

Money: Effects on Justice and Discipleship

“The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” 1 Timothy 6:10 (NRSV)

Mark 10: 17-31 1 Timothy 6:6-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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October 11, 2009

Last Sunday we collected our annual Peacemaking Offering. The theme for this year's nation-wide denominational offering came from Psalm 85:10, “Justice and peace shall kiss each other.” The amount we received, by the way, was a very generous \$1,050, of which 25% (\$262) will stay in this congregation to support the peacemaking/justice programs of our choice. This yearly collection reminds how money can be put to good use to promote peace and justice.

In a very strange juxtaposition with that reality, however, this week's scripture lessons reveal how the opposite can also be true: the misuse of wealth can be used to promote injustice.

For instance, the Old Testament prophet Amos offers a stern warning against the rich who exploit the poor. He writes: “Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know your transgressions, and how great are your sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.”

No doubt, a major theme running throughout the Bible is an indictment concerning the inhumane treatment of the poor and needy. Yet, **is there truly a connection between wealth and injustice?**

I grew up believing that the Bible said, “Money is the root of all evil.” Raise your hand if that's what you were led to believe as well. I would venture to guess that that's what a majority of folks believe, church goes or not. Well, guess what, it's yet another example of misquoting, and therefore misinterpreting, the Bible.

The biblical verse in question comes from today's Epistle Lesson: Paul's letter to his young missionary friend, Timothy. I have printed the NRSV's (New Revised Standard Version) English translation of 1 Timothy 6:10 under the sermon title in today's bulletin so that there would be no misunderstanding as to what the passage actually states.

Let's clear up some misconceptions. First and foremost, the culprit of evil isn't money per se. Money is an inanimate object that is morally neutral, being neither good nor evil in and of itself. **The biblical passage informs us that the trouble comes not from money, but from the “love of money.”**

The focus is not on the finances themselves, but on how we approach the issue, primarily when the desire for money becomes the object of our affection. The point being made is that **we are to love God and neighbor and self, not money.**

But even with this point cleared up, this passage still does not say that the "love of money is the root of *all* evil." Instead, it states that **the "love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." That's very different than saying "all evil."** I hope this clarifies this biblical misunderstanding a bit.

That being said, however, again let me reiterate that the Bible does go on and on and on to warn us about the evil and wrongdoing and misplaced priorities that an obsession with money can lead to. Let me illustrate.

The French have a story about a millionaire in his palace who spent his days counting his gold. Beside the palace was a poor cobbler who spent his days singing as he repaired people's shoes. The joyful singing irritated the rich man. One day he decided to give some gold coins to the cobbler. At first the cobbler was overjoyed, and he took the coins and hid them. But then he would be worried and go back to check if the coins were still there. Then he would be worried in case someone had seen him, and he would move the coins and hide them in another place. During all this, he ceased to sing. Then one day he realized that he had ceased to sing because of the gold coins. He took them back to the rich man and said, "take back your coins and give me back my songs."

Let me ask you: **Is there anything in your life that had led you to stop singing your songs? If so, what would it take to get you back to singing?**

The message is that attachment to riches, and the preoccupation with the accumulation of stuff, can actually take away our freedom and joy, as well as lead to acts and attitudes of injustice.

Jesus was deeply aware of this and so he warned that the attachment to money could have a negative affect on one's ability to serve as a disciple. Here in the Gospel of Mark and elsewhere **the Bible is abundantly clear that those with money often find themselves so distracted by it that faithful discipleship – serving God and others – often takes a back seat.**

Yet let me reiterate: Money isn't evil or sinful. Money is just money. What we do with it and how we let it affect our *priorities* can, however, be damaging to ourselves and others, and oftentimes to those whom we are closest. And we must remember that during the time of Jesus, more than 90% of the entire population could be classified as impoverished peasants. Only a very small percentage of people had much money at all. Therefore, a lot of the oppression and injustice that the people faced came at the hands of those few who had money, and therefore the power and control. Again, that is part of the strong prophetic warning in today's Old Testament text from Amos.

Most of you have heard of a branch of theological study called **liberation theology**. It came out of the Third World countries of Central America over the past several decades. The majority of the people in those countries are very poor, not unlike biblical times (including those to whom Jesus spoke, and those who first read Mark's gospel). Therefore, at one level they can relate better than we can to the disciples, who were also poor, and those who suffer oppression and injustice at the hands of the wealthy.

Just in case it needs to be stated, even the poorest member of this congregation is still considered rich and wealthy when compared to a majority of the world

population today. So today's passage from Mark about the rich man really does apply to all of us, not just the wealthiest sitting in our pews.

Each one of us, then, are called to reflect upon how money and financial concerns affect our priorities and discipleship. For despite the rich man's sincere devotion to the Word of God, and his good record of keeping the commandments, he cannot bring himself to accept Jesus' call to discipleship. Instead, he walks away in sorrow.

Why? Possessions have a peculiar and insidious way of becoming our masters. Precisely because they hold the potential for good as well as for bad, they can easily seduce us. The gospel author, Mark, strings together a series of sayings on wealth and wants to make one point very clear. **Riches often constitute a formidable obstacle to persons who seek faithful discipleship.**

Mark makes his point by including a statement that most people, even those not knowledgeable with the Bible, are familiar with, **"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."** This is an intentionally ludicrous saying that is meant to express the total impossibility of entering the kingdom of God based on our doing something to get there.

This is one of the ultimate revelations of Jesus' life and ministry as presented in the New Testament. **Inclusion into the family of God is a matter of God's grace, not any of our works and efforts to try to earn it.**

So the thoroughly perplexed disciples ask in exasperation, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus replies that it takes a miracle for a rich person to be saved. He says, "With human beings it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God."

As preachers are prone to say at this point, that's the good news! God can save even the rich - that is, God (and only God) can get that camel through the needle's eye. Therefore, and this is Jesus' point, **God can save anyone! And from my heretical standpoint, God does save everyone!**

What we are faced with is one of those frustrating **paradoxes** found in the Bible. **Eternal life, which includes the here and now, is a free gift of God, yet faithful discipleship demands all that we are and all that we have.** True discipleship is a complete commitment of our time, talent, and financial resources.

So, if you're one of those who finds that the pursuit of or worries over money has become too big a priority in your life, let me close with another illustration. It comes from a book called *Celebrating One World: A Worship Resource Book on Social Justice*.

A rich industrialist from the North was horrified to find the Southern fisherman lying lazily by his boat, smoking a pipe. 'Why aren't you out fishing?' asked the industrialist. 'Because I have caught enough fish for today,' said the fisherman. 'Why don't you catch more than you need?' said the industrialist. 'What would I do with it?' asked the fisherman. 'You could earn more money,' was the reply. 'With that you could have a motor fixed to your boat. Then you could have enough money to own two boats...maybe even a fleet of boats. Then you could be a rich man like me.' 'What would I do then?' asked the fisherman. 'Then you could sit down and enjoy life,' said the industrialist. To which the contented fisherman replied, 'What do you think I am doing right now?'

Amen.