

October 18, 2015  
COMMITMENT SUNDAY

## GOD AND MONEY

Matthew 6:24  
(Luke 16:10-18)

At some churches, people are not able to be “members” until they are tithers. At others, people can be members, but they cannot serve in a leadership position until they are tithers. Such churches take very seriously the dictum of Luke 16:11, where it says, *“If you have not been faithful with money, who will entrust to you the true riches.”* But, let’s be honest...would this church have ten people who qualify? Would we have five? I would never presume to make tithing a measure of someone’s ability to serve, or, to lead. And I don’t believe any church should either. Such high expectations become a distortion of God’s graceful ways. Many people just don’t have the resources to be free enough to be so generous, but that does not disqualify them from the ability to use their gifts and graces in church. Still, what about the words of Christ, *“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much”* (v. 10) Remember, from God’s perspective, money is a small thing, a little thing. Still, what do we make of that eleventh verse: *“If you have not been faithful with money, who will entrust to you the true riches?”*

And what about those of us who would ridicule the Christly view of money, and who justify ourselves even in the sight of others? God knows our hearts! We are miserly, and we are insecure. And...we are often living beyond our means. We tend to trust in earthly riches – the money we have socked away – more than we trust in God – who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. (1 Timothy 6:17) Look at Luke 12:15 – *“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions!”*

In his sermon entitled *The Use of Money*, John Wesley has this to say: In the hands of His children, (money) is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked; it gives to the traveler and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of an husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless. We may be a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain; it may be as eyes to the blind; as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death.” (p. 578, John Wesley’s 44 Sermons)

*Be on guard against all kinds of greed.* How many kinds of greed can there be? Count them... There is the greed that is totally selfish, keeping everything for self, giving nothing away. There is the greed that lets out that circle enough to include their own family (as long as they get along!). There is the greed that appears generous, gives regularly, but never sacrificially – still holding back. There is the greed that has a lot, gives a lot, and....expects a lot back...because they give so much. It’s a greed that says, “I’ve been generous, therefore, I deserve something.” It wants its name on a plaque. It wants recognition. It wants appreciation. It wants praise. What we need to remember is that our gifts are our way of *thanking* God, of appreciating God’s gifts that are placed in our hands. But...give *them* praise, give *them* the appreciation, give *them* the plaque. Just remember that God’s Word in Scripture tells us that *that* will be their only reward. (Matthew 6:2) God knows your heart! Still, there are more kinds of greed. There is a greed that is disguised as being frugal. There is a greed that is frivolous in every direction but charity. There is a greed that has abundance, but talks poor... and so on and so on and so on.

*“And if you not have been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?”* Money is foreign currency to those whose true citizenship is in heaven. And all that we can really call our own is our soul, because that’s all we really have...ultimately. But even our souls are given by God. Perhaps all that is truly ours is our character. And the field of finances is a training ground for

the human character. While we are in this life, we are learning the faithful use of money. If we fail to learn, we will not be fit for the Kingdom. Incompatible loyalties – two masters – divide us. We simply cannot serve God and Mammon (or money, or, wealth). And we are slaves to money whenever we hold it back! Because somehow we have convinced ourselves (justified ourselves) that we need it more than God does. It's not that God needs anything, but that God intends for it to be used in His service. God does not want a partial faith. God requires of us an undivided devotion! The tithe belongs to God already. And yet, we hold it back for ourselves! I've said it before: Have you ever lived off of ten percent less that you are making now? If you did, how? What is the difference now? Is it that because you have more money, you have more stuff? Examine your lives?

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus spoke these words after His parable about the Dishonest Steward who was more shrewd in dealing with his peers than are the children of light. (16:8) That parable followed the story of the Lost Son (The Prodigal Son). Perhaps in some ways, the second parable interprets the son's use of money as he had squandered his resources in dissolute living. (15:13) But that parable was the third of three (including the Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep), all about the rejoicing that happens when the lost are found. And the reason Jesus told those parables was in response to the way the Pharisees and Scribes grumbled about Him, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:2)

Apparently, the Pharisees were still within earshot after the three parables about the lost. They heard the message of the Dishonest Steward, they heard Christ's words about the impossibility of serving two masters, and that ruffled their feathers enough to evoke a reaction. "*The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed Him.*" (Luke 16:14) And He said to them, "*You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your heart!*" (16:15a)

With the Pharisees, their hearts were wrapped up in the Law. They were strict legalists – the letter of the Law. And the Law dictated a tithe. Consider how the Pharisees tithed mint and dill and cumin – they were absolutely precise – but they neglected the weightier matters of the Law: justice and mercy and faith. (Matthew 23:23) A lot of people who have been extremely wealthy have been very strong proponents of tithing. Like the Rockefellers. But do you know why? Because a tithe limits the amount they felt obligated to give. But Jesus blows the ideas of the tithe off the map! He calls on people to give themselves... completely – self-denial! "*Go and sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then... come, follow Me!*" (Mark 10:21) No one should ever feel limited to give just a tithe. Give yourself completely! God knows your heart!

*"What is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God!"* (v. 15) First of all, yes, many of the things humankind seems to elevate as a cause for pride are actually disgraceful to God. I call to mind, for example, the college student who might boast about being able to drink a whole twelve-pack of beer in one night. I call to mind the idea of "scoring with chicks." But the decadence of alcoholic indulgence, and the profanity of fornication are not virtues. In the context of this passage, however, the cause for pride is wealth. And wealth is not a virtue in the sight of God! The words, here, are spoken directly to the Pharisees. Their hearts were full of pride because of their wealth. They were loves of money. And they ridiculed Jesus for suggesting that "*You cannot serve God and Mammon (or wealth).*" Their hearts were a combination of a love for money and an adherence to the Law, and especially the law of the tithe. And...they were proud of the way they tithed. "*What is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.*"

The law of the tithe is fixed, though. It will not change. Tithing was required of the faithful. But since the coming of John the Baptist there has been something greater than the Law. Now there was grace. Now there was the Kingdom of God! And Jesus, the King! With the proclamation of the coming of God's Kingdom, the people have responded with such enthusiasm that it would seem that "*everyone wants to enter it by force.*" (v. 16) In other words, people are struggling to get in. In some respects, that

passage should actually say, “*Everyone tries to enter it in force.*” As in all together, people are responding by the hundreds, wanting to get in, aching to be saved, wanting to know Christ. And the Pharisees think they’ve got the answer? Where are *their* crowds? Where are the people clamoring to hear them?

Don’t worry, Jesus says, the Law will not be changed. You keep your focus on the tithe. “*It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter in the Law to be dropped.*” (v.17) Tithing is a nice, noble goal. But...it’s limited. Grace is taking the people way beyond the tithe. Grace is getting people to give their hearts. Grace leads people to change their character. They go from self-serving sinners to Kingdom-building servants. They go from being faithful in the little things to being faithful in much. From being faithful with their financial resources to being entrusted with the true riches!

Grace! Love! Generosity!