

A Sermon for the Feast of St. Matthew, September 21, 2008

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Not much is known about St. Matthew, but one theme of his story is money. As Matthew left his tax collecting position to follow Jesus, he left some money behind. (Matthew 9:9). Our statue of St. Matthew picks up this theme. The coins at St. Matthew's feet represent the lucrative business he left behind. And Matthew has taken a pen with which to write his gospel.

Our collect today applies this theme to us. As Jesus called Matthew to follow him, so we ask God, "Grant us grace to forsake all covetous desires, and inordinate love of riches, and follow the same thy son Jesus" (BCP 250).

There is difficulty involved in applying the New Testament teaching about money to our lives. On the one hand, Jesus said to the rich young ruler, "Sell all you have and give it to the poor and follow me and you will have treasure in heaven" (Matthew 19:21). On the other hand, we all need money for food, clothing and shelter, not to mention college, retirement and medical expenses.

The Bible does not say that money itself is evil. The Bible says it is evil to love money. 1 Timothy 6:10 says, "The love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." The rich young ruler's money was not evil, but his love of that money was keeping him out of the kingdom.

Paradoxically, amidst its warnings about the danger of loving money, the Bible describes the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, in terms of great wealth. Revelation says that the city is made of pure gold and the walls and gates are made of precious stones (21:18-21). This is the "treasure in heaven" that Jesus tells us to lay up for ourselves (Matthew 6:20).

Our money is temporary. 1 Timothy 6:7 says, "We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out." Jesus teaches us that there is permanent wealth in the world to come. And Jesus teaches us that the faithful use of temporary wealth stores up eternal wealth for us.

Faithfulness begins, not with the money itself, but with what we actually do. At root, the issue is our motive: Why do we do what we do? When I was in college, most of the guys in my fraternity were business majors, not because we had a love for business, but because we thought that business was the way to make the most money.

This is a flawed motive. Our desire to earn money must be mixed with the desire to do something good for somebody, and to do that good thing well. Jesus said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). He meant that we should focus on doing what we do to the glory of God and the good of others, and the things we need shall be provided for us as a by-product.

We all begin with flawed motives. But if we are serious about our faith and the life of prayer, God will purify our motives. God will lead us to see how what we do impacts others and to consider whether what we do is actually good.

The early church had a list of prohibited occupations, which a convert had to forsake to join the church. Each Christian ought to ask: “Is what I do good?” Does it contribute something positive to society? Then, “Am I doing it well, to the glory of God and for the good of others?”

Is it good in the eyes of God? And, is it good for others? These twin concerns match up with the Summary of the Law, the commandment to love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves.

These priorities also apply to what we do with the money we get. God commanded the people of Israel to honor him by giving him the tithe and the first fruits of all their increase. In the Bible, the first part represents the whole. When we give God the first part, we acknowledge his ownership of all that we have. This is a key weapon in the battle against covetousness and anxiety.

God also commanded Israel to be generous to those in need because love for God is shown by our care and concern for those who are made in his image. The primary biblical reason for having more than we need is, as Ephesians says, “That [we] may have something to give him who has need” (4:28).

When we focus on doing good work to the glory of God and the good of others, and when we are faithful and generous with our money, we manifest the kingdom of God. We show what the kingdom of God is like and how it will be in the world to come.

This is why the devil tells us that it can’t work this way. He says that we have to cut corners and compromise principles to have enough money. He says that if we are really generous, we won’t have enough left for ourselves. For the devil, the gain of one is always at the expense of the other.

However, the economy of the kingdom of God is not a zero sum game. In the kingdom of God, you can do good work that honors God and helps others, and prosper doing it. You can be faithful and generous, and actually be better off for having given. We have to decide who we believe. We have to decide whether we will live by faith or live by doubt.

It can be hard at times to live by faith because the rewards of faith are not always immediate. We may do what is right and suffer for it. We may be generous, but struggle. These are tests. God asks us: Will you do what is right because it is right, even when there is no immediate reward for it?

Jesus did what was right and, in the short run, was killed for it. But he was raised from the dead and is now King and Lord. Our lives will follow that same pattern. If we are faithful, we will receive an eternal inheritance in the Resurrection, even though we will lose all we have in this world by death.

Thus, 1 Timothy says, “Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” (6:17-18 NKJV).