

## **Money, Money, Money**

Scripture: 1 Timothy 6:6-10 & 1 Timothy 6:17-19

Delivered: UniPlace Christian Church

From marble flooring to an indoor waterfall. From a in-house movie theater to a refrigerator with a built-in wine dispenser. From a deck that had a fire pit and a backyard that overlooked the city skyline of San Francisco. There is a certain feeling of privilege to be invited to a last minute house party nestled on Bellevedere, California, the 8<sup>th</sup> most expensive place to live in the United States and home to the late Robin Williams, Carlos Santana, Sean Penn, and David Crosby. Especially if it's a house party where the owners are out of the country and have no idea who you are.

Living in Marin County, California as a seminary student had it's benefits. Even though most of us seminary students at SFTS came from small blue collar towns in The South or in the Midwest and lived in a crumbling student dorm called "Oxtoby" that look like a 1960s Soviet Union prison on the campus of SFTS, we were only 30 minutes north from the Golden Gate Bridge and 30 minutes south of the Napa Valley. And in between our seminary were the mansions of renowned artists, business leaders, and tech start-up gurus. So, when one of our classmates be friended one of the wealthy locals and earned their trust to house sit for them, they would invite all their other classmates over and throw a party.

Now it may seem weird that a bunch of mid 20 something seminary students would be up late on a Friday night partying in a 5 million home blaring music, dancing by the fire, and playing Frisbee in the living room. In fact, when the police showed up and busted our party, they thought it was very weird too. But in reality, the occasion to move our Friday night parties outside of a student lounge with old worn couches and dishes of uncleaned plates growing mold and move it into a 8.9 million dollar homes without the owners knowing was worth the occasion.

Over the course of four years, the sense of awe and wonder living in such a wealthy community that did not exist when our seminary was built, allowed us as seminary students to see the contrasting difference between Marin and that of the communities we were raised. Especially within Marin County. While the majority of residents were worth millions and lived in million dollar mansions, there were also immigrants that lived with 7 or 8 family members in a small apartment and had jobs in the service industry. I should also disclose that the many of the people at my church or those in the community who had wealth that I had gotten to know were compassionate, open-minded people who would tithe to the church or come out and volunteer to feed the homeless and be advocates for social change. But for many of them, there was a still disconnect, a fine line that existed between a community of wealthy compassionate, progressive elites who drove 50 thousand dollar vehicles and the working

poor, largely consisting of immigrants that walked to work to support their families and merely take the table scraps left over of the American Dream.

Christian Eberhart, a professor of religious studies at the University of Houston, says that “usually, bible passages about material wealth cause some amount of discomfort or even reprehension among audiences in our modern North Western hemisphere, which has a strong materialistic orientation. On a global scale, many of us would, after all, qualify as “rich.” Moreover, we often tend to associate personal success and happiness with material affluence.”

For us, the word “wealth” has different meanings. For some of you, it may mean having a financial surplus in terms of savings, stocks, pensions, homes and automobiles. For others, it may mean having a surplus of creative gifts, experiences, and good health. But in scripture, the Greek term for “wealth” that Jesus used is *mammonas*; and is transliterated from Aramaic and means earthly goods in a derogatory sense referring to as a “false god” that gets in the way of true worship of the real God.

It is true Jesus had, as Eberhart said “a preferential option for the poor. Throughout his life, he showed love and compassion and cared for all who were at the bottom of society, namely the poor, sick, outcast, and those whom others considered sinners. Especially the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts contain various stories that criticize rich people.”

Poverty was at the center of the sociological and political backdrop of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. At that time, riches could only be acquired through continuous cooperation with the Roman administration. Those who were rich usually supported a system that oppressed the vast majority of the population for the benefit of only few at the center of the Empire. In a way, the early Christian movement was a counter-cultural one, it opposed this system and envisioned a more equal distribution of material resources. This is how we see in Acts 4:32-37 sharing their possessions.

We also see wealthy people being appreciated as “benefactors” in early Christianity. Luke mentions that many women who accompanied Jesus and his twelve disciples “provided for them out of their resources” (Luke 8:3). Likewise, Paul needed the financial support of benefactors for his travels and missionary activities. In fact, he had a secretary at his service to whom he would dictate his letters.

What we see not only in Jesus teachings, but Paul's text which we are studying today, is not condemnation of those who are wealthy, but those who are in love with their wealth—believing it's the only vehicle of finding happiness and everlasting life, a disillusion created by our American consumerist culture.

How do we reconcile as Christians our need to acquire financial security while also our desire to to be compassionate advocates for the poor? And how do we as Christians not become blinded by our quest for financial security that we start believing salvation and deliverance can be bought with our check books?

For starters, I first think it's important no matter who we are, to recognize the wealth

inequality on our own country.

According to a 2015 study by the Washington Post, 81 percent of American counties, the median income, about \$52,000, is less than it was 15 years ago. This is despite the fact that the economy has grown 83 percent in the past quarter-century and corporate profits have doubled. American workers produce twice the amount of goods and services as 25 years ago, but get less of the pie. The wealthiest 85 people on the planet have more money than the poorest 3.5 billion people combined. The top 1% of America owns 50% of investment assets (stocks, bonds, mutual funds). The poorest half of America owns just .5% of the investments. And young people in the U.S. are getting poorer. The median wealth of people under 35 has dropped 68% since 1984. The median wealth of older Americans has increased 42%.

Sharing these facts is important because there is a tendency by those with economic security to label those who are poor as being lazy, and if those who are poor are to simply pull up their boot straps, they can obtain financial security. While I believe hard-work, sacrifice, and determination is required to find financial security and that government programs are only meant to be a temporary solution, the problem in our country is it's becoming more difficult for those who are poor to have a solid ground to build a foundation for financial security. Consider this, if you lost everything you had financially today, your job, your retirement benefits, your college degrees, your savings and the only thing you were able to find was a job 40 hours a week making 10 dollars an hour in the service related industry, would you be able to afford to survive? Now imagine if you were a single parent and had to pay rent, put food on the table, and buy medicine and school supplies for your children?

No matter how we identify ourselves politically or where we are in the income bracket in the United States, recognizing the disappearing middle class and the rising gap between the rich and the poor is important. Just as it is for our churches and denominations to recognize and advocate that our government addresses the financial inequality not just in our own country, but also around the world.

However, in addition to recognizing the financial inequalities, we must also recognize our consumerist culture makes us believe that materialism and financial wealth are a necessity to prosperity, happiness, and to have a relationship to God.

In the four time Emmy winning television program, "Mad Men" illustrates the falsified reality of financial wealth as being the key to happiness. The series, which takes place in the 1960s, is centered on a character named "Don Draper" who is a creative director of an advertising agency on Madison Avenue. Don Draper has it all, he is an attractive young man in his late 30s, is charismatic, and his gift at creating advertising campaigns for America's biggest companies has made him a millionaire. But as the series progresses over 7 seasons, we see Don Draper selling the illusion that materialism makes you happy while despite having it for himself, he's a deeply unhappy person. And throughout the series, we see Don Draper trying to find happiness in the spending of money freely, by having affairs with young women, drinking heavily, and ends up losing his wife, children, and career.

In series finale, we see Don Draper, the powerful alpha male advertising executive huddled under a payphone in California on the phone with his former secretary in tears after

he lost everything.

"I messed everything up. I'm not the man you think I am," I broke all my vows. I scandalized my child. I took another man's name. and made, nothing of it."

While our character Don Draper does discover happiness in the last two minutes of the series, I won't ruin it for you in how he finds it. For Don, it's the realization that material wealth and the consumerist culture are just an illusion of happiness and what really is happiness is something more.

"We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved and uncared for is the greatest poverty, Mother Theresa once said. "We must start in our own homes to remedy this kind of poverty.

Mother Teresa knew that there are three kinds of poverty: material poverty, spiritual poverty and the virtue of poverty. She fought hard against the first two, and practiced the third with a kind of holy perfection.

It was in her speech at the National Prayer Breakfast in 1994, she taught the American people, about spiritual, or moral, poverty We are, after all, a country that shows our love of neighbor by funding government programs and social services that keep our fellow citizens decently housed and fed. Fighting material poverty is something we generally know how to do.

But Mother Teresa gently pointed out that in our "rich" country, we suffer not from material poverty but rather from spiritual, or moral poverty. A poverty marked by the lonely elderly in nursing homes, the young people given over to drugs, and much more. She told us we show a terrible lack of love toward each other. We are not willing to embrace the children we create, preserve the families we form and tend to the lonely ones who need our company and tenderness. The result is a spiritual poverty, a crying emptiness as bad as, or worse than, the hunger and need of material poverty that she combated in Kolkata. While Mother Teresa lived in material poverty, she had spiritual and virtue wealth. For her, and many others who live in covenant communities, while there is an absent of possessions, there is a reliance on God.

While we as modern day Christians are called to address systematic poverty and unequal distribution of wealth in our country and in our world, we are also called to remember that it isn't through materialism, bank accounts, or 401k we discover God. Rather it's through letting go our need for materialistic possession that we find vulnerability and through that and a dependency of God.

"Jesus announced a great reversal of values in his Sermon on the Mount, elevating not the rich or attractive, but rather the poor, the persecuted, and those who mourn," says Phillip Yancey. "Instead of lauding such traits as wealth, political power, and physical beauty, he warned against their dangers. We are also told that fulfillment comes not in the pursuit of happiness, but rather in the pursuit of service. We are asked to respond to our most grievous failures not by covering them up, but by repenting of them openly."

In scripture, Jesus Christ, becomes the very embodiment of His Gospel message by embracing poverty. In fact, he identifies with the poor, saying, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me” Poverty was at the very core of his message. And while Jesus called on his disciples just like us to address feed the hungry and clothed the naked, he calls on us to find dependence through him not in the materialistic chase which we think will define us.

Jesus didn't say, 'Blessed are those who care for the poor,' writes Henri Nowuen. “He said, 'Blessed are we where we are poor, where we are broken.' It is there that God loves us deeply and pulls us into deeper communion with himself.

My friends, all of us here come from different stories. Some of you may have wealth some of you may be getting by paycheck to paycheck. And while those with wealth are called to be generous with what you have and those who don't are called not to be envious of what you don't have, we are all reminded that the kingdom of God cannot be bought through currency or material possessions. Rather, the kingdom of God is given to all of us.

That table you see has been set out for all of us and no seat is greater than the other. All of us have been invited to break bread from the same loaf, drink from the same cup. For it is a table that has been set by a poor, homeless, and forgotten someone who was deemed a societal outcast yet came to deliver all of us.

Much like I tell the students who set up our community dinner each night in our church basement, I like to think the great feast we all have been invited to is like that the one we see each week. Not a table at a fancy restaurant with a marble floor. But one in an old basement with outdated tile and broken tables. A feast where we are called to set the table for everyone to the poorest of the poor to the richest of the rich. For a place has been set for us where we will be served salvation and deliverance a table which doesn't divide or segregate, and the only requirement needed is faith and love.

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