

In our Gospel reading Jesus says that you cannot serve both God and money. Either God will be preferred above money or money will be preferred above God. We all know how it is supposed to be. We are supposed to prefer God to money, but that doesn't mean that we actually do. Why not? Because preferring God to money requires faith. Will God do what he has promised? When will God do what he has promised?

In the meantime, while we are waiting for God, we might be miserable, uncomfortable, or even just bored. Do you know what is a very powerful force for alleviating those undesirable conditions? Money. Money is very powerful because it enables you to buy things that can help you. If you are miserable, you can hire a psychiatrist. If you are uncomfortable, you can buy new furniture. If you're bored, you can take a trip. Money gives a person power to improve his or her lot in life, and we all want our lots in life to be improved.

When we consider the alternative, the picture can be quite different. The Bible gives us several examples of people who rely only upon God, and it isn't always pleasant. Consider the people of Israel when God liberated them from their slavery in Egypt at the time of Moses. The Israelites were happy to be rid of the oppression and cruelty they experienced under their slave masters, but they soon encountered other problems. They were led by the cloud to the shores of the Red Sea with the Egyptian army hot on their heels. They were trapped. If only they had more money they could have bought some guns, but you know how the story goes. God unzipped the water like unzipping a zipper. The people's sandals didn't even get wet. When they got to the other side, they praised God with full hearts, but their problems were far from over.

Now they had to contend with a hostile environment. A desert doesn't have much water, and the water they brought with them was quickly running out. They became thirsty—that's how bad it was. They didn't have enough water even to travel. They were stuck. Then God made water come out of a rock.

Not long after that, the same thing happened with their food. They were hungry and there was nothing to eat. You know how this story goes too. God gave them each day their daily bread by covering the desert floor with manna. It was truly daily bread. If they tried to store it up, it would spoil. Every day there was nothing in the pantry or the checking account. They lived like birds, which do not know where their food will come from each day, and yet our heavenly Father feeds them.

God took care of the Israelites, but this experience was very hard on them. Why? I think it could be summed up nicely by saying they had no power. There was nothing they could do against the Egyptian army. There was nothing they could do about their lack of water and food. If God would shut off the tap, they would be doomed.

This is precisely the kind of nightmare scenario where a person gets lost in the wilderness. People die in those situations, and that is exactly what the Israelites were thinking. They had two refrains that they said over and over. They said, "**We're all gonna die!**" They also said, "**I wish we never would have left Egypt.**" At least in Egypt they had a little power to improve their own lot even though they were slaves.

So what was the upside? Obviously this experience was difficult. Were they right? Should they have stayed in Egypt? Not everybody is going to see the benefit the Israelites enjoyed because not everyone believes. The benefit the Israelites enjoyed was that the Lord was their God and they were his people. This is a repetition of the covenant God made with their forefather Abraham. God told Abraham that he would be his God, and he and his descendants would be his people. From all the nations and peoples of the whole earth, God chose this one.

At the time of Moses, God revealed himself to be the God of his people. He redeemed them with a mighty hand by the 10 plagues upon Egypt. He gave them cool water to drink and heavenly bread to eat. He took up residence on the heights of Mt. Sinai so that the whole area shook with his glory. He gave the Israelites worship and the tabernacle, so that they could be cleansed of their sins and God's own holiness was communicated to them.

The end result of all of God's work was to make it so that they could dwell with him in the inexpressible adventure of seeing him and living in his glory. On the face of it, it might not seem like a big deal to know God. It requires faith. Many of the Israelites at the time of Moses must not have believed, otherwise they would not have been always wanting to return to Egypt. But knowing God is a big deal.

Paul wrote an entire letter, his letter to the Ephesians, with that as his theme. King David, in Psalm 27, says knowing God is the only thing he wants. Have you ever played that game where you ask, "If there was one thing you could have—anything at all—what would it be?" David knows his answer. He says, "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple." David wants to be with God.

He expresses this same wish in his most well-known psalm, Psalm 23: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life," and then this is the concluding phrase: "and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." What goes on in that house that the warrior-king, David, wants to dwell in it forever? It must be spectacular!

Let's return to the passage with which we began: Jesus says, "You cannot serve both God and money." Based on what we've talked about thus far we can see how these two things can run at cross purposes with each other. Money, power, fixing problems, can be ways to occupy your time so that you don't need to think of God, much less confront him.

We see this strategy at work already in the Garden after Adam and Eve fell into sin. They solved the problem of their shame by covering themselves. They solved the problem of confronting God by hiding in the bushes. The one thing they tried to avoid at all costs was the feeling of being vulnerable, helpless, and powerless before God. They didn't believe in him. They thought God would kill them—the very thing he had threatened to do if they should eat from the tree!

There's something similar with the Israelites. If they had had the power and resources to do so, they would have gone back to Egypt. They say it over and over: "I wish we never would have left Egypt." Why? Because there was relative comfort there. They had garlic, cucumbers, and melons to eat instead

of that worthless manna. Sure, they were slaves, but one can get used to chains. Money and power has a kind of anaesthetizing effect on our spiritual life. The illusion of being in control because you've got money is as powerful as it is tranquilizing. On the other hand, the feeling that you are not in control of your own life and your own future is horrifying. We will do almost anything to avoid it, as the words and actions of the Israelites show.

So when Jesus said, "**You cannot serve two masters, you cannot serve both God and money,**" he is not addressing a problem that can be easily fixed. It's not superficial like having good manners or good habits. His statement reaches down into the most fundamental questions of life: In whom or in what do you believe? Do you believe in God with all the powerlessness and vulnerability that entails, or do you believe in what you believe you can muster for yourself?

Here's another big question: What is the purpose of life? If the purpose of life is to survive in the most comfortable way possible, then money your thing. I hope you have enough of it, but it seems that even rich people never have enough. They always want more.

If the purpose of life is to know God, then money will not help. It might be a hindrance. No doubt, this is why Jesus talks about the spiritual dangers of money so much. Money is powerful. It is precisely because it is so powerful that we are prone to fear, love, and trust in it above all things. But regardless of however powerful it might be, I know a better God. It's the God of David:

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. ... Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Believe in that God.

