

A Den of Robbers

(Mark 11:15-17)

I. Introduction

- A. There has always been something of a tension between church and money
 - 1. People in Paul's day were already making money on religion (**1 Tim 6: 5b**).
 - a. One of the characteristics of false teachers in the NT was their greed
 - 1) Their teaching was "*for the sake of dishonest gain*" (**Tit 1:11**)
 - 2) Peter warns, "*In their greed these teachers will exploit you*" (**2 Pet 2:3**)
 - b. Many distrust "*church*" today because they think it's all about the money
 - 1) Frankly, it's hard not to get impression from watching religious TV
 - 2) Some religious programming comes across like *church infomercial*
 - c. Is it any wonder that some wonder if church is about God or Mammon?
 - 2. But then there's the "*necessary*" part of the "*necessary evil*" of money
 - a. Paul didn't seem awkward or apologetic about giving (**1 Cor 16:2**)
 - 1) He takes up 2 chapters stressing 1 special contribution (**2 Cor 8-9**)
 - 2) He's blunt—compares them to Philippi, warns "*reap what you sow*"
 - b. Jesus wasn't in ministry for the money, but he taught a lot about it
 - 1) Jesus stresses money more than any topic except kingdom of God
 - 2) He even stressed the church offering (*remember the widow's mite?*)
 - 3. So even though it is awkward at times, we do have to preach about money
- B. One blog I read suggested that we need to find new ways to preach on money
 - 1. It's uncomfortable to bring up the topic—so we need a fresh approach
 - a. Remove chairs/pews before preach, "*We had to sell them to pay lights*"
 - b. Singing and dancing nuns seemed to increased contributions in *Sister Act*
 - c. Maybe have the deacons dress in rags and sit by the door with a tin cup!
 - 2. **Point:** There's really no easy way to talk about the church and money
 - a. It'll always be a bit awkward, especially from a preacher on salary!
 - b. Jesus had a fresh approach-- He made a whip and turned over tables!
 - c. I won't use that approach— but that is the story I want to look at today

II. A Den of Robbers: Then

- A. Jewish sacrifices had to be offered at the Temple in Jerusalem— pilgrimages
 - 1. It was hard enough to lug a sacrificial animal from Jericho, let alone Rome
 - a. It made sense to buy a sacrificial animal after you arrived in Jerusalem.
 - b. So a thriving business in sacrificial animals grew— within Temple
 - 2. Temple complex was in a sense a separate city, much like the Vatican
 - a. It had its own currency; to buy an offering one had to exchange money.
 - b. Entrepreneurs were happy to provide that service—within the Temple
 - 3. This becomes the background of our familiar story—or rather, two stories
- B. Synoptics place the cleansing of the temple in Jesus' last week. (**Mk 11:15-17**).
 - 1. Jesus refers to merchants and money-changers as “*den of robbers*” (**11:17**)
 - a. This makes it sound like Jesus is condemning their **dishonesty**
 - b. System required sacrificial animals be blessed or approved by a priest
 - 1) Most of sacrifices were refused, so worshipper had to buy one there
 - 2) Their “imperfect” animal was then confiscated... and later resold!
 - c. Money-changers charged excessive fees despite the Law against usury
 - 2. So the system was set-up to make money off of people in name of God
 - 3. **Factoid:** “*Den of Robbers*” is from Jeremiah’s Temple sermon (**Jer 7:11**)
 - a. Jeremiah’s point isn’t primarily about what they did at the Temple
 - b. He was upset they committed adultery, perjury, robbery before going!
- C. John gives us a slightly different angle in his version of the story (**Jn 2:13-16**).
 - 1. The point isn’t so much the dishonesty of their business—it’s the business
 - a. Jesus says, “*How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market*” (**2:16**)
 - b. The Greek work here is ἐμπόριον, from which we get the word *emporium*
 - 1) So the NAS has “*place of business.*” The ESV has “*house of trade*”
 - 2) Petterson, “*Stop turning my Father’s house into a shopping mall*”
 - 2. John has Jesus condemning a system that confused the Temple with market
 - a. He isn’t condemning merchants/money-changers, but the Temple clergy
 - b. They traded God’s “*house of prayer*” for a system to make them money.
 - c. And immediately afterward, the Priests decided Jesus had to die (**11:18**).

III. Den of Robbers: Today

- A. It's easy for merchants/money-changes to find their way into the church
 - 1. By 1500, the church controlled 1/3 of wealth of Germany, France and Italy
 - a. Popes were more financially and politically powerful than most kings
 - b. Church raised huge amounts selling indulgences, the forgiveness of sin
 - 1) Tetzel's line, "*As coin in coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs*"
 - 2) Luther finally pitched a fit and overturned tables of the merchants
 - c. How did that happen? How did church and Mammon become such allies?
 - 2. Modern health-n-wealth churches sound more like Tetzel than Luther
 - a. God wants His children to prosper... and prosper always means money
 - b. If we have enough faith to give (*money*), God will prosper us (*money*)
 - 1) People who struggle financially do so because they don't have faith
 - 2) So prosperity becomes modern indulgence sold by the church!
 - 3. How did it get to point where faithfulness and finances are equated?
- B. Is it possible that this could be a temptation for us in our materialistic culture?
 - 1. Can the church today to be influenced by money and not even realize it?
 - a. Are subtle forces at work want to turn the church into a marketplace?
 - b. Can church focus so much on material that we loose sight of kingdom?
 - 2. Church we worked with in Kiev in 93 met in a rented school (\$2 a week)
 - a. Church leaders wanted a building ("*legitimacy*"); church in US offered.
 - b. One of missionaries warned the church, "*Who do you really want to be?*"
With a harsh winter coming and so many hungry and destitute around you, do you want to be known as a church that ignored the poor because it built a building?
 - 3. Maybe the church at home needs to ask, "*Who do we really want to be?*"
 - a. We must meet somewhere (*can't rent for \$2*) Church buildings are good
 - b. **Point:** Church can get so focused on facilities that we forget who we are
 - 1) Church so strapped by mortgage that it begs for money all the time.
 - 2) Church so obligated to brick-n-mortar that that becomes its focus
 - 3) Church can focus on making budget and not focus on spiritual life
 - 4) Church can horde its bank account and ignore the needs of others
 - c. If that happens, church needs to turn over tables and chase out merchants

IV. Conclusion

- A. There is a pattern here that should be of more than historical interest
 - 1. Somehow the pursuit of God is replaced by a focus on money & material
 - a. The Jews turned the Temple into a marketplace for buying and selling
 - b. The medieval church came to focus on material wealth and power
 - c. The health and wealth church sells prosperity as its modern indulgence
 - d. Local churches can become over-focused on their own facilities
 - 2. How did the Jews or the medieval church get so off base about money?
 - a. How did ancient trees become the Petrified Forest National Park in AZ?
 - 1) Gradually, over time, the cellulose in tree is replaced by minerals
 - 2) Result is something that looks like a tree, but is really made of stone
 - b. In same way, the kingdom of God can be replaced by things of money
 - c. What was left looked like a temple or church—but it was marketplace
 - 3. When that happens, the tables need to be turned over & merchants chased!
- B. Let's go back to the slide warning about churches forgetting who they are
 - 1. Notice how it makes perfect sense if we replace churches with Christians
 - a. Christians strapped by their mortgage have nothing for others
 - b. Christians so obligated by material things that becomes their focus
 - c. Christians can focusing budget and not focusing on their spiritual life
 - d. Christians hoarding their bank account and ignore the needs of others
 - 2. Ultimately, churches get off track because Christians get off track
 - a. We allow the values of kingdom of God to be replaced by the world
 - b. When that happens, we need to make changes— turn over our tables
 - c. If we refuse to do so, the Lord just might shake things up himself!
- C. You were expecting a sermon on giving... so did I when I started this
 - 1. What we both have this morning is a plea to stop and think
 - a. When we focus on material things-- as a church or individual families
 - b. When we find ourselves focusing our stuff and our desire for more
 - 2. Remember to ask question, "*Who is it that we really want to be?*"