



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

2 Poland Manor
Poland, Ohio 44514
330-757-1547

October 25, 2015

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

What Does Money Have to do with Faith?

Luke 16: 13-17

No slave 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."

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.

"The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped.

"All the Church cares about is money!" I wish I could tell you how many times I have heard that remark. I have heard it uttered by individuals who were no longer a part of any church. I have heard it said about clergy, reflecting a perspective that our main goal in life is to separate our parishioners from their bank accounts, and line our pockets in the process. "All the Church cares about is money!" "All the minister preaches about is money!"

A number of years ago, while living in a smaller community in Wisconsin, I was speaking with a local businessman. He owned and operated a grocery store. The business was doing very well, because there was little competition. He was a Methodist and somehow our conversation moved to the area of church. He began to tell me everything that was wrong with his church and why he no longer attended. It was then that he dropped the line: "All the Church cares about is money!"

I was about 35 years old at the time, and probably a bit impertinent, but I took the remark in stride and replied, "I know what you mean, Ralph. I stopped going to your grocery store for just that reason. Every time I go there, all you care about is money. Everywhere I look in your store there are dollar signs and prices. Everything there is about money...not food!" His jaw dropped, and then he smiled and politely moved the conversation to a safe topic.

Money and faith have always had a strange and antagonistic relationship. There is a great deal of discomfort that we feel when we talk about money. This discomfort about money and faith manifests itself in many forms in the life of Christians and congregations. People are uncomfortable and some even offended at the passing of any kind of money within proximity of the sanctuary. In many congregations the most volatile meetings are the ones that are related to money.

By the same token, clergy are uncomfortable with money. Studies indicate that my profession rarely address the topic of money. If we preach about it, we treat it with kid gloves in a stewardship sermon. I am also aware that many clergy will not even preach a stewardship sermon. This silence on the part of clergy impacts the Church and its ability to function as an institution. But its primary impact is upon the spiritual life of the church. The great American Psychiatrist, Karl Menninger remarked that the truest sign of a healthy and spiritually balanced person was reflected in their generosity.

The message is about money and faith. The question is: what does one have to do with the other? First, how does the Bible view money, wealth and possessions? Second, does the biblical message still speak to our contemporary culture? And finally, how do we live in this world of capital and finance, and still show faithfulness to Jesus?

I

What does the Bible say about money, wealth and possessions? It says a lot! A number of years ago, the stewardship committee of my church, asked me to find all the verses in the bible that dealt with money and how we treated material possessions. They wanted to choose one or two for the stewardship brochure. I don't know what they expected but when I printed all the verses in the Bible referring to money, wealth and possessions, it came to 23 pages, single spaced! You may be surprised to know that Jesus taught about money on 24 separate occasions in the gospel. He was not silent on the topic, but rather it was his primary concern. Most congregations hear one stewardship sermon annually, and it is usually the preacher's weakest effort. How does that square with faithfulness to the biblical message?

The bible's message about money and wealth does not seem consistent, yet there are a number of consistent themes which emerge. First, wealth, prosperity, and riches are from God. We are to be thankful to God for the richness of life. Throughout the Old Testament, the Hebrew people were reminded that their prosperity was not earned, but rather given by God. The same God who gives, can also take away, and often does.

The Old Testament did not regard money and wealth as being intrinsically evil. It was not condemned, but the texts are also suspicious about it being a blessing. It can also be a mixed blessing. At the core, it taught that money, possessions and wealth held no promise for happiness. Joy was not found in those things.

The Wisdom literature is especially interesting in regards to money and wealth. Job, who was wealthy, argued passionately that the goodness of one's life has no relationship to one's wealth and prosperity. Ecclesiastes warns of the false security that money affords, stating wealth and money are ultimately "vanity:" useful, powerful, but ultimately they do not matter. In the words of Ecclesiastes, "the same end comes to all."

Many of Jesus' teachings center on wealth, riches, money and prosperity. Jesus did not take a neutral view of money and wealth. He saw money and possessions as powerful forces in our lives, and consequently he addressed them as a god, and named them *Mammon*. He taught that money and wealth are God-like, demanding our allegiance, our time, our energy, and our soul.

The rich young man, whom Jesus looked on with love, knew this well. "Go and sell what you have and give to the poor." He walked away, because he was wealthy... and could not let go of it. Jesus was very clear with his passage: "How hard it is for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of heaven." Wealth and riches, prosperity and possessions are not a source of security, often they are the root of anxiety. (I never worried about the stock market's daily performance until I had investments!) Jesus stripped money and wealth of its power. He did not avoid it, but rather preached that his followers should feel freedom in relationship to money. We belong to God... not to the economic system.

The early church took these teachings of Jesus to heart and lived in a community where wealth and abundance were shared. Members of the church gave everything that they had, and it was distributed in a manner that met the needs of all.

II

Does the biblical message still speak to our contemporary culture? We live in a culture that places wealth, money and possessions at the center of our lives. We go to school, not to learn, but so that we can earn. Our self-worth is tied up in how much we earn and how much we have. We should not be surprised when a ball player, earning millions of dollars wants more because a competitor receives more. We accumulate possessions, wealth and

riches. We store it in garages, storage centers, bank accounts and stock portfolios. Advertising plays upon our anxiety, and we accumulate with the hope of obtaining security.

Money is also power in our culture. Elections are decided by the realities of fundraising. We purchase leisure, relaxation, and even spiritual experiences with money. Behind this is the tacit belief that money and riches, possessions and prosperity will bring fulfillment and happiness. How does the Christian live in this culture?

III

How do we live in this world of capital and finance, and still show faithfulness to Jesus? The message of the Bible and the teachings of Jesus often conflict with our culture and they do regarding money. Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, took to heart the teachings of Jesus, and literally gave away everything that he had and earned, often placing his family in poverty. I admire his devotion, but I don't think that is the answer. Another temptation might be to insulate ourselves from the world, and live in communal societies. Once again, I admire those who try to do this, but I don't think this is the answer either. Jesus called his disciples to live in the world without being consumed by the world. He believed that if the world was to be transformed, his followers would have to live in it... He chose to. He called us to travel light, to live with an attitude of freedom in relationship to our wealth, our possessions, recognizing that our true wealth is the kingdom he proclaimed. We are caretakers, stewards, of the wealth of God's world.

A minister was talking with a businessman who was a member of his congregation. The conversation was about money and the minister was challenging this parishioner to stretch and give more. The man replied, "But I have to live too!" The minister looked into the eyes of that man, with love and asked: "For what?" What do you live for, and does your stewardship, your relationship to money reflect that? What do you live for? Perhaps that is the question we need to ponder about money. For what?

I need to name the elephant in the room. It is that time of year when churches hold their stewardship drives and ministers preach about money. The reality is Poland Presbyterian Church exists in this world. Our life as a community of faith takes place in this world. We have the reality of bills and obligations, salaries and mission opportunities. These real reminders often lead us into a very anxious existence, where we forget "the lilies of the field." We also have the teachings of Jesus and the Old Testament. It is amazing how we have managed, even those who take a literal interpretation of the Bible, to avoid those teachings. These realities begin to intensify during this time of year when we are faced with budgets, stewardship campaigns, and pledges.

We all fall short of Jesus expectations in regards to money and our wealth, but that is not an excuse. As we ponder the financial realities of our church and our own personal budgets, I believe that we are not making financial decisions, but rather decisions about faith. We can argue that we don't believe in pledging... yet many of us pledge a portion of our income to the bank.. in the form of a mortgage. The question we need to ask is "For what?" What is my life for? For what purpose is the wealth, little or a lot, to be used.

When our hand is near that pledge card my prayer is that it is not merely a household budget decision. It needs to be a faith decision. A decision about what you believe is the source of security, happiness and fulfillment. For what?