

“Who Will You Serve?”

Matthew 6:24-34

27 February 2011

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

Matthew 6:24-34

“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.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Prayer.

The past two days, our family has been at an indoor waterpark celebrating Christians’ 13th birthday. It is great fun to not be concerned about the pressures of this world, if only for a few hours, or days. The parking lot was filled with higher end cars and SUVs. Everyone wore the arm band of admittance; that caused me to think of it as a red band of affluence. While waiting in line for one of the water slides, Cynthia commented to me, “This is something my father would have never approved of. He would have said that this is a waste of money.” I hear you, Irving. Neither would my father.

Growing up, we lived lives of scrapping to get by. It was a treat to have dad bring home from the grocery store a box of fresh donuts. Now, I don’t even think twice about stopping at Dunkin’ Donuts to get a dozen for one occasion or another. We got new cloths once a year; the last week of August, so we’d be ready for school. Today, I get new cloths whenever my waist size changes by two or more inches (which is quite often). I hardly think twice about running the credit card and paying the monthly bill.

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The world of Jesus was more like the world many of us grew up in.
 The focus was survival; just getting by; the basics- food, clothing, shelter.
 Anything else was gravy.
 Aspiration was for making a better life for yourself and your children.
 One could only hope to somehow come into privilege,
 To accumulate treasure the size of Solomon.

The problem with striving for wealth is two-fold:
 First, it isn't true that only the poor strive for wealth.
 The wealthy strive for even more wealth.
 Why else would stock brokers be just as busy as the 7-11 clerk selling Lotto tickets?
 Striving for wealth is not income dependent.
 Like crack or heroin, the desire to accumulate more and more simply becomes a habit that
 requires a more powerful fix.
 Abundance is a dangerous thing,
 And if handled with enough frequency,
 It can become the habit that takes over your life.
 Indeed, excessive wealth can even take your life.
 Who here isn't waiting for Charlie Sheen to self-destruct and die of an overdose in a prostitute's
 arms?

The second problem with wealth has to do with God.
 The stakes here are much higher.
 It is one thing to drive yourself into the ditch.
 It is quite another to transgress and offend the Lord;
 Who, after all, is our eternal judge, jury, and eternal steward of heaven.
 This is the point Jesus is making with the crowds this morning:
 We cannot serve God and wealth.

Jesus is teaching the crowds in this extension of his sermon on the mountain¹ not to abandon
 our lives, our stuff or our accumulations. He isn't suggesting that we move to the desert, take a
 vow of poverty, or join a monastery. "Rather, he is addressing the basis for excessive worry and
 anxiety that can result from a life separated from God."² As his disciples, gathered at his feet,
 learning the ways and will of our Lord, Jesus Christ, we are being told that we are called to a
 different set of values and priorities than the rest of the world. ***We are called to wholehearted
 devotion to God.***

¹ Matthew 5:1

² Beaton, R., as found at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=5/25/2008#

We are not called to God and country. We are not called to divided devotion to God and family; or to God, family, and country. We are called wholly, signally, there-is-no-other firsts, there-is-no sharing the spotlight; we are called to devotion only to God.

Money and stuff are so temporal. Politics and nationalism are so of this world. How many times have the governments of Europe changed in our lifetime? In the past one thousand years, how many times have the borders of North America changed? Have we not listened to the Psalmist? The Psalmist observes:

*For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.³*

Christianity is not a system that can be cheated. God is not the IRS who we think we can exaggerate our exemptions or deductions. Discipleship is an all or nothing proposition. Either we follow Christ, or we don't. And the way we communicate our discipleship to the world is by the fruits of our actions. If we are talking the talk, then we better be walking the walk. Because there are few things more damaging to Christ and his Kingdom than the hypocrisy of living a double standard.

Our relationship to God through the Lord Jesus Christ is eternal. What we see here is only the beginning of an eternity with God. If we want the fruits of eternal reward, then we need to take the responsibility of paying the price and taking responsibility in the here and now.

Obviously, this laser focused, no negotiating position on God's insistence for our devotion, is going to raise up a howl of objections. What Jesus is doing with his teaching, by following this section of "You cannot serve God and wealth," is placing it in the context of our physical needs, anxiety, faith, and trust. Do we trust in ourselves, our ingenuity, our cleverness, our Marine-like attitude that we can overcome every obstacle with grit and leave-no-man-behind, success-at-all-costs determination? Or do we trust in God?

All the money in the world doesn't solve death. Just ask the Carnegies, Rockefellers, Hughes, and Kennedys.

Who do you trust? Who do you serve?

Jesus responds to this common instinctive, primal issue with a promise:

³ Psalm 90:4

“But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” Jesus tells us,
“and all these things will be given to you as well.”

If we have faith, and are willing to live a life of faith

- willing to talk the talk and walk the walk –

Then the divine promise is: all these things will be given unto you.

God frees the human condition from addiction to mammon.

No longer are we the gerbils running inside an endless spinning wheel attempting to get ahead in life.

When we strive for the kingdom of God

All of our needs are provided.

We are called to wholehearted devotion to God.

Everything else is a mere distraction.

When we focus on God, we become the best parents possible.

When we devote ourselves to God, we become the best students, the best employees, the best citizens in our community.

So,

Give it up.

Give in.

Surrender the need to build bigger and bigger barns.

Put those efforts, instead, in building God’s kingdom;

Living righteously, listening to and being attentive to God’s will,

And leaving the rest up to God.

Amen.

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