

“For the Love of God: Give Generously”

The Bible contains over five hundred verses on the subject of prayer, a little less than five hundred verses on the topic of faith, but more than two thousand verses on the subject of money. Over sixty percent of Jesus’ parables are about money and how we use our material possessions. Nearly one-third of all of his teachings focus on how we value, earn, spend, and give our money. (Herb Miller, Money Is Everything, page 3)

Now contrary to what many of us may think, Jesus and the Bible don’t talk about money to try to raise money. In fact, in all the teachings of Jesus there is not a single appeal for funds for his ministry. Rather, Jesus talks a lot about money because he knows it’s one of the most dangerous, tempting, seductive rivals to God in our lives.

Listen now for God’s Word to us as I read these words from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

(Please read Matthew 6:19-21 and 24)

Money is an amoral commodity. In and of itself money is neither good nor evil. It's what we do with our money, how we earn it and spend it, that makes it good or evil. Money is like electricity. It can light a church, but if it ever gets out of control it can burn that same church to the ground.

Money can do some very good, necessary, wonderful things. It can

feed our families;

put braces on our children's teeth;

provide a college education;

enable us to go on a much needed vacation.

Money can

not only feed our families, but feed starving families in North Korea;

not only make our mortgage payments, but build a house for Habitat

for Humanity in Philadelphia;

not only pay our health insurance premiums, but finance cataract

surgery in a Presbyterian Hospital in Pakistan.

One spring when I was part of a mission trip to Reynosa, Mexico, a mother brought her dehydrated, listless baby to our clinic. Forty dollars bought

her baby a car ride to the emergency room, three days of critical care in the hospital, and saved her life. Money can do some very good, necessary, wonderful, Christ-like things.

Yet, money has its limitations. Money can not buy us

a good self image;

integrity and character;

genuine love, happiness, or inner peace.

Money can not bring us any sort of lasting satisfaction. When we buy what we want:

a new car;

a new dress;

an i phone;

a big screen TV;

how long does that satisfy us? How long is it before a new desire arises within us and we're back looking through another shopping window?

My salary today is higher, much higher, than I ever dreamed it could be when I graduated from Seminary, but is it enough? Well, not quite. I

could use just a little more. I don't know about you, but when my cup "overfloweth" I often reach for a bigger cup.

On top of this, money doesn't last. We can't depend upon it. It's only temporary. In today's Scripture lesson Jesus warns us about the vulnerability of our possessions to moths and rust and thieves. But what about rising gas prices; declining home values; recession; mergers and acquisitions; downsizing; and the fluctuating, fickle stock market? In this life, no matter what our background, bank account, education, and position, there is no guarantee we will always have money.

And what about death? At the funeral for the billionaire, Greek shipping tycoon, Aristotle Onassis, a large, curious crowd gathered outside the church. While they were waiting, much of the talk was about his wealth and who got what. Someone asked, "Exactly how much did he leave?" Another replied, "Everything. He left everything." (Peter Gomes, The Good Book, page 296)

There are no pockets in shrouds, no U-Haul trailers behind hearses. Our money can't protect us from death nor can it accompany us in death.

Money has its limitations. It is a temporary, undependable, fickle commodity that can never bring us ultimate satisfaction and security.

Money is also dangerous. In our quest to possess it, it can end up possessing us. If you own a home with a yard, you know how much time and money it takes just to maintain it. If you also own a vacation home, that means even more time, money, and maintenance. Many won't wear their fur coats or park their luxury cars on the streets of Philadelphia because they are afraid they'll get defaced, damaged, or stolen. The more we own, the more we have to maintain, to worry about, to protect.

Money is also dangerous because it can threaten, harm, destroy relationships. Trying to earn a living with a decent lifestyle in this affluent area can absorb most of our time and energy, and leave little else for our children, mates, friends, and ourselves.

Disagreements over money can

destroy marriages;

alienate parents from children, sisters from brothers;

end friendships;

sever business partnerships;

divide churches.

Money is dangerous. It can come between us and God. Think for a moment about those people of wealth in the Gospels who follow Jesus.

There were the wise men at his birth. There was that short tax collector in Jericho named Zacchaeus. There was Joseph of Arimathea who buried Jesus' body in his own tomb, and perhaps, just perhaps, Nicodemus also became a disciple. But that's all I can think of. Out of all the people Jesus touched in his ministry only four or five had any wealth.

Is this because there were so few people of means in Jesus' day? Or is it because most of the wealthy and the powerful thought they didn't need God? They believed they could depend upon themselves, their wealth, their education, and their power to take care of them.

In the congregation I served in California there was an elderly woman who had no immediate family; who lived very modestly; who dressed, acted, and talked as if she was nearly destitute. However, when she died, she left

almost five hundred thousand dollars to the church. I was shocked and dumbfounded. I was also very grateful for her generosity, but sad, too, sad that she was so afraid that she would not have enough, that she felt she had to live as if she had almost nothing; sad that she couldn't trust more in God and in us to take care of her if she needed us.

Now, does God love her or you or me any less if we misuse our money or place most of our trust, time, and energy in our money? Of course not! As Paul reminds us, "Nothing...can separate us from the love of God." (Romans 8:38-39) Nothing can cause God to stop loving us.

However, God's love is not the question here. The question is: Our love for God. Can you and I love and trust God, if we are so preoccupied with money, if we

run after it;

fight over it;

hoard it;

worry about it;

trust it;

love it;

make money our master?

Now, this is not all Jesus has to say to us about money. In his Sermon on the Mount he does more than teach, “Beware! Money is not worthy of your trust and love.” In the words that immediately follow this warning, Jesus tells us who is worthy of our love and trust. Listen to this Good News.

(Please read Matthew 6:25-33)

There are at least two approaches to life. The first approach is: I must depend upon myself, protect myself, defend myself, take care of myself, for if I don't, who will?

Jesus describes a second approach to life. In the Scripture lesson we've just heard he says, “Trust and depend upon God to take care of you. If God feeds the birds in the air and clothes the meadows with flowers, then how much more will God take care of you, O you of little faith?”

God is trustworthy.

**If God went to all the trouble to create us in his image and to give us
life;**

If God gave his only Son to show us how to live this life;

**If God allowed his only Son to suffer and die to save us from sin and
death in this life;**

If God takes care of the daily needs of birds and flowers;

**then surely God will take care of all of our daily needs as well. God is
trustworthy. God will take care of us.**

**In my best moments, on my best days, I believe this promise of Jesus and
try to live it. I believe it because nothing else that Jesus has taught me has
proven to be false. I also believe it because it's been my experience that
God has provided for me:**

sometimes not as much as I wanted;

sometimes more than my wildest dreams;

most of the time more than I deserve;

but always, even in spite of my doubts and worries, God has

provided what I've needed. God has taken care of me.

Can't most of you say the very same thing? Why then do we continue to worry and fret. If God has provided for us up to now, can't we trust God to take care of us in the future?

One of the ways we can demonstrate that we do trust God to take care of us is

by trusting less in our money to take care of us;

by being generous and sharing more of our money with God and others.

As Paul reminds us in today's first Scripture lesson, generosity is an essential part of being a Christian. He writes, "The fruit of the Spirit is...generosity..." (Galatians 5:22) Can't we trust God enough to give God permission to transform us into generous, Christ-like disciples? Can't we trust God enough to share with others some of our blessings as God and others have shared their blessings with us? Can't we trust God enough to return to God a significant, sacrificial portion of our time and our money for the work of God's kingdom?

This sermon ends my series of sermons on some of the ways we become and continue to be faithful followers of Jesus. In the last three months I've preached about

praying;

observing the Sabbath through worship and rest;

reading the Bible;

loving and serving;

obeying;

giving;

witnessing;

and how God can use these spiritual disciplines to transform us into better, more faithful disciples of Jesus. I can't emphasize this enough: our efforts to practice these spiritual disciplines do not produce any of the changes.

What these disciplines do do is put us on the path to God and invite God to make us into loving, joyful, generous, faithful disciples of Jesus. It is God who makes disciples. These spiritual disciplines simply give God permission to do so.

Let us pray:

Lord, all of our will power, brain power, heart power haven't been able to make us into Jesus' faithful followers. Lord, come to us, live and work in us, complete in us, what we haven't been able to do by ourselves. Thank you! Amen!