

Money and Other Idols

I Timothy 6:10 is probably one of the most misquoted verses in the whole Bible. How many of us, I wonder, have, with complete confidence in our memory, said “Well, you know what the Bible says – money is the root of all evil.” That’s the meaning of the funny math equation on the front of our bulletin this morning. I’ve said it that way myself. In fact, I said it that way during the call to giving in one of my first services as youth week pastor at Kirkwood Baptist Church over thirty years ago, which earned me a stern talking to from one of the elderly female pillars of the church at the end of the service. But the Bible does not, in fact, say that money is the root of all evil. What Paul wrote to Timothy is that the love of money is the root of all evil or, as our NRSV translates it, the root of all kinds of evil.

This morning, I want to reflect briefly on the difference between the verse as we thought it was written and as it was actually written as we consider the question, “What is the proper place of money in our lives?” How should we interact with money as individuals? What should our financial policy be as the local Body of Christ called Good Shepherd Baptist Church? Is there a way in which we have allowed money to become an idol to us, diverting our allegiance and energy from the service of God, where it belongs? Are there other idols in our lives which similarly serve to distract us from the Way of Jesus? And, finally, how can we focus our lives in the way most pleasing to God that prevents us from following the almighty dollar rather than our Almighty and All Merciful God?

So, first, let’s think about the difference between “money is the root of all evil” and “the love of money is the root of all evil.” In the Bible, money is often presented as a temptation but not as a curse. We are tempted to turn away from God and towards money as the means of our salvation. Psalm 49 points out the foolishness of trusting in money rather than in God: “Why should I fear in times of trouble, when the iniquity of my persecutors surrounds me, those who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches? Truly, no ransom avails for one’s life; there is no price one can give to God for it. For the ransom of life is costly, and can never suffice that one should live on forever and never see the grave.” There is a similar sentiment in Psalm 52: “The righteous will see, and fear, and will laugh at the evildoer, saying, “See the one who would not take refuge in God, but trusted in abundant riches, and sought refuge in wealth!”” Proverbs 11:28 says, “Those who trust in their riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like green leaves.” The list could go on and on.

But the Bible also presents wealth as a blessing from God. Job, Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon and others are presented as men who followed God closely and who were rewarded with plenty in their lives. Lori Claudio, a denominational worker with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America reminds us, “Throughout the Scriptures we read how God promises his people that he will multiply...bless...increase... what they have been given.” There is nothing wrong with being rich. It is not the actual possession of money that Paul is warning Timothy against but the focus on wealth, the sin of putting financial gain ahead of all else and of pursuing it without regard to the consequences to self and to others.

It can be such an easy trap to step into, such a slippery slope upon which to stand. In his online commentary for Luther Seminary, A.K.M. Adam of the University of Glasgow traces the all-too-common path from the contentment with “enough” held up as a model by both Paul and Jesus to the consuming focus on “more”: “Although human well-being requires only a minimal

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economic basis (as in, "if we have food and clothing we will be content with these," in 6:8), the transition from basic food and clothing to nice food and clothing, and from there to stylish clothing and rich food, takes place gradually. We are not likely to observe the progress from need to desire, especially when that transition involves ourselves and our loved ones. Yet praiseworthy as is the concern to see one's family and friends well-nourished and healthy, therein lies many pitfalls. For instance, the determination to see one's family amply fed and equipped contributes to the anxious concern to be a good provider, exactly the sort of anxiety Jesus inveighed against in the Sermon on the Mount. It may slide from the desire to see one's family well-fed and clothed to seeing them more well-fed and clothed than others (the sort of temptation Jesus warned against, saying that the gospel constituted all who accept and live by it into a new, expansive family). And of course, as this letter points out, the eagerness to be rich opens the door to putting that goal ahead of faithful commitment to God (as Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and Mammon")."

Of course, to be content with "enough" is a terribly counter-cultural concept. It was for the first century audience and it is even more so for us. Our culture is built around ever increasing consumption. If you watch, listen to or read coverage of economic matters in our country, you will find that one of the leading economic indicators about which financiers worry so much is not the simple measurement of Gross National Product, but rather the growth or lack thereof of the same. On an individual level, that translates into constant hectoring by advertising that bombards us daily with encouragement to buy more, eat more, take on more debt and continually set our sights on a higher and higher standard of living. But this is not what Jesus or Paul called for. When Paul writes to Timothy about contentment, he is echoing his own words to the Philippians: "I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

It is easier, we might say, to be content with enough if we have enough. But what, really, is enough. Paul reduces it to food and clothing. I think most of us would add shelter to that list. But isn't that really all that is necessary for life, combined with the love of God and God's people? We are so terribly rich in this country, all of us, compared either to our brothers and sisters in the first century or with the majority of the global Body of Christ in the twenty-first century. It is really to us, all of us, that Paul is writing when he gives Timothy his message for those who are rich by the standards of the present age. We should not be setting our hopes on the uncertainty of riches, waiting for our ship to come in, waiting for the market to rise, waiting for our number to come up. Instead, we should be putting our focus on our relationship with our Loving Creator and on loving our neighbors as ourselves. We are those upon whom Paul calls to do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share.

If that is how we are called to relate to money as individuals within the Body of Christ, how does this impact our collective behavior as Good Shepherd Baptist Church? I want to offer some perspectives this morning not only as your pastor but also as a career non-profit administrator. Those of you who were not closely involved in the process of my calling, which began six years ago this month, may not be aware that in my previous career I was regarded in the non-profit community as a "fixer," that is to say as someone who could be hired or transferred to take on a

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department or an organization in distress, particularly in financial distress, and get things turned around in short order. In that career, I was entrusted with the reins of six different arts or social service institutions that were in deficit situations. In every case but one, I was able to greatly reduce or eliminate those deficits in short order. I know what it takes to move a non-profit to financial health and I know what it looks like when you get there.

One of the benchmarks that those in nonprofit work use to measure the financial health of an organization is cash on hand in operating and reserve funds. It is recommended that a nonprofit have at any time cash equivalent to three months worth of expenses or a quarter of the annual budget. I am pleased to say that at Good Shepherd, we currently have the equivalent of approximately seven months worth of expenses in cash on hand, over twice the commonly accepted measure for health. Incidentally, we have been at approximately this same level since I arrived in your pulpit, despite buying three furnaces, painting our building and making a number of other improvements.

What, you may well ask, is my point in this financial recitation? Am I suggesting that we all take a holiday from tithes and offerings? God forbid! Am I advocating that we begin to spend our reserve with abandon? Of course not, although I am honor bound to mention that I have known wise older Christians in my life who held that it was a sin for a church to keep financial reserves as it indicated a lack of trust in God and besides, money in the bank was not considered to be money that was doing God's work. But I am a fiscal conservative. In the last month, I have counseled both the arboretum committee and the deacons that we should delay further action on that project until somebody has had the time to do a pro forma budget showing that the wedding garden will not be an unaffordable white elephant. What I am suggesting is that we do not need to be timid in making financial decisions as we work together to discover God's plan for the future of this church. We have resources, we have proven financial discipline and we serve the owner of the cattle on a thousand hills, as the Scripture says. I have advocated in the past and will continue to suggest that we follow the lead of all the other churches with which I have been associated and work toward budgeting a congregational tithe; that is, a percentage of our general fund income, not special offerings, that is directed to mission work taking place outside of this congregation. We have encouraged each other to give to this church with the reminder that God loves a cheerful giver. I believe we need to live into that truth as a congregation as well. As long as we are truly seeking the will of God to guide our actions, I believe that God will provide.

Our attitude about money can be revelatory of other things to which we give allegiance over the allegiance which we owe to God. As A.K.M. Adam writes, "Any object of desire that overshadows a primary allegiance to God – be it sex, or status, or spiritual virtuosity – imperils the faithfulness that sustains our sharing in Jesus." All of these things mentioned by Adam, and money as well, can be idols for us. Our Psalm this morning is another scripture that focuses on the danger and foolishness of becoming infatuated with that which is made by hands to the detriment of our relationship with the Creator of All. Any human relationship, any human endeavor, any attainment may become an idol for us if we rely on that person, thing or idea to complete our notion of self rather than relying on God. Humans, it has been said, are born with a hunger for completion but the void at the center of that hunger is a God-shaped hole. No amount

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of money, no possessions, no achievements, no other human being will ever be able to close that gap in our lives.

Besides money, the greatest pretender in this regard is earthly power, esteem and praise. That is why the Psalmist begins his warning against idols as he does. “Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory...” It became a well-known prayer in Latin in the Middle Ages. “Non nobis Domine sed nomini tuo da gloriam.” It was, in fact the motto of the famous Knights Templar, of whom so much pseudo-scholarship and bad fiction has been written of late. Shakespeare put the words of the hymn into the lines of his great warrior-king hero, Henry V. At the beginning of Shakespeare’s play, young King Henry is spoiling for a fight, eager to win glory on the battlefield with the French. But after the famous battle of Agincourt, in which the English lost fewer than 50 men compared to approximately 10,000 French dead, Shakespeare portrays a Henry appalled by the carnage. He warns his victorious army not to gloat in their dominance but rather to give glory to God. Kenneth Branagh’s film of the play shows the young king’s reaction to all the death in a wonderfully effective scene which uses the “Non Nobis” as a background. There is a good deal of stage blood in the scene but I think it’s worthwhile for us to see as we contemplate the false idol of glory. Let’s take a look...

Had Henry truly turned from an idolatry of the glory of war? More to the point, have we? Are we as a nation still deluding ourselves that our adventures abroad are actually embarked upon with no self-interest and only the desire to raise the station of others? A more modern Psalmist offered his take on national pride and glory. Here is Rudyard Kipling’s “Non Nobis” written for the pageantry of the opening of Parliament in 1934:

Non nobis Domine!— / Not unto us, O Lord! / The Praise or Glory be / Of any deed or word; / For in Thy Judgment lies / To crown or bring to nought / All knowledge or device / That Man has reached or wrought. / And we confess our blame— / How all too high we hold / That noise which men call Fame, / That dross which men call Gold. / For these we undergo / Our hot and godless days, / But in our hearts we know / Not unto us the Praise. / O Power by Whom we live— / Creator, Judge, and Friend, / Upholdingly forgive / Nor fail us at the end: / But grant us well to see / In all our piteous ways— / Non nobis Domine!— / Not unto us the Praise!

What then, is the corrective from the love of money and the other idols who haunt our lives? Hear again the words of Paul: “But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.” Pursuit or even retention of wealth cannot be at the heart of our existence. Nor can a lust for power, reward, attainment or praise. Instead, we are called to conform our lives to the life of Jesus, who gave up heavenly power, rejected earthly power again and again, refused even to use his miraculous powers to turn stones into bread to feed people only to gain glory. Instead, he took the form of a servant, a man despised and rejected and acquainted with grief. And because he was faithful to the plan of God to the very end, painful and lonely, he sits at the right hand of the Creator as our exemplar. We must follow him in offering our all, our bodies, our talents, our finances, our very lives, to the work of God and for the good of God’s Creation. To him who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords; who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.