

Shandon Presbyterian Church Sermon

Things Jesus Never Said: **Money Is the Root of All Evil**

Matthew 6:19-21

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Several years ago, I got to spend a lot of time with John Bell, a minister in the Church of Scotland who has spent a great deal of time teaching and talking about music, primarily concerned with making it accessible to everyone, without compromising the power and beauty music possesses. Reflected in the music he writes is his unwavering commitment to justice and activism. We were leading a conference together at Montreat. He was the one doing the preaching. I was the one doing recreation — leading energizers, playing games, and otherwise making a holy fool of myself on a grand scale.

When we all first gathered together for the first time a few days before the conference was to begin, he asked if he could lead us in an icebreaker, to help us get to know one another. We agreed, expecting a name game, or something to get us laughing and relaxed. Instead, he had us all write down one question the whole group would be asked to answer. Some of us went an expected route — similar to some of the questions I asked Jackson earlier: What is your favorite snack food? In your opinion, what is the best book ever written? How far did you travel to get here? John Bell went last, and he took a different approach. His question was this: If you were given \$1000 with no strings attached what would you do with it? Most of us mentioned traveling to far-away places, I think. A few mentioned books or paying off student loans.

But then he said he wanted a second question, and because he was John Bell, no one protested. His second question was this: If you were given \$1000 with the stipulation that you could not spend any of it on yourself, what would you do with it? We were just as quick to come up with responses, but he

concluded the “icebreaker” with this — “Don’t worry about having money,” he said. “Just be worried about what you do with it.” We sat there quietly for a few moments, thinking about what he had said. And it will forever be one of my more chagrined memories that the very next thing the conference director did was ask me to teach everyone else the moves to a newer energizer.

Don’t be worried about having money. Just be worried about what you do with it. That sounds like something Jesus would say, doesn’t it? For those of you who haven’t been with us the last few weeks, we’re in the middle of a sermon series about Things Jesus Never Said. Up this week: Money is the root of all evil. Jesus never said that. There’s lots of good reasons why we might think he would have, though. The most obvious reason is that scripture contains something pretty close to that. The apostle Paul, in one of his letters to Timothy, writes, “There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, and therefore we can take nothing out of it; but we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.” Now, as I mentioned, this is Paul, not Jesus. But much more importantly, Paul doesn’t say money is the root of all evil, either. He says love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. And that’s a different thing altogether. Now, a quick disclaimer: one sermon cannot address everything related to faith and money. It’s not possible unless you are willing

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to camp out right there in those pews for several days without so much as a bathroom break. In late February, we'll spend a couple of weeks exploring money from a few different perspectives, in a series called *The Economy of Heaven*. We'll expand on some of this a bit more then. Today, we're staying very focused on whether money is evil, or not. It's not.

Money itself is not evil. It is a reality of living in this world, and there is no escaping it. Money affects everyone — no matter how much you have, or how much you don't, whether you hold countless investments or you've taken a vow of poverty. Because money itself is not evil. The way we use it, the attitude we have surrounding it, what we communicate with it, and the power we give it — that's where evil can creep in. Love of money, as Paul puts it. Love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. But scripture as a whole does not offer one single, coherent message about money. In parts of the Bible, money and wealth and riches are signs of God's approval and blessing. The Psalms, in particular, convey this: "Blessed is the one who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in the Lord's commandments. Wealth and riches are in their house, and their righteousness endures forever." But then the New Testament includes the Magnificat, where Mary sings how "the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be sent away empty."

Elsewhere in his letters, Paul says, "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh. You have laid up your treasure for the last days." And as for Jesus when he speaks of treasure, Addie-Grace read us one of his most well-known statements about money: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." If I understand Jesus properly here, what he's saying is,

our relationship with money says a whole lot about who we are and what matters most to us. He isn't against earthly treasure, he just wants to make sure we understand money as a means, not an end. That's why he has that hard conversation with the rich young man a bit later in Matthew's gospel. The man comes to him and says, "What good deed must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus reminds him of the commandments, and the man says in return, "I have done all of this. What else is there?" That's when it gets a bit more difficult. "Sell what you have and give it to the poor, then come and follow me." The man then goes away grieving, because he had so much he would have to give away. Jesus then says to his disciples, "It will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle."

What Jesus reveals here is not that those with money or means cannot be faithful. Indeed, the young man has kept all of the commandments. Neither does Jesus reveal a distaste for money or means. He never chides or criticizes the man for having the wealth he has. What he says is, essentially, whatever you have, and in your case it is money and possessions, whatever you have, you will need to learn to hold to it lightly if you are going to follow me. Following me must become the most important thing. Are you willing to be more loyal to me than you are to your wealth? Are you willing to use your wealth in service to my view of the world, in helping those who need it most? Jesus never criticizes anyone for what they have. Just for the approach they bring to what they have.

Because here's the simple truth. It takes money for us to be Shandon Presbyterian Church. And we don't need to be ashamed of that. We have a building that needs electricity and heat. We have a staff that needs to be paid. We have mission and outreach that needs to be funded. And none of that can happen if we all declare that we are going to live money-free lives. And aside from our own concerns

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— the free medical clinic and the free dental clinic? They would have fewer resources. The counseling center? They would be able to offer less client aid. Transitions? They would be able to purchase less food. The weekend backpack program? Fewer students would have enough to eat. Harvest Hope, Senior Resources, Family Promise. But also — classes for your kids to learn the faith. Small groups for you to find strength and comfort. Music that helps us worship in ineffable ways. Worship that connects us to God and to one another and reminds us that all the rest matters, deeply. What we do here matters, and it all takes money.

Money can be used for tremendous good. Money can be immensely faithful. It all depends on how we view it and how we live with it. Whether we let it shape our lives, or whether we use it to shape the life of the world. Peter Gomes, who prior to his death was an American Baptist minister, Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard Divinity School, and Minister of the Memorial Church at Harvard University, and who was often considered one of the greatest preachers of his generation, tells this story of learning the value of money. Early in his career he worked for the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. He was often invited to preach in the pulpits of small, rural, black Baptist churches — places he described as “tiny, hard-scrabble places that rejoiced in such mellifluous names as Mount Pisgah, Zion’s Hill, St. John of Patmos, and Ebenezer.” In those churches, they paid the guest preacher by taking up a love offering after the sermon. Dr. Gomes said, “The people were almost always generous-hearted and grateful for the attentions and efforts of a young man new to the ministry and new to them. And so early on, I refused these offerings on the grounds that these poor people and their poor church needed the money more than I did, since I had a decent salary from the institute, after all, and it was my pleasure to give. In fact, it made me feel quite morally superior to decline these gifts and to give them back. I knew even then,” he said, “that giving

was essentially an expression of power, and it was power perhaps more than charity, philanthropy, or stewardship that caused me to refuse the offerings of the people.”

He mentioned this practice to the dean at Tuskegee, who had become a friend and mentor. She was not impressed. In fact, she lectured him “without mercy” for his arrogance. “Who are you,” she thundered, “to refuse to accept the gift of these humble people? You have given insult by refusing to let them do what they can for you.” She said, “You will never be able to give until you learn how to be a generous receiver.” Dr. Gomes writes, “Jesus himself could not have put it better. Never again did I refuse to accept a love offering, because it was then that I first began to understand what money was all about.” (310-311) Because money is about money, but it’s about so much more than that. Money communicates and what we communicate with it. It’s about value, and priorities, and relationships. It’s about gratitude and enabling dignity and loving our neighbors. And there’s absolutely nothing evil about any of that

