

“Four Short Stories About ‘Chocolate’”

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First Scripture Lesson: Mark 12: 38-44

³⁸As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

⁴¹He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

Second Scripture Lesson: Matthew 6:19-21, 24

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also... ²⁴“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.



Sermon: *Four Short Stories About “Chocolate”*

When we talk about our lives and the way God blesses and provides for us, we often talk about money.

The Bible tells us that everything we have and everything we are comes from God. I had a fella tell me once that wasn't so. “God didn't make my car,” he said. “Somebody in a factory in Michigan made it and I bought it with my own hard-earned money.” Only God can make a tree, but I guess only Dodge can make a Charger with a 590 horsepower, seven liter Hemi.¹

Sometimes I think that's our attitude about money, too. I worked for it. I earned it. It belongs to me. But that attitude ignores the fact that the circumstances into which we were born, the education and talent and work ethic that we have, and the opportunities we are given, come to us by the Grace of God. Everything we have, and everything we are, really grow from the benevolence of God who created us, sustains us, saves us, and loves us beyond measure. So, in our lives of discipleship we make use of the gifts God has given us for the work to which God has called us.

And that means, sooner or later we have to talk about money.

Money can be a touchy subject to talk about, even with the person you love most. A recent survey of 1,000 American adults conducted by the American Institute of CPAs found that money is the most common reason that married couples fight; more so than children, chores, work or friends. Couples fight about who makes money, who spends it, who saves it and who doesn't. But according to researchers, the main reason so many couples *fight* about money is because they don't *talk* about money.²

Now it's been brought to my attention that some people don't like to talk about money because they find it rude or intrusive. Money is a private matter and what we do with it is no one's business but our own. For some it's a security issue; you shouldn't talk about your money in case someone decides to try to steal it from you. When people start talking about money, some folks get suspicious that they're about to get hit-up for some.

Nowhere is that suspicion more prevalent than in the church. As soon as the minister starts talking about money, people start getting tense, waiting for the sales pitch, the guilt trip, the sermon on giving what you've got to the church. Some of you might be getting that feeling right now.

But in the gospels, Jesus talks about money and what we do with our money more than any other topic. Repeatedly Jesus addresses money and the love of money and reminds His listeners that money is not the most important thing to their own personal well-being.

- He tells a rich young man to sell all that he owns, give the money to the poor and follow him.³
- He tells the story of a wealthy man whose harvest exceeds expectations, yet rather than share his abundance, he tears down his barns to build bigger barns to keep it all for himself.⁴
- Jesus teaches that you can't serve two masters, money and God, because you will love the one and hate the other.⁵
- He teaches that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.⁶
- He teaches blessed are the poor but woe to those who are rich.⁷
- And so on...

So today I want to share with you four stories about money ... and if that makes you uncomfortable, then just pretend I'm talking about chocolate. Everyone likes chocolate, right? Maybe that will make Jesus' teachings about mon ... er ... I mean chocolate, a little easier for us to hear.

Story #1: The Heart of the Mite

In the story of the "Widow's Mite", which was our first scripture reading this morning, Jesus speaks critically of the scribes who love their notoriety and having the best seats at all the big banquets. They love long robes which were designed for leisure, not for hard work. They give long prayers to attract attention to themselves and perhaps most damning of all, Jesus says they "devour widows." It is ironic then that Jesus contrasts the unscrupulous nature of these scribes with the example of just such a widow.

Jesus sits opposite the place where offerings to the temple are left and watches as people come from different social and economic backgrounds and leave offerings of differing sizes and values. But then a very poor widow appears and drops two small coins into the slot and silently walks away. We know neither her name nor her situation other than that she is widowed and poor; which as we noted last week, means that she is doubly vulnerable. But Jesus says that her offering is greater than all the others because it comes not from great wealth, but from extreme poverty.

So, the importance of this story is not in the giving, because everyone that Jesus observes approaching the offering boxes gives: rich and poor and middle class. Bringing an offering does not make the widow unique.

The importance of this story is not in the amount of her offering either, because the monetary value of her offering was tiny. The two "lepta" that she dropped in the box were roughly the equivalent of seven tenths of one percent of a denarius which was a single days wages for an unskilled worker.⁸ Based on our current minimum wage, that's about 47 cents.

No, this story is not about who or what or how much. This story is about the woman's attitude toward giving to her worshipping community; that even when she had nothing to give, she still gave because supporting her worshipping community was *that* important to her.

Story #2 – The Things Money Can't Buy

The scripture in your bulletin insert tells the story of a rich man who comes to Jesus asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"⁹ Jesus tells him to keep the law. When the man says that he has done this since he was a child, Mark writes that "Jesus looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing'." With all of his wealth and possessions, Jesus saw that something was missing. And in a twist of what we might expect, Jesus does not tell him what to *add*. To the contrary, Jesus tells him *what to get rid of*. Which, as it turns out, is everything.

Now, I don't think that "sell all you own and give the money away" is a general instruction for everyone, all the time. But it is a pointed statement to this man and to everyone whose wealth stands between them and their participation in the Kingdom of God. The young man had everything, and it couldn't help him get closer to God. His stuff was actually a barrier *preventing* him getting closer to God. So, Jesus told him to cut it all loose. Get rid of it. To give it all away and follow.

What are our barriers to following God? What keeps us from living the best life that God desires for us? Is it our money, our careers, our politics, our leisure time hobbies? Money can help us do a lot of things, but when we just let it pile up, all it does is block our path to God.

Now, the really interesting thing about the story of the rich man is that we don't know how it ends. Oh, you might *think* you do, but you don't. Mark writes that the young man went away grieving, for he had many possessions, but Mark never

says precisely why he grieves or what he does next. Does the young man grieve because he can't bring himself to give away his many possessions? Does he turn away from Jesus in order to keep all of his stuff? Or does he grieve ... because he knows he *has* to follow Jesus and he now understands that doing so will involve a tremendous sacrifice? What if he grieves, not because he can't give it all away, but because he knows he will ... and that it's going to be really hard to do?

I guess the answer isn't all that important. The answer that matters is how we answer Christ's call to get rid of whatever it is that stands between us and a life of discipleship. The key is for us to find that thing ... and let it go.

Story #3: Who is serving Whom? (and yes, that is grammatically correct. I checked.)

The second scripture reading this morning was an excerpt from Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" in which He teaches that you can't serve two masters, because you will come to love the one and hate the other. Which makes sense. True loyalty can only be given to one thing. You can be a Cavaliers fan and a fan of LeBron James, but when the Cavs play the Lakers, you're going to have to choose for whom you will cheer.

When you're young and single, you can date multiple people, but when it comes time to settle down, you can only marry one of them. You can hold down two jobs, but when both of your employers want you to work the same hours, you'll have to make a choice as to which is more important *to you*.

If you try to serve two masters, pretty soon, one of them is going to want you to do something that contradicts the other one. What will you do then?

Now, money is not a bad thing. We use it to buy the things we need to survive. We long ago evolved, for better or worse, from an agrarian, craftsman society where we grew, made, or hunted everything we needed into a society of workers who trade and who earn and buy. And in a world like that, money is necessary.

But it sometimes becomes clear that money is more than just paper in your pocket and numbers on a ledger. Money is the way we keep score; to show who is successful and who is not. Money can buy you out of trouble that someone with lesser means cannot avoid. Money can buy privileges. Money can buy access to power. Money can buy more advanced medical care, healthier food, better housing, safer neighborhoods.

All of those things can be really attractive. And if we're not careful, before long money becomes more than just a tool, it becomes something to which we are loyal; it becomes our master. And pretty soon we're living for money, making moral and ethical decisions based on money, prioritizing our lives to save it, make more of it, and use it for our own purposes.

Yes, money can buy "Kingdom things", too: housing and medicine and food, both for ourselves and for people who don't have enough. But it is a very brief step from money serving our needs, to our serving the need for money. And for the disciple, money is always a tool to serve God, not the other way around.

Story #4 – Chipping In

When I was growing-up, my elementary school was just a few blocks from my house and I walked to and from school every day with my friends. On some days, we would adjust our route home to take us past Hardees. We didn't have a lot of money because we were kids. But every now and then, when the weather was warm, and we were particularly thirsty, my friends and I would stop at Hardees to buy a drink.

Now I don't mean we *each* would buy a drink, I mean that we would pool our money and buy *A* drink.

We would empty our pockets onto one of the tables in back, sort out the buttons and lint, and then scrape together whatever nickels and pennies and dimes we had that day, and one of our group who was selected for his character and honesty and trustworthiness around money, would go forward to the counter and order. Usually it was Sprite and usually it was a small or medium ... which were both tiny by today's standards of fast-food smalls and mediums.

Then we set the cup on a table, and gathering around it, each of us would put in our straw and begin to drink - at the same time. Did I mention that there were five in our group? Yes, there was some straw pinching at times and you would always run the risk of backwash in a situation like that, but we were able to have together, a treat that none of us could afford alone.

It is important for us to remember that we are the church; **we are**. The church is not some *thing* out there that wants us to give. The church is our group, and we have to chip in together if we are to do the things that God calls us to do that none of us can afford to do alone.

I can't afford to provide meals at the YWCA and Hoge Memorial and the Open Shelter. I can't buy enough coats for the kids at the Hilltop Preschool who need them. I can't provide an excellent preschool education to the children of this community. I can't make disciples of all nations beginning right here in Clintonville. I can't reach out to every person who questions God or who has been wounded by this world or who yearns to know more about Jesus and be changed by His life-giving gospel.

I can't do all of those things alone and neither can you. But **we** can.

And that's why God put us here; gave us one another; to be the Church; to love and serve God by loving and serving God's people; to be the presence of God to one another and to support one another in doing that work. Together.

Conclusion:

Money... I mean Chocolate... no, I mean money, is important. And God has put us in a position to make it, but the work of God's church also needs it. And while it would be great if everything was really about chocolate (With Halloween coming up, we would just need to go trick-or-treating for everything the church needs) alas, we cannot do the Lord's work with candy.

And that's okay, because everything that we need to do the work to which God has called us is already here. God has blessed us with time and talents and treasure enough to do the work of God's Kingdom. We just have to put our money where our faith is.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

Notes

¹ "Mopar® Introduces Dodge Charger Redline Infused with New High Output 426 HEMI® Aluminum Crate Engine and More Aggressive Style." *Fiat Chrysler Automobiles US Media Website*, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles, media.fcanorthamerica.com/newsrelease.do?id=11852&mid=6.

² Tysiac, Ken. "Financial Matters Are Top Cause of Couples' Spats, Survey Shows." *Journal of Accountancy* (May 4, 2012): Web. 11 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.journalofaccountancy.com/News/20125634>>.

³ Mark 10:17-22, NRSV

⁴ Luke 12:16-21, NRSV

⁵ Matthew 6:24, NRSV

⁶ Mark 10:25, NRSV

⁷ Luke 6:20-26, NRSV

⁸ Hare, Douglas R. A. *Mark*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996. 164-5. Print. Westminster Bible Companion.

⁹ Mark 10:17-31, NRSV