

“Counter Cultural Disciples: A Fool (for Christ) & His Money”

Luke 12: 13-21 & Hebrews 13:5-6

Sermon by Jan Edmiston – July 30, 2006

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Jesus was at the point in his ministry when he was attracting a lot of attention – some of it negative. He had just had dinner at the home of a Pharisee where he managed to insult his host and all other Pharisees, along with all lawyers and scribes. But nevertheless, so many people were gathering – both men and women¹ – that they were trampling each other to get to Jesus. Thousands of people had gathered to hear what he might say next. And some were shouting out questions in hopes that he might help them with their personal problems.

Clearly, they already saw Jesus as a very wise rabbi.

One person in the crowd hoped that Jesus would resolve a family dispute that, unfortunately, many of us can relate to:

Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.

And Jesus essentially said, “What do I look like? An estate mediator?” The man’s problem was not his father’s estate, perhaps. Maybe it was something else. Maybe it was greed.

Did the man really need his father’s money? Did the brother have control over the inheritance for a reason? And as usual, Jesus didn’t answer this man’s request with a pat answer. Instead, he told a parable. A parable about money and possessions.

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Last week I preached about sex and there are several passages I could have used for that sermon. But in preaching about money, the choices are almost endless. There are approximately 2,350 verses about money in the Bible. This is about twice as many verses than there are about faith and prayer.² And this is astronomically more prevalent than verses about sex.

Fifteen percent of all Jesus’ words are about money and possessions. “He spoke more about money and possessions than he spoke about heaven and hell combined.”³ In fact, the only subject he discussed more than money was The Kingdom of God.

Why was Jesus more concerned with money and possessions than he was about almost anything else? Because clearly, he knew that our attitudes about money and things had a direct connection to our spiritual lives. They impacted the way we saw The Kingdom of God.

¹ Luke 11:27

² *The Treasure Principal* by Randy Alcorn. (Multnomah: 2001).

³ *Ibid.*

We cannot be faithful followers of Jesus Christ without examining the role of money in our lives: how we earn it, spend it, save it, borrow it, or share it.

This is serious business. 2,350 verses.

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Our feelings and attitudes about money come from our earliest experiences. The financial advisor Suze Orman tells the story of the day her father's business burned to the ground. She was a little girl and her father owned a chicken stand – the sole means of supporting the family. One day the chicken stand caught fire and thankfully her father got out of the burning building. But as they were all standing there watching the chicken stand burn, her father realized that the cash register with all their money was still inside the burning building. He ran back into the fire and came out holding the searingly hot metal cash register. It was melted the flesh of his arms. She learned from that moment that money was more precious than life.⁴

All of us have learned about money from stories like these. But whatever our attitudes, if we are serious about following Jesus, we will look to Scripture to figure out what God intends for us in regards to money and possessions.

Do we love money to the point that it is the focus of our lives? Do we expend so much energy worrying about it that we fail to live the kind of lives God intends for us?

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Jesus said something ridiculous to the crowd that gathered that day. He said: One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Clearly, Jesus didn't know 21st century culture.

Of course one's life consists in the abundance of our possessions. Every day in every corner of this nation, we and everybody else judge each other according to what we have. Our possessions define us.

You can be sure that if I drove a new BMW 3-Series convertible, you would see me differently than if I drove a beat up used Grand Caravan.

I have a friend who needs to remind me – every time we talk – what she has. It would be laughable, if it weren't so sad.

Literally, every time we talk she works into the conversation that she has a husband and children with Ivy League degrees, she has a house with a pool, and she has membership in certain elite organizations. I have the passionate urge every time she

⁴ From the first chapter of *The Nine Steps to Financial Freedom* by Suze Orman (Crown Publishers, 1997).

reminds me that her husband went to Harvard Business School that I would love her even if he went to NOVA. She is not valuable because of where her husband went to college or what kind of shoes she wears. She is valuable because of who she is. She is my sister in Christ.

To be perfectly honest with you, I do the same thing. I judge people according to what they have, not who they are. At least that's my first impression. My neighbor must be unsuccessful because he lives in a rundown house. Or my other neighbor must be truly happy because she can afford to vacation in Aspen every winter.

Jesus tells us a parable to clear up this question: are we valuable because of what we have or because of who we are?

There was a seemingly successful man with so much stuff – in this case, so much grain – that he needed bigger barns to hold everything. He was one of the original tear-down-and-build-a-McMansion-barn guys. He even tells himself, tells his own soul that this is true success. This is genuine happiness.

This is like the person to acquires a bigger house with bigger closets and a bigger garage because he's got too much stuff, too many clothes and too many cars for his old house.

You know, there's nothing inherently wrong with big houses or big closets. That's not the point of this parable. I have another friend who gave me a tour of the addition they built onto their house a couple years ago which included a new master bedroom. And the whole time she was showing me around, she said, guiltily – you know, we don't really need this walk-in closet. We don't really need the sky lights or the nice bathroom or the built-in book shelves. We were fine with the old room. Underneath her new bedroom was an expanded kitchen that was worthy of a caterer. But this was the point of the home expansion.

She uses her kitchen to make meals for her work. But she is also a person who generously shares her home with family and friends and even strangers. She uses what she has as a tool to connect with others.

The person in Jesus' parable was not like this. He was a self-satisfied, self-righteous hoarder. He even tries to convince himself that this bigger barn proves his spiritual worth. And even more presumptive, was the fact that this man believed he had "many years" to enjoy his "ample goods." Ironically, as Jesus tells the story, his life would end that very night, and then it would be his descendants who would be arguing over an inheritance.

"Be on guard," Jesus said to the crowd. Guard yourselves against greed. The Greek word is "phulasso"⁵ which literally means "beware of" or "shun" or "flee from."

⁵ *fulavssw*

In this nation, we are “on guard” against terrorists. We “shun” certain unseemly people or things. We “flee from” danger. Imagine being so vigilant against “all kinds of greed.”

There is the kind of greed that is like a game for certain high-rolling business people. They truly don’t need any more financial possessions. But it’s like a game to them – winning businesses, trading millions. Most of us don’t deal in those financial circles.

The most destructive form of greed that tempts most of us involves simply trying to keep up with our peers. It’s not just the Joneses anymore. It’s the Joneses and the Smiths and the Martins and the Lewises and the whole neighborhood. This leads to one of the most insidious financial issues of our time: personal debt.

When I was traveling in the Middle East, I noticed that many of the homes of Muslim families were not finished. They might finish the first floor, but then it was clear that construction had stopped and the second floor was not completed. I asked our tour guide why so many homes were not finished and was told that it is against Muslim culture to have personal debt. Families build until they run out of money, and then they wait until they can afford to finish another part of the house. Once the house is finished, the family has a fully-paid-for home. This is a wonderful way to live.

In our culture, we are taught that a mortgage is a good kind of debt. College loans are a good kind of debt. They are the kind of debt necessary to build up financial security for the future.

It’s the bad debt that ruins families.

Statistics show that – in 2003 – 40% of the American public spent more than they earn, paying for it by going into personal debt.

The average household owes over \$10,000 in credit card debt. There are enough credit cards out there in circulation to give every man, woman, and child in the United States four credit cards each.⁶ Credit card debt is a huge financial problem. But it is also a serious spiritual problem.

I am convinced that God does not want this for us.

In the late 90s, there was a documentary called “Affluenza” a term coined by a filmmaker named John de Graaf.⁷ Affluenza is defined as being “the painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety and waste resulting from the

⁶<http://www.hoffmanbrinker.com/credit-card-debt-statistics.html>

⁷ There is a book also called *Affluenza: the All-Consuming Epidemic* by John de Graaf (Berrett-Koehler: 2001).

dogged pursuit of more.” Friends we know that we suffer from this malady. And we also know in our hearts that this is not what God intended for us.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us to:

Keep our lives free from the love of money
and be content with what we have.

It’s not the money that’s a problem. It’s the love of money.

Money – actually – is a good thing.

Money allows us to clothe and feed ourselves. To buy homes for shelter. To buy medical care and transportation and vacations. To support the arts and create beauty and download iTunes.

And – this is the most fun use of money – we can help other people. We can be instruments of God.

Clearly God is in the business of healing people and lifting up people and blessing people. If we have money, we can be instruments of God, doing God’s business, bringing about God’s kingdom on earth.

This is glorious work. It makes life worth living. This is what connects people to each other.

One of the most fun types of giving is giving anonymously. After my father died years ago, someone anonymously gave my family a gift card to have a fancy brunch out together after worship one Sunday. To this day, I still don’t know who it was but it was a wonderful gift. It brought joy to us and comfort to us at a difficult time. And I couldn’t even thank the person face to face. So I just thanked God.

Try this at home. Do something lovely for someone who will not be able to thank you. Replace someone’s broken lamp post. Leave anonymous flowers. Use your financial gifts to make someone’s life better.

Unfortunately we can’t do this glorious work if we are drowning in debt. We can’t afford to take a neighbor out to lunch if we’re paying piles of interest on the flat screen TV we bought last year.

This sermon is not about debt per se, but debt is a serious spiritual issue. And I would suggest – if this is your issue – to pray that God helps you get out. Seek financial advice. Get out of debt. It will change everything.

If that sounds trite – pray to get out of debt – then what about this? These words again from the letter to the Hebrews sound disturbingly naïve:

The LORD is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?

Is he kidding here? What can anyone do to me? Plenty! Let's just look at the money-related possibilities:

- Someone could sue me.
- The IRS could audit me.
- I could be fired and lose the ability to support my family.
- Someone could hurt me physically so that I couldn't work.
- Collections agents could take away my furniture.

What can someone do to me? Quite a bit actually.

The point is that – no matter what happens – God is more powerful than any creditor, any crisis, any illness, any family member, any earthly terror that might keep me awake at night wondering how we can possibly survive.

If you've ever had a moment in life when you've felt like all you have, all you are, all you hoped for is being taken, and you've had to call desperately on God for help, then you know what it can mean to say that God is with us. This is what faith is: that we trust God even when the whole world is crushing down on us. And the reality is that God does send help. Talk to someone if you need help today.

I've found that in 22 years of ministry, people will share all kinds of things with me: addictions, sexual issues, job frustrations, abuse. But the least likely issue people will talk about involves money.

It has become the most sacred of the sacred cows.

But Jesus says that money is not the most sacred thing. Like so many other blessings, money is to be used as a tool, an instrument to help bring about a different world. Money is supposed to expand the Kingdom of God so that the world becomes what God intended it to be.

A bonus blessing in all this is that there is an overwhelming joy that comes from giving from the heart, giving in faith, giving that we know will do great things for other people. Giving that makes God happy.

People who use their money in a way that is pleasing to God are rich – whether we are giving 10 million or ten bucks. If we are pleasing God in the way we are using our financial resources, then we have truly found treasure.

Money makes the world go around. That's not from the Bible; that's from a show tune.⁸ Money is one of the instruments we can use if we want to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

With great joy and expectation, may we dig for treasure in all the right places.

⁸ The musical *Cabaret*.

Let us pray:

Generous and lavishly loving God: you are given us even more than we realize we have. We thank you for the financial blessings of life, but pray that you would grant us spiritual wisdom as we use what we have. May it be to the glory of Christ Jesus who gave up everything for the world. Amen.