

Your Money or Your Life

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Texts: 2 Corinthians 8: 12-15

We probably all know the old line encouraging us not to care too much about wealth: “You can’t take it with you.” Like so many artifacts of morality in our culture, the source of that line is actually the Bible, specifically from Paul’s first letter to Timothy: “For we brought nothing into the world, and therefore we can take nothing out of it.”

Biblical wisdom notwithstanding, some people still try. There once was a rich old man who, like a lot of people, figured all he had was a blessing from God. He was confused by that old line, not understanding why, if God gave it to him, he shouldn’t be able to take it with him when it was his time to return to God. So, he was determined to prove the saying wrong.

Nearing death, he made a plan: He asked his wife to go to the bank and withdraw all the hundred-dollar bills that would fit in two large duffle bags. He then told her to take the bags of cash to the attic and leave them directly above his bed. When he died, he planned, as his spirit rose, to reach out and grab the bags on his way to heaven.

A few months after the funeral, the wife was clearing out her husband’s old junk up in the attic, and she came upon the two forgotten duffle bags stuffed with cash. "Oh, that old fool!" she said. "I knew I should have put the money in the basement." You can’t take it with you.

The same guy who taught us that we can’t take it with us taught us what to do with it while we are still here. His teaching comes out in dealing with a specific situation in the early church. In Jerusalem, people were suffering, and as Paul founded Christian house churches in other towns, he collected funds to help the strugglers in Jerusalem. Sharing with the poor was a foundational aspect of Judaism, and Paul particularly wanted to show that the Gentiles who followed Christ, although not bound to keep the Law of Moses, were bound by the Law of Love to be generous with others. So, in encouraging the Corinthians to share with those in Jerusalem, Paul writes:

For, if you are eager to give, the gift is accepted according to what you have, not according to what you don’t have. Because relief for others is not intended to be distress for you, but follows from equality: at the present juncture, your abundance is for their lack, so that their abundance may be for your lack, in order that there might be equality, as has been written, “Whosoever [gathered] much had nothing in excess, and whosoever [gathered] little had no shortage.”

There are probably 30 themes one could tease out in this passage – especially in the context of Paul’s difficult relationship with the house-churches he founded in Corinth – but today I’ll mention just three things I think we can learn from this moment in the early church.

First, and most abstractly, Paul talks about this act of sharing as an act of worship. The sharing is spoken of as a gift – and the connotation is not something wrapped up in fancy paper and put under the Christmas tree. The connotation is making your gift, your offering, before the holy one at the temple in

Jerusalem. And the verb that is used to go along with this gift, is the same verb used for when Jews fulfill a religious obligation. As Gentiles, the Corinthians were not expected to take up Jewish cultic practice, but sharing with others is an act of worshiping God. I might point out here that this is exactly why I have encouraged the practice of having all of us come forward to give our gifts in worship. Sharing with others is making a holy offering to God.

Second, I want to draw out what an outrageous vision Paul is presenting here, given the culture of the time. Although traditionally a Greek city, and indeed it is in Greece today, Corinth was a thoroughly Roman city at the time of Paul. Classical Corinth was destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC, when the city was besieged, captured, and burned to the ground, with all the men killed and the women and children sold into slavery. It was left barren for 100 years, and then rebuilt as a regional capital of the Roman empire, complete with temples to the Roman gods, so the new locals could offer sacrifices for the well-being of the emperor.

If I had more time, I'd offer more nuance here, but in short, compassion was not considered a Roman virtue. There was plenty of "charity" going on, but it was all done in the context of status games. Rich people gave money to poor people (or more commonly, sponsored festivals and games in their cities), not to be kind, but so those poor people would publicly sing their praises, giving them more honor. To actually care about the suffering of the poor was considered weak, acting as if they were important enough for their suffering to matter – which clearly it didn't, since they had no honor. There are a few politicians and billionaires causing trouble today, who hold exactly the same view.

So, to seek to create a community of compassion, where the goal was equality, was outrageous – in the literal meaning of that word: it was “passing beyond reasonable bounds.” It was passing way beyond the bounds of reasonable Roman culture. To share out of compassion and for the sake of equality was to create an entirely different kind of community. A community for whom Christ was Lord, not the Emperor. When you share with others, you are both showing the value of compassion, and you are creating a new kind of community. I am sometimes tempted these days to thank all those in power now who are dismantling the vestiges of compassion, for they are helping us see the true and profound contrast between the actual, lived out values of our society, and the actual, lived out values that come straight from the gospel. Creating a compassionate community of sharing was deeply counter-cultural then, and is deeply counter-cultural now. Lord help us be true to who we are.

The third theme I want to draw out here is the most practical – indeed, I suspect some of you might think it too practical – or at least too specific. I highlight Paul's line that “the gift is accepted according to what you have, not according to what you don't have.” In other words, we are to give based on what we have. We are to give proportionally based on what we have. We are to give a proportion, a percentage of what we have. To state the obvious, if you have a lot, you're going to be giving more, and if you don't have a lot, you'll be giving less, but in the strange and glorious economy of the gospel, it's all the same. This is the only way to fairly share the burden of compassion and justice, of course. In the eyes of God, \$10 for one person is the same as \$10,000 for another. It's not the amount, but the proportion that matters. Whether you hear that as good news or bad news depends on how much you have, I suppose, because even if you make a million a year, \$10,000 just sounds like a lot more than \$10 - but it's not in the economy of the gospel. So, Paul teaches, give proportionally – give a percentage.

And now I want to launch into what I can only call “The Interim Zone” - because I am your Interim Pastor, and if I was taught anything about what this time means, it means that I can say a few things that

maybe people might not like so much, and if you decide to get rid of me, then oh well, I wasn't gonna be here much longer anyway.

I would like to call upon this congregation to have a conversation. I urge you, over the next few months - maybe even before I am finished here and your new settled pastor arrives – to have a discussion in which you decide whether you can all accept the goal of giving 5% of your income to the church. I would supplement that by suggesting you also give 5% to other organizations, or people, or causes that reflect your interests and values, whatever those may be: the Sierra Club, the Human Rights Campaign, the Antidefamation League, or whatever it is. 5% to the church, 5% beyond, for a nice round 10% which, of course, reflects the Biblical idea of a “tithe.” Some of you raised in the church have heard of a “tithe.” It literally just means “a tenth,” and it is what preachers (un)like me have pushed while pounding on the pulpit and saying “You all have to give 10%!” (while thinking, but perhaps not saying, “or else I can’t get a raise!”). I don’t really see it that way, because it is not something to pound about, and my income doesn’t matter. But it is something to agree to, together, because that’s the only way to assure that all of us are carrying the part of the burden that we can carry. Paul says, “give according to what you have.” Those who have more, give more. Those who have less, give less. It’s all the same in the eyes of God.

I encourage this congregation – and we’ll start it among the Stewardship Committee, and then take it to Executive Council, and then the Council will decide if and how to take it to the whole congregation – to determine whether we can make this our congregational culture: not a rule that has to be followed, but just what we do around here – we give 5% to the church and 5% to others, because it is an act of worship toward our holy God. It would bring joy. It would bring financial stability. It would bring life to this place. So, I call upon you to have this conversation, and see if we can make this “just what we do around here.”

And now finally back to that image I mentioned earlier from the hymn (the sidewalks of heaven paved with gold). There was a very rich man who was just about to die and, ignoring the wisdom of the Bible, he decided he wanted to take some of his wealth with him. So, he started negotiations with God about the matter. God was not sure this was a good idea, as it had never been done before and God did not want to set a precedent. But finally, after long talks, God reluctantly agreed to allow him to bring his wealth to heaven.

Just a few days before he died the rich man converted all his money into gold bullion, you know, gold bricks. Then he died and the funeral home made sure that the suitcases containing the gold bullion went with him. He arrived at the Pearly Gates with his suitcases full of gold bricks and there was Peter. Peter told him he could not bring the suitcases into heaven. But the man said he had already spoken to God and God had said it was OK. So, Peter got on the God phone and sure enough it was true. So, Peter was curious as to what was so valuable that the man wanted to bring it into heaven. Peter said, "Could I look in the suitcases?"

So, the man opened the suitcases and Peter exclaimed, "Why are you bringing sidewalk pavers to heaven?"

The sidewalks of heaven are paved with gold (figuratively speaking!), and that’s what awaits those who live in the kind of community where we share, where we love, where we bear the burdens equally, based on what we have, all of it for the glory of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

