

“The Problem with Two Masters”

October 16, 2022

Treasure series

You can't serve (or worship) God and money both.

We can get caught up with language when it comes to Jesus. We downplay his words sometimes to make them fit what we want to hear instead of hearing what he actually says. Remember that Jesus talks about money and the Kingdom of God more than anything else, and especially here, he's gets right to the point.

There's no skirting the issue: *You can't serve two masters*. There's no getting around what Jesus says here. To use the word “master” is surely from another time, but it implies a relationship where we don't have total control. Let's be honest: we don't want to be mastered by anyone or anything; **we** want to master things. We want to be in control. We don't want to be held in bondage by anyone or anything, so to hear Jesus clearly say that we can't serve two masters is a challenge.

And he's clear on exactly which two - God or money. We have to choose. We can't live with a divided heart. And we've seen the outcome for those whose stories make the news - financial ruin, jail time, and more. If there are competing allegiances in our hearts, something will be destroyed. We can't make it work; division leads to conflict where there's constant strife - or one side ultimately wins.

Of course, we want to serve God first! How's it possible that money can have control of us? And yet we know it does. We see it every day in news stories that make headlines where money is at the root of people lying, cheating, and stealing. Gambling can become an addiction. Shopping online is easy and can easily become a problem when we're overwhelmed with too much stuff that we really don't need. Lives are ruined by “get rich quick” promises. And we know the reality of people working to pay off debt - money that they've already spent even before it was actually in their hands. We have cash advance and instant cash stores. Frederick Buechner put it this way: “There are people who use up their entire lives making money so they can enjoy the lives they have entirely used up.”

Maybe Buechner's words sound harsh, but he's onto something. Money can quickly become a singular focus, especially when we're struggling. If you've never felt that struggle, you're the exception to the rule. Most of us have had moments or seasons when our financial situations were uncertain. That may be where you are right now.

I was thinking about my experience of learning about money. I never witnessed my parents fighting about money. I don't remember them worrying about it. But as I grew older and we had more conversations, they shared about times when money was tight. And those times were stressful. When I wanted to attend seminary, they weren't sure how it would work after supporting me and my sisters through our undergraduate work. They never told me about their feelings until long after, but it was a reality. I'm so thankful for the generosity of scholarship donors who made it possible, and I know they were too.

We're talking about treasure and the relationship between faith and what we have, but it's really about much deeper things. Jesus cares about our hearts and calls us to be fully devoted to God. And we have to hear Jesus - that our hearts usually follow where our treasure is - even if we want it to be the opposite.

Our hearts follow where we've invested time, energy, and money. If we look at our calendar or our bank accounts, we might find some places where we're divided. We've said "yes" to too many commitments. We've swiped our credit or debit cards too many times. We've not paid closer attention to what we have and how we use it. And in the end, we're not satisfied or content with doing more or spending more.

Sometimes the desire for money gets in the way of our relationship with God. Certainly, there are worthy endeavors that we work hard for, but we can't allow them to push God to the side. In Pastor Jacob Armstrong's words, "We may not kick Jesus out, but we sometimes move him over." Jesus warns against serving two masters; maybe we struggle with even more than two!

There are a lot of ways that we hear the struggle between serving God and serving money. Perhaps the most truthful one is around how and what we give. We may give our heart to Jesus, and maybe you remember that moment or it happened over time, but sometimes it takes our wallet a little longer to be fully converted. Jesus knew that even as he spoke to those who had left everything to follow him. Years later, Reformation leader Martin Luther said, "There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, mind, and the purse."

Pastor Mike Slaughter wrote, "I became a new person in Jesus in 1969, but I wasn't converted in my wallet until 1976." Slaughter shares what we know is true - that our relationship with money can be a tough part of life to entrust to God. But ultimately, loving God is an intentional commitment to self-sacrifice for the well-being of others. Slaughter offers the story about a conversation between a chicken and a pig. The chicken says, "Let's do breakfast." The pig replies, "That's easy for you

to say. You just make a donation. For me, it's a total life sacrifice." If we are followers of Jesus, then there's a call to sacrifice - not just a donation. We're called to move from consuming to investing.

You can't serve both God and money. Those are challenging words. What is the proper role of money in our lives as people who seek to follow Jesus? How do we live faithfully?

Perhaps one way to start is to ask ourselves if money has become an idol for us. When we talk about idolatry - what takes God's place - money is usually at the top of the list. Does money receive the energy and resources that should belong to God? Are we serving the gift of money rather than God who is the Giver of that gift? That's what idolatry is - when we worship the gift and not the Giver of that gift.

There are lots of words of wisdom about money, and we'll share some today
SLIDE: Money is a terrible master, but an excellent servant. – P. T. Barnum
We want money to serve us as a tool to work for the Kingdom of God. However, as Pastor Rick Warren says, "Money has the greatest potential to replace God in your life...When Jesus is your Master, money serves you, but if money is your master, you become its slave." We don't want to live in bondage, but that's the threat. Money becomes an idol, and we live with constant anxiety and uncertainty because no amount is ever enough.

Jeanne Torrence Finley writes, "Our material possessions complicate our lives by distracting us from what's important. The risk is that our possessions will come to possess us. The more things we have to manage, clean, organize, or repair, the less time and energy we have for loving [God and others]." That's a challenging word. There's no time in history when people have had more stuff than we do, so what will we do about it?

P. T. Barnum's words are a good match to Jesus' words. *Money is a terrible master, but an excellent servant.* We want money to serve as a tool. Money can serve God's purposes, but we can't allow it to become what controls us. Where do we offer our attention and devotion? How do we order our lives so that money is a tool we use **and** a blessing we share?

When we're trying to serve God and money and maybe even more than those two, and trying to divide our hearts among them, we end up torn. That's not God's intention for us. God asks for our full devotion. God wants us to find our true security in God's love - not in stuff we can accumulate. **SLIDE:** We cannot find security if our heart is divided. - Henri Nouwen

What happens when someone asks us about why Jesus is important to us? Perhaps we don't use the title "Master" for Jesus; maybe "Lord" or "King" is a better word for us. However, we describe our relationship with Jesus, we must consider what it means to be fully devoted to him - to offer our whole hearts - holding nothing back. We pray. We worship with others in community. We serve others in the name of Jesus. We tell others about Jesus. We show his love in our actions. We give out of God's abundance to us.

We can have a healthy relationship with money - having it and recognizing it as a gift of God of which we're stewards (managers). Remember that money itself isn't the problem. It's how we use it and relate to it. I wonder if Jesus' words aren't so much about what we have, but more about what we do with what we have. He's talking about stewardship. How do we manage the gifts that God gives us?

That giving part is sometimes the most difficult, but it's absolutely important. Giving consistently and giving to God are disciplines that can transform our lives. Generosity is one way that we stand against the pull of greed and consumerism, which so easily suck us in. Generosity is a powerful example of trust in God and can open door to conversations that offer an opportunity to talk about why we give - to talk about God's goodness, grace, and abundance.

José Andrés founded World Central Kitchen after the earthquake in Haiti in 2010. World Central Kitchen provides meals in response to humanitarian, climate, and community crises and building resilient food systems with locally led solutions. Since then, they've fed Puerto Rico after hurricanes and people around the world during the pandemic. Millions of meals have been prepared and have sustained people in times of great need. Andrés is a Christian and is quick to make the connection that a mentor shared with him: "charity should not be about the redemption of the giver. But charity in the 21st century should be about the liberation of the receiver." What a word - seeking to help people and free people. It's a powerful word about the gifts we offer.

I'm praying as we walk together through this series that God is working in our hearts to guide us to grow in generosity. I'm praying that a part of that is leading us to make faith commitments that demonstrate that Jesus is Lord. It's not just about money that we offer, but it's time and energy too. It's about supporting the mission and ministry of the church here and around the world; we share financially where we are fed spiritually. But even more, this is about our hearts. Taking time to consider

our giving in all areas - time, energy, and money - matters. It really does help to align our hearts and our treasure.

One of the basics of our faith is that we are God's good creation, and God calls us to be faithful stewards of God's gifts in our lives. This series is about how we invest our whole lives, and a part of that is looking at the relationship between faith and money. It's about growing in deeper faith and trust in God. And it really does matter. Jesus is calling to put money in its proper place - as a tool to serve God.

In a prayer that we offered last week, it was clear that we don't give because the church needs money; we give as a response to God's goodness and generosity as stewards of God's gifts. We make a budget so that we can be faithful stewards of God's gifts. I hope you have a budget for your personal finances. We want to be faithful as individuals, and we want to be faithful as a congregation.

In my role as a pastor, I'm called to love and serve God. I'm also called to preach and teach - and encourage spiritual formation. And a part of that is looking at our whole lives and how we give faithfully and generously. There's nothing to add to Jesus' words because they are clear: *we can't serve both God and money.*

I encourage us to consider what it means for us to serve God. Last week, we heard the challenge to consider where we feel the disconnect between what we truly treasure and how we invest our time, energy, and money. It's a difficult thing - to admit that what we value the most doesn't always receive the most and best from us. It's difficult to consider saying "no" to some things in order to say "yes" to God. But that's where we are.

You wouldn't be worshipping today if your relationship with God wasn't important to you. But there's also a sense of what can be - how God can help us get our hearts and treasure more aligned with God's purposes. And there's something powerful about being freed from the pull of more.

If you've been making a faith commitment for many years, I hope you'll continue. If you've never made a faith commitment, I hope you'll start - with something consistent. May God help us order our lives so that Jesus is Lord and everything else falls where it should so that we're standing on a firm foundation.

Thanks be to God. Amen.