

# *God's Economy*

*Questions of the Congregation Series*

*I'd Love to Hear a Sermon about: Faith & Money*

from the pulpit of  
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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Matthew 6:24-34

Jesus said: <sup>24</sup>“No one can serve two masters; for a servant 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. <sup>25</sup>“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup>Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

<sup>27</sup>And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? <sup>28</sup>And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup>yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup>But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you — you of little faith? <sup>31</sup>Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ <sup>32</sup>For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

<sup>33</sup>But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. <sup>34</sup>“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

When we polled the congregation for suggested topics for a summer preaching series, we were already deep into the pandemic. The numbers of people getting sick and dying of the new coronavirus were escalating daily. The parallel problem of businesses needing to shut down was beginning to take its toll with millions of people losing their jobs; worries about how the stock market would respond were pervasive. Even though we are now moving through a Yellow Phase of a slow re-opening – there are still huge questions about how our economy will ultimately fare the effects of the pandemic.

In the midst of all that turmoil, a number of folks asked if a sermon might cover the topic of economics, of faith and money. One thoughtful person put it this way: *Is there a biblical case for the price being paid for shutting down the economy due to Covid-19?* Another asked: *How can I use my resources to help in the midst of this crisis?* One suggested we consider a biblical basis for capitalism, and another asked *how WE can use this moment when we are shut in to reset how our faith intersects with the totality of our lives.* Because Christian spirituality is never separated from the created, material world and the life it offers.

So, first of all, thanks for asking these questions. Thanks to all of you who are thinking deeply about how our spiritual life is indeed intimately related to our material world; and about how we – as people of faith in the midst of a global crisis – can use our resources for holy purposes in obedience to God.

Secondly, as I move in this sermon considering the Bible's guidance about faith and money, let me say this. These questions were sent our way before the brutal death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests and the killing of Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta which have appropriately raised again our consciousness about the issues of race in America.

Issues of race in America are also bound up in questions about economics. Our nation's founders instituted slavery as a means of

economic gain – on the evil practices of acquiring human persons as property for cheap labor. From the Jim Crow laws that denied black citizens equal opportunity to the discriminatory practices of segregation and redlining to keep certain schools and neighborhoods white; from the Tulsa Oklahoma massacre nearly a hundred years ago, to the fact that black and brown people have died to Covid-19 in disproportionate numbers to white people due to where they live and work; and to the cries today for police reform – all of these issues of race in America are deeply rooted in systems of economic inequality.

So, consideration of the questions that arose from the congregation about faith and money more than a month ago, are even more timely now amid the twin pandemics of the coronavirus and racism. A journalist reporting on the effects of racism and the pandemic on the economy asked recently: “What are the economic rules of this upside-down world, where opening the economy too soon produces mass death, but shutting it down for too long produces mass suffering?”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus’ sayings in the Sermon on the Mount may not appear to offer complete answers to all our specific questions about faith and money, but they do address a way by which we can prioritize our values. What are the economic rules that God gives us to help negotiate this very complicated time in which we live? How can the Bible help us find our way toward a more just and equitable social order for God’s children of every color, race and creed? Matthew’s gospel takes up this topic of faith and money with the urgency of these kinds of questions.

Jesus actually talked about material wealth more than any other topic. It comprises roughly 20 % of his preaching, and is a theme of 11 out of 39 parables. Jesus understood that how we use our resources is a matter of the heart; a likely reason one might choose not to follow him, or a powerful instrument for sharing the goodness God intends for

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Thompson, The Atlantic, April 2, 2020.

humankind. “You cannot serve God and wealth,” Jesus says, which is a challenging word to hear.

Many of you may remember that when the Greek was left untranslated in earlier versions of the Bible and the saying read, “You cannot serve God and mammon.” *Mammon* has two meanings, literally; our New Revised Standard Version of the bible reads simply, “You cannot serve God and wealth.”<sup>2</sup> Another translation of *mammon* is: “the god of wealth.” You cannot serve God, the Creator of all that is, including the birds, and the lilies and the human family, *and* serve the god of wealth.

Jesus does not condemn money as evil in and of itself; he does not say we should not have what it takes to live. What he cautions against is devoting one’s whole self to material gain. That’s a problem, and it is a timeless human problem. You cannot have it both ways, Jesus says. You cannot worship the God who gives flight to the birds, and spins the flowers in beauty and worship the little “g” god of wealth.

If you place your ultimate security in your economic wellbeing, then you are not fully trusting in God to care for the stuff that really matters. Money, worry about money, love of money, believing that money buys happiness and secures our life – all pull in the opposite direction from the reign of God Jesus proclaims.

If you are going to devote your life to something, Jesus says – then attend to the commandments God cares about most – loving one another, forgiving one another, caring for the poor, joining Jesus himself in his healing ministry, and inviting others to join our work for God’s justice and peace. Do not ever let the little “g” god of wealth get in the way of that. Because that is what an authentic life is all about.

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Long, *Matthew*, p. 74-75.

A friend of mine, a younger preacher who lives on a small farm and serves a rural church shared a conversation she had with her five-year-old. They were driving along in the car, and young Thomas was buckled in the back seat, when he said to his mother Leanne, “You know, money is really valuable.” “Yes,” Leanne agreed, “it is.” A few moments later, he added, “You know what else is really valuable? Jewels.” “Yes,” Mom responded, figuring that he was thinking of a pirate’s treasure from the pirate ship he’d been playing with, “they are valuable.” After another long pause, he said, “And you know what else is *really* valuable?” “What?” his mother asked, to which Thomas responded... “Air.” “Yep, it sure is,” she said. And later, Leanne wondered, “How could I ever explain human economy – to my child? The most valuable of the three – of money, jewels and air – the one we can live mere minutes without, is the only one that is free.”<sup>3</sup>

You know – the thing that set off the current protests and righteous anger calling for police reform were these words of George Floyd: “I can’t breathe.” And the real economic tragedy of Covid-19 is that – at its worst – it denies people the ability to breathe.

Jesus wants for each of God’s children: rich and poor; black, brown and white; rural and urban; for all of God’s children – abundant life, and that means having adequate food and clothing and shelter and free access to the air we breathe. The essence of a truly abundant life is free, given by God and meant to be shared. And so, we who have more wealth than most of the people in the world, have a divine job to do. In our freedom, and out of our abundance, we are being called to give ourselves away for the cause of the Reign of God. Called to share the gifts of Christ himself: to love all – including our enemies; to heal the sick; to feed the hungry; to repair what is broken in our country and in the world; to work for justice and equity for all people; to serve God, which also means to use our considerable wealth for the common good.

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<sup>3</sup> Leanne Pierce Reed, Moveable Feast unpublished paper on this text, 2011.

The church – this church – can help each of us, and all of us together find ways to invest in this kind of economy – in God’s economy. Then the richer our lives will truly be in the things that really matter, including God’s love for each human being in the world.

AMEN.