

Matthew 6.25-34
15th Sunday after Trinity
9 September 2018
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

You can either be a slave to mammon or its master. The same goes for how you stand toward God. You can either be God's slave or try to be His master. But you can't do both.

That's the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel for today. And it makes perfect sense. You can't be your child's friend and his parent. You have to be one or the other. You can't be your employer's employee and also his boss. That'd be disaster. So also, you can't be a slave to mammon and at the same time be its master. And you can't serve God while also trying to boss Him around. It's an impossibility.

Intuitively both of these statements make complete sense to us. And you might say, "So what? What's the big takeaway? I've already got this figured out. It's common sense."

And so you go on in life, quite satisfied that you've got this whole thing nailed. How does it go in popular culture? "God first?" That's what we say. And somehow you work it out in your mind that the way you live is a "God-first" way of living. You take what you're comfortable with—your own level of commitment to God—and say, "Yup. That's God first. At least for me."

But Jesus doesn't let you off the hook that easily. He's knows what's in your heart. You don't. That's the depth of your sin and corruption. You can't know it unless it's revealed.

And that's exactly what He does today. He reveals it.

Corruption is an interesting thing. When you think of government corruption, it's the inability of the government to correct itself. What's against the law becomes the way of doing business. It's the air you breathe. The government not only turns a blind eye to it, it takes it as the norm. And it can't be corrected unless something or someone from outside the system comes and exposes it.

That's exactly how it is with your own sinful corruption. You're so used to it you can't see it. It was how you were born. It's how you're wired. It's how you think and act. It's how everyone thinks and acts. And so it's not only *inside* you, it's *all around* you. Reinforced every day from sun up till sun down. The very movement of your heart.

So how in the world is Jesus going to reveal this sinful corruption? After all, in popular "Christian" culture—you hear it all over the place—people claim to live "God-first" lives. In other words, people claim to know that you can't be God's slave and God's boss at the same time.

And yet, one Christian can't stand to miss church on Sunday. While another is quite happy with once a month, or twice a year.

One Christian will never miss Bible study. And another is so unfamiliar with her Bible that she's not sure if 1 and 2 Chronicles are in the New Testament or the Old.

One Christian never leaves dinner without having family devotions. And another forgets to ask the Lord's blessing on the meal.

And it's all the same. "God first. At least to me. That's the level of commitment I'm comfortable with." Try to expose the corruption hidden there, and it's all defenses. Like a judge talking to his colleague about taking bribes and the latter saying, "It could be a lot worse."

When such warnings become like water rolling off a duck's back, what can you do? What God demands is that He be the master and you the slave. And everyone's got it figured out what that should look like.

But now, Jesus gives you a litmus test. Because there's an entailment, a symptom, an indicator you can't argue with. This is how it goes. If God is truly your master, then mammon will be your slave. That's God first. But if you're trying to be God's master, then you're actually a slave to mammon.

And so, even if what true slavery to God looks like can evaporate in the mists of relativity, you have one thing you can look at: your cash flow.

No look, this isn't Dave Ramsey stuff. This isn't practical advice on how to manage your money. The litmus test Jesus gives has nothing to do with whether you've overextended yourself in debt. Whether you've got adequate savings for retirement. Whether you're on track to pay off your house quicker than the Joneses. Wow many times a week you eat out. Etc. That doesn't matter to Him.

What does matter to Him is whether you're mammon's slave or mammon's boss. Whether your confidence lies in your pocketbook, no matter how big or small, or in God. It's a matter of the heart. But this matter of the heart you can read from the outside so that not even your heart can deceive you.

And here's how you can tell: God gave you everything you have in this life for one purpose only—for you to serve. Not for you to serve you. But for you to serve your *neighbor*.

Your hands? They belong to your neighbor. For his good.

Your mouth? That, too, is for your neighbor. To build him up and not tear him down.

Your marriage? Not for you, but for your spouse. For *her* good, not yours.

And your money and income? Not for you. But for your *neighbor*. And for your neighbor's good.

So that what you possess you have as if you don't have. Good things given by God to you for your neighbor's good.

So when you want to ask yourself, "Am I God's slave or trying to be His boss," you find the answer here: what do I think of everything the Lord has placed into my hands? Is it for me or for others, for their good?

If it's for you, you're mammon's slave and you can't possibly be serving God.

But if you lay hold of it all and use it for the sake of those who need it.

And if you let God rule, who says in Luke 6[.38], "Give, and it shall be given to you."

And if your trust is in God who says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you,"

then you're the boss, master, and lord over mammon. You've turned it into a cowering slave doing whatever you, its master, command it to do. And mammon has become to you nothing but a tool for bringing help and good where it's needed.

That's why God's Old Testament people were commanded to tithe to the Lord. To give Him a whole tenth of what they brought in. And not the last tenth. But the first. So that they could *possess* riches and not *be possessed* by them. So that they would put their trust in the *Lord* above all things, who promises to give daily bread, and not turn their pocketbook into their god.

And that's a good place to start. A tenth. The New Testament knows nothing of the 10th.

Oh, I know all the reasons not to do it. Uncle Sam takes a big bite already. Life is difficult today—bills, college, mortgage.

But talk about a big bite. Jesus commanded His disciples to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's. In those days when the taxman came knocking, there was no tax rate. He took whatever he needed to make his contract. That's why Zacchaeus was so hated.

And difficult? Today you're worried about your August electric bill; back then the concern was whether there'd be anything for dinner.

No, the Lord has blessed us so much we don't even know what a tax bite is; and we, whose stomachs aren't bloated by starvation, have no idea what difficulty is.

One tenth. That's all. To the Lord. To support the proclamation of His Word. To bring the help of Jesus to everyone who needs it. To baptize the unbaptized. To bring the light of Christ and His righteousness into the darkness of sin and despair. To bring saving faith through Word and Sacrament where there's only condemning unbelief.

Fellow members of St. John's: if one tenth came in to our congregation this is what the ministry of the Word would look like here: all by itself St. John's could put three foreign missionaries on the ground in perpetuity; here at church four pastors—one for every 200 people instead of one for every 400—would be active, every day, with God's saving Word and Sacrament; and our help for the poor and needy of our community could exceed \$100K per year. Think of it. Just a tenth. And talk about help and good! What greater good than the gift of eternal life. What greater good than comforting the poor and needy.

That's good it does for others. But how about you? What's in it for you? It's the great killing of the flesh. That's what the whole Gospel lesson is about at the end of the day. It's not about seeing results in terms of numbers of missionaries and pastors. It's not about how much can be done for the poor and needy. Those are great good things. Don't get me wrong.

But what Jesus cares about as far as *you* are concerned isn't your wallet; it's your soul. He doesn't want to save your pocketbook. He wants to save you. And He knows what you're like. He knows what the human heart is like. How it seeks first to stuff its bag with "all these things" and then shoehorns the kingdom of God and His righteousness in around all the stuff that gets packed into the bag. But He also knows that bag isn't big enough. And He knows that all that

can do is set the heart at war with itself, give the flesh the upper hand, and sever His baptized and saved Christians from their baptism and salvation.

And He doesn't want that. He wants all people to be saved. Including you. He died for all. Including you. He shed His blood for everyone. Including you. He is the firstfruits of the resurrection of all flesh. Including yours. And He has ascended to heaven to prepare a place there. Even for you. That's His kingdom and His righteousness. That's what He wants you to seek. Because if you have that, you have it all. That's His promise. And God never lies. Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you. Fellow-redeemed: If God didn't spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, do you really think that He won't graciously give you all things?

Hardly. And you know that. If you have Christ, you're richer than Bill Gates and George Soros combined. Because you have Him who, though He was rich, was made poor for your sake, so that through His poverty you might be made rich. If you have Christ, the value of your life can't be counted in gold and silver. It refuses to be. It's of far greater value. For its worth is measured by His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering death. God's Son! For you! And if you have Christ, you don't have just this life and a cold, dark ending under 6 feet of dirt, but an empty grave on the Last Day and eternal life and His everlasting righteousness.

That's what slavery to God looks like.

Just see to it that you seek first that kingdom and that righteousness. For then, through faith in the Son of God, all of these other things will be added unto you.

Amen.

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