

Where's Your Trust?

A sermon in the 2017 Stewardship series "Satisfied"

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- Matthew 6:24-34 ³¹ "So do not start worrying: 'Where will my food come from? or my drink? or my clothes?' ³² (These are the things the pagans are always concerned about.) Your Father in heaven knows that you need all these things. ³³ Instead, be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what he requires of you, and he will provide you with all these other things.
- Philippians 4:11b-13 ...For I have learned to be satisfied with what I have. ¹² I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have more than enough. I have learned this secret, so that anywhere, at any time, I am content, whether I am full or hungry, whether I have too much or too little. ¹³ I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Learning to trust in God through the example of Jesus strengthens us to be free from bondage to the material world.

In case you might have missed the clues, today we're wrapping up a three-week worship series focused on our role as stewards or caretakers of the countless blessings God entrusts to us. Yes, God trusts every single one of us to be responsible managers of treasures God has put in our lives for useful purposes.

Two weeks ago we considered the question "What is Enough?" and found that the Bible helps us realize that because we have the gift of Jesus in our lives, we have what we truly need.

Last Sunday's sermon tackled those tough questions that go through our heads anytime we're asked to consider giving a gift like an offering – questions like "How much should I give?" and "What do I owe?" and "What's my 'fair share'?" We came to the conclusion that what's really at issue is "What's expected?" We noted that as caretakers of God's wealth of blessings, what's expected is that in our giving we are grateful, joyful, generous, and yes, even sacrificial. In the extreme example, Jesus was willing to go beyond merely taking care of himself. Jesus sacrificed to provide an everlasting blessing to the world. To a much more humble degree, we are expected to sacrifice, too – to extend ourselves beyond the mindless, unconsidered token, to step out of our comfort zone in order to know that our gift is not only making a difference in our church but it's making a difference in us.

So this is the final installment of a worship series I entitled "Satisfied." I came up with the title of this series and this year's stewardship campaign based on the apostle Paul's self-assessment of his faith. Paul realized that his ability to rest his trust in God enabled him to be *satisfied* with whatever he did or did not have (see Phil. 4:11).

When you travel with me on my next trip to the Holy Land in a few years, one of the places you'll visit is a site called the Mount of the Beatitudes. That's a modern name for a hillside overlooking the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. In the centuries since Jesus traversed those hills and shores this certain spot has been revered as the kind of locale where Jesus would have preached to the crowd gathered below him on the hillside. Tradition says that the Mount of the Beatitudes was where Jesus spoke what we have come to call his "Sermon on the Mount."

Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount fills chapters 5, 6 and 7. It contains a lot of verses you'd find familiar. Among them is a verse that says, "You cannot serve both God and

money.” (Maybe you grew up hearing it stated as, “You cannot serve both God and ‘mammon’.” “Mammon” is simply the Greek word for “wealth.”) Jesus explains it this way: “No one can be a slave of two masters; he will hate one and love the other; he will be loyal to one and despise the other.”¹

Jesus wasn’t saying that it’s hard to choose. He was cautioning that we cannot be *completely* devoted – we cannot be slaves – to two masters. Let me suggest some examples of two masters:

When we had kids at home I know I felt the demand to be productive here at work but also be engaged in the home life with my wife and boys. At various times I’m sure I felt like I was enslaved to one of the two – sometimes enslaved to the demands of the church, other times to the demands of the family – and if I poured *all* of my energy and attention toward one, consequently the other was going to suffer.

Or think how many businesses face the struggle of serving two masters: on the one hand making the best product possible, and on the other hand making an affordable product; or striving to be an employer that’s committed to being fair, generous, compassionate and responsible while on the other hand doing to your employees whatever is expedient in order to maximize returns for stockholders. You can’t be *completely* devoted to *both*.

Or imagine church members who want to feel absolutely at home and comfortable with one another in their familiar church, but by the same token they recognize that a church’s calling is to reach out and welcome the stranger. You can’t be *completely* focused on *both* – you can’t be a slave to strengthening your church’s fellowship and always focused on seeking out the newcomer.

Maybe you’re thinking, “But Jon, those are such extremes! Surely there can be balance...?” Of course. Often that’s the goal. But if you’re slavishly serving one set of goals above all else, you can’t also be *completely* devoted to the other set of goals.

In your personal life do you find yourself struggling to be *completely* devoted to serving two masters?

- Seeking a more healthful lifestyle *and* living what they used to call a “the high life” of excess food or drink or sex or stimulants or sedatives...
- Satisfying our consumeristic need for instant gratification today while saving for tomorrow...
- Feeding an insatiable desire to succeed and achieve while also heeding a quiet inner calling to be mindful of the “now”....

Do you struggle to be completely devoted to two masters simultaneously?

If we can’t be completely occupied by serving two masters simultaneously, then where do we put our trust? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us. We needn’t be consumed by a panicked sense that it’s all we can do just to take care of ourselves. No, Jesus gently encourage us to realize that:

- our lives unfold under the attentive eye of God;
- our lives are lived within the compassionate heart of God;
- our needs are met because of the generous hands of God.

The world we live in disparages that kind of trust, that approach of living by faith. It’s as though we’re chided for thinking we should ever risk “taking off the training wheels” to see where we can go on our own. The world tries to scare us into fearing scarcity when we should be recognizing the reality of abundance in our lives. We can be so focused on keeping a grip on what we have. What we’re slow to realize is that if we loosen our grip and open our hands, not only are we able to share to meet the needs of others, but we’ll discover that we already have an abundance of blessings and treasures and opportunities that we hadn’t noticed because we’ve been preoccupied

¹ Matthew 6:24 Good News translation

with taking care of ourselves and keeping a hold on what we have. We might even notice that what we thought we “needed” wasn’t so crucial after all.

In the fifth century, a man named Arenius determined to live a holy life. So he abandoned the comforts of Egyptian society to follow an austere lifestyle in the desert. Yet whenever he visited the great city of Alexandria, he spent time wandering through its bazaars. Asked why, he explained that his heart rejoiced at the sight of all the things he didn't need.

Those of us who live in a society flooded with goods and gadgets need to ponder the example of that desert dweller. A typical supermarket in the United States in 1976 stocked 9,000 articles; today it carries [47,000]. How many of them are absolutely essential? How many superfluous?²

For the past three weeks we’ve heard from Philippians Chapter 4 where Paul made a bold confession to that poor little church he had started several years earlier. Paul had been raised in a fine Jewish home. He had received the best of educations. He enjoyed the benefits of a life of privilege, especially the privilege of Roman citizenship which provided him with priceless opportunities and protections. He had it all going for him.... Paul thought he had it all, until his eyes were opened by a blinding encounter with the Risen Christ while Paul was traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus. Paul realized that the comforts and the privileges, the power and the opportunity he enjoyed were pointless without accepting God’s unconditional love and generous forgiveness. Up until then Paul had put his trust in the things he could command. Then Paul learned of God’s gift of Jesus as our master and brother and friend. That’s when Paul realized that he had been putting his trust in himself and the things of the world that he could command and control and accumulate. Paul’s eyes were opened to recognize that his trust belonged in God rather than in himself.

Okay, I can’t get through a worship series without one Parker the Dog story. It’s not remarkable. It’s not even cute. When Parker the Dog is lapping water out of his Snoopy bowl or he’s chasing his dinner-dispensing toy around the family room floor, he forgets about everything else. He doesn’t care about playing with the tennis ball, or the prospect of going for a walk, or deciding which of three doggie beds he’s going to take his next nap in. When he’s consumed by consuming he doesn’t realize that other opportunities are out there for him. It’s only when he lifts his head – and looks beyond the daily needs that are absolutely going to be provided for him day after day – it’s only when he looks up that he realizes he doesn’t need to worry about whether he’ll ever get another morsel. He remembers he can trust us. We’ll look after him. We’ll provide for him. We’ll love him.

Back to Jesus speaking to the multitudes on that Galilean hillside. He challenged them about why they bothered being worried about the food and drink and clothing – the everyday needs of everyday life. He asked, “Isn’t life worth more than food, and the body worth more than clothes?” And he reminded them that wildflowers don’t labor to clothe themselves with such beauty, but God cares for the flowers (for goodness’ sake!). So didn’t the people see that God would take even that much more care for them! Where was their faith? Where was their trust?

We know where our trust can be. We are freed from bondage to the material world when by the example of Jesus we learn to put our trust in God.

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² *Our Daily Bread*, May 26, 1994; figure in brackets updated by *Consumer Reports* at <http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/magazine/2014/03/too-many-product-choices-in-supermarkets/index.htm>, accessed 10/11/2016