

Greed and Charity
Matthew 21:1 – 11, 12 – 17
Sunday, April 14, 2019

I used to get at least three catalogs in the mail every week from Christian publishing or church supply companies, trying to sell me books and banners and tote bags and t-shirts and rulers with the books of the Bible listed on them and coffee mugs or water bottles with your church's name on them; bracelets and necklaces and Christmas ornaments with pictures of Jesus on them; chairs and candles and pencils and pew cushions.

At least once a month I would get these thick envelopes in the mail from pen companies offering me 1,000 ball point pens at a discount price with the church's information on it, and even a *picture* of the church on it. I actually really *liked* getting those in the mail, and I kind of miss them now, because they would send me a free sample of the pen. At one time I had at least 30 church pens between my office, car, and home, and I didn't have to pay for *any* of them.

I used to get at least three phone calls every week from Christian telemarketers, telling me how they have this new DVD series that we can use for Sunday School and small groups about how to raise today's children according to biblical principles, and it's led by some of today's most prominent pastors and biblical scholars, and they'd send it to me for free, and if I don't like it, I could just send it right back (of course I'd have to pay shipping), but if I *did* like it, it was only three payments of \$99.

Now, let me ask you something: all of those things that I just told you about – companies selling books and banners and t-shirts and pens and DVD series – would we consider that *greed*? I mean, it was *annoying* getting all of those catalogs and phone calls each week, and maybe it's a little *obnoxious* and *kitschy*, but is it *greed*? We probably wouldn't call it that, right? We think

of greed as an insatiable desire to get more and more money and possessions. And this is just *business*. As far as I know, they aren't marking their prices way up and trying to take advantage of people. And they're actually providing a valuable service, right? There are times when we *need* to buy books and banners and bulletin covers and pens, and the DVD series can provide opportunities for spiritual growth (we use them for Supper at St. John's), and those are good things, right? We wouldn't call that *greed*; it's just companies providing churches with goods and services. It's business as usual.

This story of Jesus "cleansing the temple" on Palm Sunday, I have always read this as Jesus responding to the *greed* of the moneychangers and vendors, driving them out because they are engaged in unjust practices that take advantage of the poor. That they were selling animals at incredibly marked up prices that the people *needed* to make sacrifices in order to be right with God, and when they were changing the money from Roman coins into coins that could be given in the temple, they were doing so at marked up rates. That they were taking advantage of the poor and desperate. That's what I've always *heard* and been *taught* about this story. And so I was prepared to talk about greed in *that* respect today.

But the more I read about this and dug into it this past week, the more I kept coming across scholars and theologians who were saying, "That's not it at all. There is absolutely nothing in the text to suggest that this was happening." Jesus says that they have made the house of the Lord "a den of robbers," but he's not talking about any kind of unjust practices by the moneychangers and vendors. He's quoting the prophet Jeremiah, who stood at the gates to the temple hundreds of years before and called out the hypocrisy of the people, saying, "Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house...and say, 'We are

safe!’ – only to go on doing these abominations? Has this house which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?” A den of robbers isn’t where the robbers go to *do* their robbing. It’s where they go *after* they do their robbing, to hide out and be safe. Jeremiah was saying, “You think you can just live however you want and then come here and make your sacrifices and say your prayers and go through all the steps and everything is okay?” So in quoting Jeremiah, Jesus is accusing them of hiding out in the temple from the consequences of their actions out in the world. He isn’t saying anything about the unjust nature of what they’re doing in the temple.

What they were doing in the temple – selling animals and exchanging foreign currency – was actually very *practical* and *necessary*. This was the time of Passover, and people were travelling from all over the region to come worship. When they came, they had to have an animal to sacrifice, and that animal had to meet certain standards of the priest. It was very hard to bring an animal with you if you were traveling a long distance to get there. What happens if the animal gets loose on the way there? What happens if it dies? And what if you get there, and the priest says, “Sorry, but this animal doesn’t meet the requirements.” It’s not like you could just run back home and get another. So these vendors were there selling animals to help make it *easier* for people coming to make their sacrifices. It was a matter of *convenience*.

And these people coming from all over the region, wherever they came from they lived in the Roman Empire, so they brought with them Roman coins. Roman coins were only 80% silver, but in order to pay the temple tax, they were required to have something called a Tyrian shekel, which was more pure (94% or more silver). So these moneychangers were taking money that people *couldn’t* use and exchanging it for money that people *could* use to pay the temple tax. It

was a necessary function. And while both practices were subject to abuse, there is no evidence that this was taking place. It was just business as usual. And *that's* what gets Jesus upset.

It's not that they're buying and selling animals for sacrifice or exchanging currency for the temple tax. It's that they're doing it *in the temple*, in what was supposed to be a house of prayer, a sacred space. Why couldn't they just do it *outside* the temple? Imagine if you walked into this sanctuary this morning, and there were vendors here selling Bibles and devotional books and Christian music CDs and DVD series. How would that *feel* to you? Those things are not inherently *bad*. They provide a useful function. It's fine when they're sold online or in catalogs or stores. We can go get them there. They just shouldn't be sold *here*. This is supposed to be a sanctuary, a sacred space, a house of prayer, not a marketplace.

We think of greed as the insatiable desire for more money and possessions. And it's one of those things that we feel like we know it when we see it. When a pharmaceutical company marks up the price of insulin hundreds of dollars just because they *can*, we look at that and see greed. The problem with greed is that it's not always that obvious. It can take on much subtler forms. When it starts taking on the form of, "How can I get more or hold on to what I have," then greed can start to just look like "business as usual."

It's like in the movie *Wall Street* that epitomized corporate greed in the 1980s. Michael Douglas plays Gordon Gekko, this incredibly wealthy and powerful financial tycoon, who at one point gives a speech where he says, "Greed is *good*. Greed is *right*. Greed *works*. Greed *clarifies*, *cuts through*, and *captures* the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all of its forms – greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge – has marked the upward surge of mankind." He's saying that greed pushes people and societies to do *more*, to do *better*. And that desire for

more drives people and economies and countries to grow. He was supposed to be a *tragic* figure in that movie, but he ended up *resonating* with people and becoming someone that people aspired to be like.

We live in a culture that has *normalized* greed. We look at it and say, “That’s just *business*. That’s capitalism. That’s what makes things go and grow. Business as usual.” And it’s hard to differentiate sometimes between “business as usual” and greed. What we have to be careful of – in our business practices and our churches and our personal lives – is when we normalize those subtle forms of greed. When we say, “No, this is okay. This is necessary. I *need* this. This is just the way things work.”

If Jesus rode his donkey into our businesses, which tables would he overturn? Which tables would he overturn in our *churches*? In our *homes* and *personal lives*?

Last week we talked about gluttony, which mostly pertains to food and drink and asks the question, “How much do we *need*?” Greed pertains mostly to money and possessions, but it asks the same question, “How much do we *need*?” And greed can be determined in part by asking the question, “Who is this *helping*, and who is it *hurting*?” Is it only helping *me* and no one else? Is it helping me at the *expense* of someone else? Those are hard questions that we *have* to ask, in our businesses, our churches, and our personal lives – who are my actions *helping* and who are they *hurting*?

The way that we *resist* greed is by practicing *charity*. Now, we’ve become accustomed to thinking about charity as being a handout; something we give to someone in need, even though they haven’t done anything to *earn* it. If we have *normalized* greed, then there are definitely

some ways in which we have attached *negative* associations to the idea of charity. But *charity* comes from the Latin word *caritas*, which means *love*. Not a *romantic* love, but a *benevolent* love, an *altruistic* love, the kind of love with which God loves us; love which seeks nothing but the well-being and blessing of the other.

Look what Jesus does after he drives out the moneychangers and vendors who were practicing their subtle and normalized form of greed in the temple. It says, “The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.” He *gave* them something (healing, life) as an act of love. Jesus did not just take back the temple for his *own* sake. He took it back to help those in need; to create a sanctuary for those in need. And that is the mantra of charity, of *caritas*: Not for my own sake, but for those in need.

Jesus cleansed the temple to reestablish it as a house of prayer for *all* people. And here’s the thing. We think of the cleansing of the temple as a one-time thing that Jesus did 2,000 years ago today. But scripture says (in 1 Corinthians 3), “Do you not know that *you* are God’s temple and that God’s spirit dwells in you? For God’s temple is holy, and *you are that temple.*” In what ways do *we* need to be cleansed of the subtle forms of greed that have been normalized in our society and set up shop within us, so that we – our bodies, our lives – can be houses of prayer, sanctuaries for those in need? What tables need to be overturned in us so that we can practice charity, *caritas*, sharing God’s love with those who are desperate and hurting? Not just giving them a handout, putting money in a jar or offering plate, but *loving* them, *knowing* them.

Charity resists the urge to accumulate for myself, instead *sharing* what we have in a way that seeks nothing but the well-being and blessing of those in need. When we do *that*, our lives will proclaim Christ as the king who has come to save us *all*.