

June 25, 2017

Church Planting
Money Matters
Acts 20:1-6

Opening words: A.W. Tozer once wrote, "*I remind you that there are churches so completely out of the hands of God that if the Holy Spirit withdrew from them, they wouldn't find it out for many months.*" That quote makes me ask you these questions: How long do you think it would take for us to discover the Holy Spirit had withdrawn from Western Reserve Church? Would the Holy Spirit's exit be an instant discovery? Would the Holy Spirit's exit be a slow erosion? How many would never notice the Holy Spirit was gone? Do you think the Holy Spirit left Western Reserve years ago? Do you think the Holy Spirit was ever here? Do you think the Holy Spirit is with us today?

This is sermon number forty-eight in my sermon series, *Church Planting*. You remember my task. During the summer months, I am preaching through the Book of Acts. Why make a major time commitment to the Book of Acts? Because, Acts is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who created the church originally and it will be the Holy Spirit who must revive the church again. Human effort is not enough. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 20:1-6. This week's message is called *Money Matters*.

Acts 20:1-6 When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out for Macedonia. ² He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, ³ where he stayed three months. Because some Jews had plotted against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia. ⁴ He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Tophus from the province of Asia. ⁵ These men went on ahead and waited for us at Troas. ⁶ But we sailed from Philippi after the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days.

His name was John G. Wendel. He is not remembered as one of the great philanthropists of his day. However, he will be remembered as one of the wealthiest millionaires ever. He died in his home in New York City in 1915. Seeking to keep their inherited fortune in the family, Wendel and five of his six sisters never married. He passed his fortune on to them. When his last sister died in 1931, the estate was worth \$100 million. One hundred million dollars in 1931 is worth approximately \$1.5 billion today. However, she never had a telephone, electricity, or an automobile. She wore one dress. It was homemade. She wore it daily for twenty-five years. Can I state the obvious? Money makes a wonderful servant but a horrible master. The Wendel family forgot the most important thing: You can't take it with you. The great evangelist Billy Graham once said, "*The greatest legacy one can pass on to one's children and grandchildren is not money or other material things one has accumulated in one's*

lifetime, but rather a legacy of character and faith." I think he is correct. If you find some wisdom in that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the twentieth chapter of Acts. Paul's time in Ephesus is nearing an end. He is preparing to go back to Jerusalem. Why Jerusalem? He is returning to Jerusalem to help the struggling church. That congregation was experiencing extreme hardship. Paul is returning to Jerusalem to support them. Verse four tells us, he did not travel alone. Several names are mentioned. There was a guy from Berea. There were two guys from Thessalonica. There was a single guy from Derbe. There were three more from the province of Asia. That means Paul travels to Jerusalem with seven people. When I first read those names, I assumed they were traveling with Paul to offer him companionship. As a matter of fact, I began to research this message with that theme in mind. That all changed on Monday night when I began to research the text itself. I discovered they were not traveling as Paul's friends. They were traveling as delegates from various Christian congregations. Each one was carrying their congregation's financial support to the struggling church in Jerusalem. They may have been the first example of a connectional system - congregations responsible for one another. The sermon suddenly shifted from a message on the importance of friendship to the importance of Christian stewardship. Never forget it: Stewardship is not just a Fall church program to generate funds for the annual budget. Christian stewardship is a way of life.

I should not have been surprised. Money is a major theme in the Bible. The topic of money is found in both the Old and the New Testaments. Jesus, himself, was always surrounded by and spoke of money. If you look at the scriptures through that filter, it really is amazing. Consider these stories with me.

There is the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector

There is the story of the rich young ruler. He had everything money could buy but he had nothing at all.

There was the time Jesus turned the tables of the money changers over. It was a form of protest. The temple was a place of prayer, not profit.

There was the time Jesus was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver.

There was the time the Magi came to worship the baby Jesus with extremely expensive gifts; gold, frankincense and myrrh. I wonder if Mary and Joseph sold those gifts because they needed the money. Life has always been expensive.

There was the time Jesus saw a poor widow put the tiniest, yet the largest, gift into the temple's treasury, a mite.

The Bible contains thirty-eight different parables from Jesus; sixteen of them deal with money.

Do I have to go on? Do I really have to go on? We live in such complex times. Studies tell us two things people say they want, and don't want, in a church. First, people don't come to church to hear about money. Second, people want to hear Biblical sermons. This is the problem: If you want to hear Biblical sermons, then you are going to have to hear about money. Jesus, himself, spoke more about money than any other topic. The

question for today is, why did Jesus talk about money? I am going to answer that question by making three obvious statements about money. If you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

Money is Important!

For over twenty years, Kathryn and I have been going to Russia. The best part of those trips was living in the orphanage with the children. They were great, and our days were filled with joy. You could not help but form an emotional connection with them. It was great until the connection was broken. Team members always had a hard time leaving them when the trip came to an end. It was always an emotional scene saying good-bye and getting in the van and driving away. There was only one thing worse, looking at the future of those children. The truth is, they don't have much of a future. They would leave the orphanage at about the age of twenty. Some would go off to live with a distant relative. Some of the disabled children would be sent to adult Russian institutions and have a sad life. The rest would be expelled from the orphanage and given a small stipend by the government to live. The amount of money they received was tiny and not enough to survive. They would be forced to choose between food and shelter. In Russia, there is a stigma about orphans. What do most Russians believe about orphans? They believe, orphans are second-class citizens with an inferior education. They believe, lacking money, male orphans will in time end up in prison. They will get caught committing some minor crime just trying to exist. They believe, female orphans will in time turn to prostitution just trying to exist. I believe, the best days of those orphans was when volunteer mission teams came and made them feel special. You can ask any orphan and they will tell you, money is important. But, you don't really have to ask an orphan. You can stay right here in America.

You can ask the 794,960 Americans who filed for bankruptcy protection in 2016. That figure came from the National Bankruptcy Forum. That figure is down from the previous year. The number one reason Americans file for bankruptcy protection is long term medical care. You don't have to ask an orphan or a person who filed for bankruptcy protection. You already know it. Money is important! Just watch how your standard of living drops without it. If you believe money is important, say, "**Amen!**" However, money isn't just important. Money is also temporary.

Money is Temporary!

In 1988, William "Bud" Post won \$16.4 million in the Pennsylvania Lottery, but he now lives on his social security. Post said, "*I wish it had never happened. It was a total nightmare.*" A former girlfriend successfully sued him for a share of his winnings. His brother was arrested for hiring a hit man to kill him, hoping to inherit a share of the winnings. Other siblings pestered him until he agreed to invest in a car business and a restaurant in Sarasota, Florida. Both businesses failed. Post even spent time in jail for firing a gun over the head of a bill collector. Within a year after winning the \$16.4 million lottery, he was \$1 million in debt.

In 1993, Janite Lee won \$18 million in the Missouri Lottery. Lee was generous to a variety of causes, giving to politics, education and the community. But according to published reports, eight years after winning, Lee filed for bankruptcy with only \$700 left in two bank accounts and no cash on hand. Having money is hard work.

This is obvious statement number two: Money is limited! Perhaps, large lottery winners should be assigned a financial planner. One of the few things I would do over again in my life is get a financial planner when I was young. Does anyone here feel unqualified to handle their own personal finances? One of the things I hate in life is wasting money. The reason is obvious. Money is limited. If you agree money is limited, say, "**Amen!**"

Both themes are present in the Bible story for today. The church in Jerusalem was struggling. Fellow believers heard their story and decided to respond. They didn't just pray and say, "Good luck!" They decided to take an offering to help this suffering congregation. They knew what we know; money is important. It was so important to them they sent delegates to deliver their money. Those delegates must have been trusted members, because no one wants to waste money and money is limited. When the offering was received by the church in Jerusalem, they must have rejoiced and felt valued by their fellow believers. This story illustrates our third obvious point: Money is revealing. We only spend our money on things that are important to us. That is why Jesus spoke more about money than any other topic. How important is Jesus to you? What is important to you? To answer those questions, just track your spending.

Money is Revealing!

When I was in seminary, I was not just a poor seminary student. I was a destitute seminary student. Through my years in Kentucky, I had all kinds of odd jobs. For a while, I cleaned office buildings late at night. For a while, I worked at the local newspaper. For a while, I worked maintenance at the school. Through all those years, I served as the pastor of the Pleasant Grove Christian Church in Lancaster, Kentucky. The church was dominated by one family, the Sharps. They hired me to work on their tobacco farm.

The farm was owned by the father, Allen. The farm was run by his three sons, Horace, Fred and Lee. I don't want to brag, but I know more about burley tobacco than anyone else here today. I have seeded tobacco beds, pulled tobacco plants, set tobacco plants, sprayed tobacco plants, cut tobacco plants, hung tobacco plants and stripped tobacco plants. Several times, I went to market to sell the tobacco. It was hard work. Prior to the Civil War, slaves did that work. In my time, poor destitute seminary students were hired. I learned a great deal about burley tobacco, but one thing still amazes me. All the money that it took to raise the tobacco for the year was borrowed. They hoped to pay it back once the crop was sold. On the Sharp farm, all that borrowed money was held in a checking account with a green checkbook cover.

I worked hard, but I was still destitute. One semester, I couldn't pay my bill. I think I stilled owed \$300 from the past semester. If I didn't pay it off, I couldn't register for the

next semester. There was no one to call for help. I couldn't call my parents or anyone else. They didn't hear my calling into the ministry. I couldn't call anyone with the United Methodist Church because they hadn't accepted me yet. There was no one; I was alone. To this day, I still don't know how the Sharps found out; I never said a word. One day after church, Horace stayed behind. I was locking the doors of that ancient church building, when Horace said, "I want to give you something, boy." He pulled out that green checkbook and pulled out a yellow check. He handed it to me and said, "Here." It was made out to me for the exact amount I owed. I said, "I can't take this, it is borrowed money." He smiled and said, "Shut up, you stupid Yankee. Take it, study hard and make us proud." I didn't know what to say, but I did know what to do. I took the check. That check saved my future.

Don't tell me money isn't important. Don't tell me money isn't limited. Don't tell me money isn't revealing. Don't tell me money doesn't talk. That check told me the Sharps believed in me and it gave me the courage to face another day. If this church has gained anything positive from me, it is because of them. How you handle your money says a great deal about you. What is your money saying to your world? How important is Jesus to you? The great evangelist Billy Graham once said, "*The greatest legacy one can pass on to one's children and grandchildren is not money or other material things one has accumulated in one's lifetime, but rather a legacy of character and faith.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"