



BIRMINGHAM FIRST

A UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

First Things First:
“WHERE IS YOUR TREASURE?”

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“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

“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.” (Matthew 6:19-24, selections)

In the Centennial year of Methodism in America, numerous churches were founded or rebuilt. I served at Centenary United Methodist Church in Pentwater for many years. Several institutions of higher education also were established and one was Centenary College in Louisiana. For many years at Centenary there was a great professor named Dean R. E. Smith. Dean Smith was a

saintly man, a brilliant scholar, an outstanding communicator, a real friend to the students. He was a legend at Centenary College. As he wore a black patch over one eye, he appeared very distinguished.

In one of his most famous lectures, Dean Smith would talk to his students about how we discover Truth, how we determine what is genuine and authentic. After some discussion, Dean Smith would suddenly ask the students this question: “How wide is my desk?” The students would look at the desk and then make their best guesses. A variety of answers would ring out.

“I think it’s about 72 inches wide.”

“No. I believe it’s more like 68 inches wide!”

“Looks like 75 to me.”

“I’m going to guess 81 inches wide.”

Some wise guy from the back of the room would always quip: “Is it 71 and 5/16?” And everyone would laugh.

Then Dean Smith would say: “These are all pretty good guesses but ONE of them is more nearly true than the others. Now, how do we determine which one is most accurate? How do we decide which answer is most nearly right and true?”

There would be complete silence in the classroom and then tentatively someone would say: “Get a measuring stick?” “That’s right,” Dean Smith would say. “To determine which one is closest to the truth, we have to get a measuring stick and measure it.”

Dean Smith would then go to the blackboard. He would take a piece of chalk, and in silence he would draw the outline of a cross. With that piece of chalk, he would trace over and over the outline of the cross, letting it sink dramatically into the hearts and minds of those students. He would then stand back and point to that cross and say: “There’s your measuring stick! There’s your measuring stick for Truth.”¹

In the Sermon on the Mount, there’s a powerful passage that is a measuring stick for all of us. It is the primary teaching of Jesus Christ about the dynamic between wealth and faith. It’s a hard-hitting passage. Yet it’s no surprise that Jesus puts a hard choice to us in this sermon. If you don’t think God has anything to say about your monetary affairs, you had better read the Bible again. Jesus talked more about possessions than he did about heaven and hell. In the Bible there are about five hundred verses on prayer, less than five hundred about faith, but more than two thousand about money.

In the church, we often soft-peddle any talk about stewardship and financial commitment. I need to tell you that does a grave disservice to the teaching of Scripture and the measuring stick of Christ’s teaching. It was hard, but in his greatest teaching Jesus hit his listeners with a one, two punch combination about wealth and generosity before finally giving them a word of Grace.

And the first thing Jesus said was, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves

treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”ⁱⁱ

In the ancient Middle East, people did not have banks like we have banks. They had only houses made of baked clay. When Jesus says not to store up treasure where thieves break in and steal, the word actually means “to steal by digging through.”ⁱⁱⁱ Thieves, in those days, would dig through the walls of a house. If a family had hoarded up a little gold, they might come home one day to find that burglars had dug through the walls and their treasure was gone.

Jesus then warns us to avoid things that the moth can destroy. To us that seems petty, but in the ancient Middle East, clothes were costly. Often you would take payment not only in silver but also in fine, festal garments. They were rare and difficult to make. They could take up a sizable portion of one’s wealth. But such things are foolish to set the heart upon, for the moths might get at them, and all their beauty and their value be destroyed. Jesus warns there’s no permanence about possessions like that.

And Jesus told us to avoid the things that rust can destroy. At least that’s the most common translation. However, the word here is *brosis*; it literally means “eating away” and it’s nowhere else translated as rust.^{iv} The picture is this: in the East, wealth often consisted in the corn and the grain people had stored away in their barns. But into that corn and grain there could come the worms and the rats and the mice, until the store was polluted and destroyed. The reference here is to how rats, mice and other vermin could get into a granary and devour the grain.

It is simple wisdom, everyday imagery, that Jesus is delivering to his listeners. He’s sounding a warning in terms they understood. Yet, it’s like a measuring stick or a litmus test by which to see where we’ve placed our treasure and our hearts.

So we have our first hard punch. Don’t store up treasures on earth, Jesus says, rather store your treasure in heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The next punch Jesus throws at our collective sensibilities is this: “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!”^v

In the ancient world, this was even more vivid than it is to us. We were brought up reading this as “No one can serve two masters,” but that is not nearly strong enough. The New Revised Standard Version gets close to the original meaning. The word translated as “serve” actually meant “to be a slave to.” And the word translated as master, *kurios*, means “one who has absolute ownership.” We get a far better understanding if we translate this as “No one can be a slave to two absolute owners.” We’re being told we can’t be torn between two powers; which one will we choose? God? Or wealth?

A number of years ago The Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. began a special “Ministry of Money.” They conducted numerous workshops expressly on money, and people of all sorts of social strata from all around the country became involved, from those on public assistance to multi-millionaires. People on small fixed-incomes to people who owned some of the largest fast-

food chains in the country, people who owned huge lumber industries in the Pacific Northwest. And in these seminars these people found themselves taking these passages seriously for the very first time and making decisions in their lives concerning the use of their money.

Many realized that money has been like a log jam in their lives, a log jam that had blocked and hindered the spirit of God in their lives for such a long time. And they saw the log jam starting to break up in their lives and they began to feel the Spirit moving through them as if for the very first time. And suddenly it clicked in their minds, rich and poor, that their attachment to money, their concern for possessions, had been literally killing their spirits.

One man in the seminar found himself in touch with why he was so uptight when the minister or anybody else touched upon this area of his life. He, like us, would get nervous and defensive. He said, "My parents were very enlightened, good parents. When it came to the problems of my sexuality, we talked about it openly, no problem, no embarrassment, and other subjects too. But whenever they were talking about money, and making a decision about money, they went into a room and closed the door and excluded all of us children. I realize now the feelings projected to me when they did that are partly the reason I am so uptight about my money. I've come to think money is almost sacred. And somewhere along the way I decided to serve wealth, not God. I decided not to let God into my financial world and upset the fine balance I've reached on this point."

It is very, very hard for us. Money deceives us into thinking we can balance it with God. Almost any other area of life, "OK, God, come on in. But not here! Stay out of this part of my life!" I really think this is the reason Jesus keeps hitting this again and again and again. "You cannot serve God and mammon." "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." "One thing you lack to receive eternal life; go and sell all you have and give it to the poor." "The love of money," Paul said, "is the root of all evil." Money isn't evil. Money does tremendous good at so many times and to so many people. But when our greatest love is money, something is seriously wrong. Time and again, Christ's "measuring stick" hits us with this crucial reality, the choice of our ultimate allegiance.

And it's such a great thing when in our lives we finally come to the point where we willingly say, "Yes, God, come into this part of my life! Be my Lord here, too! I realize how closely I am identified with my money and my possessions. I realize I really think my life would be much better if I only had more money." How amazing it is to let God's spirit into this part of our lives and to see our spiritual log jam start to break up and move. Keep the first thing first. Keep God first! Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength! We cannot serve both God and mammon, God and wealth: there's only room for one "absolute owner" in our soul.

I have come to believe the greater our number of things, the deeper our need for spiritual values. Let me say that again. The greater our number of things, the deeper our need for spiritual values.

Jesus strikes us hard. It's a one, two punch which staggered his hearers then and speaks no less forcefully today. And, yet, it's precisely at this point that Jesus speaks a word of grace. He speaks words we have heard many times, familiar words. It's now that Jesus says, "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?”^{vi}

Everything that Jesus then says about not being anxious, not being full of care and worry, is set here directly in contrast with being ruled by mammon, by wealth. It’s true, as Augustine said, “In bondage to God we find our perfect freedom.” No one among us can serve two masters. That’s why Jesus hammers home the choice we each must make. In whom shall we trust? In what shall we trust our lives? “Seek first God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness and you will have all you need. Surrender yourself and all that you have to God,” Jesus tells us. To make any other choice is to be tormented by worry and anxiety and care.

A few years ago, the spring rains came to Italy and caused an unusually high flood stage along the Arno River. The Arno River flows right through the center of Florence. And many of the world’s greatest art treasures were in danger from the rising floods. When finally the water went down again, the people rushed into every building to see whether these priceless treasures had been damaged or destroyed.

One of the treasures is itself a building: the Church of Santa Croce. The tombs of Galileo, Rossini, Machiavelli and Michelangelo are in the Church of Santa Croce. If you go into that church you can see the high-water marks of other floods, even though the walls have been scrubbed. After the waters subsided there were those who said, “We should check the foundation of the Church of Santa Croce” to be sure that the church had not been structurally damaged. But the head priest said, “We can wait just a couple of months. And when we get to the third week in June, we will know whether the church has been damaged or not.” There were many things to do, other structures to examine, so they said, “Okay.”

The third week in June, someone asked him about this and the priest said, “Yes, don’t you remember? Seven hundred years ago when the architect designed the building, he placed under one of the eaves a tiny little slit, perfectly chosen so that only once each year the rays of the sun come through that slit and fall on a tiny piece of metal embedded in a stone in the center of the church. That particular little slit is lined up with the northern-most trajectory of the sun, the farthest ever it comes any given year. But if, in fact, the ray of sun comes through that little slit and strikes that piece of metal on that day, the church and its steeple are still properly aligned.”

There comes a time to check the foundation; to be sure our foundation—and all we build upon it—is still aligned toward God. There comes a time when we are challenged to see if the measuring stick of our lives is really the Cross of Jesus Christ. For our church, that moment will come two Sundays from now when we bring our commitments down front and put them in the small wooden church which represents our church. In the meantime, you and I have some time to reflect upon who—or what—is the absolute master we will serve.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

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- i. Told by James Moore, St. Luke's UMC, Houston, 11/15/92.
 - ii. 6:19-21
 - iii. diorussó, Strong's Number: 1358.
 - iv. Brosis, transliterated. Strong's Number: 1035
 - v. 6:24
 - vi. 6:25