier and healthier. Not just as an idea, but as a real experience. And they couldn't do it.

Gravity. Knowing what you should do, but not being able to resist the pull to go the other way.

And I can see their stupidity and their short-sightedness. In part because I do the same dumb things, am pulled by the same gravity.

When a suggestion pops up on Amazon and it sends me down the rabbit hole of searching for something I hadn't even known that I wanted and now I'm certain will be just the thing to fix everything that ails me.

Or when the air conditioner stops working and financial gravity spins me into a worst case scenario about what this repair bill is going to do, and what it says about my worth as a person.

The good news is that we aren't alone in struggling with this. The Rich Young Man in Matthew has the same struggle going on. He goes to Jesus and asks what he should do to gain eternal

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.universetoday.com/15110/gravity-of-jupiter/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/frontierhouse/>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frontier\\_House](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frontier_House)

life. “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

It’s worth noting that perfect here doesn’t mean without flaw or fault, it means whole, mature, focused. And the perfection which Jesus calls the young man to pursue is one that accepts and shares God’s love, loves people more than money, more than things.

And the man goes away grieving, because he cannot escape the gravity.  
But that’s exactly what we are called to do.

Discovering gravity begins with realizing who and whose we are, seeing not only ourselves but those around us and those apart from us as children of God.

Many years ago I heard Baptist pastor Tony Campolo tell<sup>4</sup> a story of something that happened to him on a busy bridge outside of Philadelphia during one afternoon busy rush hour. He got a flat tire. And he got out to change the tire, and because there wasn’t a shoulder he had to stop traffic in his lane. So he worked on the tire and the jack and the tire iron and the lug nuts. He’d kept the radio on, and as he worked he was surprised when he heard the announcer say “rush hour traffic all over Philadelphia had come to a veritable stand-still because of one unidentified problem on the Schuylkill.” At that moment he looked up and saw the traffic helicopter flying overhead. And Campolo proclaimed to the Presbyterians in the audience that his first response was the most human one, pride. “at that moment he was the center of the universe! “It’s me! I, Tony Campolo, have tied up the whole city of Philadelphia. I, Tony Campolo, am a traffic congestion superstar.” He stood up tall and enjoyed his power for a few seconds, until the horns started honking and he busily went back to work on the tire.

I thought of this story because of a quote I recently came across from Campolo about this, that I think says something about gravity, too, and it hits pretty close to home, I believe.  
*“Jesus establishes clearly that the greedy accumulation of things is an attempt by persons to evade dependency on God. The one who greedily hoards possessions in order to establish security for the future lacks the faith that Jesus expects of those who follow Him. Our security, according to Jesus, is in our relationship to God in whose hands lies our future.”<sup>5</sup>*

And that is why this is important. Because our future IS in God’s hands, and discovering our own gravity is the first step towards living into that future.

Amen.  
Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Campolo told this story at a General Assembly breakfast many years ago, but as I went to write my account I found it re-told in *A Geography of God: Exploring the Christian Journey* by Michael L. Lindvall. I have relied on Lindvall’s account for some of the details.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.presbyterianfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Favorite-Stewardship-Quotes-for-Bulletins-or-Church-Newsletters-2.18.pdf>