

God and Money

"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." Luke 16: 13

Pastor Brown was going about his Monday morning routine when the phone rang. It was loyal church member, Agatha Longtimer. The conversation began pleasantly enough, with Pastor asking Agatha about the green bean casserole she had brought to the last potluck.

"Could my wife get the recipe for that?" he asked.

"Oh, that was just something I threw together at the last minute," Agatha said.

"I sure liked it," Pastor said.

"Well, thank you." The line was quiet for a few moments. "Pastor, I wanted to ask you something."

Pastor Brown took a deep breath and said, "OK."

Agatha continued, "I was confused by the gospel lesson yesterday. You know, that one about that manager. It sounded to me like Jesus said it was okay for him to be dishonest."

"Well, I can see that," the Pastor said. "It is kind of an unusual story. But the point of the whole thing is not so much that it's OK to be dishonest, but that we ought to be wise with our money."

"Hmm," said Agatha. "But that manager didn't tell the truth! Is that any example to follow?"

"No, of course not," said Pastor Brown. "Jesus' point is that the manager was smart, in that he used money to make friends, since he had just gotten fired. Those friends might come in handy, now that he was unemployed. Even his former boss had to agree that was a shrewd move."

"OK," said Agatha, not sounding all that convinced.

"But remember how Jesus wrapped up the story?" the pastor asked. "He said,

“Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves.” He also said, “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.” This whole discussion is really about how we use our money.”

Agatha said, “Well, I know Christ ends up saying, “You cannot serve both God and Money.”

“Exactly,” said Pastor Brown, “and I think Jesus is asking some hard hitting questions of us. Are we wise in how we use our finances for the sake of God’s kingdom? Do we use our money to “gain friends,” so that the good news of Jesus is heard? Do we even think of using our money that way? I think Jesus might have some serious issues with the way his modern disciples are using money.” There was silence on the line for a few seconds. Then Agatha spoke.

“Pastor, why didn’t you preach on this reading yesterday?”

Now it was Pastor Brown’s turn to be quiet. Finally he said, ‘Well, Agatha, you know no one wants to hear another stewardship sermon. It turns people off. Did I tell you the story about my cousin? He and his wife were church-shopping, and the first church they went to, it was Stewardship Sunday, and the sermon was all about what you ought to give to the church. So they decided to try a different church the next Sunday, and guess what? It was Stewardship Sunday there too, and they quickly got the impression: the church just wants our money. So now they don’t go anywhere.” Pastor Brown paused. “I guess I do tend to shy away from talking about money from the pulpit,” he said.

"Pastor Brown," Agatha interjected, "If the Bible has something to say about money, tell us what it says! Why should we pretend it’s not part of our life with God?”

“You’re right, Agatha. Over and over Jesus says that how we use money is a direct reflection of our faith. He also points out that money and possessions, the stuff that we love so much, can quickly become a god of its own, like in yesterday’s reading, “You cannot serve both God and Money. I mean, we should not be giving God our leftovers. I just heard a presentation on the prophet Malachi that got right at the heart of giving. You know, back then, God expected his people to bring the very best as offerings. He expected them to bring the best and healthiest animals. But do you know what they were bringing? Blind, diseased, and crippled goats. The leftovers. What do you think God thought of that?”

“I can’t imagine he appreciated that very much,” Agatha said.

"You're right," said Pastor Brown. "But we've all done it, at one time or another. We bring God our blind goat and keep the healthy one for ourselves. We give God the leftovers and act as if we've done Him a favor. I confess I've done it myself."

Another pause, and Agatha then said, quietly, "So have I, Pastor." She took a deep breath. "But times are tough for a lot of people."

"Believe me, I know that's true, Agatha. But here's the thing: in Malachi and elsewhere, God says, "Test me. Try it. Give me your best, and just see if your needs are not met." It's almost like he's saying, "I dare you to try to outgive me." Wait, here's the verse, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse...Test me in this...and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."

Pastor Brown let those words hang in the air.

"That takes a lot of faith," Agatha said.

"It does," the pastor said, "but it's more about thankfulness. Remember the great sacrifice God made for you in sending His Son. Think about what He gave up in order gain you. Jesus gave everything away on the cross to purchase you. What's the appropriate repsonse to that? Test him and see what happens when you give freely. Try it out and see if you lack anything when you give generously back to the Lord."

Agatha was silent. Pastor Brown could hear the smile in her voice when she finally said, "I still think you should have preached about this yesterday."

"Don't worry, Agatha. You've helped me to see that I should, and I will, very soon. Now about that casserole..."