

Sermon 1
Discovering Gravity
Matthew 19:16-26

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

The story was that British astronomer Patrick Moore 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. 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.

And it wasn't the first time the hoax had been around! It started in 1976! This same hoax comes around every so many years and even showed up around the time of the eclipse recently. But Ever since Sir Isaac Newton identified what made apples fall to the ground, we have known that gravity is a consistent and unyielding force. A force that we don't even realize it is ordering our world right now.

Today I want to help you see that there is another force that is working around us all the time. Just as gravity exists in the natural world, *financial gravity* exists in the economic 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 is necessary for our existence. Every human being has certain needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing. Like the hunter-gatherers of old, we instinctively know that we have to procure these things for ourselves and those we love.

Problems begin to arise when financial gravity that is felt with such intensity that it begins to control us. What is this financial gravity? Well, You notice financial gravity when you open an Internet browser and see ads posted for items that are magically in the styles and colors you like. Every time I even look at

something on Amazon, the next day, items like the ones I looked at are amazingly all over my Facebook feed. That's financial gravity. You also feel it when you walk down the street of most any local town. There is usually an eclectic mix of retail stores, specialty shops, cinemas, and restaurants. For me the pull comes around an antique shop. For some, they enter a shopping mall and it is palpable: It's like something tries to pull you inside each time you pass a store.

We see the impact of financial gravity when we examine our bank accounts, noting that the balance is lower than you hoped, or when your credit card bill is higher than you would like.

Financial gravity isn't all bad! The key is to experience the force in just the right proportion. Take a look at this video.

All of us feel the force of our needs. These are normal things of life. As an adult, you have to figure out what income can provide for those needs. Sometimes in our world today that might mean working two or three jobs. There are things that we need! Think of our Needs like the weights stacked on the training sled. A short list would include food, shelter, clothing, and things that allow you to work and live, such as transportation and communication.

The problem is that we live in a society that constantly tells us we will be better off if we have more and better things. *Soon we move well beyond our needs into the zone of wants.* And the stack of weights grows.

For most people, the list of wants is never short: a newer car in a better model, a faster computer, a larger home, a flatter TV, a designer dress or suit, an expensive hobby. As we add these to our lives, we really feel the added force of financial gravity holding us down. What we hoped would bring us freedom actually brings us exhaustion. Like the man in the video, we are harnessed to our possessions in ways that wear us out.

On the other extreme, when we have too little financial gravity, our world is out of control. Expenses are accrued with no sense of connection to income. I remember when my kids were growing up and they wanted something. I'd tell them that we didn't have the money.....my son would always say, "Well just write a check!" He had seen me write checks for other things and thought that was THE MONEY! College students and young adults who don't know the difference between *spending money* and *managing money* tend to call home regularly for a checking-account refill. These students are floating in space without enough financial gravity to hold them down or back. And many times in today's world it's not just the young adult children that do this! We NEED some of this financial gravity in our lives! But just

enough to keep us from weighing ourselves down with possessions or floating away with no cares about money management. There must be a balance.

In the US, Financial gravity is especially strong. The marketing culture is so well developed that its message of more and better is always in our face, always pulling at us, always in our minds. At the same time that marketing has gone up, the once-esteemed value of *frugality* has gone down. In fact, no one uses the word frugal anymore! It rings of a nostalgic time, describing the ways that people made it through the Great Depression. BUT, The combination of increased marketing and decreased frugality forms a black hole of consumerism, where the force of financial gravity is so great that it threatens to pull us in. Once in that hole, we cannot escape.

We begin to describe our happy lives as:

house poor, car poor, possession poor, and cash poor. When I bought my first house a few years ago, my dad said, now you'll be chained to your property. What? I thought! But he was right. I started to realize what it meant to be house poor.

This complicated relationship that we have with money and possessions is not a new problem. One day a young man approached Jesus with a question. The young man asked:

“Teacher, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?”

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 fellow’s mind.

The young man replied, “I’ve kept all these. What am I still missing?” (Matthew 19:20 CEB)

Now, here is the thing about Jesus. He knows what you are missing before you ask. So if you ask him what you are still missing, you have to be prepared for the answer he is going to give you. That answer is going to be very particular to the person who is asking. To this young man,

Jesus said, “If you want to be complete, go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come follow me.” (19:21)

Jesus was issuing a once-in-a-lifetime offer. He could have heard Jesus teach daily, participated in miracles, and helped form

the early church. Think for a moment of the man 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 possessions and money.

But when the young man heard this, he went away saddened, because he had many possessions.

(19:22)

It is important to note the young man's emotional state as he declined Jesus' offer. 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 bear to sell out. He grieved as financial gravity pulled him back into his old world.

Jesus points out that we have a choice between two worlds where we can live:

the kingdom of self and the kingdom of God. The first world, the kingdom of self, is the world we see and touch every day. It is

the world you have created that includes your family and friends, your work and hobbies, your home and possessions, and your abilities and interests. You manage this world. That is a good thing. God has given you dominion of it. Some call it your *sphere of influence*. God created us to enjoy life and have influence in the world.

The problem is that we lose perspective. We often think that *our* world is *the* world. You know this is happening when you hear yourself using the word *deserve*. We say: "I know it's expensive, but I work really hard and feel that I deserve it" or "You do such a good job, you deserve to enjoy a little more." We hear people describing this kingdom of self when they say, "She's such a princess." Or "He's just bougee."

The reality is that we want to reign over our self-focused realm. We don't want to lose all that we've gained! And when we are so self-interested, we find this to be a space where financial gravity is felt with greatest intensity.

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 collect, the more we experience the gravity that comes from their mass. That is why serious Christians who are wealthy are often the most

generous with their money. They understand that if they do not manage their money, it soon will control them.

Jesus said it's hard for people to escape financial gravity and move into God's kingdom, but he didn't say it's impossible. In fact, he later added, "All things are possible for God" (Matthew 19:26). He understood the dynamics of balance and how hard it is for us to let things go. He understood our difficulties and emotional attachments to money and things. But defying financial gravity is that one thing needed to fully meet the goal of completely loving God – with body, heart, mind, and soul.

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, so we don't have to be like that man in the video, laboring under the burden of the weight we have accumulated.

Today I invite you to undertake an experiment to see how you experience gravity in your life. I also invite you to attend church the remaining three Sundays in this series.

The experiment:

Clean-Out Challenge

Clean out a drawer, closet, room, or area of your home this week and see how it feels. The ease or difficulty of discarding things you no longer use will tell you a lot about the degree of financial

gravity you're experiencing. Set these cast-away items aside, and we'll be collecting them here at church a week from Saturday. More information about that next week.

We live in a country where most of us are truly wealthy when our possession and money are compared with people in other countries. But are our possession weighing us down? Keeping us from finding freedom? Keeping us from fully living into God's world for us?