

Money Talks 3

“Where did my money go?”

October 12, 2014

This message was shared by Pastor Kurt Jacobson at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, grace and peace be with you all.

Today we're finishing “Money Talks” and I hope this topic has opened some conversation with others about money and the management of it. If you missed either of the previous two messages, they're on our website for you to read, watch or listen. Two weeks ago we faced the subject of ownership and management and the truth that we don't own our money, but we are in charge of it. Last week we looked at the importance of a having a budget and if you're not controlling your money, it'll control you.

If you need help with managing money right now, here's a good place to go first. Lutheran Social Services offers free and confidential budget and debt counseling – available via phone or online 24/7.

Today we're going to consider how money and in particular, unsecured debt enslaves us. To start we're headed straight to the Bible and a challenging thing Jesus had to say to some folks who were enslaved and unable to see it and unwilling to consider God as a source of freedom. He says this: *I tell you most solemnly that anyone who chooses a life of sin is trapped in a dead-end life and is, in fact, a slave.* (John 8:34 The Message)

Jesus is speaking to people of Jewish descent who resisted much of what he had to say. So these folks respond to Jesus saying “*We are children of Abraham and we've never been in slavery to anyone.*” Faithful Jews could tell the story of their history that once upon a time they were back in Egypt and “oh yes, we were slaves.” Then God led them to the Promised Land where they lived and then were taken over by the Babylonians and “oh yes, we got carried off into slavery again.” Then the Assyrians moved in and they became slaves again. These are the biographical chunks in Jewish history showing the rhythm of God's relation with them. God was always rescuing them from slavery.

There's a similar truth for us, though I believe we don't think about it much. We're constantly in danger of becoming enslaved. And money is one of the biggest things we get enslaved to. From it, we need God to free us. When Jesus said, “*anyone who chooses a life of sin is in fact a slave*” it does apply to the predicaments and messes people get into with money.

You see, sin is a condition, not an action like lying, cheating, stealing. Sin is separation from God and it happens when you are not in sync with God. When we choose to go down paths in life not in sync with God – we choose sin. And we all do it. We will always do this and God is always reeling us in – to free us from sin.

This is true in lot of areas of life, including how we manage money. I like what this Bible translation says: *anyone who chooses a life of sin is trapped in a dead-end life.* When you are choosing a life that isn't what God has in mind for you, you are on a dead end path. Money has the power to lead you down a path that isn't necessarily good, even if it might be fun, attractive, or the path of least resistance

right now. When money controls you, you are in essence, a slave. You've lost your freedom. That's what Jesus is telling us.

I've heard this said: "Americans have become far too comfortable with debt." Do you agree? With regard to the debt we hold, is it sometimes sin? Recall what sin is – a separation from God. The problem with debt is it makes us a slave to money, so that we can't be a servant to God.

I get credit card offers in the mail regularly. Do you? Usually inside the envelope is an insert with the title "Initial Disclosure Statement." Recently I read that insert and do you know the word "debt" is never used. It's "Unpaid balances." This statement defines all the rights the credit company has over me. The credit card can make me a slave of that company.

I said last week a goal is to live free of unsecured debt. Carrying a balance on a credit card is unsecured debt for stuff you bought in the past that you're still paying for today. Getting unsecured debt out of your life gets you off the dead end road.

If debt is a trap of seeking to have more – and things you can't pay for right now – then what's the answer? Contentment. Don't chase after more. You'll never be satisfied. Chase after contentment. There's only one place from where it comes from. Contentment is the BENEFIT of seeking God. That's what Jesus was saying in discussion with the Jewish folks. "If the Son sets you free, you will be free through and through." Only with God in the picture, will you find contentment with your financial situation. When your life is spent on seeking God and letting God's vision direct you, your finances can follow suit.

Yet, we all know people get knocked off the course of seeking God's guidance for life. There are so many forces pulling at us, even when we're at our best. Regarding money, I want to talk about three forces I call "green monsters." They knock us off the course of being good money managers.

1 The first green monster is this thing - a credit card. I can buy things with it, even when I don't have money. They're cool and colorful. Sometimes they have pretty pictures on them. There are 2.4 billion cards in in the world. (creditcards.com) If you stacked them up it would be 70 miles high – 13 times higher than Mt Everest. They get the name green monster because a person making purchases with them will spend, according to Dunn & Bradstreet, 12-18% more than when using cash.

The monster's ugly side is this:

- The average balance per credit card for an American is \$3,779 with average consumer holding over 3 cards. (*Cambridge Credit Counseling*)
- Making the minimum payment will take 11 years to pay off this balance.
- It's when the average credit card debt reaches over \$18,000 do card holders seek help. ("Changes in U.S. Family Finances from 2007 to 2010: Evidence from the Survey of Consumer Finances; Federal Reserve Bulletin, June 2012 Vol 98 No 2.)

In 2011 the entire credit card industry collected \$18.5 billion in fees. (bcsalliance.com/creditcard_profits.html) No wonder these little green monsters are so healthy at eating away at us.

2 Green Monster of Advertising: knocks us off course of being good money managers:

Some 3000 advertising impressions come upon us every day. They weave into our thinking and acting telling us we need things. Think about those impressions on your brain and the impact it has on you. What if you were bombarded with 3,000 bits of historical information each day? You'd have a PhD in history by age 12. Or what if you had 3,000 bible verses coming at you every day. You could easily be a Bible geek! Yet, we fool ourselves thinking "I'm not really affected by all that advertising. I can make my own decisions." Right! Any idea what is spent on advertising in America? In 2010 it's estimated the amount was \$143 billion. Why? Because the businesses advertising made more than \$143 billion because of it. We're suckers for advertising and it influences us. We are slaves – we get trapped by this – and we go where they want us to go. Now I'm well aware that some of you work for businesses that advertise. It's part of the system and the American economy in which consumer spending drives 70% of it. I'm not anti-credit cards or advertising. But two words: be careful and be aware.

Advertising creates wants we didn't know we had, and it turns our wants into needs. The other thing it does is turn your needs into things. You and I have lots of needs in our lives which are real, but very seldom are they things. Rather, they're intangibles: people, relationships, purpose, hope. On these needs we spend little of our income.

3 Third green monster that knocks us off course is the disease of Comparonomics.

Nathan Dungan is president and founder of "Share Save Spend" over in Minneapolis. His book for parents "Prodigal Sons and Material Girls: How Not to Be Your Child's ATM" provides lots of great parenting tips regarding money. But he also says this to us all: we determine our financial well-being not based on normal economic principles, like how well our material needs are met, or our budget is balanced. Rather, we determine our financial well-being by looking at the Jones' next door and how our circle friends are living. Comparonomics. What we fail to ask ourselves is this: have we gone into debt to be the Jones? Are they happier? Are they living the way they live because it's a perfect expression of the values they hold? Or are the Jones' looking across the street at the Smith's to measure their well-being? I'm willing to bet it's the latter.

Jim Collins, author of Good to Great, says that comparison is the chief secular sin of our society. (jimcollins.com/articles) Comparison makes us do all kinds of things that are unhelpful and destructive. Comparison is the trap that makes you live someone else's life and miss your own and the life God has in mind for you. Comparanomics often times produces debt. Debt can cripple us and put us on a dead end path.

Being in debt makes you unable to AFFORD TODAY. You can't afford today when you're living in debt. The average household today uses 14% of income to pay for revolving credit (not mortgages).

Being in debt makes you unable to provide for your FUTURE. If you're having trouble paying now for yesterday's spending – you're not thinking about tomorrow. God wants you to think about tomorrow, because your money is partly to provide for yourself later in life.

Being in debt makes you unable to be GENEROUS. You were created to be generous. You're not a storage facility – you're a delivery station. God gives us two hands – one for getting – one for giving. We were created to be generous – and when we're not that way, something is wrong.

Being in debt makes you unable to be CONTENT.

Do your own gut check – think of time you spend managing your money so you're in control and confident about it? How much time do you spend each week stressing about money? If the second category is bigger – there's a problem. Being in debt makes you unable to be content.

Being in debt makes you unable to RETURN to God.

God is saying *“I want you to trust me with what's going on in your life. I don't want you to think this money is going to do it for you. I gave it to you for a reason – but I didn't want you to think it would take care of all your needs. I'm the only one who can do that. I want you to trust me with that.”*

You can find out if you are trusting God by being willing to return a growing percentage of money to God – and having God fulfill your needs, rather than holding tightly to money and thinking it will fulfill you. God wants you to be part of the network for the biggest, most important enterprise on this earth – that being God's presence in the world through the Church. With all its imperfections and its worldliness at the same time – the church is God's main stage for acting. Being in debt makes us unable to return to God and be a healthy part of God's church.

These three – be generous, be content – being able to return to God – combine to make you available to God to enjoy money, managing it wisely to honor God and bless others.

Let's pray:

God, we need you. We need you to be at the center of our lives and we need you to free us from all the sin that enslaves us – and separates us from you. For the blessing of money – we need your help to manage it faithfully – using it to enjoy wisely, to care for ourselves and to trust that as we share it, it will bless others. Each of us have our own green monsters – some because we don't feel we have enough money and others because we have so much that we're not using it to honor you and fully trust you to guide and center our lives. Help us all to come closer to you – to be set free from slavery and to serve you and your people in the ways of Jesus Christ, who sets us free. Amen.