

January 10, 2016

## GOD AND MONEY

Matthew 6:24

(Luke 16:10-15)

At some churches, people are not able to be “members” until they tithe. 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 truly 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. But...what about these 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 point of view, money is a small thing. And what do we make of verse eleven: *“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. We trust more in earthly riches – the money we have socked away – 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 had 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 just 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 gives very generously, but knows it could give a whole lot more. And even then, 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* the praise, give *them* the appreciation. Give *them* the plaque. Just know that the Scriptures tell us that that will be their only reward. (Matthew 6:5) *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 have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?”* (Luke 16:12) Money is a 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!

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus spoke these words, about Two Masters and having divided loyalties, 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 idea 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!"* (Luke 16:15b) 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 lovers 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. Tithing sets us apart from the world, where greed is considered good, at least as a motive of some kind. 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! Tithing is a nice, noble goal. But... it's limited. Grace is taking 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 little things to being faithful also in much. From being faithful with their financial resources to being entrusted with the true riches. From having divided loyalties, to serving only one Master, the true Master: Jesus Christ!