

YOU CANNOT SERVE GOD AND WEALTH

A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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"You cannot serve God and wealth."ⁱ Strong words here at one of the wealthiest universities in the world, in the heart of the Silicon Valley. This morning's gospel lesson from the sixteenth chapter of book of Lukeⁱⁱ follows a lot of condemnatory words by Jesus earlier in the book, like: "Woe to you who are rich...Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry." (6:24,25) "You fool[s]...who store up treasures for [your]selves but are not rich for God." (12:20,21) "Sell what you have, and give alms." (12:33) Later Luke will report Jesus saying that "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (18:25)

What does this mean for Stanford and its students? After all, the institution was established, according to its Founding Grant, as "a university of the highest grade [with]...its object [being] to qualify its students for personal success." Many have come here with a rags to riches dream, or at least what in Fitzgerald's Great Gatsby is called "a heightened sensitivity to the promises of life."ⁱⁱⁱ Does that mean that they should not try to store up treasures for themselves here on earth^{iv} for fear of God's eternal disfavor?

I've had the privilege to explore this kind of question, along with many other questions, over the last two weeks with a class of fourteen Stanford students and two graduate assistants in what is called "Sophomore College." This program is now in its tenth year, and it brings together some three hundred Stanford sophomores with a couple dozen faculty members for an intense two and a half week experience in one class, meeting every day with their faculty member and the two course assistants -- taking field trips, going to film screenings and experiencing other course-related activities together.^v My course is rather presumptuously entitled "The Meaning of Life: Moral and Spiritual Inquiry Through Literature." We study novels, short stories and plays like the Great Gatsby, Flannery O'Connor's Displaced Person, John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men, and Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. All of these titles will be familiar to those of you who have been attending my July sermon series for the last two years.

On Tuesday night we were at the San Jose Repertory Theatre, attending a performance of George Bernard Shaw's Major Barbara. It's very well done, and it'll be there through October 3, so I encourage any of you who might be interested to get tickets and see it during the next two weeks. In the following day's class, one of my students asked what the Bible would say about the perspective of the millionaire capitalist character whose views seem to triumph at the end of the play. I suggested the verse from this morning's lectionary: "You cannot serve God and wealth." Like a good Socratic teacher, I then threw the discussion back to the members of the class. I guess it's now my turn, standing alone in this pulpit, to try to fathom what Jesus may have meant by those words and how they might apply both to the play and to us sitting here today.

The central story line of Shaw's 1905 play concerns successful industrialist Andrew Undershaft and his daughter Barbara, who has become a Major in the Salvation Army in the West Ham section of London. Both agree that poverty is unconscionable in twentieth-century England, but they have very different solutions. Barbara's is charitable service, provided one-by-one and one-on-one in an inner-city shelter for the hungry and dispossessed. Andrew's is robust capitalism, as exemplified by his company which provides good wages, benefits and working conditions in a company town with well-run schools, hospitals, libraries and recreational facilities. When it looks as if Barbara's shelter is going to be closed for lack of funds, her father steps in, with another successful businessman, to save it. Barbara had assumed that her superiors would refuse the money, tainted as it is, coming from the likes of a whiskey distiller and an arms manufacturer. When it's accepted, a deeply disillusioned Barbara quits the Salvation Army. Eventually, though, after some very tough dialogue and a visit to his business, Barbara is converted to her father's perspective on how best to conquer poverty. Her finance becomes the successor CEO to her father's company. Barbara's commitment to saving souls then continues in this corporate world of "fullfed, quarrelsome, snobbish, uppish creatures, all standing on their little rights and dignities."^{vi}

Now why isn't Andrew's view, and that of the newly-converted Barbara, clearly condemned by Jesus's biblical injunction that you cannot serve God and wealth? Well, first of all, Jesus obviously didn't mean, when he said "Blessed are the poor,"^{vii} that all material well-being was to be denounced. Jesus didn't mean that the hungry should not be fed, the homeless not be sheltered, and the naked not be clothed. Indeed, he made it clear that one would be following in his footsteps and serving him by working to raise the standard of living of those who were most economically disadvantaged. And, as he says in one of his last lessons to his disciples at the end of the book of Matthew, not to work to improve the lot of the poor is literally to risk damnation.^{viii}

Here Jesus stands firmly in the tradition of the Israelite prophets who, as you heard in this morning's reading from Jeremiah^{ix} cite God as saying, "For the hurt of my poor people, I am hurt... Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" The prophet Isaiah quotes God to challenge the upper classes of his day for explicitly persecuting the poor: "It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses...Ah, you who write oppressive statutes, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless."^x

So one meaning of "You cannot serve God and wealth" seems to be that you can't accumulate wealth at the expense of the poor, either by literally robbing them or by supporting legislation that disadvantages them. Andrew Undershaft has not done that. Instead, he's worked to raise the standard of living of the poor within his world, both through his business and through his contributions to charity.

Perhaps the essential meaning of Jesus's words has to do with making an idol of wealth -- having the accumulation of wealth become the most important thing in the world...becoming so attached to wealth as a master that one becomes enslaved by it. Idolatry for Christians and Jews and Muslims of course harkens back to the story in the Torah and the Qur'an where the children of Israel make a graven image to bow down to while Moses is up on the top of Mount Sinai talking to God and receiving the Ten Commandments.^{xi} In the New Testament book of

Colossians, greed or covetousness is specifically identified as idolatry. It is, of course, possible to accumulate wealth without being greedy, without being unethical, without becoming attached to it.

I can remember my own mother, who had times in her life where she was both wealthy and relatively poor, saying with a shrug of her shoulders, "Here today, gone tomorrow," and "Easy come, easy go." For a large part of her life I believe she really meant it. Hermann Hesse's title character in his novel Siddhartha becomes a business man during one period of his life. For many years he's able to taste riches and power while remaining a holy man in his heart -- to live the life of the world without belonging to it. He puts relationships ahead of personal advantage and deals with everyone equally: "He did not treat the rich foreign merchant differently from the servant who shaved him and the peddlers from whom he bought bananas."^{xii} He was actually quite successful, but he retained a kind of disinterest, not becoming absorbed by and attached to his business. Eventually, though, as the author puts it, "The soul sickness of the rich crept over him...The world had caught him: pleasure, covetousness...and finally also that vice that he had always despised and scorned as the most foolish -- acquisitiveness. Property, possessions and riches had also finally trapped him. They were no longer a game...they had become a chain and burden."^{xiii} He becomes so miserable that he almost commits suicide, saved at the last moment only by remembering the ancient beginning and ending of the Hindu prayers that he used to say: the word "Om" which refers to God. As the text says, "He remembered all that he had forgotten, all that was divine."^{xiv} He then gives up most of his possessions and moves away; his new work merges service to others with making a living.

Maybe that's another dimension of Jesus's aphorism that you cannot serve God and wealth -- the risk of radical separation between the Sabbath and the rest of the week...between listening to the prophets and generating profit. I wrote a book with a colleague from the Harvard Business School a few years ago, entitled Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values With Business Life.^{xv} Unless you can feel at some level that your work is done literally for the glory of God, you risk the idolatry of materialism and acquisitiveness. Finally, I think another dimension of Jesus's proverb is that pursuing and maintaining wealth can lead to self-satisfied indifference if not to outright selfishness. At the beginning of Fitzgerald's Great Gatsby, the very wealthy couple, Daisy and Tom, are described like this: "They had spent a year in France, for no particular reason, and then drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together."^{xvi} By the end of the book, after the husband of Tom's mistress has shot Gatsby and then committed suicide, the narrator explains: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy -- they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made..."^{xvii}

I personally grew up comfortably, but my parents always preached a doctrine of social responsibility to me: "To whom much is given is much expected." That's Luke 12:48. I'm grateful to them for that, because it didn't allow for self-satisfaction or indifference. However, I was able to take an easy way out in a sense -- become a minister, where I'm paid a steady salary and can serve God naturally as part of my job, especially in as beautiful and stimulating a place as Stanford. I admire hard-working lawyers and physicians and engineers and business people and countless others who have accumulated wealth, but who have vision and passion and give of themselves to others tirelessly every day.

Now how about Andrew Undershaft and his daughter Barbara? How do they measure up against the maxim "You cannot serve God and wealth?" Andrew is provocative when he claims that his religion is being a Millionaire,^{xviii} but he quickly makes it clear that he means poverty is the greatest social evil -- both for himself and others -- and that he'd like to see each and every person acquire enough money for a decent life and power enough to be one's own master.^{xix} There's a question about whether his money is tainted because he's an arms manufacturer who's willing to sell to anyone with the ability to pay,^{xx} but that would be another sermon. He also has a troubling sense of corporate power in society, especially in influencing politics, but that might sound familiar to many here, especially in an election year.^{xxi} Yet, at the same time, he recognizes the power of true religious faith, as in his daughter Barbara. Most of all, he's an honest and generous business leader, committed to eradicating all vestiges of poverty for everyone within his realm of power and influence. As for Barbara, she gains a bigger vision of fighting poverty than by charity alone. She learns of the importance of systematic change, harnessing the power of capitalism as appropriate. In the end she regains a sadder-but-wiser understanding of spiritual power as well, to which she remains committed. She now sees her work not as a bribe of heaven, converting hungry people by giving them bread, but instead engaged, systemic work throughout society, raising hell to heaven and man to God.^{xxii}

So, it's my claim that the words "You cannot serve God and wealth" by no means signify that wealth per se is evil. Nor should Stanford abandon its goal of qualifying students for personal success. Instead, I believe the message is four-fold: First, as the prophets have insisted, we best serve God by promoting and improving the material well-being of the poor. Second, none of us must ever make an idol of wealth, allowing it to become so important in our lives that we are attached to and enslaved by it. Third, our work life must be infused with our religious values, or otherwise it risks becoming at best acquisitiveness and at worst greed. Fourth, "To whom much is given is much expected," as the Bible puts it. We must be good stewards of our talents and resources, ultimately devoting them to making a better world for all.

"No slave can serve two masters; for the slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

NOTES

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- i. Luke 6:13.
 - ii. Luke 16: 10-13.
 - iii. F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (New York: Collier Books, 1992), p. 6.
 - iv. See Matthew 6:19-20.
 - v. See Ray Delgado, "Sophomore College: A Decade of Broadening Horizons," Stanford Report, September 1, 2004.
 - vi. George Bernard Shaw, Major Barbara (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 152.
 - vii. Luke 6:20.
 - viii. See Matthew 25: 31-46.
 - ix. Jeremiah 8:18 - 19:1.
 - x. Isaiah 3:14.
 - xi. See Exodus 18:18-20, 20:3-4, 32:1-6; Qur'an 6:91, 7:154, 17:2.
 - xii. Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha (New York: New Directions, 1957), p. 57.
 - xiii. Ibid., p. 63.
 - xiv. Ibid., p. 72.
 - xv. Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan, Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values with Business Life (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).
 - xvi. Fitzgerald, Great Gatsby, p. 10.
 - xvii. Ibid., pp. 187-188.
 - xviii. Shaw, Major Barbara, p. 88.
 - xix. Ibid., p. 94.
 - xx. Ibid., pp. 139-139.

xxi. Ibid., p. 128.

xxii. Ibid., pp. 149-153