

Hebrews 13:5-6

“Love of Money, Contentment & Not Being Afraid”

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Ordinary Time

Already in Hebrews 13, we’ve seen that the Apostle is calling the church to a holiness of life that is costly, one that requires brotherly love, the opening of our homes to strangers, visiting the imprisoned and those in need, and a dedicated pursuit of sexual holiness.

Now, in verses 5-6, the Apostle turns his attention to a new topic and theme - the deadly danger of the love of money and the necessity of contentment with God’s provision for our earthly needs.

Our sermon text this morning comes from Hebrews 13:5-6. Listen now to God’s holy and inerrant word - it’s also printed on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to read along.

5 Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” 6 So we can confidently say,

*“The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?”*

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

It's awkward to talk about money in our culture. You might feel that already, just seeing the passage and the title of this sermon.

How much money we make, how much money we have, how we spend our money, how much money we give away - our reluctance to talk about these matters openly is one of the most deeply held and unchallenged values in our culture.

And I am not at all convinced that is a good or wise taboo to have, particularly in the church.

In any case, our Lord Jesus certainly did not have any trouble talking about money. In fact, if you read the gospels closely, you'll soon discover that Jesus talks about money and wealth and the rich and the poor all the time.

The danger of wealth is, by any honest accounting, one of the central features of Jesus' teaching ministry, which is an interesting thing to think about and consider.

Our Lord certainly speaks of these topics much more frequently than he talks about, for example, sexual holiness.

This week, in preparation for our sermon this morning, I spent some extended time going through the gospel of Luke and pulling out some of the things that Jesus said about wealth.

There was quite a bit of material to work with, and I can't even come close to mentioning everything he said in just that one gospel.

But I want to you to hear some of the things Jesus taught regarding money and wealth this morning as we begin, and to feel at least a little bit of the weight of Jesus' teaching on this topic.

In Luke 6, near the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus taught his disciples in the sermon on the plain and said: *“Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”*

In Luke 8, in the parable of the sower, Jesus tells his disciples that when the seed fell among thorns and was choked out, this was a picture of those who hear the word but *“are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.”*

In Luke 12, as we heard in our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus gives an extended teaching on wealth and possessions.

It begins when a man in the crowd asks Jesus to adjudicate a dispute he is having with his brother over their inheritance.

Jesus refuses to get involved in this dispute, and instead warns the man: *“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”*

Jesus then immediately tells the parable of the rich fool, who builds many storehouses and exults in his wealth, saying to himself: *“Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry.”* To which God responds: *“Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”* So, Jesus says, is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.

Jesus then goes on in that chapter to teach his disciples to not be afraid or anxious about how they will live or be clothed or have enough to eat, and he instructs them with these words: *“Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail...for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”*

In Luke 16, Jesus says it plainly: *“No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other...you cannot serve God and Money.”*

This offends the Pharisees who are listening, for they pride themselves on their outward piety and good works, but Jesus tells them directly that their love of money is *“an abomination in the sight of God.”*

(Interestingly, the only other time an abomination is mentioned in the New Testament is in reference to the act of sacrilege that Jesus prophecies will take place in the temple in Jerusalem by the Roman armies before they tear the temple to pieces in 70 AD).

And in Luke 18, after the rich young ruler abandons Jesus instead of selling his possessions and following him, Jesus says to the disciples directly and simply: *“How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”*

It's important that we take seriously these teachings of Jesus.

Clearly he considered how we relate to wealth and riches as a significant test of our discipleship to him.

And so it is that the Apostle to the Hebrews, building on the teaching of Jesus himself, says to us today:

“Keep your life free from the love of money.”

Those who love Jesus, those who are to be holy as he is holy, must live lives that are free of the love of money.

I think one of the particular dangers of reading a text like this is that we can very easily assume that it's talking about someone besides us.

When we come to this passage, it's incredibly easy to think of a wealthy man cruising on his million dollar yacht and drinking his thousand dollar bottle of champagne and think, well sure, that guy might have a problem with the love of money — but how could this apply to me, with my salary, with my house, with my car?

But, of course, assuming that the Word of God is speaking to someone besides ourselves is perhaps the most dangerous spiritual error that we can make.

It is, in many ways, the fundamental mistake of the Pharisees.

No, beloved, if we are to follow Jesus, it does not matter how much money is our bank account, or how many people we can list that are surely richer than we are — no matter our financial situation, we must carefully listen to this explicit command from the Scriptures which tells us simply and straightforwardly: *“Keep your life free from the love of money.”*

It's worth considering for a moment why it is that we might be tempted to love money in a sinful way. What does money do for us, after all? Why might we be tempted to love it?

I would say very simply that money does at least three things for us that might cause us to love it - money gives us security, it gives us power, and it gives us pleasure.

And it's important for us to consider the reasons why we in particular, because of our own story, our own sinful nature, might be tempted to love money.

We might be tempted to love money because money gives us security, or at least the feeling of security in that it seems to guarantee that, at least when it comes to our physical needs, we're going to be ok.

If we're anxious or worried about the future, if we have money, we can pull up our investments or review our assets and think...hey, I'm going to be fine. Nothing can touch me. And you know, what? My children are going to be fine as well. I've got them covered.

But of course, any security that money seems to provide is actually an illusion. Fortunes take a lifetime to make, but they can be lost in a week, in a day, in an hour. History is full of examples of this phenomenon.

Some of us might be tempted to love money because it gives us power. And in a sense, this is true.

People treat us differently if they perceive that we have wealth. They listen to us more closely. They treat us more deferentially. Money gives us access to social circles that we'd never be a part of otherwise.

But God is no respecter of persons. He judges impartially. And indeed, the power of wealth cuts both ways, because the Scripture teaches on many occasions that those who possess the power of wealth will be held to account for how they used that power.

Some of us might be tempted to love money because it can give us pleasure.

And, in a fleeting sense, this is true. Money can make it possible for us to travel to exotic places (or even just give us a week at the beach) and experience things that those with less wealth will never enjoy in this life. Money can buy us fancy cars and large houses and fine clothing and excellent food and drink.

But none of these pleasure can sustain us or give us real happiness. All of the pleasures of money are, as Ecclesiastes teaches us, nothing more than vapor in the end.

What then, is this love of money that we are to keep our lives free from?

My sense is that to love money in the way that the apostle warns about here is to love inordinately the things that our money seems to give us - the security of money invites us to feel, the power and prominence that money seems to give us, the pleasures that money seems to provide.

And each of us, if we are to really hear this teaching *must* wrestle with the way in which we ourselves are actually tempted to love money.

Because if do this, if we really love money, it will be, the Scriptures promise, the ruin of our souls.

Ironically, loving the security, the power, the pleasure, that money seems to promise actually makes us a slave to money, a slave to our financial fortunes, a slave to our careers, a slave to the movements of the markets.

Our happiness, our contentment, is always dependent on how well we keep the beast fed - how well we do in making our money and managing it and protecting it and keeping it safe.

Enslavement to money has the power to consume us. It *has* consumed countless men and women throughout the centuries, including some who have professed faith in Jesus.

And, in that light, it seems important to me that the Apostle phrases his command the way he does.

Keep your life *free* from the love of money, he says.

And indeed, beloved - it's crucial that you see this — this passage is not just a prohibition against the love of money, it's also an invitation to something, an invitation a different way of life, a way of life that the world knows nothing about.

It's an invitation to freedom - to being free of the power money can hold over us.

And that freedom is rooted first in contentment.

Keep your life free of the love of money, the Apostle says, and be content with what you have.

Contentment, fundamentally, is what we are called to in relationship to money and wealth.

This implies that to live a holy life is to have a kind of settled detachment from money.

In a world which tells us that to live a good life is to make decisions and use our years and gifts to advance our careers and enlarge our assets, the call of the gospel leads in a different direction.

The gospel says that there are many many things more important to living a good life than having a successful career and accumulating wealth.

In fact, the gospel of Jesus Christ claims that the relative importance of those things is very small. Whether or not you accumulate wealth counts for very little the kingdom of God.

If those things happen, ok. Fine. But don't think for a second that it matters in some fundamental way. Don't build your life around it.

And if you become wealthy, you shouldn't think - how wonderful and wise I am. You should think I had better *be careful*.

I had better remember the words of Jesus.

I had better remember the strong warnings he gives to those who possess wealth.

And whatever happens I must not fall prey to the lie that the wealth I've gained is something I've created through my own tenacity and talents.

The distribution of wealth in this life is mysterious. No one can truly understand it. God alone is sovereign over these things. And remember, wealth cuts both ways.

Wealth in this life, according to the Scriptures, is just as likely to be a curse as a blessing — for has not our Lord said: *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,”* and also *“Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”*

And has not the Apostle Paul taught us, as we heard in our New Testament reading: *But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 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.*

So instead of loving money, be content with whatever God gives you — and perhaps just as importantly, be content with whatever God gives your neighbor as well.

As we close this morning, I just want us to think about fear for a moment, which is the emphasis of the last portion of this passage.

So many of us, regardless of how much wealth we have or don't have, relate to money from a posture of fear.

We fear that we won't be able to make enough money for the things we think we need.

We fear that our careers aren't leading to the kind of financial security we thought they would.

We fear that we'll lose the money we do have if we don't interpret the markets correctly and make the right investments.

We fear that we'll miss out on all the good things that money seems to offer.

We fear that we'll never be able to get ahead, that we'll never be able to save for retirement or buy a house or give our kids enough money for college, or whatever it is that we're anxious about.

And in response to that fear, our passage today has a word that we need to hear - particularly in regard to how we think about money.

Listen to the words of the Apostle again:

5 Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." 6 So we can confidently say,

*"The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?"*

Beloved, do you hear this?

What the Lord wants for you, above all things, when it comes to money is for you not to be afraid. To be delivered from fear.

And why? Because God will never leave you or forsake you. He is your helper. He is your provider.

And it is only as you rely on the security that God promises you rather than the security that your money seems to give you, that you will know what it is to not be afraid when it comes to your finances.

Remember the words of our Lord from Luke 12. Hear them again.

"Fear not, little flock, he says, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Fear not, beloved. Your father knows what you need. And he will give it to you.

And do you know what happens when we stop being afraid of not having enough money, when we stop loving money?

We begin to give it away. That's the truest sign that we no longer love money.

We relinquish our grip on it. Because we realize it doesn't really do that much for us, anyway.

In Luke 12, right after Jesus tells his disciples to *Fear not, little flock*, he tells them this. He says: *"Sell your possessions and give to the needy."*

And indeed, it is to the degree that we give our money away that is the most certain litmus test for whether we truly living lives that are free from the love of money.

We give our money away first in the tithe that God requires, to provide for the ministry of the church that gives us nourishment for our own souls.

But giving our money away isn't completed by 10%, by the tithe. That's only the beginning. That's only the floor, not the ceiling.

We give to the deacons fund, to care for the needy in our own congregation and community.

We support Christian missionaries and ministries outside of our local church.

We find Christian works of service to the orphans and widows, the poor and needy in our larger city and region and around the world and we support these as well.

We give and we give and we give - because after all - it's only money.

And beloved, do you know what Jesus promises us when we stop being afraid and give our money away?

It's such a sweet promise.

Jesus says that if we do this we will receive something much more valuable than earthly wealth.

Jesus says that when we give our money away we provide for ourselves moneybags that do not grow old, we receive a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.

For, in the end, you must either love God or love money.

It's one or the other. Jesus is quite clear about this.

And what blessing and freedom and joy comes when we keep our life free from the love of money, and offer our treasure to God instead.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.