

A film I've quoted many times over the years is the Christmas classic "It's a Wonderful Life," featuring Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey. As a young man, he dreams of hitting it big, getting out of Bedford Falls, and thinks all these things out there will make him happy. But as he goes along, he realizes true happiness comes not from being wealthy like his friend Sam, or wealthy and powerful too like old man Potter who runs the town, but through his faith and family. And indeed, at the end his brother toasts him as the "richest man in town" surrounded by friends in his old fixer-upper home, while Potter spends the holiday alone in his mansion having money, but not true happiness.

In real life, as we all know it's easy to get blinded. But when we have God front and center, what we can find is we can live in this world, and enjoy this world, while also having God keep our vision focused on what matters most.

You might not know the name of RG (Robert Gilmour) LeTourneau, but in the 20th century, he was one of America's greatest innovators and is responsible for so much innovation with respect to construction.

He dropped out of school and began working in an iron foundry at the age

of 14, in the year 1901. By 1911, he was a partner in an auto repair shop, and married Evelyn Peterson in 1917, raising three boys and a girl.

Numerous tradesmen jobs later, he discovered a passion for machinery, initially as an auto mechanic, and later as the manufacturer of the largest earth moving equipment on the planet. At the age of 28, he returned from working in the shipyards in World War I (he couldn't serve in the army due to a neck injury from racing cars) to a car dealership, of which he was half owner, that was steeped in debt due to a partner who took to drinking. LeTourneau removed himself from the business with \$5,000 in debt. The year was 1915. Ouch. Jobless and beyond broke, he jumped at the opportunity to level some land for a wealthy rancher. RG claimed that this experience was the most satisfying job he had ever held.

LeTourneau slowly expanded to larger and larger land leveling contracts. He continually under-bid his competitors to win jobs and would scramble to invent machines to speed up the work and keep him from going broke. Although there were many technological advances in other areas of commerce in the early 1900s, in the world of earth moving at the time, it was still in the stone age. Roads were built by employing large numbers of men with shovels and utilizing mules to drag small plows. RG

LeTourneau was among the first road construction contractors to introduce machinery to moving earth.

The year was 1919 and as a Christian, he felt the tug to be doing more for God. He went to his pastor, Reverend Devol, for advice. RG thought that anyone who was wholly committed to Christ had to become a pastor or a missionary to truly fulfill the great commission. After deep prayer with his pastor, RG LeTourneau was shocked to hear Rev. Duvol say the words that guided him for the rest of his life, "God needs businessmen too." This was a revelation to RG. He immediately began to consider his business to be in partnership with God.

Still, RG LeTourneau was puzzled as to why God would choose him to be His businessman. Especially when, at the age of 40, in the year 1927, a big construction job went bad and put him \$100,000 in debt. But as RG remarked later, after seeing what God could do to restore a business and a life, "He uses the weak to confound the mighty."

The end of the 1920s also marked a unique event in American history, the start of the Great Depression. Not exactly the best time to be up to your eyeballs in debt and uncertain as to how to feed your wife and kids.

However, what happened next despite this climate was incredible. RG faithfully served God, not man. The surety company that had backed RG on the construction job that posted the \$100,000 loss was going to see to it that RG paid them back every penny owed. So on LeTourneau's next job, the surety company demanded RG work on Sundays or else they would foreclose on his business, his house, everything. Since RG's business partner was God, he gave the problem to God to solve. The owner of the surety company, Mr. Hall, boarded a train to officially shut LeTourneau down, but upon arrival to the job site the next day, something miraculous occurred. The surety man had a change of heart and allowed RG to continue.

Although the job was completed without working on Sundays, RG was still deep in debt. He was able to buy some time with his creditors by committing to improve his financial reporting. The surety company installed

an accountant named Mr. Frost to reign in the books. What Mr. Frost found was worse than he had originally expected.

Meanwhile, RG had skipped his yearly missions pledge the year before so he was committed to making good with the Lord. He told Mr. Frost that he had pledged \$5,000 to his church for missions. Mr. Frost couldn't believe it. RG was so far behind, even thinking of donating to the Lord was out of the question. Unbelievably, the business managed to stay afloat and the missions commitment was paid in full that year. Then, his business hit a breakthrough.

For years, RG LeTourneau had sold the machinery he had built for himself when he got a little behind financially. Although he still considered himself, first and foremost, a road construction contractor, the selling of his earth moving equipment inventions had been a profitable sideline for him. RG's attorney hinted at the idea of solving his financial woes by going full force into the manufacturing business rather than rolling the dice on the ups and downs of big construction jobs. RG then turned his complete focus to the manufacturing of his machinery inventions. After that, his financial woes were a thing of the past. The following are the revenue results his

manufacturing business produced during a time when the rest of the country was plagued with the Great Depression:

Year 1932 – Net Profit: \$52,055.61

Year 1934 – Net Profit: \$340,275.49

Year 1938 – Net Profit: \$1,412,465

He had hundreds of patents during his lifetime, and was the maker of almost 300 inventions. He introduced the rubber tire into the earth-moving industry, invented and developed the Electric Wheel, pioneered the welding of several metals, and built large mobile offshore drilling platforms. He even made cranes to move crashed fighters and bombers on aircraft carriers and on land. LeTourneau's machines accounted for nearly three quarters of the earthmoving machines during WWII.

Despite all this success, it never obscured his faith. In fact he allowed a half hour for his employees to pray, called a "chapel hour," and if an employee didn't want to attend he never forced his faith on anyone. He was down to earth and loved his workers; jokingly a reporter asked him how many men he had working for him. "Oh, I'd say about half of them," he replied. He was

a leader in the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church, president of the Christian Businessman's Committee, and took his faith very seriously.

Because of this, the money that was coming in never really took over his life. He lived comfortably. But, he wanted to also give back. And so with his wife, they came up with the idea of "reverse tithing." In 1935, with the gigantic profits pouring out of the manufacturing business, at the gentle suggestion of his wife Evelyn, they transitioned to a 90/10 split with the Lord. 90% went to the Lord and 10% went to RG and Evelyn. LeTourneau was fond of remarking, "It's not how much of my money I give to God, but how much of God's money I keep for myself." With the money, they established the LeTourneau Foundation to manage the administration of donations. By 1959, after giving \$10 Million in donations to religious and educational works, the LeTourneau Foundation was still worth some \$40 Million.

As for why he did this, he was apparently known to frequently quote Matthew's Gospel, 6:33: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides."

In that same year, 1935, RG LeTourneau overcame a lifelong fear of public speaking and gave his first speech at the opening of his newest plant, to which he urged his fellow Christians in the room to do more for the Lord in their businesses. In attendance at the presentation were several area pastors, who immediately requested he speak to their congregation about Christianity and business. This was the beginning of a lifelong commitment to speaking on Christians in business.

His inventive mind and hard-working ethics would take him all over the world, amassing a fortune as he went. In 1953, he sold the Peoria business to Westinghouse Air Brake Company (WABCO) for a cool \$25 million. Biographers of R.G. LeTourneau pretty much agree that he donated 90 percent of his fortune to charities and Christian organizations. In later years, with the profits from his business, he was able to purchase airplanes so that he could speak to more and more audiences around the world. He entered eternal life in 1969 at the age of 80.

Retired employees who formed the LeTourneau Memorial Association were determined to honor their old boss with a fitting memorial. Four years later and armed with \$25,000 in donations, their dream was realized. The 12-

foot bronze memorial, designed by Keith Knoblock, is located in the upper section of Glen Oak Park. An additional \$5,000 was raised to maintain the monument and presented to the Peoria Park District for perpetual care. On a sunny day in May of 1988, a century after his birth, nearly 1,000 people met to dedicate the statue of R.G. LeTourneau.

Odds are though I don't think Mr. LeTourneau cares too much about the statue that was put up in his honor. Rather, he understood he couldn't take his money with him. And he opted to use much of what he had in life to make this world a little bit of a better place than when he came into it.

In our Gospel this week, we have the story of the rich young man. He's a man who's on the right track. He comes up to Jesus, recognizing Jesus is a young rabbi who can bring him closer to God. And so he asks what must I do to inherit eternal life. Like Solomon, traditionally seen as the author of our first reading, he's seeking wisdom. Solomon is a powerful king of the Israelites, blessed with power, and wealth, but he says far greater than all of that is wisdom. This young man has been blessed too, and like Solomon, he is a seeker.

Jesus reminds him that God's love is freely given to him; He says "no one is good but God alone." Like all of us he doesn't merit that love, but also as a man with faith, he's trying to find the right path and do the right thing.

He's made progress. He believes in God. He's following the commandments. So what is the problem with possessions and riches in his case?

Jesus is trying to help him think like Solomon. Eternal life with God is the most precious and valuable gift that anyone could have. Sadly, when Jesus invites him to be a disciple and to sell what he has and give it to the poor and follow Him, he goes away sad. It's a tragic scene, because his wealth has become an obstacle.

Wealth can become an obstacle for all of us too; we can cling to things and think if we have this or that or a certain amount of money we are in control of everything. Money and power are seductive drugs. When they are ordered properly, they can bring about good things, but it's also easy for things to become disordered in our lives.

Now, we hear this and might think gee, sell all of what he has, that's a bit much. Or even in the case of R.G. LeTourneau, giving 90% of what we have away, you can still live pretty comfortably if you are a multi multi millionaire but isn't that a little high too?

The truth is there is no magic number in terms of how much one should give. Everyone is in a different circumstance; some need every penny to pay the bills. And I think it's also quite alright to have a cabin, electronic gadgets, or a rec room or nice things in life. The key is to have the right focus, like R.G., who wasn't worried about getting a statue, but about being a man of hope and faith who made this world a better place. How is that done?

It again starts with God. We give thanks to God for everything. His love. His mercy. His blessings in our lives.

We then make sure God is number one. It can be tempting to put things ahead of God; for some that is money. For others it is power. For others it may be a perpetually busy schedule. And for others it is leisure activities. As I've said a million times, God is not the "break glass in case of

emergency” in our lives, but should be someone we have an ongoing relationship with; it’s why Mass and prayer matter so much.

So if God is number one, we then ask ourselves OK God, what are you asking me to give up to follow you. And this is where we have to think outside of the box, and not get hung up on just money alone. What is God saying to you to give up and follow me? Maybe God is saying you need to give up some of your time to spend more time with your family, to volunteer more. Maybe God is saying you need to give up your ego, and step down from something or relinquish control. Or perhaps He is saying you really want to buy that yes, but can you afford it and is the money best spent elsewhere to maybe donate to charity or for a real need your family might have? Perhaps it’s something that is negatively impacting our spiritual or physical health, such as too much reliance on alcohol or tobacco. Or maybe God is even saying have less technology in your life so you can spend more time physically with people rather than always on your phone or playing a video game.

With all of these too we can teach others, especially our children, about this important principle when we make coming to Mass a priority, or teach kids

about giving by picking out a gift for the less fortunate at the holidays or volunteering at a food shelf or charity as a family. It's easy to judge the rich man and say "how could he be so blind," but all of us can get caught up in things that make us spiritually blind as well to following God with our whole heart, mind and soul.

Lastly, don't forget it's easy to fall back into old habits too or to get lost. We may hit the reset button or find our faith life is going well, but then other things happen in life. Solomon for all his young wisdom sadly loses his way later in life. We keep our wisdom through that ongoing relationship with God and daily prayer and examining our conscience. This is because Jesus' words are true and comforting: for people it is impossible, but not for God, for everything is possible for God. So let us rely on His power, and find forgiveness for our past sins and reliance on false gods, and remember that through His power, we will have treasure in heaven. On our part, may we strive to chose what brings us true happiness, and come and follow Him.