

“The Difficult Sayings of Jesus: 4) The Problem With Money”

a sermon by

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**Text: “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.”
(Matthew 6:24)**

On Thursday evening of this past week our church, along with nine other Uptown churches, received the “Settlers’ Award” from the Charlotte Center City Partners in recognition of the contribution of these churches to the city of Charlotte for almost 200 years. As I read a summary of the history of each of these churches, I was amazed by the perseverance each of these churches demonstrated: Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, and a House of Prayer. These churches survived a Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Great Depression. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, as many people moved to the suburbs of Charlotte, these churches stayed downtown, forming an anchor to hold the city.

Those of us who were present for this occasion could not help but marvel at the changes that have occurred in the Center City of Charlotte over the past two and a half decades.

Two of the people sitting at our table Thursday were the Reverend Gregg Busby and an elder in his church, Mildred Mosley. She had a special connection to our church. Her great grandparents were slaves that sat in the balcony of this church. They were part of the group of slaves who, in 1966, founded the first African-American church in this city.

Most of us, I suspect, don’t think a great deal about the balcony of our church being built as a place for slaves to worship. As I thought of Mildred Mosley and those thirty or so slaves who worshipped in this church over one hundred fifty years ago, I remembered an address that was sent to me, that was given by Sam Wells, who is the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. The title of the address was “The Gospel According to Reynolds Price,” and it was given at the Reynolds Price Jubilee in February of 2008.

Wells noted that Reynolds Price has written a great deal about religion in the past several years: *Three Gospels*, *Letter to a Man in the Fire*, and *A Serious Way of Wondering*. Wells notes that Price has a great appreciation for the New Testament Gospels, not just as religious books, but as literary masterpieces. Wells also noted that Reynolds Price's own faith is rooted in a powerful experience in his own life when, suffering from a cancerous tumor in his spine, he encountered an appearance of Jesus at the Sea of Galilee in which he was healed by Jesus and spared what had appeared to be a certain death.

Wells went on to note that one of the distinctive aspects of the Gospel of Reynolds Price and it is Price's reservation about the institutional church. Price makes no secret of the fact that he does not attend church – any church.

For Price, this reservation about the church is rooted in his boyhood, growing up during the Great Depression in Eastern North Carolina. Price notes that the county in which he lived was 65 percent black and 35 percent white. In his later life, he became keenly aware that during the 1940's and 1950's in the South, there was an astounding indifference in the white churches to the racial injustice that was all around and that probably from the end of the Civil War until the 1960's, there was no word ever spoken in any church in the South about racial injustice.

But Price noticed something else about the church that troubled him. It wasn't just the willful racist self-blinding of white Christianity – it was the way that the churches seemed blinded to the plight of the poor. It wasn't just the racial blindness, but the economic blindness that convinced Price there was a raging chasm between the Jesus of the New Testament and the institutional church.

I.

Over the Sundays of Lent, we have looked again at some of the difficult sayings of Jesus: the command of Jesus to his disciples to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him; the troubling saying of Jesus about the Christ who brings a "sword" and "division;" and this past week, the tension between Jesus and his own family.

This morning we look at the trouble with money and the saying of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, "You cannot serve God and mammon (wealth)." Mammon is an Aramaic word that means "property."

Jesus used this saying to make a simple point. A person cannot serve two masters. Either that person will love the one and hate the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.

One of the characteristics of Jesus that has always had appeal to me is the uncanny way that Jesus understood that life has choices. There is a "narrow way" and a "broad way." You cannot travel both. There is the "kingdom of God" and there is the "kingdom of man" and you must choose the kingdom to which you wish to belong. You can serve God or mammon, but not both.

So, what are we to say about the problem with money?

II.

The first thing to say is that there is no evidence in the New Testament that Jesus had anything against money. Wealth, as Jesus understood, is a very neutral quantity. It has power for good and power for evil.

It is hard for me to imagine that Jesus had some kind of inherent bias against wealth. He understood that it takes money to buy food, provide shelter, and supply the basic necessities of life. It is hard for me to imagine that Jesus would not approve of social security, pension plans, medical insurance or anything else that people use today to attempt to provide shelter from some of the raging storms of life.

There is no evidence that Jesus had an attitude that was anti-wealth. In fact, one of the parables he told was of a rich man who had an unjust steward, who was about to lose his job. So the steward went to all the people who owed his master money and arranged to have some of their debts forgiven, that they might receive him in their homes. (Luke 16: 1-9) When the master of the house found out what the steward had done, instead of condemning him for his dishonesty, he commended him for his shrewdness. Jesus used the occasion of that parable to note that the children of the present world were more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light.

Throughout the years, the church, as well as our society, has benefitted greatly from the proper use of wealth. When one thinks of the Universities and Colleges that were established by the generous gifts of wealthy people, hospitals, orphanages, and a host of cultural amenities, it is staggering indeed.

II.

But Jesus also understood that there was a dangerous side to wealth. That is the basis of his warning about “treasures in heaven and treasures on earth.” In Jesus own day, wealth was often measured in precious garments and rugs. Jesus knew, however, that moths could destroy garments and rugs and thieves could break in the mud homes in which people lived, so he understood that laying up treasures in heaven was far more valuable than treasures on earth.

In June of 2002, Charles Colson wrote a piece in *Christianity Today* that caught my attention. In this article, Colson told of being invited to lecture at the Harvard Business School. The title of the lecture was “Why Harvard Can’t Teach Ethics.” The immediate crisis that precipitated this lecture was the collapse of Enron, WorldCom, and several other prominent corporations in this country.

Colson admitted that he left Harvard very worried. Most of the students to whom he talked seemed to know so little about moral philosophy they didn’t know enough to challenge what Colson said. He reminded them of what a pre-eminent theological Michael Novak argued a decade ago – that Western liberal democracy is like a three-legged stool. Political freedom is the first leg, economic freedom the second, and moral responsibility the third. Weaken any leg argued Novak, and the stool topples.

Today our economy has collapsed because the third leg of the stool – moral responsibility – has collapsed. The greed and malfeasance that produced this crisis is a direct result of the failure of people to make ethical decisions. Did we not learn anything from the Enron collapse? How could we have not seen this tsunami that has overcome us?

III.

This collection of these sayings about wealth ends with a statement of Jesus about anxiety and trust. For Jesus, that is the real problem with money. It focuses our attention away from God and toward ourselves. Jesus points his hearers to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. (Matthew 6:25-34) The lilies of the field toil not nor spin. Yet Jesus said that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these.

As for the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, yet the Lord God feeds them. Are we not more valuable than they?

The point of all of this is that Christ calls us, even in the worst of economic times, to trust in the one who can provide for us more than we can imagine. There is, I believe, nothing more important for the church today than the recovery of the notion of a God who cares for us, who hears our prayers, who feeds us as he does the sparrows of the air and clothes us even as he does the lily of the valley.

John Leith, in his book *The Reformed Imperative*, has written that the Christian witness is that the last word in every human situation is the grace of God. God's grace is not only forgiveness and power, it is also, as Reinhold Niebuhr noted "God's providential working in history by which he makes the wrath of man to praise him and transmutes good out of evil." The Lord said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Today, we are facing a situation in which many people are frightened. Some have lost jobs. Others worry if they will have the necessary resources to provide for their families and for themselves.

Faith in God's providence is simply another aspect of the awareness that God is personal. As Christians, we believe that that our confidence about the personal nature of God is rooted in our experience of God's presence in the saving work of Jesus Christ.

The Christian witness to the world today is that God's grace is the last word in every human situation whether it is some grave illness that we face or some terrible economic uncertainty. This grace is not a human disposition that enables us with stoic discipline to face whatever happens. Rather it is the personal activity of God which opens up new possibilities and gives hope beyond every defeat.

That confidence in God's sovereignty allows us to sing with meaning:

“Through many dangers, toils, and snares
I have already come;
'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.”

Amen.