

Getting Our Priorities Straight: The Almighty Dollar

Matthew 6:19-34

March 27, 2011

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more cloth you – you of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘what will we eat?’ or ‘what will we drink?’ or ‘what will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles that strive for these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

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Lent is a time of preparation. It is a journey that we walk each year to prepare us for the good news of Easter morning. This year, our journey in Lent takes us on a path that explores some of the things we have valued more than the God who should be the focus of our worship.

This morning we continue the theme the youth started last week as they talked about consumerism through their wonderful skit about the Golden and the Givens families. Today's scripture confronts us with a question about what we prioritize more: God or wealth. Listen with me for God's word to us as I read from Matthew's gospel...

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Don't you wish Jesus would be a little more practical?

I mean, what are we supposed to do with this?

"Look at the birds of the air...

Consider the lilies of the field...

Do not worry about what your life...what you will eat, or drink or wear..."

As others have noted before me¹, what Jesus says is all well and good, but last I checked the birds of the air and lilies of the field didn't have a mortgage note. Or car insurance. Or children who will attend colleges that require tuition payments. Or 401K contributions to offset the soon-to-be-non-existent Social Security program that currently takes money out of my paycheck.

The last I checked, the birds of the air and the lilies of the field weren't the ones laying awake at night wondering how to scratch out a life on a fixed income, or earn back money that was lost during the Great Recession, or figure out a way they could afford to retire before they turned 75.

Look at the birds of the air; the lilies of the field...

It almost makes you angry. At least a little defensive.

"Do not worry about your life..."

What *does* Jesus mean here?

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¹ Long, Tom, *Matthew* (Westminster Bible Companion, 1998) p. 75.

At first glance, it seems as if Jesus is issuing some kind of idealistic manifesto about the evils of money.

But, you should know, he is not. Nowhere does Jesus say that money is, in and of itself, bad. What Jesus is talking about in this passage is the power of money.

The proverb we all know – actually, a verse from 1 Timothy 6 - is not “money is the root of all evil.” The proverb is actually, “the love of money is the root of all evil.”

It is the *love of*, or the *desire for*, money that Jesus is talking about. More specifically, Jesus is talking about trust; who claims it; to whom we give it; and who that means we serve.

Let me pause here to make it clear that me preaching about not being beholden to the power of money is kind of like listening to Larry King lecture about the importance of marriage.

I don't stand before you as a good example. I love money. I'm not proud to say that, but it's true. I worry about money that I have. I covet the money I don't. Too often I allow wealth, or money to determine the things I consider successful, or worthy, or good. Money steals my attention and distracts me from noticing - and caring - and loving - those people and places without money. Truth be told, I drink the Kool-aid of upward mobility: I hope to make a little more money with each passing year - thereby assuring my family and me of a comfortable future. And all of this means that my priorities are out of whack.

Two weeks ago, I quoted Martin Luther who said that to have a god is nothing else than to trust in something and believe it with your whole heart.²

What do you think? Would money qualify? For me? For you?

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² As quoted in *Greed as Idolatry*, by Brian Rosner.

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Jesus isn't talking about money; he is talking about the power of money. Specifically, he is talking about the power of money to promise us tomorrow; security; the future. And the way Jesus sees it, you either trust that your future is secured by God or you trust it is secured by money. You can't have it both ways.

I can't think of a harder place to hear today's scripture than in the country in which you and I live and that we love.

Our country's economy is built upon the assumption that the future depends on our consumption; that our future will be secured by an ever-expanding market that gives more and more people access to wealth.

Don't get me wrong - I certainly do not believe there is a better economic system, present or past, than our version of free-market capitalism. I believe our economy fosters healthy competition, innovation, personal responsibility, and, most of the time, contributes to the common good.

But Jesus' words challenge me to ask whether or not I believe in the economy, or whether I think it is simply the best framework to organize people and the resources that people generate. Jesus' words challenge me to ask whether I believe that the future really is secured by economic means.

Jesus' words challenge me to look upon a future defined by money - where the question is always and will always be, "do I have enough?" and compare that to a future defined by God's gracious promise - where anxiety has no place because, by the presence of an empty tomb, there is nothing to fear.

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But that is the future. As for our present - we live in this world. A world where choices have to be made about our priorities - about who or what we trust.

Jesus doesn't ask for us to pretend that reality doesn't exist. We still have mortgage notes, insurance premiums, college tuition bills, and 401K contributions to think about. Those kinds of things don't just fall out of sky if you pray hard enough (no matter what Joel Osteen tells you...).

Money is a part of this reality. It is a concern. It is important. It does have a bearing on our life and our future.

But in the end - the treasures that we store up on this earth will not save.

Ultimately, they will not satisfy.

They do not confer worth.

They cannot make us secure.

And so it is that we are encouraged - in the words of a biblical scholar - to be "the real atheists" of our culture; to turn our backs on the myth that success and salvation are related to the accumulation of riches,³ embracing instead - using the words of our affirmation of faith - the promised future of the One "in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through whom God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."

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Let us pray: Almighty God, give us the courage, wisdom, and strength to put our trust in you. And when we misplace that trust - guide us back on the path by your grace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

³ Brunner, Fredrick Dale, *Matthew: The Christ Book* (Eerdmans, 2004) p. 237.