

A Sermon About Money

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

November 22, 2020

Luke 12:13-21

This is a sermon about money. It is not about pledge cards or church budgets or even stewardship, not directly anyway. It is about money. Tomorrow when someone asks you what the preacher preached about, you can say, "He preached about money." And your friend will say, "That's why I don't go to church anymore. All they talk about is money."

The truth is that preachers almost never preach about money. They hate to talk about money. Money is the third rail of the ministry. You learn early on to leave it alone. You can talk about sex. You can talk about politics, if you're careful. But stay away from money.

That's because money is the ultimate taboo topic in America.

You might not think so. After all, money is in the news all the time. The stock market is up or down. The Fed has lowered the prime. The federal deficit doubled over this time last year. Lots of jobs have been created, but not enough to satisfy those who still don't have one.

When I say that money is the ultimate taboo topic, I mean my money and your money. We don't talk about our money to each other.

Once, when I was still a pastor, I conducted an experiment in a sermon. I asked members of the congregation to think about their best friend. "Picture him or her. This is the person you called when your marriage was falling apart or when your kid got in trouble or when your mom died. This is the person who knows you better than anybody outside your family. Here's the question," I said: "How much money does your friend make?"

The stunned expressions on the congregants' faces said, "That's none of my business." Why not? Why was it your business when your friend's spouse had an affair, but it isn't your business how much money they make? What is there about money in our society that makes it such a taboo topic that even best friends don't talk about it with each other?

The short answer, of course, is that in our society money is a measuring stick. It tells you how you're doing compared to other people in your pool. The comparisons start early. At high school reunions. I recently watched a video of an old Drew Carey routine in which he shared his dread of going to his first high school reunion. "I have six months to make something of myself."

Jesus' attitude regarding money is so contrary to our American value system that we who are both American and Christian have to say either that he didn't really mean what he said, which is what we usually say in one way or another, or that he meant exactly what he said, we just don't want to do it, which, I think, is more likely the case.

"Give to everyone who asks of you." (Luke 6:30) That is in Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount. Give to everyone who asks of you? Really?

On my morning and evening walks downtown I pass half a dozen homeless people every day. At least once per walk someone asks, "You got any spare change?" I

always say no. Because, you don't know what they're gonna spend it on, right? Which is code for, he'll probably buy a beer, which, of course, is what a lot of us do at the end of the day. Nonetheless, we're probably doing him a favor by not giving him any money.

It's different with the "deserving poor." That's a curious phrase, isn't it? Do we divide any other class of people into deserving and non-deserving? A middle-class guy gets fired for being a jerk, we'll give him some help, get him back on his feet. He doesn't have to be "deserving." Poor people, though, have to deserve to be helped.

Jesus probably didn't know any of that when he said, Give to everyone who asks of you. He also probably was not aware that giving to those who ask of you on the streets is not deductible. I wonder if I could ask a homeless guy for a receipt.

"Sell all you have and give it to the poor," Jesus said. Of course, he didn't have three kids, including one in college, and a mortgage. He basically lived off the grid, didn't he? He didn't have a job and lived off donations a group of women gave to "support his ministry."

Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all he had and give to the poor, but that doesn't apply to us. Even if it does, our negotiators got him down to 10%. After taxes. That was a big win for us. And the 10% includes all benevolences, right? Not just the church. When you think about, a lot of what we pay in taxes goes to help the poor and needy. That should count against the 10%, don't you think? When you put all that together, it's kind of a wash, really.

Carlyle Marney, the great Baptist preacher of the last generation, said that we're all latent legalists, especially where money is concerned.

"One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions," said Jesus. Well, maybe not in Nazareth

We can argue with Jesus, say that he is idealistic, say that his ideas are impractical, or we can pretend we didn't hear him. It is harder to ignore people who seem not to be bound as tightly by our world's values as the rest of us are, people who take Jesus seriously, if not literally.

Like Lynn, a friend of more than thirty years. Apart from elected office holders, Lynn is the best-connected person I know in Winston-Salem. Lynn knows everybody. Everybody knows her.

You could do a rewrite of the old joke about the two people who went to Rome on vacation and visited the Vatican. Looking across the plaza, one said, "Look! Who is that?" The other replied, "I don't know who the guy in the funny hat is, but that's Lynn he's talking to."

Lynn's first job out of college was as a political organizer for the national Republican Party. She had an office in the White House.

Eighteen years ago, she co-founded a non-profit organization that paid a stipend to teenagers who lived in the projects, as well as some who were rescued from the juvenile justice system, to stay off the streets and spend the summer learning how to write poetry and rap and lyrics, how to speak publicly, even how to make movies. Graduates of her program usually finish high school. Some go to college, including some of the best arts schools in the country.

When Lin-Manuel Miranda stepped aside from the lead role in "Hamilton" last spring, he was replaced by Jimmie Jeter. J.J., as he is known locally, was one of Lynn's

kids. Last Thursday night her organization held its annual fund-raiser. J.J. Zoomed in from his Manhattan apartment and sang songs from “Hamilton.”

I asked a mutual friend to describe Lynn in a word. “Generous,” she said. Indeed. Generous in every way -- her time, her attention, her energy, her creativity, her imagination, herself. If you are invited to dinner at her house, you will be treated to a lavish meal, and you will probably meet someone you had only heard or read about.

If you are imagining Lynn living in a big house in a posh neighborhood, you are wrong. Lynn lives in a small four-room frame house at the end of a dead-end, poorly paved street where every other house on the street is an A-frame rental.

Her life, which is extraordinarily rich and full, does not consist in the abundance of her possessions. Her investments are in young lives. Her legacy will be measured in high school diplomas and college degrees; dreams come true, and hope born new.

She has found another way to do life. Call it the Jesus way.

On many levels we American Christians struggle with how to be American and Christian. Advocates of the Prosperity Gospel have stopped struggling. Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and wealth,” but they say, “Sure you can. In fact, serving God is the way to get wealth.”

The rest of us squirm when we read what Jesus said about money. We want to take him seriously. Calling him “Lord” has to mean something, right?

I have a modest proposal, a very modest proposal. It is inspired by Wendell Berry’s wonderful poem, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.”

The only way to live in this world without being formed in its image, Berry said, is to do something every day that doesn’t compute in the world’s system of values. Do something that leaves the world scratching its head.

“Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing Love someone who doesn’t deserve it Plant sequoias. . . . Be joyful though you have considered all the facts Practice resurrection.”

If we are going to break the cultural mold that we have poured into, we are going to have to do something every day that chips away the mold.

One embarrassing example. Recently, I told my wife that I was tired of coming home from my daily walks feeling like a failure as a Christian because I didn’t offer to help all who asked of me, so I had decided to put a dollar bill in my shirt pocket and give it to the first person who asked me for spare change.

“That’s your big conversion?” Nikki said. “A dollar?”

“Well, what do you suggest?”

“Make it five.”

“That’s \$30-35 a week,” I objected.

“Yes,” she said, “which is what we spend every Friday when you and I go out for lunch.”

It’s a small step, but it’s a start.

Following Wendell Berry’s lead, here are some modest proposals:

- If a guy on the street asks of thee thy spare change, gave unto him five dollars. Just to prove you can do it.
- When your favorite charity (or church) comes calling at year’s end, determine the absolute most you can afford to give -- then double it.
- Wear a T-shirt that says, “Consumerism is the opiate of the people.”

- Or one that says, “I’m going broke saving money at Costco.”
- Practice generosity.

Above all, remember that we serve a Lord who was blown away by the extravagance of a woman who “wasted” a whole bottle of expensive perfume out of sheer gratitude.

Remember also that it is in his name that we live. Amen.

Benediction

Let us go. And as we go, let us remember, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the God of lights, with whom is no variation, neither shadow of turning.” (James 1:17) Amen.