

Sermon on money 11 June 2017 Leith Valley Presbyterian Church
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Scriptures:

Psalm 112

Matthew 6:19-24

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

(the scriptures are printed out in full at the end of the sermon)

Sermon Text:

Today my topic is money and generosity, and I want to begin by asking you to use your imagination for a few moments. Imagine that you are listening to three friends talking. Now if you're like me, you might be tempted to say a few things as well as listen, but for now I'm asking you to imagine that you're listening to them.

Your three friends are talking about their parents' attitude toward money, and the first friend says, "My mother was afraid of money. She believed money was the root of all evil. She saw her friends becoming obsessed with money, going into debt, working too hard to pay off the debt. She really thought money was a big source of idolatry, that we too easily worship money instead of God."

The second friend responded, "How weird. I just don't get that attitude. For my parents, money was the evidence of God's blessing. When we were struggling financially, they told us to try to love God more and serve God more, and God would bless us with more money."

The first friend said, "Wow, that's really different. How could your parents ignore Jesus saying we can't serve two masters? We can't serve both God and money, Jesus said. And there are a whole bunch of other verses in the Bible about the danger of money."

The second friend said, "They would never have thought they were serving two masters. They truly believed they were serving God, and they knew that serving God would result in all sorts of blessing, including the blessing of money."

The third friend had been listening to all this, and then that friend spoke up. "I think my parents had a different view of money, not the same as either of you. My parents saw money as a tool, and tools are neutral. They can be used for good and for ill. My parents had been missionaries in Vanuatu before I was born, and they still had lots of ties there, and in my childhood they were always raising money for some project in Vanuatu. In fact, they often still do that. They talk about Paul writing in 2 Corinthians 8 about the significance of raising money for people in need, and the importance of generosity."

The first and second friends looked at the third friend and said, "Wow, that is different. That's another perspective. I wonder which one is right."

For your first friend's mother, money was a snare, a possible source of idolatry, and she could cite many biblical passages that talk about the danger of money. For the second friend's parents, money was a blessing from God, and those parents knew that the Bible does talk about wealth as a blessing. For the third friend's parents, money was a tool to get things done.

The first point I want to make about money this morning is that the Bible says a lot about money, and the Bible says a lot of different things about money. I've summarized three common views about money in the Bible. I believe part of why we find it hard to talk about money is that there are at least those three different perspectives on money in the Bible. You saw the three perspectives in the little scenario I asked you to imagine.

Jesus does indeed say that we cannot serve two masters. We cannot serve both God and money, and elsewhere in the Bible there are numerous statements about people being tempted to serve money or spend too much energy in pursuit of riches. You may be familiar with 1 Timothy 6:10: "The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil." That verse goes on to say, "And in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." In our culture today we see a lot of emphasis on getting rich, and we have all heard stories about rich people whose lives are really messed up. Indeed they have "pierced themselves with many pains."

The Bible also does refer to money as a blessing from God. In the psalm we read today, Psalm 112, the first three verses read:

Happy are those who fear the Lord,
who greatly delight in his commandments.
² Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.
³ Wealth and riches are in their houses,
and their righteousness endures for ever.

It's interesting that later in the psalm we find a slightly different perspective:

They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;
their righteousness endures for ever;

Blessing from God with money should result in generosity with money. Sometimes when people view money as a blessing from God they forget that usually in the Bible we are encouraged to share our blessings from God with others.

And that third perspective, money as a neutral tool, is also there in the Bible. The passage from 2 Corinthians describes the churches of Macedonia, who collected money to help the Christians elsewhere. Paul is encouraging the Christians at Corinth to join in that offering.

So the first point I wanted to make today is that the Bible has varied views on money, and part of why we find it difficult to talk about money is that these various views are confusing.

I know we all come from different places regarding our attitude toward money. I know we have all been raised with different perspectives. I want to tell you a little bit about my story related to money.

Unlike most people, I was raised with a lot of talk about money in my family, specifically from my father. My father's father was an accountant, and my father used to accompany him on business trips. My father soaked up his father's knowledge about money, and my father's biggest hobby was to read about the stock market and make investments. When I was a child, my father was always talking about money. My father's idea of a bedtime story went like this: "Let me tell you about compound interest. Compound interest is the biggest source of advantage to the investor, because your money earns more money for you without you doing anything."

My father taught me to balance a cheque book by the time I was about 10, long before I even had my own cheque book. In high school, as we sat and talked at dinner, my father would often give my brother and me instruction about something related to money. He might pull a pen out of his pocket and use his paper napkin to draw a graph about how the Federal Reserve Bank controls inflation. When I got to university and took an introduction to economics class, I was bored out of my mind. I learned all of that from my father. Don't all fathers teach their children about the money supply or about the Federal Reserve Bank?

My father's attitude toward money was that it was a tool. If you asked him if it was dangerous in any way, or a possible source of idolatry, he would have been incredulous. He viewed money as something completely neutral, something you either have or don't have depending on whether or not you work hard. He didn't see it as a blessing from God. He saw it as the result of his own hard work. Money was simply a tool that we work hard for in order to accomplish our own goals.

My parents went to church every Sunday, so I went with them, but we never talked about God or faith or the Bible at home. So we never talked about what the Bible might say about money. I adopted my father's attitude toward money. I had my first Saturday morning job when I was 14, and I worked here and there all the way through my teen years. I loved having money and saving money. It was one of the joys of my life. At 19 I became a committed Christian and started attending the Christian group at my university. I found out that Christians talk about money in different ways than my dad did.

I heard other Christians talking about generosity with money. I heard them talking about tithing, whatever that was! I began to feel God moving in my heart about money, and I began to feel a call toward generosity with money. But it was a hard transition to make. When I was 21, for the first time in my life, I put some of my own money into an offering basket. I was at a student Christian conference, and they were taking up an offering for student work overseas. I pulled a ten dollar bill out of my wallet and put it in the basket, and I felt like I was tearing my heart out.

It got easier. At 22, I got my first job, and I decided I would tithe. The Christians I was around emphasized tithing as giving away 10% of your income, no more, no less. In my first job, my salary was really low, so 10% wasn't a lot of money. That was good. But the next year my salary increased a lot, and 10% seemed like a lot. That really stung.

At 24 I married my wonderful husband, Dave, and we decided together to tithe. That was one of the best decisions we've ever made. We've always had the practice of giving half of our tithe to our congregation and the other half to various forms of mission. Sometimes that mission was local and sometimes international.

I think tithing is an important Christian discipline that helps us grow in faith and helps us be transformed more into Christ's image. For me tithing has always been 10% of my income, sometimes gross and sometimes net. Ten percent is enough to hurt a little and make a difference in my life, but not so much that it made me unable to give to my children what they needed. Christians throughout history have emphasized giving away 10% of income, so that seems like a good pattern to follow. So I want to advocate that to you today. But even if you give away less than 10%, all generosity with money matters to God. And I want to explain why, using the three views of money I talked about.

First, money as a tool. Our financial generosity makes it possible for our ministers to have a salary, for our church buildings to be repaired, and for our church to hire people to work with youth or do administration. Our financial generosity makes all sorts of mission activity possible: relief work after disasters, development work where we help people make a living, evangelistic work where we help people share the gospel in places where there is no church. Money is a tool, and we need to use that tool to make things happen that we believe in and care about. That's part of being a responsible human being. It's part of being a generous Christian like Jesus was generous.

Second, money as a blessing from God. Everything good in our life is a blessing from God. I hope when you pray, you thank God for the food on your table and the roof over your head. It is God who gives us the money for those things. Oh, yes, we earn it by working hard, but God has given us the strength and health to work. God has given us employers, our places of work. God gave us favour in the eyes of the people who hired us and who continue to employ us.

Have you ever heard the saying, "Blessed to be a blessing"? God gives to us generously so we can give generously to others. When we give a portion of our money away, we are affirming that we have been blessed to be a blessing to others.

Third, the view of money as a snare. Tithing, giving away a set proportion of our income, is one way we keep money from snaring us. Each month a set proportion of our money goes away because we have made a commitment to do that. Each month, as we give away that money, we are affirming that we don't want our lives to center around worshipping money. We want to worship God. We want to have one master, not try to serve two masters, and tithing helps us do that.

The apostle Paul wrote some powerful words in that passage in 2 Corinthians (verse 9): “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”

When we give generously, we are transformed into the image of Jesus, who was generous. I can testify to that. I was not at all a generous person as a young adult. Years of tithing have made me more generous. Even now, I’m not a super generous person, but I’m much more generous than I was. And that’s the power of a pattern of giving, like tithing. We are more aware of God’s blessing to us, we are less likely to fall into the worship of money, and we are able to participate in God’s work here in New Zealand and around the world. We become a bit more like Jesus. And that’s what the Christian life is all about.

Psalm 112

¹ Praise the Lord!

Happy are those who fear the Lord,
who greatly delight in his commandments.

² Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.

³ Wealth and riches are in their houses,
and their righteousness endures for ever.

⁴ They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;
they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.

⁵ It is well with those who deal generously and lend,
who conduct their affairs with justice.

⁶ For the righteous will never be moved;
they will be remembered for ever.

⁷ They are not afraid of evil tidings;
their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord.

⁸ Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;
in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.

⁹ They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;
their righteousness endures for ever;
their horn is exalted in honour.

¹⁰ The wicked see it and are angry;
they gnash their teeth and melt away;
the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.

Matthew 6:19-24

¹⁹ ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

22 'The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; ²³but 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!

24 '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.

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

8 We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. ⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

8 I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. ¹⁰And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— ¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. ¹³I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵As it is written, 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.'