

GIVE IT AWAY

SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION
OF THE CHURCH.



Catalog No. 20161211
Various Verses
14th Message
Paul Taylor
December 11, 2016

Various Verses

There's a website that I receive regular emails from called Quora. It's an online community where people ask mostly random questions and others take a shot at answering them. Recently, I noticed that someone asked the question, "Why should anyone ever take a job that doesn't pay as much as possible?"

Of course, this question had no personal interest to me, but I was curious about the answers that people gave nonetheless. The most popular answer said this,

"Jobs that pay a lot of money make you feel poor."

I have never felt as poor as I did when I worked at big investment bank. I made a salary that most people would consider totally insane. The trouble is that so did everyone else on the floor. I had a boss that probably made over \$1M/year and his boss probably made over \$5M/year, and compared to them I was a total pauper. I take the subway to work. My boss always takes a cab to work. His boss probably has a chauffeured limo. People had better watches than me, they sent their kids to better schools, they took vacations to more interesting places."¹

What a fascinating observation: "Jobs that pay a lot of money make you feel poor." That thought resonated within me. I live in one of the richest areas of the world. All of my needs are met. A good number of my "wants" are met too. I eat well and often. I have a home to live in and cars to drive and clothes to wear.

But driving through this area, I sometimes feel really poor. There are times when I want a nicer car or a nicer house or a nicer wardrobe. Even though I have no right to anything that I already have, I find myself wanting more.

Why does money control so much of our lives? Having some makes us want more. Why do we want it in the first place? What do we do about this? Is it possible to break our obsession? To train ourselves not to want? How do we appreciate what we have instead of longing for what we don't have?

This morning we are taking a brief detour from the book of Acts. As part of our series called *SENT: Living the Mission of the Church*, we've scheduled several times to look at particularly relevant issues that come up within the story of Acts. A few months ago we talked about faith and politics. In the new year, we'll address race and world religions.

Last week we heard the account of the mostly Gentile church in Antioch. We saw them form, grow, and develop as a community. Then we saw them do something surprising in the face of a crisis. They received word of a famine that was going to affect the entire area. But instead of worrying about themselves, they took up a collection and sent it to the church in Jerusalem. This morning we're going to consider what motivated this community to gather up their money and give it away.

The church in Antioch had received the Gospel from Jerusalem. But then they turned around and sent it back in the form of material relief. Very quickly, the Gospel had changed their attitude toward money. How?

Some are you thinking, "How convenient: a sermon on giving right at the end of the year." The pastoral staff actually wanted to talk about giving at a different time of the year. Late December seemed a bit too forced of a time to have a sermon on giving. But the generosity of the church in Antioch is such a great example of giving that we wanted to reflect on it more. In the end, we felt God was leading us to take the time now, not because it's the time of the year that people usually make year-end gifts, but in spite of it.

And what we're going to discover as we look into the idea of giving from a biblical perspective is that giving isn't actually primarily about the recipient. We don't give entirely for the sake of the organization or the person that we are giving toward.

That church in Antioch heard about a need. But it wasn't just because of the need that they were willing to give their money. Something about the Gospel had changed them so that they responded the way they did. Something had changed within them. I think they

discovered something that runs throughout the pages of the Scripture. Giving is not primarily about meeting someone else's need. Giving is a practical and concrete way to understand and experience your own need for God.

Don't give in order to meet the needs of others. Give to discover your own need for God.

Giving breaks us free from the power of the money and wealth that surrounds us. Giving allows us to shift our orientation from the financial mechanisms of the world around us to living under the generosity of God's provision. That's why we say that giving is an act of worship. Giving connects our hearts to God.

Addicted to Money

You should have all received an envelope in your bulletin this morning. Please pull it out and open it. Take the Advent insert from your bulletin in one hand and that dollar bill in the other. How do you feel holding those two pieces of paper? Why is one of them so different?

[Answers from congregation]

Money is a powerful thing. It does something to us. That insert in your other hand is describing one of the themes that arises out of the celebration of God—the creator of the universe—incarnating himself as a man to walk on the earth. The dollar can buy you a pack of gum...if it's on sale. So why is the dollar so much more powerful?

It turns out that our affection for money actually violates a basic economic principle. Most things decrease in value when you have more of it. It's basic supply and demand economics. But that isn't true with money.

Two years ago The Washington Post ran an article describing a study performed at Stanford's Graduate School of Business. They found that the more money people have, the more they value it. Making money makes me want more of it. Having money actually increases my desire for it.²

The more money I have, the more I love it. Making money makes me want more of it. Having money increases my desire for it. A little bit of money doesn't satisfy me. It makes me want a little more, which makes me want a little more, which makes me want a little more.

That means that for most of you, I have just increased your affection for money. I've given you a little. And instead of saying, "Oh, good. Now I have a little more money. I'm satisfied," most of you are thinking something like "Wow, this feels good. I wish I had more."

I think that's why the apostle Paul says the following.

1 Timothy 6:10:

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

The craving for money leads people away from God and into all kinds of evil. Affection turns into love. Love turns into addiction. Finally, addiction turns into idolatry.

We depend on money instead of depending on God.

God warned his people about this very thing. After he rescued them from slavery in Egypt, he told them that if they obeyed him, he would make them prosperous. He would grant them success. Their lives would get healthier as they followed his commands.

But that would open them up to a new kind of slavery. God says the following in Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 8:11-14:

"Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, 12 lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, 13 and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, 14 then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

He then summarizes the temptation.

Deuteronomy 8:17:

Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.'

This is a strange kind of process that God is warning us of. He says that his people will obey him. That will give them prosperity. Then the prosperity that came because they obeyed their God could have the effect of making them forget that same God.

Obedience leads to prosperity. Prosperity leads to pride. Pride leads to forgetting God.

Today, God doesn't reward obedience with prosperity. We don't believe that obeying God guarantees you any kind of success in life. People who tell you are selling something called The Prosperity Gospel, not the Gospel of Jesus.

But a similar principle still applies. Prosperity still tends to make us forget about God. When things in our lives are messed up, we tend to blame someone else. When things are going great, we think it's because of how well we've done. That's one of the reasons that people in this area often have such a hard time understanding their need for God. What's the appeal of a savior when I don't think there's anything I need to be saved from?

Think about your life. Are you tempted in this way at all? This room is full of people who have tried really hard to be faithful to God. There is also a fair amount of prosperity in this room. Have any of us been led to believe that the things God has given us is because of my power and the might of my hand?

Are we addicted to money? Even just a little bit? Are you addicted to money?

I love blueberry muffins. I love the blueberries. I love the bready part. I love the sugary crumbles on top. I love how the muffin part just around the blueberry doesn't quite cook all the way because the blueberry slows it down.

My family frequently makes blueberry muffins at home for breakfast. Often we'll get one of those mixes from the grocery store where you just add milk and egg and oil and voila!: Amazing blueberry muffins. But I've noticed something about those muffins. When I eat one, I want another. After I eat the second, I want a third. After the third, I'm completely stuffed, but I want a fourth.

For many of us, money is like those muffins. We are addicted. No matter how much we have, we always want more.

One of the reasons that we love money so much is that it gives us power. It opens up possibilities. Things that weren't possible before are possible when you have a little more money. We become more independent. We can make more choices.

We like power. We like independence. We like control. And none of those things are bad things, in and of themselves. But they are dangerous because they can lure us into worship. They can lure our heart away. We become addicted to our own independence. And so we love our money.

The problem is not that the church won't have enough money to finish our remodel project. The problem is that our hearts are far from God. God doesn't need your money. He just wants to make sure that you don't think you need it. Our addiction to money leads us away from God.

Give It Away

So what do we do? In the face of such powerful forces, what do we do?

Well, I'm glad you asked. You need to understand the intricacies of your own heart. You need to examine yourself to see how far you've gone down the path of addiction. You need to discern to what degree you've allowed money to become an idol. You need to understand all the complicated connections that I've just explained and you need to be able to evaluate yourself along that spectrum. Only then can you reverse the process and start to dig yourself out of the hole of addiction.

Except it's not nearly that complicated. You don't need to understand all of that. You don't need to know anything. The solution to the problem is not an intellectual exercise. It's not dependent on your intellect or your skill, or even your maturity.

Jesus encountered a man who was desperately addicted to money. He was young and successful and powerful. But there was something in him that wanted to follow God, so he asked Jesus how to do that. Jesus gave him the simple cure-all solution for breaking the addiction to money in Mark 10:21.

Mark 10:21:

And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

It's simple. Absurdly simple. One way to break your addiction to money is to give it away. That's it. We just give it away. The way to break your addiction to money is to give it away.

Are you addicted to money? The solution to your problem is easy: give it away.

It's simple, but don't be deceived. Simple doesn't make it easy. That young man that Jesus gave such a simple solution to wasn't able to do it. He went away in grief because he couldn't bring himself to do it.

There's a scene in the first *Lord of the Rings* movie where the hobbit Bilbo has decided to give away his precious ring to his nephew Frodo. It's a huge decision for him. It's taken him months to make the decision. So he takes an envelope, very similar to the one that you received this morning and puts it on his mantle. Only he "forgets" to put the ring in it. He wants to give it away. He intends to give it away. But when it comes right down to it, he finds it incredibly difficult to actually give it away.

We can have the same attitude toward our money. We think about giving it away. We talk about giving it away. We listen to sermons about giving it away.

But addiction and idolatry aren't broken by what you think or by what you intend to do. They are broken by your actions.

Throughout the Scriptures, there are many practical suggestions for how to go about this process. I'd like to highlight three of them as some tips for helping us to break our idolatry to money by giving it away.

First, plan ahead.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul writes to a young church and commends them for wanting to give money to help others in need. But he tells them to match their desire for giving with the action of giving. He is worried that they will end up wanting to give but not actually doing it.

So Paul tells them that he will come to receive their collection, but he gives some advice.

2 Corinthians 9:5:

So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction.

He tells them to set the gift aside so that when he comes it's already prepared to be given. He doesn't want them to wait until he gets there and then make the collection. He wants them to set aside the money so it's ready for him when he gets there.

I learned about this principle when I was in seminary and it has made giving in our family a lot of fun. We have a separate bank account that we use to set money aside. Every month a certain amount of money gets automatically transferred into that account. Once it's in there, it's off limits. In our minds that money is already given away.

Then when needs come up, we have this bank account that we can give from. We've already given it away, we just need to figure out who we're supposed to give it to. So when that need comes, it's pure joy and excitement to see it go to good use.

In effect, we've separated the pain from the joy of giving. We release our hold on the money first and the pain is over. Then when we actually give it away, it's just fun to see it go somewhere good. I think that's what Paul was after when he talks about money being a "willing gift" rather than an "exaction."

So plan to give. Plan ahead.

Second, set a goal.

If you're planning ahead to give money, then you need to have a goal for how much to give. A lot of people talk about the Old Testament tithe as a model for giving 10% of your income.

In reality, the Old Testament guide for giving was more like 23%. There were two tithes of 10% taken every year: one described in Leviticus 27 for the priests and one commanded in Deuteronomy 14 to be set aside for

worship festivals. And there was another 10% tithe taken every three years to assist Levites, aliens, and widows. We do have to remember, though, that the Old Testament tithing system was also a kind of government tax.

So, what do we do today? What should your goal be? There's not a number that is right for everyone. You should figure out what number is right for you and try to meet that goal.

If you have no idea where to start, 10% is a great starting point. It's served a lot of people very well over the years. But there are some of you that couldn't possibly give that much during this season of life. There are others for whom 10% isn't nearly enough.

The important thing is to have a goal. For our family, our current goal is to increase our giving every year. I have a spreadsheet that I use to track everything we take in and everything we transfer to our giving account. Our goal is to have that percentage increase every year.

So here's a practical suggestion: figure out how much you gave in 2015 and try to give more this year. Set a personal goal for your own growth and development—not according to a set standard or by comparing yourself to other people.

Remember, what we're trying to do here is break our heart's addiction to money. It's not about how much you give. It's about your heart.

Our first two practical suggestions are to plan ahead and set a goal. Our third follows from that. Give first.

This is another principle that comes straight from the Old Testament. When God was commanding his people about the tithe, he said this in Deuteronomy:

Deuteronomy 18:4:

The firstfruits of your grain, of your wine and of your oil, and the first fleece of your sheep, you shall give him.

You don't give away the money that you have left. You give away first. And you spend or save the money that you have left. Giving is the first thing you do. If you're giving away the leftovers, how is that going to break your addiction to money? But if you give first, you acknowledge that everything you have is from God. Give first.

Someone once put it this way. The question is not "How much of my money will I give to God?" The right question is to ask is "How much of God's money will I keep for myself?"

So that's it. That's the secret. If you're addicted to money. There is a simple solution. Give it away. There are some practical ways to make that easier. Plan ahead. Set a goal. Give first.

In fact, we've even made it super easy for you to put this sermon into practice. That dollar bill that came in your bulletin this morning is given to you. We "gave it away" to you so that you can apply the message this morning. Your assignment is to give it away. You can give it back to the church. You can give it to the person sitting next to you. You can give it to a friend or a charity or a person on the street. But you can't keep it. You have to give it away.

When you find yourself addicted to money, you give it away. It's not easy, but it really is that simple.

Giving Through Jesus

Except for one thing. When you're addicted, you don't want to give it away. When you worship money, you can't stand to part with it. Maybe you don't want to give away that dollar bill. It's only a dollar, so you probably will anyway. But the problem isn't so easily solved when the problem lies deep within our hearts.

We know about giving it away. We just don't want to. What then?

Again, I'm glad you asked. You've come to the right place. We don't just believe in a God who gives us some good advice, adds on some practical suggestions for putting that advice to work, and walks away. Our God tried that for centuries with his people and it wasn't enough.

It turns out that real addiction is stronger than that. Idolatry to false gods isn't easily broken.

And so God did what no one expected him to do. He did it himself. He gave himself away. Everything. He sacrificed himself. He didn't just talk about the principle of self-sacrifice. God didn't only explain it to his people. He did it. He took action so that he could come into our hearts through faith and transform us.

God didn't sit in heaven thinking to himself, "Gee, I hope my creation knows that I love them so much that I'd give anything for them." Instead, he said, "I'm going to demonstrate my love by giving everything."

Jesus gave up all that he had for our sakes. He gave up his status. He gave up his privilege. All of that was sacrificed so that he could save us from the addiction of our hearts.

Paul describes that process in Philippians:

Philippians 2:6-7:

[Christ], who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Jesus wasn't addicted to his equality with God. He didn't need to give it up for his own sake. But he did give it up. He let it go. He held it loosely and let it fall from his hand. For the sake of us.

I love that picture of the open hand. Jesus didn't hold onto his equality with Jesus. He let it go. He was free. And his freedom gave us a similar kind of freedom. He sacrificed by coming to earth in the first place and he sacrificed his life on the cross in order to give us freedom. His work frees us from our addiction to sin, whether it's money or success or accomplishment or power or greed or anything else. Jesus gave it away so that we would be free.

Romans 6:17-18:

But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

The whole point is that we would be free. Yes, our addiction to money can be broken by giving it away. But it turns out that we aren't strong enough to do that. So Jesus did it for us. He gave what he had away so that our addiction could be broken.

We have been set free. We don't have to be slaves of money. We are free from our addiction. We are free to see the insert in this Sunday's bulletin as representing far more value than this little green piece of paper that bears the picture of a man who might have been great, but who comes nowhere close to the image of Jesus.

We aren't slaves to money. We are free to give it away. And when we do, we proclaim not only our freedom from money, but where that freedom comes from. We don't need money. We need God.

We need to know God. We need to be reminded of our Father's great love for us. We need to be forgiven our failures through the death of the Son. We need the encouragement of his Spirit. We need to be included in his people as part of his community.

And so we give away what we might be tempted to need because we know who we really need.

By giving away what we think we need, we enter into what we really need. When you give money away, you remind yourself that you need God.

A few years ago in the young adults group, we did a project during Lent. We drank only water for the last two weeks of Lent as part of a ministry called The Water Project. The goal was to give all the money we saved toward building wells in developing nations. It was a cool thing to do.

But I quickly discovered that my fondness to caffeine went beyond a casual affection. I had body pains, headaches, and wasn't sleeping well. Taking caffeine pills seemed like that would be cheating, so I decided to eat chocolate covered espresso beans instead. This is the logic of an addicted brain.

Giving up one thing made it so clear that I had a need. I had developed a physical need for caffeine. But all of us have a spiritual need for God. We were created in order to be dependent on him. But when all of our needs are met and we have plenty of everything, that need can be obscured. And so Jesus gives us the freedom to live in that kind of dependence.

It's a risky feeling. It's not always comfortable. It means we're not in control. It means God might do things or lead us places that we don't expect. But that's what faith is. That's what it means to need God. And so Jesus is with us, helping us to give away the things that we think we need so that we can really understand what our true needs are.

Jesus has given us the power to be free from money. So we give our money away to remind ourselves of that and live in that truth.

Conclusion

The people who lived in Antioch probably would have resonated with the quote that we started off by considering: "Jobs that pay a lot of money make you feel poor." They lived in the third most important city in the Roman Empire. They were surrounded by wealth.

But then they encountered the Gospel and spent a year soaking in its truths, growing closer to Jesus. They discovered the principle that we've been talking about this morning. Because of Jesus they were free. They were finally free from all the addictions that they thought controlled them.

The money that surrounded them didn't have to rule their lives. In fact, it could become a tool in their hands to remind them of their newfound dependence on Jesus.

When a crisis struck, they gladly gave away their money as a way of expressing their need for Jesus. The Gospel gave them freedom. They lived in and developed that freedom by giving away their money.

That opportunity is open to us. Jesus has given us freedom. We don't have to be addicted to money. Live in the freedom of Christ. Open your hand. Give it away.

Endnotes

¹ "Why should anyone ever take a job that doesn't pay as much as possible?" *Quora*, quora.com/Why-should-anyone-ever-take-a-job-that-doesnt-pay-as-much-as-possible. Accessed 6 December 2016.

² McGregor, Jena. "The addictive power of money." *The Washington Post*, 10 January 2014. Accessed 6 December 2016. washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2014/01/10/the-addictive-power-of-money/