

March 15, 2009
Houghton Lake UMC

“The Dangers of Greed and Theft”
Lenten Sermon # 3

Mark 7:17-23

In the book, The Kingdom Assignment: What Will You Do With the Talents God Has Given You?, Denny and Leesa Bellesi, share a stewardship experiment they used with their church that changed the lives of their people. It was an experiment where the church gave money to their parishioners to use for God’s Kingdom, and how the church folks who took on the challenge saw God work through their gift and investment. In the book, Denny taught a lesson on stewardship I want to share. I will begin reading on page 64 with the question, “*Why all that talk about money?*”

Have you ever wondered why Jesus talked so much about money? Lots of people like to think that money is talked about too much in the church. The truth is it’s probably not talked about nearly enough, at least not in the way that Jesus did. In his ministry, Jesus talked about money more than just about any other subject and I think I know why. There are two main reasons.

The first is because nothing gets our attention in this life quite like money does. Have you noticed that? I heard a story a while back about a man who called a church and asked to speak to the “head hog in the trough.” The receptionist was indignant. “If you’re speaking of our senior pastor,” she shot back, “I’ll have you know we have a bit more respect for him than that. But just the same, he’s not in his office right now. Would you like me to have him call you when he returns?” The man apologized, “I’m sorry, I just wanted to stop by and give him a check for \$25,000 my wife and I wanted to donate to the church.” To which the receptionist replied, “Just a minute, I think I see the “Big Pig” coming through the door right now!” Nothing gets our attention quite like money does, even in the first century, and I think Jesus knew that.

The other reason I believe Jesus spoke so much about money is because this subject is a very spiritual issue. Jesus said, “Where your treasure (money) is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). Know why? Money not only calls for our attention, it also calls for our hearts, our allegiance, our devotion, just as God does. In fact, the Bible says there is something about money

that rivals God. Think about it. Money has many of the same qualities we attribute to God. It creates, it provides, it protects, it controls.

Money, we say, is the bottom line. And to some degree it is. This is exactly why Jesus said, “You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matthew 6:24). Its true, isn’t it? We can either use our money to serve God or our god will be our money. They will always vie for preeminence in our lives. The question is, who is going to win the battle for our hearts?” (unquote)

This is yet one more area of life that can be a battleground of spiritual warfare. If money is our focus, then life will be consumed with the making of money and the collection of earthly things -- and we will gain an earthly reward. If, on the other hand, pleasing our Heavenly Father is our goal, then money will be something we use as a tool to further the kingdom of God in this world. Two of the sins that can so easily beset us are greed and theft. Money usually holds center stage in this temptation and can become our downfall.

This Lenten season we have set our focus on the words Jesus shared in our text this morning. Jesus said, “All these evils come from inside a human heart and make a person ‘unclean’.” Sin comes from the heart. Sin begins in the heart, moves to the mind, and then comes out of a person in ways that are destructive; its wages are ultimately death. We have already reflected on evil thoughts, deceit and murder, remembering the sin Cain committed against Abel in the book of Genesis. We made the observation that in that case envy led to deceit, and then to murder, then more deceit, and ultimately to Cain’s eventual banishment from the family. This morning we are focusing our attention on the sins of envy, deceit, greed and theft.

The feelings of envy often well up in our hearts as a result of injustice and the sense that circumstances are unfair. Envy can swell in the hearts of those who feel that they are “on the outside looking in”, or “on the bottom looking up”. When the “have not’s” envy the “have’s”, that envy can lead to deceit, greed, and theft. Theft leads to cover-up (which is more deceit), and the guilt of the crime or the fear of exposure can eat away at a person so deeply inside that it destroys what joy they received by the ill-gotten gain. It can destroy the person’s life completely.

Deceit is also a word we mentioned last week when we said that to lie -- to deceive others -- is destructive. Lying destroys truth, honesty, integrity, trust and the very foundation of all of our relationships. Where there is deceit there are broken relationships, and relationships are the very foundation of our lives and the wellspring of our joy and happiness. Destroy our relationships and our lives will be in pieces, as well. So envy and deceit can also lead to greed and to theft.

Now, greed is certainly something we have experienced on a grand scale in this past year as we've watch the news and learned how the CEO's of large companies "took the money and ran". Greed has been so rampant that banks are in jeopardy because they speculated on the housing market and made bad loans. Greed is at the foundation of our own current economic crisis. It has not been a quick disaster, but banks have been encouraging credit and discouraging savings for years and years, as seen just by the interest we don't make on our savings accounts. Selfishness, greed and opportunistic exploitation have come to light repeatedly in the news of late, as we get down to the bottom of the oil price speculations that almost ruined our economy and we learn more about ponzi schemes and a man whose last name is Madoff. He "made off" with billions of dollars and will probably spend the rest of his life in prison. Yes, lately we know greed all too well.

Theft is also one of the "unclean things" that come out of a sinful human heart. We can steal merchandise, as shoplifters are caught and prosecuted, but we can also steal reputations. We can steal from our bosses and undermine corporate profits. We can also steal the truth. All of these "thefts" destroy truth, honesty, integrity, and trustworthiness as well as peace, joy, kindness, gentleness and self-control. The Ten Commandments says, "Thou shall not steal." No other explanation was needed. To steal the property of another person was sin; it has been righteous law for thousands of years and yet every generation has to learn again why stealing is wrong.

The act of stealing begins when we are just toddlers and it's one of the first lessons children learn when they are taught to share. I remember one day at our home growing up when one of my brothers' teenage friends stole some money at our home. We had never had that problem at our house before, so we learned very quickly not to trust that individual in our home a second time. We

never confronted the teenager, but we never had money laying around the house again, either. Sadly, that act of stealing destroyed our trust in our friend. It is true that one robber in a neighborhood can make the entire community suspicious and defensive until the thief is caught.

Theft also comes in the form of extortion and intimidation. City gangs and the mafia have traditionally worked in these ugly realms. Intimidation is the typical work of warlords and loan sharks. Intimidation and fear may get the bully what he wants for a time, but in the end, when sin has paid the utmost wage, death will come to them as well. In all of its facets, theft is actually the corruption of power. The strong man, (the bully, the intimidator), is only thinking of the things of this world and has only the present in mind. As Jesus shares with us, they will only have an earthly reward. Heaven will not be their inheritance.

What is it that Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount? Jesus called us to lay up riches in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal (Matt. 6:19-24). Jesus wants us to focus on our heavenly reward, on eternal life and riches. Why spend all of our energy and worry on things that will only last a few years? Jesus is telling us not to worry about food and clothing and the things that we need. God will supply them, one day at a time. If disaster comes, yes, our lives may change. We may not live tomorrow in the same way we live today. To covet, however -- to desire something owned by someone else, to compare ourselves with another and to compete for the riches of this world -- is only futility and a waste of time and energy. Even in times of economic crisis or gas shortages where people begin to horde and stockpile those things, deceit and theft are not an option for a Christian disciple. We can depend upon God to meet our earthly needs. God has promised it, and God will deliver.

In Jesus' day greed was rampant everywhere, practiced by the Jewish tax collectors who charged more than was required by the Roman government. The Jewish people saw them as traitors because they were making fortunes at the expense of their own people. Matthew, Jesus' disciple, had been a tax collector. And do you remember the little man named Zacchaeus who climbed a sycamore tree to get a glimpse of Jesus? He, too, was a tax collector, extorting money from his

fellow Jewish travelers. Greed was in the tax collectors' heart and dominated their life even at the expense of their own patriotism. When Jesus came He called them to heavenly goals, and that made all the difference. Matthew became Jesus' disciple; Zacchaeus return his fortune to those he had extorted in exchange for a righteous heart, a place in heaven, and to regain his good name among the people.

Because of their greed, Jesus also faced off with the money-changers in the Jerusalem temple. The Jewish priests had transformed the gentile court area of the temple into money-changing stations for the Jews coming to the temple. In doing this they had pushed the gentiles right out of the temple. The gentile court was supposed to be the largest area of the temple used by the rest of the world for prayer and worship. But, because the Jewish people didn't care about gentiles they focused their attention and the temple space upon making money from the Jews who came to Jerusalem each year. This is why Jesus drove the money-changers out when he went into the temple and declared it to be a house of prayer. Jesus correctly accused them of turning it into a den of thieves. Greed and deceit had become an acceptable practice even in the life of the spiritual leaders. How could they teach the truth about God, faith, fairness, or grace when they practiced a lie and cheated the very people they were called to instruct? Greed and theft dominated the life of the first century Jew, even while they were under Roman occupation. Even John the Baptist had to instruct those who repented at the Jordan River not to steal. The Law of Moses was being totally ignored, even back then.

What do we need to learn about money, greed and theft? First of all, money is not an evil thing in itself. Money is a tool that will reveal our priorities, our values and our goals – our hearts. Secondly, greed and theft are attitudes and actions coming from our hearts, making us “unclean”. Thirdly, the Ten Commandments, “Thou shall not steal”, and “Thou shall not covet”, are commands God gives us to practice in every circumstance of life. Nowhere does God condone robbery, extortion, intimidation, or deceit. The fourth lesson is that people who sin are thinking horizontally. They are not thinking vertically. They have their eyes on the things of this world, and

those things will eventually become worthless. The things of this world do not bring happiness, fulfillment, joy, or contentment. Many of the things of this world just bring more work, more responsibility, more things to take care of, repair, and insure. God wants us to think vertically first, “To seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and then all of these things will be added unto you.” The dangers of greed and theft are very real. And again, we need to be aware of these temptations when they come our way. Envy, deceit, greed and theft have shipwrecked many lives. Only when we keep our eyes on Jesus can we escape these deadly snares. “Thou shall not steal” applies in every area of life, from candy to copyright infringement. Greed and theft must be identified, labeled, exposed, confessed and repented of, so it will not destroy our lives and our relationships, and keep us from our eternal, heavenly reward.

Let’s pray...

Dear Lord, we thank you once again for your law and for your Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives. Thank you for the Bible and the lessons we can learn from it, about the sins that can trip us up. Thank you, Lord, for your lessons about money, greed and theft. Help us to think vertically first, to “keep our eyes upon Jesus” so that the “things of this world will grow strangely dim in the light of your glory and grace.” Help us to keep an honest heart and to keep our lives within your purpose. Help us not to be enticed by the things of this world that can lead us astray and shipwreck our lives. But rather, help us to remain on the straight and the narrow way so that we may effectively serve you and ultimately inherit eternal life and the rewards of faithfulness that will last forever.

In your name we pray,

Amen.