

“Discovering Gravity”

October 9, 2016

Defying Gravity series

The scene from the film *Gravity* is a reminder that gravity is a powerful force that's important in our lives. Without it, we don't have any grounding. I think of those astronauts floating around in a shuttle once they're outside of Earth's atmosphere. I remember images of astronauts trying to pour a drink and seeing all of the droplets hanging in the air.

The movie clip is a bit more dramatic, but it gives us a sense of how vital it is that we're connected to something. Gravity is a part of God's good creation and the natural world. It's consistent. We can count on it, and we know that what goes up must come down.

So you might wonder why gravity is a part of our discussion around money and stewardship. What does this have to do with faith? Well, consider the term *financial gravity*. Just as gravity is a part of our natural world, financial gravity is a force that's working around us. It's generated by the culture and economy in which we live, and, just like Earth's gravity, it's necessary for our existence. Each of us has needs like food, clothing, and shelter, and we seek to meet those needs for ourselves and those for whom we care.

I wish it were that easy. I wish I could stop there, but we know that there can be problems. We can get to a place where financial gravity is so strong that it begins to control us. It gets more intense when we see ads in the newspaper. Anyone look at a newspaper and see an ad this morning? We get drawn in by the home shopping channel. I'll confess that I almost bought a kitchen tool set as I flipped channels the other night because it seemed like a great deal!

We feel the pull when we get online - and wouldn't you know - there are items in styles and colors that I like! Someone knows me and is trying to sell straight to me! And with just one click, I can have it! Maybe you feel it when you walk by stores on the street or in the mall and you're drawn in by the SALE signs and promise of bargains. Maybe you're a thrift-store shopper who can't pass up a good deal on something you may or may not use. We feel it, don't we?

And there's the impact of financial gravity. You examine your bank account. What you have is lower than you'd hoped. Your debit card has been used a lot. And your credit card bill is higher than you thought it would be. The weight of stuff and the worry about maintaining it drags us down. Struggles in marriage are often related to money and money management and the stress it creates.

Financial gravity is a fact of life, but the key for us is to experience this powerful force in just the right proportion. We have to consider our needs and our wants - and

know the difference. Watching the coverage of Hurricane Matthew this week offered me perspective on financial gravity - people leaving their homes for safety's sake, but some staying even after the warnings from community leaders, images of Haiti devastated, many people dead, and the aftermath that will be a long and painful process.

Take a look at this short video. **SHOW “HARNESS”**

We feel the force of our needs. These are normal things. As adults, we have to figure out the income that can provide for our needs. Needs are like the weights stacked on this training sled. A short list would include food, shelter, clothing, and things that allow you to work and live, such as transportation and communication.

It's not difficult to realize that our society tells us all the time that we'd be better off if we have more and better things. It's easy to move from needs to wants - and to ignore that jump. The thing is that our list of wants is never short: a newer better car, a faster computer, a larger home with more storage for all of the stuff we have, a TV with a flatter screen, clothes that cost more, newer tools, items to support our hobbies. As we add these on, we can feel the added force of financial gravity holding us down.

We hope that more stuff will give us more freedom, but instead we're more exhausted by the pull and the bills. Like this man, we're harnessed to our possessions so much that we're worn out. We can't move anything, and our needs are sometimes overcome with the wants.

We know that it's not just one-sided either. When the balance is off and there's too little financial gravity, our world is out of control. We spend, but there's no connection to income. When we don't know the difference between spending money and managing money, there's a problem. We're floating around without enough financial gravity to hold us down.

Financial gravity is especially strong in the United States. Marketing culture is so well-developed that the message of “more” and “better” is always there. We've lost a sense of waiting to purchase big items until we have the money in hand. And the value of frugality – being frugal - isn't seen as a positive trait so much anymore. We've left frugality for earlier generations.

My dad and I had a conversation about that earlier this year as he told me (again) the story of how he and my mom saved, cut coupons and sent in refunds, shopped wisely, and were frugal. He remembered the day that she came out to the barn to show him the money she had set aside to pay off the farm. And I remember the joy when the last payment was made.

Tom Berlin says that this “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 there, we cannot escape.” We seek those

promises of happiness, freedom, joy, and comfort, but instead, we hear one another describing our lives as poor.

I want to make it clear that I don't think any of us are "poor." There are close to 3 billion people in the world who live on less than \$2 per day. I know the cost of living is different around the world, but I also know that we have a very complicated relationship with money and possessions. And it's not new!

This rich young man who comes to Jesus with a question: "Teacher, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?" We assume he was a good man who wanted to live a devout life. He loved God, but perhaps he could feel 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 tells him to keep the commandments. Jesus reviews them, and I can picture this man checking off the boxes in his head. Yes, done it. Good. Done. Already done it. "So," he says, "I've done all these. What else?"

Jesus knows what we're missing before we ask. So if we ask, we better be prepared for the answer. For this man, the answer is to sell all he owns, give the money to the poor, and come and follow me.

I hope this passage makes us uncomfortable because it should! When we talk about giving as a Christian, inevitably this encounter comes up. Jesus hits us with selling our stuff, giving it all away, and following him. And hear Jesus clearly - his words aren't tailor-made just for the "rich."

Jesus is making a once-in-a-lifetime offer. The young man is invited to be a disciple - to hear Jesus teach daily, participate in miracles, and help form the early church. Think of who and what he might have become! Someone who could love people more deeply. Someone who could share the Gospel or go into the world as a missionary. But all we know is that he was sad, and we assume he didn't do follow Jesus.

This young man was torn between two worlds. He wanted to know more about eternal life. He wanted to be faithful to God, but the pull of financial gravity was too strong. Jesus says 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're in every day - family and friends, work and hobbies, home and possessions, and abilities and interests. It's a world that we manage. It's a world that God gave us control over - our *sphere of influence*.

It's not a bad thing, but we can lose perspective. It's *our* world – but not *the* world. Tom Berlin says that we can check ourselves when we find that we're using the word *deserve*. "I know it's expensive, but I work really hard and feel that I deserve it" or

"You deserve to enjoy a little more." And we use royal terms to describe the kingdom of self: "She's such a princess!" or "Well, here comes the young prince!"

And we want to protect the boundaries of our realm fiercely. We can become very self-focused. We don't want to lose the power or benefits of our reign. This is where financial gravity is felt with the most intensity. Jesus said it's *hard* to enter the kingdom of God when we feel financial gravity as strongly as the young man did.

Why? 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, and they pull us in. The more we amass, the more we experience the gravity that comes from their mass. That is why it's important for us to consider how important discipline is when it comes to money. Faithful Christians who are wealthy are often the most disciplined about doing good because they understand that if they don't manage their money, it will control them. No matter who we are or how much we have, we have the responsibility to manage money so that it doesn't begin to control us.

Jesus said it's hard for people to escape financial gravity and move into God's kingdom, but it's not impossible. He was clear that "all things are possible for God." Jesus understood these dynamics, both for this young man and for us today. And we know that we are wealthy compared with most people in the world. Finding the right balance of financial gravity is one thing that we need to do to truly love God completely.

The good news is that Jesus offers us a way to find the right balance of the gravitational field of God's kingdom. Money and possessions can certainly weigh us down, but they can also be a part of what sets us free. We don't have to be like the man in the video trying to pull what's impossible to pull, carrying the burden of the weight, and falling exhausted.

So what would it look like this week for you and I do something to pay closer attention to the pull of financial gravity in our lives? Here's a challenge: clean out a drawer or closet – if you're really ambitious, clean out a whole room or area of your home. Pay attention to how easy or how difficult it is to get rid of things you no longer use. Bring them to the rummage sale by Wednesday or give them away.

I've seen this in my mom as she's trying to clean out and sort out after living in the same house for 40+ years. There's freedom in getting rid of stuff and lessening the weight of our possessions. May God help us!

May we seek first the Kingdom of God - not the kingdom of self. And may God help us to find the balance so that we are free to give.

Thanks be to God! Amen.