

“The Basis of Our Security”

1 Timothy 6:6-19

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If all you knew about church was what you saw on the TV every time you tuned into one of those Christian stations, your first impression would be that they are all glitzy, glamorous, and celebrity-driven, centered around a deity who functions as a kind of celestial Santa Claus who wants to bless you and make you wildly wealthy and successful. It's a message you can hear on those channels twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, especially when they're conducting their annual fund drive. In their sermons, these millionaire pastors will frequently brag about their fancy cars and expensive clothing and vast real estate holdings, promising their listeners that such blessings can ALSO be theirs if only in an act of faith they make a major financial gift to their ministries. “If you only pray right, live right, and then send me the money,” they say, “then God will bless you with success, happiness, and financial security beyond all your wildest imaginings.” It's all transactional- you do for me and then God will do for YOU. They insist that prosperity in one's life serves as PROOF that God is smiling down upon them although when such blessings FAIL to materialize, these same ministers will insist that it's the believer's OWN fault and not God's, that they just didn't exercise enough faith. “You need to pray a little HARDER,” they say. Meanwhile, what these televangelists are REALLY doing is lining their own pockets- conning poor and unsuspecting persons into subsidizing their private jets, their fancy wardrobes, their huge mansions, and their luxury automobiles.

Of course, such prosperity preaching has a strong appeal in a materialistic culture such as our own, ESPECIALLY in times of great economic hardship. But what I find MOST disturbing about it is how there is NO CROSS in such a message, NO GOOD FRIDAY in any of their sermons; there is NO CALL TO SACRIFICE OR WORK ON BEHALF OF THE POOR OR SUFFERING in the world. Instead, God is reduced to some kind of a cosmic genie or giant ATM machine dispensing favors to satisfy our crudest wants. Such a god is really an IDOL and a CARICATURE of the One we are called to serve.

The Apostle Paul seemed WELL AWARE of how one of the deadliest enemies of faith was the subtle incursion of “materialism” into one's spirit and the church. In this letter, he is giving his young disciple Timothy practical advice about ministry which is why it is listed among his “pastoral epistles.” Here in the sixth chapter, our New Testament lesson for this morning, he warns him to beware of those who would use the ministry to enrich or aggrandize themselves at other people's expense. As you can see, such hucksterism in the church is actually as old as the CHURCH ITSELF is! Yet Paul is careful to say that it is NOT money or material wealth PER SE which we as Christians are to be wary of but rather “the LOVE of money” and “the eagerness to be rich”- these must be avoided at all costs as such an obsession can easily take root in the heart and become a cancer in the soul. His argument is that where the love of MONEY provides temporary satisfaction, the love of GOD lasts FOREVER.

Hence, what Paul is REALLY warning Timothy is of the dangers of “materialism,” materialism being the theory that humanity's chief end is not to glorify God but rather to exalt ONESELF through the acquisition of as many “things” as possible. A materialistic society is one that assesses value in terms of the ABUNDANCE of earthly goods one possesses. A

person's worth is not measured by his or her beliefs or morals or loyalties but by the car one drives, the clothes she wears, the clubs they both belong to. It is not the cross but the DOLLAR SIGN that becomes their most sacred emblem. It is deadly because it replaces our TRUE priority with a FALSE one, with an IDOL that is almost always an extension of ourselves and our own selfish desires.

And yet, if materialism is a deadly cancer within the soul, you can't accuse Christianity of being ANTI-MATERIAL. Yes, ours is a SPIRITUAL religion in the sense that there is a spiritual dimension to God as well as to our lives, and yet, it is a MATERIALISTIC religion AS WELL. William Temple, the famous theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury, once remarked that ours is "the most avowedly materialist of all the great religions" and what he meant by that was that we are both matter and spirit, body and soul; both are interrelated and interdependent. After God created the heavens and the earth and everything therein, God said, "It is good." "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" says the psalmist. The prophets stressed that God was not only in control of history and the affairs of human beings, but also of nature, that he was the one who sends rain on the earth and gives fertility to our flocks and fields. And then, of course, the ULTIMATE proof that God is not anti-material is that he sent his only-begotten Son into the world to us to save us and in order for that to occur, the Word itself first had to become flesh, part of the material order!

The same can be said of MONEY. Money in and of itself is NOT bad or evil. As 1 Timothy 6.10 says, "For the LOVE of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains," and Hebrews 13.5: tells us, "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for God has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'" Church leaders are instructed again and again not to be lovers of money for it can become an idol that controls their lives. The point these verses make is that the INORDINATE desire for money as the ULTIMATE source of one's security can CORRODE and even KILL the heart and DESTROY our relationships with God and with one another. However, when kept in PROPER perspective, that all things ultimately belong to GOD for the purpose of serving HIM and advancing HIS kingdom and that we are merely stewards entrusted for THEIR care, we can then stay focused on him as the TRUE source of our blessings and security and NOT our jobs or bank accounts.

Christ HIMSELF didn't warn people of RICHES THEMSELVES so much as the HOLD OR POWER that they can have over a person's life- greed is an insatiable affection that can destroy oneself. By failing to keep such a passion as greed or avarice in check, money or ANY possession for that matter may eventually become an idol and displace GOD in one's heart. Wherever the consuming love of wealth is allowed to dwell, people become alienated from their God. What the Bible tells us is that having been created in the image of an INFINITE God, we were constructed with INFINITE cravings and desires that could only be SATISFIED or FULFILLED through INFINITE things such as dwelling in a loving and trusting relationship with God and experiencing his INFINITE love. THIS is what St. Augustine meant when he wrote, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." We were created to hunger and thirst only for God, but instead we try to satiate ourselves with everything and anything BUT God, with objects and possessions and passions that can NEVER truly satisfy. The accumulation of possessions and things in our life SEDUCES the heart from God, and the more we try to fill that hunger with anything BUT God, their failure to satisfy our deepest longings only increases a growing sense of anxiety and desperation deep

within us. Thus, the more we HAVE, the more we WANT with the result that FRIENDSHIPS and even our OWN INTEGRITY become sacrificed to this one absorbing passion. This is why so many people who are wealthy beyond belief--people who possess immense power and authority in this world--can remain so empty inside, continuing to yearn for that one thing they CANNOT own or possess- a deep and loving relationship with the living God.

The actor Matthew Perry, who was so memorable in the 90's television series "Friends," died last month while lounging in the hot tub of his multi-million-dollar Hollywood home; he was only 54. In various obituaries written about him, he was described as one who for all his money and success could never find the happiness or fulfillment he so desperately craved, trying to fill that void with years of drug and alcohol addiction. It was said that he was an intensely lonely man who longed for a wife and family. However, a string of failed relationships left him feeling sad and depressed, and as if he would never find that love he longed for. One friend said of him, "Mathew dated dozens of women. But in the end, he always felt they were only interested in his money and his fame. And he was generous to a fault. He would shower women with gifts only to have them pack up their goodies and walk away." The source said he was also mystified by the fact that most of his "Friends" co-stars seemed to escape lasting love too: "All Matt ever wanted was to be happy but he was always looking for love and happiness in all the wrong places. How sad that when he died he was reportedly alone."

The same could be said of Lisa Marie Presley, Elvis's only child, who died earlier this year at the same age as Matthew Perry- 54. Her final days were marked by grief over the death of her son who died by suicide three years ago, and by isolation and loneliness. She had become a recluse and not even all the money in the world at her disposal could alleviate, EVEN JUST FOR ONE INSTANT, the deep emotional and psychic pain that contributed to her OWN death!

It must be underscored however that the peril of riches lies NOT in their POSSESSION but in one's INSATIABLE DESIRE for them; it is the UNCONTROLLABLE NEED to possess at all costs REGARDLESS of who or how many people we hurt in the process of accruing them. The truth is that we LOVE money- we love it more than we even love FRIENDS and FAMILY; we love it more than we love LIFE ITSELF. And we LOVE it because it promises us INDEPENDENCE and POWER and SECURITY; we love it because it provides us our identity as INTELLIGENT and SUCCESSFUL human beings. But the reality is that this freedom and power and security we THINK they give us is all a lie; it's a bitter illusion. The person in the grip of such a passion is blind to the fact that there are FAR BETTER things than money available to us in this world. For instance, GOOD HEALTH is better. A FINE MIND is better. A SYMPATHETIC AND UNDERSTANDING HEART is STILL better. Having PEOPLE in your life who love you and whom you are able to love in return- THESE are better, WAY better! And of course, knowing that there is ONE WHO LOVES YOU with an everlasting love, who promises never to leave or forsake you EVER- that is the BEST OF ALL! With such things as THESE in one's life, it is possible to be happy and content EVEN IF YOU ARE DIRT POOR, while WITHOUT these in your life, it is VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE to experience TRUE happiness. Material wealth can do a lot of things and provide what folks call "creature comforts"- but it does not have the ability to provide inner peace and fulfillment.

This is the great paradox under which we live, that wealth can deliver things that make us comfortable, but it cannot deliver contentment. This why Paul exhorts Timothy and the early Church to be rich in GOOD WORKS, rich in RELATIONSHIPS, rich in LOVE FOR ONE

ANOTHER and FOR GOD INSTEAD for from GOD'S perspective, that is the ONLY wealth that truly matters. This is ALSO why Jesus could say in his Sermon on the Mount: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matt. 7:19-21)

Jesus was wary of riches because he saw the human penchant to make idols out of them and thus the basis of our own security. This is why he said, "You cannot serve both God and wealth." This is ALSO why he told the rich young ruler that before he could become his disciple, he first had to give everything he owned away to the poor and then come back and follow him. He knew that for all his many wonderful qualities, his status and wealth and possessions were still an impediment that would inhibit his ability to ever HEAR God and thus become a TRUE follower of his. Still, it wasn't the wealth or the possessions themselves that he was alarmed by but rather the place we put them in our hearts. After all, in the early years of Christianity, wealthy people were benefactors who helped support the early church and their mission with their resources, and even Paul was supported by wealthy members who wanted to see God's kingdom go forward.

My friends, what we have learned this morning is that our scriptures offer us a two-fold witness on money. On the ONE HAND, it is shown to be a BLESSING from God as we certainly NEED food, clothing, and shelter in order to SURVIVE and to LEAD healthy, qualitative lives. However, on the OTHER, it teaches us that the LOVE of money is SINFUL, that it can be CORROSIVE to our souls and an IMPEDIMENT to HEARING and FOLLOWING Christ. This paradox regarding these two concepts- that money and possessions are a gift from God which we are NEVER to be loved with our whole heart or made the basis of our security--come together in the biblical concept of "STEWARDSHIP." Proper stewardship WELCOMES money as God's gift but at the same time REMEMBERS that our property here on earth ULTIMATELY belongs to God, that we have merely been ENTRUSTED with it for a time, the USE of which we will eventually be held accountable. The basis of proper and responsible Christian living doesn't lie in the things we own or the wealth we amass but rather in placing our trust in the God who richly provides all things for our enjoyment. John Wesley perhaps summed it up best when in a sermon he said, "SAVE all you can...then GIVE all you can." THAT'S what proper stewardship is all about- truly learning that God blesses US so that WE can become a blessing to OTHERS.

But how do we BREAK the stranglehold of such things over our lives if we find ourselves ALREADY in their grasp? If there is one ANTIDOTE to the curse of greed and avarice and covetousness in our lives, it is, as Jesus said, "the left hand not telling the right hand what it is giving." The ANSWER lies in learning to just give and give liberally. At first it will hurt; you'll feel strangely diminished by giving up what you believe belongs solely to you, possessions which the more you own, the more powerful and important they make you feel. But then the Holy Spirit will slowly begin to work on your heart and transform your attitudes about them; HE will help convince you that the money and goods in your life DON'T really belong to you AFTER ALL, nor do they provide you with the peace and contentment you desperately seek for THAT can only come when we live in relationship with our Heavenly Father. The Spirit will remind you that you are loved by One who loves you with an everlasting love and who promises to meet your needs according to his riches in glory. And as this conviction slowly takes hold of

you, you will be surprised to find how EASY and EFFORTLESS it is to loosen your grasp on things and give them up, especially when they are now being used in the service of helping others. Through giving, you will discover such joy- perhaps REAL joy for the first time in your life. You will gradually find yourself drawing closer in love and sympathy to others in THEIR need, and in time, THEIR concerns will slowly become YOUR concerns as well. THAT, my friends, becomes God's antidote to all the possessiveness in our lives!

In their meditation on the Lord's Prayer, William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas--two of America's most important Christian theologians--have said that the REAL problem in asking for "our daily bread" is that "most of us perish from TOO MUCH bread rather than too little, filling the gnawing emptiness within through ceaseless consumption...For us, we ought to pray for the grace to be able to say, in a culture of consumption, 'Give us the grace to know when enough is enough' or, 'Help us to say "no" when the world entices us with so much.'" In other words, we have to learn that money and possessions are never an end in themselves but rather a MEANS to an end. They are nothing more than tools or resources to be used for the glorification of God and the extension of his kingdom- NOTHING MORE. When we allow our homes, our jobs, our cars, our memberships, our bank accounts to benefit ourselves and no one else, when we let them define who we are and become the basis of all our self-esteem rather than God's unconditional love for us, then we have made them an end in our lives and they become idols with which we will spend the rest of our days slavishly and yet fruitlessly worshipping. Let us pray...

*Generous Big-hearted God, so gracious and giving that you gave your only Son to die on our behalf: In light of such a great gift as that, how can any of us dare to lead small, selfish lives again. Help us all to be better givers. Enlarge our hearts, our minds, our spirits, our souls, our pity, and our compassion, especially for those who are helpless and can't help themselves, so that we might become BIG persons in your eyes, persons who think like you, love like you, and ultimately live like you. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*