

# “Serving God With Mammon”

a sermon by

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**Text: “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon” (Luke 6:24).**

Someone recently told the story of a parochial school where lunch was provided each day for the children. As the children went through the line, there were tables where different types of food were served. At one table there was a stack of apples and a sign that one of the teachers had written “Take only one apple. God is watching.” As the students came to the end of the line, there was another table with a pile of cookies on it. On this table a student had written a sign that read, “Take all the cookies you want. God is watching the apples.”

In the church we spend a lot of time talking about the mission of the church, and that is certainly proper, because we believe that God is watching what we do in that regard. We speak less often about stewardship. Perhaps it is because we are reluctant to speak of financial matters. Or perhaps like that story we don’t think what a person gives to the church is a very big thing.

## I.

The Scripture I have read is taken from Matthew’s gospel and the Sermon on the Mount. In this section there are three sayings of Jesus that reflect his understanding of the use of money. The first is a warning against laying up treasures in heaven and earth (Matthew 6:19-20). In this saying Jesus points out the problem with wealth. In Palestine the houses were often built with mud or plaster. It was easy for thieves to break in the small houses in which people lived and steal their wealth. There was also the possibility that moths could attack fine garments and even expensive rugs. So Jesus warned his listeners against laying up treasures on earth instead of heaven. He observed astutely that where a person’s treasure is, there is his heart.

The second saying (verses 21-23) concerns the eye as the lamp of the body. If the eye is sound, then our vision is sound. But if the eye is diseased, we do not see correctly.

The third saying concerns the impossibility of serving God and Mammon (verse 24). Mammon was the Aramaic word for wealth or treasure. Jesus points out that a person cannot serve two masters. He or she will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to one and despise the other.

We tend to see the world around us in very complex ways. Jesus had an uncanny way of understanding that often in life we are reduced to two choices: God or Mammon, the narrow way or the wide way, sheep or goats, right or wrong, good or evil.

This morning I want to speak of the nature of Christian stewardship and why it is critical for the life of this church. To be sure, there are many reasons people do not give to the church. Some do not like the policies or positions of the national church. Others prefer to give their money to other charities, to the United Way or some other worthwhile organization. Still others are critical of the local church. Perhaps there are programs of a church that they do not like or think are wasteful. Still, at the end of the day there is no escaping the fact that Christian stewardship is at the very heart of the Christian life and there are compelling reasons that call each one of us to be faithful in this area of our lives. So why should a person give to the church? Let me name four reasons.

## II.

The first reason is that giving to the church is a Biblical mandate. The Bible, in both Old and New Testaments, supports direct, systematic, and proportionate giving. In the Book of Leviticus the Mosaic Law required that a person bring one tenth of his resources to the priests. The prophet Malachi accuses the people of “robbing God” by not bringing their gifts to God. In the New Testament giving is an act of love, not law. Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul had a great deal to say about the subject of Christian giving. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth that in giving “we show proof of our love.” One of the acts of the early church in the Book of Acts was to take an offering for the famine in Jerusalem. The witness of Scripture is clear. Stewardship is more than giving our money, but it is never less.

Second, giving to the church is an act of worship and a means of grace. The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) speaks of stewardship as a “privilege and a duty.” In 1952 one of our Presbyteries overtured the General Assembly concerning the proper way of raising funds for the work of the Church. The Assembly affirmed what it had affirmed in 1888, 1891, 1916; namely that the proper way of raising money in the church was in recognition of what God has given us. When the newspaper editor Horace Greeley was once approached by a group of church people seeking to raise funds for their church, they were frustrated. They had tried everything: bingo games, car washes, and pancake breakfasts--the whole works. One woman asked Mr. Greeley if he had any other suggestions. To which Greeley replied, “You might try religion.”

At the end of the day there is not much more that any of us can say, than to say that it is our faith in Jesus Christ that motivates us to respond to God's love by giving a portion of our wealth to the church.

Third, giving to the church is consistent with the appeal of Christ. This past week Al Staggs gave a compelling drama here in our sanctuary on the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer will be remembered for many things. He was the author of book entitled *The Cost of Discipleship*. His *Letters and Papers From Prison* are as compelling today as they were sixty years ago. But at the end of the day Dietrich Bonhoeffer will be remembered primarily because of the witness of his death. He was hanged by the Gestapo because he resisted the regime of Adolph Hitler.

Jesus made it very clear that there was a cost of discipleship. "If any one would come after me," he said, "let that person deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." Sometimes the words of Jesus are very harsh. "Foxes have holes," he said, "the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). On another occasion he said to a man, "Follow me." But the man said, "Lord, let me go first and bury my father." To which Jesus replied, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go, and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:60). Another person said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." We read that Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

So, let us not deceive ourselves. Several weeks ago *Time Magazine* featured on its cover a story about the "Gospel of Wealth" that is so popular today. Over and over again we hear ministers preach that God wants us all to be wealthy and happy and that Christianity is the means to great wealth. But there is nothing further from the New Testament than this type of teaching. The gospel of Jesus Christ is centered on a cross. It is a powerful witness to sacrificial love. Following Jesus is never easy and we should not deceive ourselves about this fundamental fact of our faith.

Fourth, giving to the church is essential for the spread of the gospel and the work of the church. John Leith in his book *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has To Say That No One Else Can Say*, notes that there is only one thing that the church can do that no one else can do. There are other agencies in our community that help the poor. There are counseling agencies in our community that help people with their personal struggles. There are political scientists and social analysts who are far better than most of us to identify the political and social struggles of our time. There are countless organizations, civic clubs, and other groups that provide people opportunities for friendship and for fellowship and there is only one task that is unique to the church and that is the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the "Light of the World." Apart from its message of reconciliation and redemption the church does not warrant any special attention, but unless the members of the church support the church, the gospel will not be proclaimed and the great message of salvation will simply not be heard.

### III.

But what about First Presbyterian Church? What are the challenges and opportunities that we face as we near the year 2007? Let me speak to these.

We are asking the membership of the church to increase their giving by eight percent. This asking has to do with the fact that we are a growing church with growing demands in the areas of Christian Education, Children's Ministry, and Ministry to Youth. We are in the process of calling two new ministers to our staff. We are also critically aware that we are living in a community where many people are homeless and where families and children struggle for the basic necessities of life. Apart from the generous support of the membership of this church we will not be able to do those things that Christ commands us to do.

But it is more than that. First Presbyterian Church now faces one of the greatest opportunities of ministry in the almost two hundred years of its existence. There are 14 housing projects that are being built in our neighborhood. In the next five years the population of Uptown Charlotte will grow from 10,000 people to 15,000 people. Over the next five years our church will have an unparalleled opportunity to be a witness for Christ in the heart of this city.

As we approach this Stewardship Season, there is much for which we are thankful. We are a church now of almost 2,200 members. We are a growing, dynamic church with a tremendous wealth of people who are committed to Christ. The growth of children and young families in this church over the past decade is nothing short of remarkable. There are a hundred four-year-old children on the roll of our church. There are now two hundred middle school and senior high young people. In five years that number will grow to three hundred. The per capita giving of this church has been for a number of years the highest in our Presbytery.

Jesus reminds us that "to those to whom much is given much is expected from them." Anything less than our best effort will not be adequate. That is why I urge you to make a pledge to the First Presbyterian Church for 2007 and come next week to place that pledge card on the communion table of this church, thereby committing yourself to be part of the great witness for Jesus Christ that is taking place in this church.