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A Heart for God: Luke's Special Witness
Sermon 3 - Money

a sermon on Luke 12.13-21 & 16.10-13
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No one likes a sermon on money. I am aware of that. First, you suspect the preacher has an ulterior motive. The church needs money, so let's talk about stewardship. Second, money is always a sensitive topic. A sermon about money touches your core values and priorities. A financial planner once remarked, "Show me your bank account and your credit card statements, and I can tell you who you are." Self-examination at such a deep level is uncomfortable. Third, most of us do not give as generously and joyfully as we ought. We do not share our blessings with those in need as we ought. Most of us are a little too selfish with our money, and we know it. So a sermon about money brings us under conviction. *Conviction* is a good, old churchy word that describes the unpleasant gnawing of conscience when God's truth shines upon an unhealthy corner of your heart. God speaks to our heart and tells us we need to make a change, but we really don't want to. We are too comfortable the way we are. That's why nobody likes a sermon about money.

I'll make a deal with you. I have to preach this sermon about money. Why? Because Jesus had a lot to say about money. He said more about money than prayer. If I never talk about money, I won't be a good preacher. Also, everything belongs to God. God created the material world, and he loves it. He loves it so much he has redeemed it. Jesus rose from the dead, not as some sort of ghost, but with a body of flesh and blood. If I never talk about money, you might get the crazy idea that God only cares about your soul, not your body; about heaven, not earth. I need you to see how everything can be holy. Changing a diaper can be an act of worship. You can mow your lawn for God's glory. You can honor God with your money. Those may sound absurd, but everything belongs to God. If I don't preach about money, I won't be a good theologian. And, finally, if God has something to say about money, you need to know what it is. If I hold out on you, so that you have no clue what attitude God wants you to take toward money, then there is the possibility that God will hold that against me. I never said a word; you got the idea it isn't important; that's on me. If I never preach about money, I won't be a good pastor. You can see, then, why I feel obligated to preach about money.

But I am willing to make a deal. This is not a stewardship sermon *per se*. I am not going to hit you up for offerings or pledges. Instead, I want to talk about money as a spiritual

force. I want, if possible, to free you from some of the anxiety you feel about money. Jesus recognized that money causes people much anxiety. The poor because they don't have enough. The rich because they want to keep what they have and get more. Nearly everyone because we care too much about money. We trust it too much. The root of our anxiety is really idolatry. We trust money when we should trust God. We strive for money when we should strive for God's kingdom. Jesus' teaching about money is radical. It goes against the values of our culture. And yet, Jesus offers us freedom from anxiety. What he has to say is worth your attention, so if you try to listen, I'll take a positive approach. If you come under conviction, blame Jesus, not me.

I said no one likes a sermon about money, but that's not entirely true. Luke liked sermons about money. Money was a very important issue for Luke, in part because he saw it was important to Jesus. This is the third sermon in our series called "A Heart for God." It is about the special witness of Luke. Luke worried about his Christian friends because Christianity wasn't popular in their communities. Luke cared about the experiences and roles of women. Luke cared about prayer; we'll get to that in two weeks. Next Sunday is World Communion Sunday, and the series will skip a week so I can preach about that. Today is the sermon about money that Luke would have loved so well.

In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" [5.3]. When Luke reports this saying, he will have nothing to do with this "in spirit" business. Luke has Jesus saying, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" [6.20]. In Matthew, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. In Luke, "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." Luke is certain that Jesus brings good news for the poor, not just the poor in spirit, and the physically hungry, not just those with spiritual longings. But that's not enough! Luke goes on to report warnings of Jesus found in no other gospel: "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry" [6.24-25]. This is exactly what Mary sang about in the Magnificat, which was also recorded only by Luke: "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" [1.52-53].

Luke cares about money, and he wants us to know Jesus cares about it too. Again, however, Luke is going to show us more than tell us. In his gospel we meet the women who gave to support Jesus' ministry. We meet Zaccaheus, who promised to make restitution to everyone he had cheated and to give half his wealth to the poor. That's real repentance, the kind that doesn't stop with words but goes on to actions! Jesus changes Zacchaeus, and he would never look at money the same way.

In Luke's gospel, we hear about the Good Samaritan, who paid the innkeeper with his own money. In the parable of the sower, a parable Luke shares with Matthew and

Mark, the seed that falls among the thorns gets choked by what? By “the cares and riches and pleasures of life” [8.14].

Luke alone tells us the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, in which the afterlife is full of unpleasant surprises for a rich man who in life ignored his poor neighbor. Luke alone gives us our text about the parable of the rich fool.

In the sequel to Luke’s gospel, the book of Acts, Luke shows the earliest Christians giving generously to support one another. Luke reports, “There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold” [Acts 4.34]. Barnabas sets an example in generosity while Ananias and Sapphira fall under God’s wrath for lying about their gift. Peter was frustrated by this. Their land was theirs. The money was theirs. They could have said, “Here’s a portion. We’re keeping the rest.” No one would have criticized them. Instead, they wanted to appear generous while holding out. So they lied. Money has a way of doing that to us.

Read Luke and Acts and you will come away with the idea that money matters to God. Money has a spiritual quality. It quickly reveals what is in our hearts. With that in mind, let’s look at the parable of the rich fool.

Jesus tells this parable in response to a request to settle an inheritance dispute. The situation is fairly clear. A man died without a will. According to the law of the times, his estate was held by his sons, but it could not be divided except by the consent of the oldest. The man who appeals to Jesus is no doubt the younger brother, trying to get Jesus to pressure the older son to settle the estate. He knows he’s in trouble when Jesus addresses him as “man.” Jesus might have called him “brother” or “friend” or “sir.” By calling him “man” Jesus subtly expresses disapproval. Jesus disapproves because this man cares more about his share of the property than he does his own brother. Money has come between them, and Jesus wants nothing to do with it. Instead, he seizes the occasion to tell a parable about the foolishness of loving money.

Let me ask you, what did the rich man do wrong? He was already wealthy. He reaped a bumper crop. In other words, God blessed him. He had more than he knew what to do with, so he held a conference with himself. This is our first sign of trouble. In that time and place, decisions like this would be made after discussing it with family and friends. This man is alone. He has no one to talk to but himself. Is Jesus suggesting his wealth has isolated him? Probably so. And yet, we struggle to see where he goes wrong. He didn’t steal anything. He wisely makes plans for the future. Isn’t that what we do when we save for retirement?

What did he do wrong? Did he assume his wealth was all for him, so he didn’t share? He didn’t use it to help or bless others? Was selfishness his problem? I think so. Jesus

laid it on a bit thick when the guy has to tear down his barns to build bigger ones. He hoarded his wealth, and that was a problem.

Did he also miss the point of life? He thought the point of life is to “relax, eat, drink, and be merry.” That’s not what life is about. Jesus told the young man with the inheritance problem: “Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” The rich fool thought it does. He thought he had it made. He was wrong.

So he was selfish and he thought life is about enjoying yourself. He was dead wrong, but he had an even bigger problem than these. He trusted his wealth. His money made him feel secure. He didn’t pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” because he already knew where his daily bread was coming from. He didn’t need God. He didn’t need anybody. Or so he thought ...

Death has a way of setting our priorities straight. What did his wealth mean in the end? What was it worth to him once he knew tomorrow would never come? God called him a fool. He had lived for the wrong things. He had loved he wrong things. He had trusted the wrong things. We are more like him than we care to admit.

I am trying to take a positive approach, and the gospel of Luke does. Right after he tells this story, Jesus goes on to say to his disciples, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.” Jesus gives them the ol’ “lilies of the field” speech about trusting God and not worrying about material things. He ends by saying, “Strive for God’s kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well,” and “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Some of the people Jesus spoke to were rich. Like the wealthy farmer in Jesus’ story, they had plenty and felt good about it. In that culture, wealth was considered a sign of God’s favor. The rich assumed God was happy with them. Jesus warned them it might be otherwise. If they were selfish, if they were proud, if their wealth came between them and God, which it easily can, God would not be pleased.

Jesus had a word for the wealthy, but by far most of the people he spoke to were poor. They were farmers, fishermen, day laborers, wives and widows, carpenters — people who worked hard and had little to show for it. The average person in his audience would have owned one change of clothes, for example.

Interestingly, he told them the same thing about money that he told the rich: Don’t love money. Don’t make it the most important thing in your life. Love God. Trust God. Be generous with what you have, little or much. “Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Anyone coming under conviction yet? Anyone beside me? What are we going to do with Jesus' teaching? How does it affect the way we live? The way we spend? We have reached the last part of the sermon, the "so what?" part. Let me offer four quick, practical ways you can follow Jesus' teaching and be less anxious about money.

1. Money is a means, not an end. Think of it that way. Money is a tool, nothing more. Never desire money for itself, only for the good things you can do with it. A professor asked his class of freshman college students: Why have you come to college? To get an education. Why do you want an education? To get a good job. What makes a job good? Lots of money. So your ultimate goal is to make lots of money? Yes. Why? At this point they faltered a bit, but they mentioned a nice home in the right neighborhoods, various luxuries and travel, social prestige. Is this the purpose of life, he asked. They weren't sure. They knew they wanted money and the things it can buy. They were not sure what the purpose of life is, or if life even has a purpose. Jesus says the purpose of life is to love God and your neighbor.

Money is just a tool. Never love it. Value it only for the good things you can do with it. Pay attention to those things. Make sure they are good and worth doing.

2. Money is not spiritually neutral. Do not trust it. Jesus claimed that money easily comes between a person and God. The more money we have, the less we feel our dependence on God. We get proud and feel self-sufficient. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record Jesus saying, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." That shocked his disciples, who assumed the rich were on the fast track. It frightens me. We live in the wealthiest nation in the history of the world. Our lifestyle, even those of us who are poor by American standards, is more like the way kings lived in the first century than the way a fisherman like Peter or a carpenter like Jesus lived. My eighth grade Spanish teacher grilled into us over and over, if you live in America, you are rich. Our material wealth so easily becomes spiritual poverty.

A friend in my doctor of ministry seminar told me about a group of Christians in a country in sub-Saharan Africa. It may have been Kenya, but I'm not sure. Anyway, the church there is growing like wildfire. The movement of the Holy Spirit is palpable. The church is alive and joyful. But many are not happy about one thing. Their churches are mostly open-air pavilions with tin roofs on long poles. Meanwhile, the local Muslims are building grand mosques with money from Saudi Arabia. The Muslims make fun of the Christians because the Muslims have nice facilities, and the Christians do not. The Christians want money to build buildings to compete with the Muslims. My friends thinks helping them engage in a building war would be bad for the church. Maybe the church there is so alive *because* it meets in a pole hut with a tin roof.

Money is not spiritually neutral. Be careful that you do not grow too fond of it.

3. Live simply. What do you really need? We live in a consumer culture that defines us by the things we buy. We are taught to find fulfillment by making purchases. It's a lie. You are not the things you own, and you cannot buy contentment.

4. Give generously. One thing money is for – one way to use it that will free you from its spiritual power – is helping others. Look at all the ways our church is doing this: We support missionaries in Bangladesh who serve the medical needs of the poorest of the poor. We host homeless families with children through the Interfaith Hospitality Network. We support the Home of Grace, which frees women from addiction. We have a laundry supply drive for them happening right now. We collect for the Bay Area Food Bank. We had two good offerings this year for the Presbyterian Home for Children. We give to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, a host of local helping agencies, the list goes on and on.

You can get in on this. You can use your money to help and bless others. That's what it's for.

Well, congratulations! You made it through a sermon on money. Now the really hard part begins: Taking Jesus' teaching to heart and putting it into practice. If you can let go of your love of money, you will lose your anxiety as well. Amen.

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