

Dump Your False Gods: Money

March 14, 2010
Luke 19: 1-10

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First off, I want you to know I'm a big fan of money. It's a wonderful gift from God when I remember what it's for and what it's not for. (Like every false god it makes a good servant but a cruel master.) Whether people have a lot or a little, sooner or later money is going to disappoint just about everyone. You've heard that old saying, "Money talks." Somebody wrote long ago, "Money talks, I'll not deny. When it talks to me, it says 'goodbye.'"

Many of you here, by the way, are deserving of praise when it comes to using money wisely. Did you know that by far the most significant determinant of charitable giving in the U.S. today is one's weekly religious worship or observance? That is, Americans who attend church or synagogue at least once a week give three times as much to charitable causes (as a percentage of income) than do those who seldom or never participate in religious services. And you weekly worshipers [in addition to the \$100 billion per year you give to support your religious faith] are also more generous even to secular (that is, non-religious) charities than those who do not regularly worship God. Good work! [According to Adam Meyerson, president of The Philanthropy Roundtable since 2001, published in *Imprimis* monthly journal, January, 2010].

Now that our self-esteem has had its little boost, here's what's coming at you this morning: I'm going to talk how money is especially tricky about making us blind as to our true condition. Then I'll talk about Zacchaeus and why his meeting with Jesus went so well for him. Next I'll be pointing out some of the ways that money tries to make us stupid—the way Zacchaeus started out (the Zacchaeus "before" picture.) And we'll finish up with how you and I can end up more joyful and more generous, as Zacchaeus does. (Zacchaeus, and maybe you and me, "after.")

You may remember that today's idols are a lot more sneaky than, say, a golden calf Aaron could hold in his hand—and no false god is more sneaky than money. Jesus had to remind his followers, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed (that is, against being covetous, of instinctively wanting more); for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." [Lk 12:15] You don't hear Jesus having to warn this way to be on guard against any of the other usual sins, for instance adultery. It's not as if you could wake up in someone's bed where you do not belong and not know that this—"Thou shalt not commit adultery"—means you. (Nobody in that

situation says, "Gee, I don't really think I'm guilty of this one.") But money is tricky this way—call it "the stealth idol." We who are most guilty are most blind to its hold over us. So even if you're pretty sure your relationship with money is not a problem for you, and this sermon doesn't really apply to you personally, as long as you're here this morning why not pretend to listen? (I'll make you a deal: you pretend to listen and I'll pretend none of this applies to you.) After all, Jesus thought it worth warning people who had almost no money compared to most of us. Let's at least pretend He knew what He was talking about.

Zacchaeus had one big advantage over most of us. He was not blinded by money; he knew it applied to him. He was extremely wealthy—but he was clear that his money was making him miserable. He was a despised tax collector. His own neighbors hated him. (Think about a crooked customs agent who has the crooked police on his side—maybe ask Joe DiChiro about the thousand dollars he had to pay toward some phantom import taxes to get the kitchen equipment through the border into Mexico—and he was glad it wasn't two thousand.) Zacchaeus was an agent like that, only worse. He was like a French collaborator who turned in his countrymen to the occupying Nazis; he was like an IRS agent who could extort whatever he could get away with and it was completely legal—and the Roman soldiers protected him. He was the chief tax gatherer, and Jericho was a busy crossroads for tolls and a productive oasis for orchards of dates and balsam trees. His neighbors hated him. Zacchaeus could never go to the synagogue to worship. His wife was always lonely; she felt totally isolated since no one in town would befriend her. His son kept coming home with a black eye; the other kids picked on him because his father was so despicable. Zacchaeus had to climb up into the sycamore tree not because he was short—a lot of other short people saw Jesus just fine that day because the crowd let them sit in front. They would let Zacchaeus nowhere near Jesus.

Why did Zacchaeus live this way? Most likely, one reason. He was rich. Very rich. And why was Zacchaeus so eager, so desperate, to seek this Jesus who came walking through town? He was miserable. Dying inside, and not knowing what else to do about it. His desperation—his hopelessness—caused him to quit pretending. Pretending that his dignity was worth anything, that he knew what

to do any more, that his life was bearable. No denial for him; no “stealth idol” for Zacchaeus. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.” [Lk 6:20] If it takes losing our possessions in this world to become desperate to enter into the Kingdom of God, so be it. Jesus is saying that’s still a good deal. (I wish it didn’t have to come to this for any of us—but Jesus is very clear. Become all the more desperate for the riches which will never fade or rust or disappoint—whatever possessions we have or do not have down here.)

Most of us are not as desperately miserable, therefore as desperate for what Jesus offers us, as Zacchaeus was. So let’s pay attention to some of the warning signs of how money as a false god might make else everyone sitting in the pews all around us a little blind and stupid. (It made former police sergeant David Cohen, of Stoughton, MA, really stupid. In 2007 he was charged and convicted of attempted extortion and witness-tampering; he was sentenced to 30 months in jail. In November, 2009 (from jail?) he sued his police department for over \$113,000 which he maintains it owed him for unused vacation time and comp time. But here’s the best part: he’s suing extra pay above and beyond that because, while he was still on the job, he claims he had to spend 481 hours in court and 280 hours on “company time” defending himself against the criminal charges. I’m not sure this guy knows yet he was found guilty. [The Brockton, MA Enterprise, Nov 14, 2009])

--The idol of money will have us compare ourselves to others in distorted ways. When we think about our possessions we probably compare ourselves to those around us, even those who have more than we have. Almost all of us here enjoy a higher standard of living than 90% of the people in the world. So why is our focus on those who have a really nice home, really nice cars, really nice furnishings, really nice clothes who keep beckoning from those really slick magazines and commercials and TV and travel advertisements? Why not focus on the other 90% and consider ourselves incredibly wealthy, rather than on the relative few around us or above us? (This is one reason I like to visit the Open Arms Daycare Center as often as I can: it’s hard for me to keep so blind when right in front of my nose are children of God who have almost nothing in this world—but whom God brings smiles and laughter and trust. By the way I hope you’ll mark May 16, our Mission Sunday, when we’ll have the chance during Worship to hear from Heidi and Daniel from Mexico, and Daniel Okabe here with us from Uganda, and our sisters and brothers in the Marshallese church.)

--The false god of money will cause us to judge those

around us. The husband who never spends a dollar unnecessarily is frustrated that his wife is spending way too much. And, can you believe it, on vain things such as having her hair done all the time, or her nails or even her toes, as if toenails are really worth paying someone for to get all gussied up, and new dresses; let’s not even count all those pairs of shoes in her closet. Now she is making money a false god, trying to buy popularity and access to social circles and even the illusion of eternal youth. Imagine that guy’s surprise when his pastor pointed out to him that he kept saving and investing his money rather than giving it freely away so as to feel some joy about it, or even enjoying it himself. Could it be that he was making it his false god—not an idol of vanity or popularity—but he was counting on his wealth, his savings, to provide him with a sense of security and control which God alone can provide? [This is one of the observations made by Timothy Keller in *Counterfeit Gods*.]

Some will try to use money to buy popularity, some to buy access, some to buy security, some to buy power over others, some to buy a feeling of superiority, some to buy distraction away from loneliness or restlessness or the big questions of life, some to buy the feeling of success—we all get to vote in this contest. The point is that the same false god; the same lack of trust in God, the same idolatry will result in different behavior on the surface. Down in the heart it all comes from the same idol.

--The false god of money will fool us into thinking, “I’m a generous person—I just don’t have enough right now to be as generous as I’d like.” We save to get married, we save to buy a house, we save for vacations, we save for the kids’ college education, we save for retirement, we save for our grandchildren’s college education—one of these days we’ll get around to giving as generously as we’d like, rather than saving. Now saving is a good thing—but do you see a pattern here? One of these days...Not to mention spending, spending, spending...One of these days we’ll get that under control, too—then we’ll be give generously...

--The false god of money will also fool us into thinking, “If I make more money, one day I’ll have enough—then things will be different.” The idol whispers, “There is such a thing as enough money—I just haven’t gotten there. If I just stay at it a little longer, work a little harder...” Lee Iacocca was a titan in the auto industry. In his biography he was very candid, admitting how he had become accustomed to the perks and the very high salary he very much enjoyed at Ford, before he went on to turn Chrysler around. As he pondered how distorted his life had become, he heard (and quotes) the voice of his father, born in Italy: “Be careful about money. When you

have five thousand, you'll want ten. When you have ten thousand, you'll want twenty.' My father was right. No matter what you have, it's never enough."

It's never enough apart from Jesus. Jesus is the One who allows each of us to be countercultural and radical. It is possible, in Him, to say, "I have enough." Instead of looking around and comparing and wanting better lifestyle; more, bigger, newer, brighter, further away, more exotic, what if we could simply say, "I have enough. Any further money God brings me, or I get control over, I will use as God intended—to further His work. Thank you for meeting my needs, dear Lord. How may I bless others? How may I strengthen Your hand, Your work, Your Church, Your Kingdom?" The idol can never say, "I have enough."

--The false god of money makes us stupid when it comes to arithmetic. In our recall we talk about tithing: most of you know tithing is giving the first ten percent to God. I mention this because I sometimes hear folks talk about tithing, say, their \$100 per month. You can do the math: this would be tithing if their income were \$1000 per month or about \$12,000 per year. (Have you heard about the preacher who was explaining this very simple principle: "If you make \$1000, you give to God \$100. If you make \$10,000, you give to God \$1000. If you make \$1 million, you give to God \$100,000. If you make \$10 million, you come talk to Heather or me.")

Zacchaeus turns out to be an excellent teacher about tithing—and not because as a tax collector he's good at fractions. Many of us think 10% seems unrealistically high to give to God—and of course may be, for the very reasons I've mentioned and a few others besides. (Around here, what you give to God is between you and God, though your pastors and one church financial official find out. How you feel about what you give to God is between you and God. This is nobody else's business.)

Zacchaeus encounters Jesus, and he's thrilled to give away half his income to the poor and make amends to those he has cheated by returning 40%—twice what the Hebrew Law required. Ten percent would be getting off easy. What has gotten into Zacchaeus?

He is hated. He hates his life. He knows all his wealth will never bring him what he wants and needs. Then they say this Jesus is coming to Jericho. This Jesus could be his last best hope—you know what they say about Jesus. He'll talk to anyone—lepers, drunks, prostitutes, peasants, even tax collectors. He's not ashamed about it, either. He goes into the homes of these people whom the priests know are unclean. He'll eat dinner with just about anyone—in homes that defile you to go through the front

door. They say He can heal people and He even does it on the Sabbath—and right in front of the officials.

There's Zacchaeus, having run ahead of the crowd, climbing up and standing in the branches of sycamore tree, for heaven's sake, feeling ridiculous, like an overgrown 7-year old boy whom no one will play with but everyone will make fun of. But he's willing to feel ridiculous because his life is not working. He longs for more. He's stuck. Could this Jesus possibly help a traitor like him?

And out of all the people in Jericho, all the holy people and respectable people and popular people and religious people, Jesus notices him. "Zacchaeus," He calls. It means "Righteous one, Pure one." Only when Jesus says it, Zacchaeus does not feel mocked or demeaned.

"Zacchaeus, today I must stay at your house. Today!" Jesus, compelled by His divine mission from the Father to seek after the lost and invite them back Home. Jesus, wanting to spend time and have dinner with Zacchaeus, when to eat together meant a significant friendship and a special bond. Unless he was visiting his family or in-laws 12 miles away in Jerusalem, Zacchaeus hadn't eaten dinner with anyone except his wife and kids for years and years. He felt like a prisoner.

Jesus was not ashamed of Zacchaeus; Jesus did not judge him the way everyone else did. Jesus saw him; Jesus knew who he was, and still Jesus wanted to dine with him. No wonder Zacchaeus hopped down out of that tree and ran happily to Jesus—literally, "rejoicing." Zacchaeus had been dead inside for as long as he could remember, and Jesus was making him alive again.

Out of all those religious people Zacchaeus was the one whom Jesus noticed, approached, invited. Jesus seeks everyone; Jesus—through His Spirit, today—keeps wanting to know us better, enjoy friendship with us more deeply. All those other people in town kept thinking of the religious life as obeying the Hebrew Law; no doubt a lot of them gave what the Law required them to give. But Zacchaeus became the most joyful giver in all of Jericho. (Most people today are like those the crowd who watched Jesus pass by—interested in Him, but not exactly rejoicing about their giving. Thank God many of you understand how our joyful giving follows inevitably from our relationship with God in Christ, thru His Holy Spirit.)

This is what Zacchaeus teaches us today. Tithing has little to do with math—it has everything to do with grace—with allowing Jesus to come near again, in behind our defenses and into our hurts to see us and accept us as flawed and scared as we are and to love us now, "today,"

this morning, and to see us now, already, as pure as we will become in the future. If we will allow Him, He will set us free from our blindness and our excuses and our fear. Today. The joy of giving the first ten percent of our income to God—as a floor, not as a ceiling—always comes as a response to our experiencing the grace of God. If we give to follow the Law, it will never make us joyful. Following Jesus will make us joyful. (The Good Book says, “The Lord loveth a cheerful giver,” but around here we will accepteth checks from grouches and grumps.)

The Old Testament Law told the people of God to tithe their first ten percent. We have now received the love of God in Christ; we have received the Holy Spirit poured out to lead us and guide us; we have been welcomed to grow and prosper in this faith family, this part of the Church of Jesus Christ. As we look ahead to Good Friday and to Easter Sunday we consider how Jesus has gone even to die on the Cross to show us the depth of the love of God for us, and how God raised Him up again to show us His triumphant power over sin and death and evil and fear and blindness. Our Savior promises to forgive and change the lives of people just like Zacchaeus, just like you and me, and to grant us a sure purpose in our living and a sure hope in our dying.

The Law cannot begin to measure or express gratitude for this love of God; Zacchaeus’s rejoicing as he runs to Jesus sums it up a lot better. When we rejoice in the life God has for us, we are not mechanically trying to influence God. When we choose to renounce the false god of money and to allow God to open our eyes to see our true condition, we are simply stepping into the Kingdom with more conviction, with more willingness. We are only offering God what we agree rightly belongs to Him.

God does not need your money. God wants you to receive His love, and to live as His disciple, and to surrender everything else that gets in your way. Maybe you’ve been struggling with all this for some time. Uncomfortable with sermons like this, knowing God can be totally trusted but not quite able to let go. Maybe you have let go and it seems God has not made good. (Peter said, “But Lord, to whom else can we go? “You have the words of eternal life.” John 6: 68)

Maybe you can identify with the believer who got tired of feeling so uncomfortable, squirming on the fence, year after year. He wanted to surrender and follow God more fully—he knew, deep down, that he really did “have enough”—but he didn’t know how else to live or what it would feel like to surrender, so he kept worrying and he kept acquiring. One day he just sat down at his desk and listed everything he could think of: his salary, his savings,

his house, his cars, his clothes, his timeshare week...He wrote, “OK God, I’m deeding all this over to You. You are the Owner. From this day forward, You get it all. I will maintain it for you, be a caretaker for You, but You get to do with all of it exactly what You want. It’s like I’m now the gardener on the estate you own. I’m your broker trying to increase Your accounts, for Your benefit, as You direct. You are the Owner.” That man kept that note with him as long as he lived. And it brought him such a feeling of peace, such a feeling of freedom.

What is keeping you from experiencing that peace, that freedom, “today” and as long as you live? Is it really worth it?

Luke 19:1

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see Him, because he was going to pass that way.

When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried down and was rejoicing to welcome Him. (All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”)

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”