

Pursuit of Wealth, Wisdom, and Money

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday before Lent



Sermon Text: Jeremiah 9:23-24

²³ Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."

At 8:00 in the morning, the administrative court of Leipzig is wrapped in a thick fog. Niko's case regarding his right to asylum was scheduled for 8:00am. He was already at the door by 7:00am. He nervously walks back and forth and quotes Bible verses that he learned in baptismal class. He constantly consults his Bible and compares it to some questions that are often asked in court. Niko is ready and dressed in his best suit. In a few hours, his future will be decided and the answers that he gives in these next hours could decide his life. That's why he must make a good impression. A couple kilometers away in Leipzig's Auenwald, Peter is on the go. He has been in the forest exercising since 5:00am. After two hours, he is completely wet with sweat and the first aches and pains are making themselves known in his knees and legs. But Peter goes on. He forces his body to continue because he has a huge goal before him. In a few months, there will be a big competition. If he wins or even comes in second, he can go to sports school and perhaps then his dream of making the national team could come true. And not very far from these two is another: her name is Monika. She also got up early and has been studying for a few hours because she has an important test. If she passes, she could get a job at the stock exchange. Then she would finally earn lots of money. All three of these people have big goals. They want something from life. They want to achieve something through their wisdom, strength, or money. And that's good! But wait a moment, the Bible text we just read appears to say the exact opposite! Because all these things we strive for, like money, wealth, and power, are wrong according to this Bible passage!

Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches.

And when Jeremiah says this, I want to ask: "Why shouldn't we be proud?" What is so bad if I, after years of disciplined application, finally achieve my goal and am then proud about my performance...? And wouldn't our world as we know it come to a halt if people no longer search for and receive recognition from others? No, we must look more closely at the words of Jeremiah. Jeremiah doesn't say that wisdom, power, and wealth are bad themselves. He absolutely doesn't want us to just be sad with hanging heads and no longer strive for anything good so that we don't become proud. No, Jeremiah wants the opposite of that. He wants power, wisdom, and wealth but under no circumstance may these three things stand alone – they must not be goals by themselves! Because then it could be that we lose everything. I'll explain how that can happen with a true story: Bodo Janssen was a successful hotel manager. Since he took over the business from his parents, profits increased, and he wanted even more success. So he worked even harder and played around with all sorts of things to increase sales and reduce costs – but above all, the profits must rise. To achieve this goal, Bodo Janssen was horrible to himself and to others. His employees knew that they couldn't do things imperfectly because whoever

didn't completely apply themselves got a warning or was immediately fired. One day, the company took an anonymous survey about the work atmosphere of the company. It showed that the work atmosphere was extremely bad. People were often sick and there were constant problems between coworkers. There was mutual bullying because everyone wanted to make others feel small so that they could make themselves feel better. And to top it all off, the boss, Bodo Janssen, was the most unpopular person in the whole firm. Bodo Janssen was shocked and consequently had a huge existential crisis. Suddenly, it dawned on him. He didn't actually want to be richer or more successful! He never wanted that! No, he simply wanted to be loved! And he mistakenly thought that by being more successful, he had to earn more recognition and love. But he had separated these things and detached them from their true meaning and purpose. That made him bitter, and he achieved the exact opposite of what he wanted. He was even less popular! What followed was a total restructuring of his company. From then on, money or success would no longer be the focus, rather the people would be the focus. And it was the same with Jeremiah. In his immediate surroundings, the king had completely lost himself in his own madness. He had separated his power, strength, and wealth from God and from this came an ungodly power. People were exploited and oppressed. A personality cult emerged and instead of worshiping God, people worshiped their own wealth and power as gods. Unfortunately, that is a pattern that constantly repeats itself in our human history. Where people only focus on themselves, an ungodly power emerges that stops at nothing. In the end, you destroy others and you destroy yourself. We are the ones that give demonic power to these things by separating them from God. Instead of honoring God, we honor created things. Jeremiah doesn't want to take wisdom, wealth, and power away from us. No, he wants us to take these things as gifts from God and give them back to God in the same way. Jeremiah calls that true wisdom. With this, the goal that Jeremiah wanted to tell us about has been achieved – whoever wants to boast should boast that he knows the Lord! That's what we should strive for – knowing the Lord. That's something really good that we can be proud of. That is true wisdom, as the Psalmist says: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10). There is really nothing better in the entire world than this – searching for God with all your heart and knowing Him. Jeremiah as well as the entire Bible uses this word *to know* in a completely different way. The word *to know* means much more than being able to recite the 1s multiplication table from memory. To tell the truth, it means that we become closely united with another person, that we essentially become one with the other person. For example, the word *to know* is also used when a man and woman marry –the Bible constantly says, 'and Abraham *knew* his wife, Sarah.' What is expressed here is that Abraham and Sarah became one. They became one flesh. But how can one know God? And how can God become a part of us? That is impossible! We are much too sinful and weak and can know absolutely nothing about God. How can it be that we even become one with God? Paul picks up on what is written in Jeremiah and explains it in more detail. "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). In Jesus Christ, everything else becomes clear that God lives in us. That's also why Paul always says that we are in Christ. Jesus doesn't just come to us once, He wants us to always be in Him. He invites us to live in Him and be in Him. Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit" (John 15:5). Jesus talks about a physical connection here too. We are one with Christ. In Christ, it becomes clear how things are ordered with our strength, wisdom, and wealth. Everything is in Christ and is secondary to Him. It all comes from Him and returns again to Him. God's abundant love and mercy can also be seen here at the same time. God comes to us exactly as we are...regardless of the person...unconditionally. And that's how we can face others too, with God's mercy. No matter who they are and what they did. Everyone receives a flood of

God's love and mercy. And that is true freedom. It may be that we accomplish a lot or a little in life, it may be that we are rich or poor, but it may also be that we lose everything in the blink of an eye: money, wealth, wisdom. And yet, that is not crucial. Christ is crucial. We bear His name – that is crucial! We will boast only in Jesus and Him crucified, not about anyone or anything else. Amen.