

Scripture

Ezekiel 47:9

Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. ²Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side.

³Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. ⁴Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the waist. ⁵Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. ⁶He said to me, "Mortal, have you seen this?"

Then he led me back along the bank of the river. ⁷As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on the one side and on the other. ⁸He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. ⁹Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. ¹⁰People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-ge-di to En-eglaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. ¹¹But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. ¹²On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing."

Galatians 6:7-10

⁷Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. ⁸If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. ⁹So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. ¹⁰So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

Matthew 6:19-20, 24-34

Concerning Treasures

¹⁹"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Serving Two Masters

²⁴ “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.

Do Not Worry

²⁵ “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? ²⁶ 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? ²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing?

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ 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? ³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

³⁴ “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Sermon: Break Free

Last night we were watching an old episode of Bob’s Burgers on Netflix. In this episode Louise and Harvey were fighting over a chinchilla and decided to find out which of them the animal preferred. They each went to different ends of the room and began to call the critter to figure out who the victor would be.

Of course this ended with one child as the favoured one, and the other in tears. The chinchilla had no option to make both children happy – there was no way to pick them both – only one could win.

This is Jesus’ point in his teaching about serving two masters. You will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. There is no middle ground, and there is no satisfying both parties. It simply isn’t possible.

You cannot serve both God and wealth, Jesus concluded. At this point some of you are already tuning out – not a sermon about money! Well why not? We have no trouble hearing about God in our marriages, God in the way we raise our kids, God in the way we treat strangers, even God in the bedroom. Why wouldn’t we also talk about God and the way we relate to money?

Any time that we take a particular subject or topic and close it off from God, saying that God has nothing to do with it, it should be cause for concern. It should be a warning sign to us.

It is an odd claim that some things are God's business, but certain other matters are our own business – not under God's domain. We're putting on fig leaves when we do that – trying to cover something up, to hide something. But nothing is hidden that will not be revealed, so we may as well begin to lay things bare now.

A brief clarification before we get further into this. There are two things that this sermon is not. It is not an attempt to shake you down to fill the collection plate, nor am I shilling for any particular cause.

My interest this morning is not to separate you from your money, but to explore our relationship with money and wealth in light of what scripture has to say.

Money is a strange beast in that it is both the most practical of realities and the most abstract of concepts.

It's abstract in that money is a social construct. The pieces of paper or digital records don't have any value in themselves. You can't eat money, nor can you wear it. Money's value is not intrinsic; dollars only have value if we continue to agree that they do. In this sense money is an abstract concept with nothing to support it other than group think.

Despite their rather shaky foundation, dollars and cents are countable and concrete, which is why they are the ultimate measure for many people. Speaking about 'the bottom line' is a call to clarity – of disregarding the intangibles and the warm and fuzzies and getting down to what is truly important and factual or empirical.

Because money is measurable and can be stacked up neatly, money represents security and predictability to many people. We calculate our living costs and remaining years, and compare those figures with our bank balance. Then we set savings and investing goals, and by doing this we think that we are in control.

I don't really need to tell you what an illusion this is. The things that truly impact us are all outside of our control: natural disasters, fires, stock market collapses, recessions, wars, accidents, companies closing down, layoffs, injuries, disease, and death. We're like children constructing sand castles; we are kings and queens until the tide comes in and our kingdoms are washed away without so much as a trace.

Make no mistake – we brought nothing into the world, and we will take nothing out when we go. If accumulating wealth is the prime goal of our lives, then we are all doomed to frustration.

Remember Jesus' illustration of a man who had so much grain he had to tear down his granaries and build new, larger ones. God said to that man 'You fool, this very night your life will be demanded of you.'

A life spent in pursuit of money is ultimately a wasted life. This is not to say that money is itself evil, or that we don't need money to survive. Money is an essential part of our lives, but we sometimes forget who is in charge.

Money is an invention – it was created to make trade easier. As something that we created, money has no more power than what we give to it. Money should never be a master of us, and yet it is frequently the case that that which we created now controls us. The relationship has become corrupted and perverse.

We would think it ridiculous if we discovered a culture that worshipped little pieces of paper, but isn't that what we do? We spend lives of drudgery in factories and workhouses, slaving for bits of paper. We fight over the paper, we oppress people, we destroy our environment; we kill over those little pieces of paper.

Is there anyone here who can say that they have never told a lie, or otherwise hidden or concealed something, for money? Even something as small as not pointing out that the cashier gave you incorrect change? Money has far too much influence over most of us.

If money draws us into sin, then it becomes difficult to say that money is not our master. Once we admit it, it sounds pretty distasteful, but that is how money, and other masters, keep a hold over us. We don't talk about it openly, and so we remain deceived.

Let us not be deceived any longer. Money is not our master. We were not created to serve money. Money was created to serve us. That is the relationship. We are the ones in control of money, not the other way around.

An unhealthy attachment to money leads to servitude, oppression, sin, death, and ultimately futility since we lose it all when we die.

But what if instead of us working for our money we put our money to work for us in service of something greater? What happens then?

Two days ago I attended the funeral of Jay McKie, a long-time member of St. Paul's and an active part of the Simcoe community. I heard story after story of ways in which Jay contributed to his community in tangible ways: helping to rebuild the gymnasium at SCS, the Lighthouse theatre, the Lynn Valley trail, a yearly scholarship in the name of his mother, and one in the name of his wife.

Jay was a major contributor to the refurbishment of this sanctuary some years back, and also donated the bulk of our D.C. MacDonald scholarship, of which I was a recipient, and this year's recipient will be preaching here next week at our anniversary service.

I don't bring this up because I expect that we all have hundreds of thousands of dollars to give, I bring this up because it illustrates a principle. When money flows in service to God, it brings life.

In Ezekiel's vision of the new temple he saw a river flowing from the temple. We read 'This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. ⁹ Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes.'

The moving, living water brings life and freshness. This is illustrated in Israel itself. The Sea of Galilee receives its waters from the Golan Heights and from there the water flows south in the Jordan river.

I've swam in the Sea of Galilee – the water is fresh and clean, and there are many different varieties of fish that live in those waters. From there, the Jordan valley is a lush ribbon of green that winds through the wastelands until it ends in the Dead Sea.

Water comes into the Dead Sea from the Jordan, but there is no outlet. The water just collects and sits stagnant until it evaporates. As the name suggests, the Dead Sea harbours no life, and is in fact hostile to life. The salt content of the water is so high that it burned my skin when I went into the water. If you get that water in your eye you could have permanent damage.

It's the same water in both inland seas. The difference is that while the Sea of Galilee takes in water and passes it along, the Dead Sea clutches whatever it gets and does not let it go.

Life is found in the flowing, not in the hoarding.

Money is the same. When money flows through the economy and through our communities, all is well. Jobs abound, confidence rises, businesses expand, new houses are built, and we see growth. Growth is an attribute of life.

When money stops flowing, as it did in 2008, all manner of ills befall the economy and our community. This is true on a macroscopic level, but it is also true of our individual households. When the accumulation of wealth becomes our prime focus we lose sight of what is truly important.

Our wealth becomes more important than God, family, and our neighbours. Look at the drama that is playing out in the news this week with the Stronach family. Who do you think their master is?

We've already seen that an unhealthy desire for money leads to servitude, oppression, sin, death, and futility since we can't take it with us. Is there another way? What would happen if we let our resources flow?

Paul wrote 'If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.' What does this mean. What is sowing to Spirit?

Holding our wealth more loosely and allowing them to flow benefits other people. The D.C. MacDonald scholarship is a great example; it will be helping people for a long, long time. It's easy to think of many, many examples of how our wealth could help others. But what about ourselves? Does this principle of letting money flow benefit us as well?

My answer is an unqualified yes. Not because our helping others gets us 'heavenly points' that can be redeemed at a later date. Christianity is less about doing than it is about becoming. Our faith is transformative.

When we give, we start to become something. Something loosens inside, something changes; an attitude shifts. Where before we relied primarily upon our own efforts to get through life, by relaxing that control we begin to make room for God to work. It's about tearing down that false master that keeps us apart from our heavenly Father.

I'm not advocating that we lose all sense and sensibility and become bad stewards. Our wealth is important, for us and for God's plans as well. But our concern for material wealth has to be subordinate to our concern for God.

Jesus said in Matthews gospel 'I understand you need food and clothing; these things are necessary. But seek *first* the Kingdom of God, then all these other things will be given to you as well.'

In our list of priorities God must top the list. How do we know that we are putting God ahead of wealth? When God presents us with a need, we need to respond. Not grudgingly, cheerfully. That means that we don't give the bare minimum, or some token amount. We don't give out of our excess, some small amount that we won't really miss.

To show ourselves that wealth is not number one, we have to give enough that we feel it. This works at both ends of the gift.

Consider this – if your gift doesn't make a difference to you, then why would you expect it to make a difference to someone else?

And as far as your own transformation goes, if your gift doesn't make a difference to you, then it doesn't make a difference *in* you.

If our charitable giving doesn't require us to make any kind of sacrifice in the way we live, if it doesn't give us any discomfort at all, then we are not being transformed. If we want to show money that it is not our master then we need to openly defy it's hold on us on a regular basis.

We defy that master by generously giving. When we do so, instead of feeling as though we can't help, we realize that we can indeed make a difference. All it means is that we might have to skip going out to dinner once in a while. This is an empowering realization, and it is transformative as we take our place as God's agents of love and healing.

There is a liberation that comes from learning to hold wealth loosely. This is what Jesus was trying to teach in this lesson. He wasn't trying to stockpile a fund to help the poor or get money from the crowd. He was trying to set people free from the fear and worry that is both the cause and the effect of trying to control everything. Stop worrying about yourself and sow some seeds. You'll be all the better for it.

Last week I spoke of prayer as a spiritual discipline in which we stop striving and learn to abide. Our giving is also a spiritual discipline in which we stop striving and learn to abide.

Seek first the kingdom of God. Seek the best thing. Let the walls down just a little, and see what happens when God rushes in.

This week when you pray for God to care for those who need it, I challenge you to also be part of the answer to your own prayer. When we pray God usually works through someone – it may as well be you. Be a kingdom ambassador; it is a path to freedom and a fully realized humanity, if you have the courage to step out in faith.

Generous God,
in abundance you give us things both spiritual and physical.
Help us to hold lightly the fading things of this earth
and grasp tightly the lasting things of your kingdom,
so that what we are and do and say
may be our gifts to you
through Christ, who beckons all to seek the things above,
where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.