

Money changes everything

Lk 16:13-15 and 19:1-10

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We're in a sermon series looking at counterfeit gods.
Things that we might worship in our lives instead of the one true God.
We started off looking at getting your heart's greatest desire.
For Abraham, like many of us, that would be having children.
Kids are great, but it's possible for them to become idols.
But it can be the same with any great desire of your heart.
If God grants you the desires of your heart,
they can become idols.
So we need to watch out for the things we cherish most.

Last week we looked at sex and love
from the story of Jacob and his wives Rachel and Leah.
Sex and love are very powerful forces for us.
And very powerful forces in our lives can so easily become idols too.
I think some folk were surprised
that we were talking about sex in church last week.
Of course back in the day
you didn't talk about sex in church or anywhere else.
It was shrouded in mystery.
These days our society can't stop talking about sex.
But the main reason we preach about it
is not because society has changed.
It's because the Bible talks about sex a lot.
If the Bible talks about it, we talk about it
because that means that God thinks it's important for us to talk about it.

However there is one subject
that the Bible talks about even more than sex.
No prizes for guessing what that subject is.
Money.
It is so easy to make money into an idol.
That's why the Bible talks about it so much.

Now money is a tricky subject to think about.
I'm going to illustrate that by doing a little exercise with you.
Put your hand up if you have a licence to drive a car.
OK that's most of you.
And leave your hand up
if you think you are a better driver than average.
Well isn't that interesting?
What's going on here?
There's some sort of psychological trick
where just about everyone thinks they are a better driver than average.
But it's not possible, is it?
You would expect that half the population would be better than average
and half would be worse than average.
That's pretty much the definition of average in this case.
Well it's the same with money.
Everyone can see that there's a big problem in our society
with people worshipping money.
It's obvious right.
We have a word for it.
We call it materialism.
And just about everyone is happy to say things like,
"Wouldn't it be great if people valued relationships a bit more
and weren't so focused on money?"
Anyone ever thought or heard something like that before?
Anyone ever said something like that themselves?
It's amazing.
Almost as many people as have their drivers' licences.
But even though we can see
that society has a worshipping money problem,
it's almost impossible to see it in yourself.
Now I'm not going to ask you to put your hand up
if you have a worshipping money problem.
But trust me,
it's like people recognising they are a below average driver.
Very hard to do.

Well we have a couple of Bible passages before us today where Jesus is warning people against the dangers of making money an idol.

What happens if you make money into an idol?

Well Jesus has three things in our passage from Lk 16.

16:13 "No one can serve two masters.

Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other."

What happens if you make money an idol?

You will serve money.

You will love money.

You will be devoted to money.

Serving money.

That means you will put yourself through all manner of damaging stuff to get more money.

I have a friend who worked 22 hours straight in his job.

From 8am to 6am the next morning.

He knocked off, had a couple of hours sleep and was back in the office by 10am.

That's serving money.

And the thing about serving is that you do as you are told.

If you serve money, you do what money tells you to do.

And money is a ruthless master.

It will tell you devote your time to it instead of people, instead of God.

It will tell you that it needs to be your highest priority.

I had a lady in a previous church whose husband died.

I went around to her house to see her.

She wasn't there.

She was down at the bank

making sure she had authorisation to operate all the accounts.

I understand death presents all kinds of bureaucratic issues.

But surely they don't need to be dealt with the day your husband dies.

That's serving money.

Next loving money.

If you love money,

you will daydream about money.

It's not much different to a person.
If you love a person, you daydream about them too.
If you love money, you daydream about how to get more of it.
You daydream about what you will spend it on.
You might daydream about how you would like to have more of it
than certain other people who currently have more than you.
That's loving money.
The third sign of idolatry is being devoted to money.
Jesus is talking about being devoted to it
like you would be devoted to a master.
When you are devoted to a master,
you trust that master.
You trust that they will do the right thing by you.
It's going to get you all the good stuff.
Money is going to look after me.
I'll be OK
because I have enough money to pay for the best medical care.
I'm secure because I have enough money to last me until I'm 110.
I've got money so I'll never be short of friends,
people always want to hang around with wealthy friends.

What happens if you make money an idol?
You will serve money.
You will love money.
You will be devoted to money.
What's the problem with this in Jesus' opinion?
You can only have one master.
If money is your boss then God is not.
It's that simple.

It's absolutely simple.
Yet at the same time it's absolutely deceptive.
Money has a way of tricking us.
Let me illustrate from a conversation
I had with folk from my chess club a couple of weeks ago.
They asked me

if any of my ministry colleagues drive Mercedes Benzes.
I thought the question was directed toward the hypocrisy of ministers.
I told them
that only two of my colleagues drive Mercedes that I know of.
But the follow up question was fascinating.
"What does that tell you?"
They were thinking,
"That tells you that religion doesn't work
because if it did, more ministers would be driving Mercedes."
I said to them,
"It tells me that God hasn't finished working on their greed yet."
Maybe a bit harsh, but anyway.
They were dumbfounded.
They thought that if religion worked
then God would bless his clerical servants
and we'd all be driving Mercedes Benzes.
I think that if religion works
then God will give his servants the power to overcome their idols
and worship him alone.
These worldviews are completely at odds with one another.
They can't coexist.
Now you might say,
"That's just Tim's chess buddies who have no idea about religion."
But actually, that view of money
is taught from the pulpits of a great many churches.
Jesus says that no one can serve two masters.

One of the key stories in the Bible about money as an idol
is about Zacchaeus the tax collector.
Now this is a popular story,
and no doubt you've heard before
that Tax Collectors were despised people.
And often I think we brush that off with a shrug of the shoulders.
"I don't particularly like paying tax either.
Of course people don't like tax collectors."
But it was considerably worse than that.

When you pay tax,
the government taxes your money,
and they give you things for it.
Road full of potholes all over the Peninsula.
Hospitals, Schools,
Courts where you can take out intervention orders,
subsidised child care, Government funded scientific research,
subsidised medicines, free doctors,
armed services to defend our country against aggressors,
foreign aid to help the impoverished people of the world.
When you think of all the wonderful things
that the government does with our taxes,
it's enough to make you want to pay more tax, isn't it?
Maybe. Almost. OK I might have been gilding the lily a bit there.
But you get the point.
We pay tax and we get something for it.
When a first century Jew paid tax, where did the money go?
Well roads. Beautiful roads.
No potholes there.
Not even after 2000 years.
The Romans made excellent roads
because they needed them to march their armies around the empire.
Note their armies, not your armies.
And they needed to be able to march their armies around
to keep you under control.
But you could use the roads otherwise.
But apart from the roads, all of the money went back to Rome.
It wasn't because Rome was short of money.
It was an intentional plan to keep the conquered nations poor,
because poor people find it harder to rebel.
So tax was really about impoverishing your nation
to keep them subject to their Roman overlords.
The taxes did pretty much nothing for your country.
OK, so who would be a tax collector under those circumstances?
No ifs or buts.
You are being a traitor to your own people.

Who would do that?

The answer is, if there's a bucket full of money in it,
you can find lots of people who will do it.

Sadly.

Zacchaeus was one of them.

But notice that his worship of the idol of money
had some serious costs for him.

Everyone hated his guts.

That would mean

that your extended family would have nothing to do with you.

Your only friends would be other tax collectors.

Though if you were a chief tax collector like Zacch,
even the other tax collectors wouldn't be safe friends.

They'd all want to snare your job.

And the general public would despise you.

You can see how much they despised him.

If there was a short man at any normal gathering,
you'd let him get up the front so he can see.

It's not like he's going to be obstructing your view.

But not Zacch.

Jesus is coming past and he can't catch a glimpse.

No one is going to let him come to the front.

You can imagine that Zacch is not a particularly happy man.

His idol, money, had told him all the good stuff
when he took the tax collecting job.

You'll have lots of money.

You can get a big house.

Fine clothes.

You'll be an important person.

But money forgot to mention that he would be despised and rejected.

Some people would defensively harden themselves
into the choice they'd made.

In fact most people would.

That's usually how sin works.

You make a bad decision.

Then you justify it to yourself.

And you stubbornly stick to that path.
But in God's kindness,
he'd put a longing for a change of direction into Zacch's heart.
That's God's grace at work.
It seeks out a person who totally doesn't deserve it,
and moves them to a point of repentance.

Now forget all your childhood memories
about the enjoyment of tree climbing.
It's not a thing that a dignified older person would do.
But Zacch was desperate.
He knew that money had sold him a lie.
It wasn't making him happy.
He was desperately sad in fact.
So desperate was he, that he climbed a tree
just to get a glimpse of Jesus.

And Jesus saw a desperately sad man
who was ready for a change of direction,
and Jesus invited himself over.
And Zacch responded by real repentance.
Repentance is not feeling sorry.
Repentance is changing direction.
Zacch responded to Jesus' offer of grace
by turning away from his idol of money.
He said publicly then and there,
that he was going to make restitution for his legalised thieving,
and give half of his wealth to the poor.
That's real repentance.
Notice that God's grace comes first.
God got into his heart to make him want to see Jesus.
Jesus extended the offer of acceptance and friendship
before Zacch had done any repenting.
God's grace comes first.
But Zacch's repentance is real.

How did Zacch's heart change?

Well it was a miracle of God's grace.

But just because it's a miracle doesn't mean there is no explanation.

It will help us think about the idols in our own lives

if we consider surface idols and deep idols.

A surface idol is something like money.

On the surface Zacch wanted money.

That was why

he was prepared to betray his people and become a social outcast.

But why did Zacch want money?

Well there are a range of possibilities.

And the story doesn't tell us.

But considering people generally.

Some want money because they want fancy stuff and fun times.

Some people want money

because it gives them power over other people.

If you have a lot of money you can get what you want.

Some want money

because it gives them a sense of control over their world.

It makes them think that when something bad comes along,

they will be able to deal with the situation.

Some want money

because it gives them access to exclusive social circles

where they can mix with the right people.

So the surface idol of money

could actually be an outworking of any one of four deeper idols.

If you are after fancy stuff and fun times your deeper idol is pleasure.

If you want to get what you want, your deeper idol is power.

If you want a sense of control, your deeper idol is security.

If you want access to the right people, your deeper idol is approval.

Keller tells a story of a couple that came to a church for counselling.

The husband was mad at his wife because she always spent too much.

It wasn't until the minister explained to the husband,

that it wasn't just his wife who had an idolatry of money

because she liked to spend on pleasure,

but he actually had an idol of money too
because he spent his money on security by putting it in the bank,
that the couple were able to work on the issues in their marriage.

We'll never get rid of an idol like money
by just saying to ourselves,
"I have to stop obsessing about money all the time."
It doesn't work.

We need to bring the gospel to bear on our idols.

And to do that,
you focus on the deeper idol,
and see how Christ takes care of that idol.

If your deeper idol is pleasure -
then you need to keep telling yourself,
"Christ died for my sins
so that I could experience the joys of heaven with him forever."

If your deeper idol is power,
then you need to keep telling yourself in the words of Col 2:15,
"Christ disarmed the powers and authorities,
he made a public spectacle of them,
triumphing over them by the cross."

He's got the power.

I don't need to have it.

If your deeper idol is security,
then you need to keep telling yourself in the words of John 10:28,
"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish;
no one will snatch them out of my hand."

Jesus has got me secure.

I don't need to look for security elsewhere.

If your deeper idol is approval,
then you need to keep telling yourself in the words of Rom 8:15,
"The Spirit you received does not make you slaves
so that you live in fear again;
rather the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship."
I've been adopted as a child of God.

I don't need the approval of anyone else.

I am God's child.

Well it's time to summarise.

We've been looking at the idol of money today.

Money is a slippery one.

Everyone can see there is a problem with the idolatry of money.

But no one can see it in themselves.

Jesus says this is a serious problem

because you can't worship God and money.

The story of Zacchaeus shows us

that God can rescue someone from their idolatry of money.

God reaches out and changes Zacchaeus' heart.

And as Zacchaeus experiences the acceptance of Jesus,

he is freed from his slavery to money.

But for us,

if we're are going to be freed from slavery to a surface idol like money,

then we will need to discern what the deeper idols in our hearts are.

And we need to address those deeper idols

with the message of the gospel.