

Giving Money Control? Or Life?

1st of 3 sermons on “Putting Your Faith Into Practice”

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- 1 Thessalonians 1:3 (Good News Translation) For we remember before our God and Father how you put your faith into practice, how your love made you work so hard, and how your hope in our Lord Jesus Christ is firm.
- Hebrews 13:5 (Good News Translation) Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, “I will never leave you; I will never abandon you.”
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: By pledging offerings of gratitude we give money the power of life rather than giving money control over us.

“Stewardship Campaign.”

That phrase doesn’t exactly generate warm, fluffy feelings, does it? First, the word “campaign” –it sounds like a battle, a struggle. Who’s at war? We’re not pitting church members vs. the elders on Session, nor am I as pastor campaigning against the will of the Mission or Finance committees. So maybe the word “campaign” isn’t quite right.

And the word “stewardship?” Technically that word refers to an obligation for responsible caretaking of an asset or resource. But in the church we all know that when we hear the word “stewardship” we’re talking about money. Our church’s money. Your money. How they’re related. When discussed in the context of a church, “stewardship” urges us as followers of Jesus to consider what we do with our money: what we receive, what we save, what we spend, what we give.

In America, money is funny. We don’t boast about the amount of money we take in or have... we don’t, that is, *unless* you’re a Hollywood celebrity or a professional athlete. No, regular people like you and I play it close to the vest when it comes to “our” money... except sometimes we don’t:

- when we put a down-payment on that expansive home with the incomparable view, for instance, we’re not worried about being judged for having enough wampum to afford the place;
- or when we drive off the dealer’s lot in that gorgeous, expensive import, we’re proud to be behind the wheel and hope that others take notice;
- or when our neck or wrists or fingers or earlobes are garbed with fabulous bling, we want the gold to glisten, the silver to sparkle, the gems to glitter;
- or when we make a major gift, we want to see our name in that program or on that wall or above the doorway of that new hospital wing or college dormitory;
- or when we post selfies that show us exploring faraway, exotic locales, we’re not hiding the fact that we had what it took to get there.

Yes, there are times when we’re not so concerned about others knowing that we put a lot of our money into some thing or some experience.

But usually, we keep our money matters to ourselves. I suppose that part of our tendency toward financial secrecy is what we’ve inherited from our humble Protestant ancestors. Apparently they felt that dealing with matters of money and possessions *in church* was an affront to the humility of our Lord and Savior. After all, when the religious leaders asked

Jesus a question about paying taxes to Caesar, Jesus had to ask someone for a coin to make his point about “giving to God what is God’s and giving to Caesar what is Caesar’s.”¹ (To be honest, I can’t think of any instance in the Bible in which Jesus is described as carrying money himself.)

Money has an unspoken power over us, and because of that we tend not to want to talk about it—especially in church. And especially with your pastor. But just as your body temperature and blood pressure are an indicator of the state of your physical health, the way you think about and deal with money can be a sign of your spiritual health and maturity. It was that incomparable evangelist of the twentieth century, the Rev. Billy Graham, who often claimed, “Give me five minutes with a person’s checkbook, and I will tell you where their heart is.”² In a way, I do that every year when I’m preparing to file my tax return. Maybe you do, too. When you look back over the year are you surprised by where your money goes? (And remember, it doesn’t just “go there” because it wants to; it “goes there” because *you choose* to send it there!)

I was reading a blog by an accountant who has become increasingly involved in his church. Imagine taking him up on this suggestion of his. He wrote:

In the business world, we have to issue financial statements to our senior management and to the outside world. We have to go through year-end audits where our financial statements are picked over by the auditors to make sure that we are using our stockholder’s resources in a wise, efficient, legal and moral manner. What if we were required to personally issue financial statements to the outside world on a regular basis? What if we had auditors come in at the end of the year and validate the rightness of our [personal] financial statements and the financial dealings that they represent?

[So], how do we honor God with our money? ...I have... heard the saying expressed this way, “Show me your checkbook and I’ll show you what you worship.” [In other words,] our financial dealings are a reflection of our relationship with our Creator. If we... worship things more than we worship God, it [would be] reflected in our personal financial statements. ...We would see in black and white what is important to us and how we deal with others financially.³

The famous verse in 1 Timothy Chapter 6 cautions that “the love of money is the root of all evil.” It’s not money itself. Money is neutral. We can give it life, or we can give it control. If we give money control over us, we obsess over money and insatiable wealth. But when we give life to money...

- money can create the comfort and security of food and shelter;
- money can ensure the hope for a future because of education and opportunity;
- money can bring about the blessing of health and healing for hurting bodies and troubled minds.

That’s why we need to hear the challenge issued in Hebrews Chapter 13 where it’s written, “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, ‘I will never leave you; I will never abandon you.’”⁴

¹ Matthew 22:15-22

² https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/billy_graham_385912 accessed 10/8/2019

³ Mark Bowling, “What If We Had To Publish Personal Financial Statements; What Would They Say About Us?” Posted April 2, 2015 in “A Work in Progress” at <https://markabowling.com/tag/show-me-your-checkbook-and-ill-show-you-what-you-worship/> accessed 10/8/2019

⁴ Hebrews 13:5 Good News Translation.

The theme for our church's stewardship focus this year is "Putting Your Faith Into Practice." That simple phrase can involve an enormous amount of courage and can impact many aspects of your life. For you, "Putting Your Faith Into Practice" might involve:

- finally agreeing to the medical procedure your doctor has been recommending; or
- letting your newly licensed teenager take the car out by herself for the first time; or
- saying "I do" to the one you love; or
- maybe stepping into an airplane to take your very first flight;
- or, in an act of generosity and faith, taking some of your perfectly good money and giving it away.

"Putting Your Faith Into Practice" is an act... of *faith*.

Like many churches, this church encourages you to make a financial pledge to your church for the coming year. That's an act of faith, because not one of us knows for sure what's going to happen in the coming year. If all goes according to plan, we'll continue to be employed; we'll be able to count on our investment income. But who knows? Maybe some house repairs pop up, or an accident or illness may produce unplanned-for medical bills, or we'll be called on to provide a financial "helping hand" for a relative, or the minivan will finally give up the ghost and leave us no choice but to take on a new car payment. We can plan for the future, but no one knows for sure what's going to happen.

But here's what we do know: God has given us every good gift, and for that we are sincerely and humbly grateful. Our gratitude prompts us — moves us — to give gifts in return — gifts that extend God's goodness in the world through the ministry and the mission outreach of this church. Many places could receive our charitable donations; but we choose this church as the recipient of our "offerings of gratitude." We choose this church because it's our spiritual home — a spiritual home especially because of all the people Jesus Christ has made to be our sisters and brothers.

It's because of your gratitude for being God's beloved — that's why you are urged to offer a financial pledge to your church two weeks from today. How can we put our faith into practice? We put our faith into practice through worshiping and praising God. We put our faith into practice through our prayers and acts of compassion. And we put our faith into practice by setting aside a portion of the treasures God has blessed us with, and dedicating that portion to be a joyful, generous gift in gratitude for knowing and serving God through Jesus our Savior and Master.