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“Better than Money”

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Selected Proverbs

I was attending a clergy luncheon this past week and some of my colleagues were saying what a bummer it is to enter Stewardship season in the church while we are still in the midst of this ongoing economic crisis, a crisis which we continue to feel profoundly in our personal lives and in the church.

As they were talking it occurred to me that perhaps this is actually a very good time for Stewardship season in the church.

Because tight financial times offer a fresh opportunity for us to reexamine our priorities and consider what the Bible has to say about money and our relationship to money.

Now I know some of you are thinking “Oh great, here we go again hearing how money is bad and we should give it all to the church.” That is not what I want to say at all. In and of itself money is not bad, it is neutral, and it can do tremendous good for us personally and collectively.

It is our relationship to money that becomes unbalanced and unhealthy.

Today I want to share the story of a man named Solomon.

You have most likely heard of him, even if you do not have a background in the church, because he is associated with wisdom. Solomon was said to be the wisest man alive during his lifetime.

Born in 1000 BC, he died in 931 BC, and he was the 3rd King of the Kingdom of Israel.

There was Saul, King David his father, and then Solomon.

When he came to power he prayed to God saying:

“I do not want riches or anything else for myself but only wisdom.”

God was so impressed with this prayer, that God blessed him.

And God not only blessed him with wisdom, but blessed him with everything else his heart could possibly desire.

Solomon went about trying to gather all of the wisdom of the ancient Near East, and compiled this wisdom into a book called Proverbs.

Solomon is also associated with most of the other Wisdom literature in the Old Testament, including Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Proverbs, and two of the Psalms.

Here is just a sampling of some of the things he said as recorded in the book of Proverbs (The Message):

“Get wisdom—it’s better than money. Choose insight over income every time.” (Better than money—can you imagine!)

“Don’t wear yourself out trying to get rich—restrain yourself! Riches disappear in the blink of any eye—wealth sprouts wings and flies away.”

“A pretentious, showy life is an empty life.

A plain and simple life is a full life.”

“The greedy bring ruin to their households.”

And finally, this Proverb:

“Like a city whose walls are broken is a person who lacks self-control.”

Cities in the ancient world had walls around them, and when a wall was breached the enemy could get in and conquer the city.

Solomon is comparing lack of self discipline with a city that is vulnerable to domination and ruin.

I was thinking about this particular Proverb last week when my own lack of self-control was in full fruition. It seems like everywhere I went people were offering me their leftover Halloween candy, and I did not want to be rude so I had to eat lots of it.

Now I try to buy Halloween candy that I dislike, so that I am not tempted to eat it all myself before the Trick or Treaters arrive.

(Things like licorice and raisins—no wonder we have fewer kids at our house every year)

But this past week people were offering me things like

Milky Way, Reeses Peanut Butter Cups, Almond Joy—my favorites!

At work, at meetings, even at my exercise class people brought candy.

Plus it was 50% off in the grocery store this week so I had to buy some.

So I was thinking about wisdom and self-control while mindlessly eating candy all week long.

Anyway, these Proverbs give you an idea of how wise Solomon was. He was dearly loved by his people and his wisdom brought him great respect and prosperity.

So it seemed like a story with a very happy ending indeed. But something interesting happened to him the richer he became.

He was changed by his wealth and his wisdom diminished.

The richer he got the weaker his vision became.

First Kings explains that he built a temple to God, which took him 7 years to build.

He built a palace for himself, which took him 13 years to build.

His home was 225,000 square feet, with gold and ivory and every opulent thing you could possibly imagine.

He built a throne for himself out of carved ivory, with six stairs leading up to it. Not only was his throne carved in ivory, it was overlaid with gold. Ivory wasn't quite good enough so he had it covered in gold.

He had 12,000 horses; so many that they had to build cities just to stable all of his horses.

He had 700 wives and 300 mistresses, and I am not going to say anything more about that.

First Kings tells of how Solomon lost wisdom when he became rich.

Now remember, Solomon was dearly loved by his people in the beginning. Yet by the end of his reign, people hated him; he was on the verge of losing his Kingdom altogether.

He had become greedy and self absorbed and arrogant.

The book of Ecclesiastes is written about King Solomon, looking back on his life, when he had learned some painful and difficult lessons. Ecclesiastes chapter 2 says:

“I undertook great projects, building houses for myself, and vineyards, and parks, and reservoirs, I amassed silver and gold, singers and a harem, and I was greater than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

I denied myself nothing, refused my heart no pleasure.

Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done, and what I had toiled to achieve, I found everything meaningless.

It was chasing after the wind. Nothing was gained under the sun.”
At the end of his life, Solomon believed that he had gotten it wrong. Prosperity was not bad in itself. The problem was what it did to him, it seduced him and made him greedy and self-centered.

It made him forget about God.

Now, to a very large degree this is the human condition.

We all place ourselves at the center of the universe, and we become tempted by the insatiable desire for more.

We would all love to have Solomon’s wealth and if we did we would probably become just like him, building fancy thrones for ourselves.

We all can be seduced by greed and our own importance, and we crave nice things—homes, cars, gadgets.

Speaking of gadgets, I have the oldest cell phone on the planet and it is embarrassing. People pull out their I-phones and Blackberry’s with GPS and radar and sonar and I have this clunker of a cell phone.

I have to get a better one, because everyone is making fun of me.

And the way I feel about my cell phone is what drives our economy, which is actually a good thing.

If we are not buying more this year than we did last year, the recession will endure, and things will only get worse.

So we need to be buying more and more, and if we are chronically dissatisfied with what we have, then so much the better.

The lesson from Solomon’s experience is not that we need to live in destitution or poverty, and never buy anything, but that we need to be mindful in our relationship to money—our desiring, our accumulating and our spending.

Having wisdom is essential when it comes to money.

Because without wisdom, money has the power to corrupt us.

Money in itself is not evil, but its effect upon our hearts can be evil.
It can cause us to be selfish, stingy and unkind.

And that, of course, brings us to Jesus.

Jesus talked about money all the time, and some people hated him for it.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, 1 out of 10 verses deal with the rich and the poor, and in Luke it is 1 out of 7 verses. 27 of the Parables deal with possessions and money. While there are 500 verses in Scripture that deal with prayer, and about 500 verses that deal with faith, there are nearly 2500 that deal with money and possessions.

This is a constant theme in the teachings of Jesus, because he knew that our relationship to money is complicated and emotional.

He knew that where our treasure is, our hearts will be also.

So this issue is profoundly spiritual and something which cannot be ignored by people of faith.

The heart of our faith is an invitation to see everything in a different light, including our relationship to money.

To view it as a tool that can be used for blessing and transformation, not just for our own happiness, pleasure and comfort.

In two weeks we will be asking you to make a financial pledge to the church for the coming year as a part of our Consecration Sunday Celebration on November 22.

Between now and then I want to invite you to give serious prayer and thought to your relationship to money as you consider what you might give to God in gratitude for all that God has done for you.

This campaign is not as much about the church's need for money (although we certainly do need money to support our ministry), as much as it is about your need to give, that you might grow in faith, satisfaction, and love.

It is a privilege to participate in what God is doing in the world.
We all need to be more generous or we are not growing in our faith.

We cannot be stingy, miserly people and be disciples of Jesus Christ.
It is impossible.

And if we are to have the financial resources to operate our facility, keep our commitment to missions, keep our staff and ministries strong, our budget for 2010 will have to increase.

So, I invite you to be thinking in the next 2 weeks about your relationship with money.

What does it represent in your life?

Do you worry about it? Does it control you?

What are your financial priorities and are you willing to be more generous with your money in order to bless this world and give gratitude to God?

How wise are you when it comes to money? Wisdom will never replace money, but if you were to ask Solomon he would say that it is better.

Much better.

Amen.

