

Well, now. If you're interested in being eligible for the light beating, you should probably leave now, though I can't be certain you're not already in too deep for having heard the lesson. Eva and Carolyn still have a chance, I think, but if we raise them in the church like we've just pledged to help David and Emilee do, we're setting them on a collision course with what some might see as a hard reality.

Since Christian faith isn't just about life after death, it's about life *now*, the hard reality is that Christian faith actually has something to say about how we live our lives – including our money.

There's an old preacher's joke about the difference between preaching and meddling. As the preacher is preaching the congregation is tracking along, affirming the message of the preacher with loud "amens" up until the point when he or she begins to get specific. The joke ends with one occupant of the "amen pew" leaning over to the other and remarking, "well, now he's done preaching and gone to meddling."

Up until now, we've only been talking about sin and violence. Now, though, we're about to get into the deep water, or at least so it feels to me. Now we're going to talk about money, sex and politics in the next few weeks and well, let's just say that it might start to sound like meddling.

My aunt used to work for a bank and she always said, "if you want to make people mad, start talking about their money."

So, how does a Christian relate to money?

You may have heard that money is the root of all evil. That's actually a misquote, if you've heard it that way. The quote is from the Bible, but it reads, "The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil."<sup>1</sup>

We can probably recount where all sorts of things have run terribly amok because of the love of money. Indeed, if we revisit the way we conceived of sin a few weeks back, as the state wherein we live with a broken relationship with God, we deface the image of God on us as good creations, and vandalize the good purposes for which God created us, for right relationship with God and neighbor, we can probably find some pretty good examples of those latter two based on actions motivated by the love of money.

What we do with our money either contributes to the *shalom* of the world or doesn't.

So there are three primary points I want to explore about money and Christian faith today. The first is that what we do with it matters. And the second is that we don't need to think about money and faith with fear. Finally, the claim of Christian faith on our financial lives needn't be motivated by guilt either.

What we do with our money can in fact be very moral or very immoral, but the state of being of having money or not having money is value neutral. What we do with what we have is what renders spiritual value.

When we make mistakes with money it tends to be because we've forgotten that it can have spiritual value.

Human beings have long had a pernicious tendency to divide the world into things that are material and things that are spiritual.

This is a false dichotomy.

---

<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 6:10

What do I mean by this? I mean that we tend to divide our lives into material and spiritual compartments – things like prayer, worship, in some cases study go into a category that we term spiritual. We have no problem identifying the value of these spiritual things. And then we lump other things into a material category that we deal with but don't think of spiritually. Money tends to be placed into this second category.

This false dichotomy goes back to the Hellenization of the ancient near east. With the Greeks came the idea that there were material realms and spiritual realms and they are somehow separate from one another. That which was deemed spiritual was of finer stuff and deserved our attention and that which was deemed material was bad, grubby and lesser and should merely be tolerated. Thought and prayer would be something spiritual and money and sex would be decidedly material.

The problem with this viewpoint for a Christian is that it is decidedly unchristian. If we look seriously to the Hebrew roots of our faith, we will see that God makes no such distinction between “good” creation and “bad” creation. When God makes the world, it's all good. Indeed, God got down into the midst of the material in creating human kind – remember, we weren't simply commanded into existence, we were created into existence by the intimate act of God breathing life into us. So there isn't a bit of creation that doesn't have God's fingerprints all over it.

There isn't an aspect of our lives where God doesn't want intimate relationship with us. God wants us to relate to every aspect of our lives from a spiritual standpoint because God didn't divide the world into spiritual and material – so what we do with our money matters.

God made this wonderful good creation and set us into the midst of it as God's caretakers.

The terms "steward" and "stewardship" have become church-speak. In the last couple of centuries they have come to be associated with the raising of money for church operations. We've lost something in limiting the concept of stewardship thusly. So let me say a word about the steward.

The steward, in biblical usage, refers to the person who is tasked with and charged with responsibly managing the assets of a household, which could be very large. The steward is an elevated figure in the household – indeed, the master has entrusted the most important of responsibilities to the steward. It is a good thing to be the steward.

In our own households, we're stewards of what we have. We may be good or bad stewards, but we are entrusted with what God has given us. In the household of the church, our session are the stewards of what God has given this congregation by way of our annual commitment campaign. (I love that we call it, "commitment," because it says it's not just about raising and spending money, but it's about how we commit to one another to be present with each other and to help those of us with children to raise them in the faith, and those of us who are aged to have companionship and for all of us to gather together in worship and be inspired and lifted up. That's something I can commit to!)

God has given us abundance and from that abundance we have taken what we need. That is as God intends it to be. Inasmuch as the way we steward our resources contributes to the shalom of the world, it is exactly as God intended it to be.

But passages such as we read today can be a touch frightening though, can't they?

When we are fearful that our stewardship might leave us cruising for a bruising, no wonder it is comforting to divide the world into spiritual and material!

So, if our decisions about money and faith are motivated by fear, we need to back up.

I picked this passage to go with this sermon because I suspect that most, if not all of us, have at some point or another in our lives harbored at least a slight secret fear that these parables might, in fact, be evidence that God is secretly just a hair-trigger away from whomping us.

That is not the point of this parable or any others like it. Taken within its larger context, this parable points us to the reminder that God is the gracious source of all that we have. Indeed, the hymn we will sing later is Matthew's version of the same words. "Consider the lilies, consider the ravens, does not God provide for them?"

When Luke includes such a story it is because he wants to intensify the claim of the Gospel on us – take this seriously, he seems to be saying. Indeed, Jesus is asked by his followers, "do you mean this about us?"

Yes. He does. He does mean it for us.

But he doesn't mean it to scare us. He means it to help us get the seriousness of it, to remember that there is more to this world than the acquisition and disposition of stuff.

And also, whatever the Bible has to say about God's hope and expectations of how we should relate to the world with our money, it does so while unabashedly declaring that we are the subjects of tremendous grace.

Everything we have, indeed, everything we are – is a gift from God.

That should leave us with no question of whether or not God loves us.

So, we don't need to relate to money out of fear that God is going to whomp us. That's not the point of the parable and it's not the point of the Gospel.

So what we do with our money shouldn't be motivated by fear, it should be motivated by what we can do that is *good*. And that is the heart of living like God has blessed us.

Which brings me to that last part, not acting out of guilt.

Again, I have to confess my rank hypocrisy. I once made my pledge to my local NPR affiliate because I realized that I had memorized the phone in number for the pledge-line.

I had been listening for free for so long that I was even suffering through the pledge drive, so much was my addiction. I had the epiphany that I was a free-loader.

But this isn't NPR and I'm not Ira Glass. We're about the business of church here and this is a place of grace. While it is my deep hope that the members of this church live our lives out of gratitude and in so doing that the response to that gratitude is generosity to the church and our communities, what we do needn't – indeed, shouldn't – be motivated by guilt.

Let me tell you a story. I remember well a couple in Indianapolis that I knew many years back. Bill and Chris were their names and they were just delightful. By the time I met them Chris was in her late eighties and Bill was in his early nineties. She had a gold Mercedes convertible that Bill bought her for “their golden years” and she would ride around with their dog, Lance, in the backseat with the top down Bach blaring over the speakers. I have it on good authority that Lance Jr. once had his own seat on the Concorde. (I only met Lance IV but he was very well behaved.)

Bill had founded a law firm that cornered the market on one particular discipline of the law and excelled in it. He made the comment to me once, “I used to feel guilty about the

fact that I've been financially successful, but then I realized that I could do a lot of good with the money I've made. I don't really have any gifts for teaching Sunday School, nor the desire, or to volunteer to sort clothing for the clothes closet, but I am very good at making money. And I sort of think that's my contribution to the church!"

I love to tell that story about Bill and Chris, partly because they were just so much fun to be around, but also because it highlights the truth that when we live our lives with gratitude rather than guilt, God can do wonderful things.

So let's be clear: by definition, the recipients of grace are free-loaders. By definition! That's the way God wants it! God didn't set up a world where we have to earn God's love, God continually gives freely from the overflowing of God's love.

We'll never out-give God. Try it if you like, but God will always be more generous!

That's the great good news of the Gospel! That's what we're here to proclaim over and over again, in sermon and song, to young and old: that God made the world out of the overflowing of God's love, and that God redeemed us because God wants a good relationship with us and wants us to have a good relationship with each other.

It's not a trap! It's not bait and switch! It literally is what it is and is not something else.

So, that's the word I have from the Lord about money.

1. There's not a single part of our lives God isn't interested in. Including our money – and what we do with it gives it meaning.
2. God doesn't want us motivated by fear.
3. God doesn't want us motivated by guilt.

If there is a carry away from this sermon for you to live your life by this week – about money or anything else, it's this: it's all a gift from God.

So here's your homework: live with joy. And live with generosity.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.