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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
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“What Should I Give You?”

I Kings 3:5-14 | *Read the scripture online* <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=219146772>

Prior to starting his sermon, Rev. Bush showed the following 2012 commercial for Bank of New Zealand: “Money is good. Money is bad.” (90-seconds)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-YikLY7qF4>

As a general rule, no one likes to talk about money. We think about money a lot; we complain about not having enough of it. But it raises mixed feelings in us: Is money good? Is money bad? One thing is certain: Money affects us, and too often adds stress to our lives.

Perhaps it was a relief when, after we heard the “money is good, money is bad” commercials just now, we heard the reading about Solomon’s prayer. God spoke to Solomon in a dream and said these words: *Ask what I should give you.* Solomon knew of God’s steadfast love shown to his father, King David, the first ruler of all Israel. And being aware of the tremendous responsibility now placed on his shoulders as the new king, Solomon asked for an understanding mind and the ability to rule his people wisely. His request was more than just having the right information in his head so he’d make the right decisions. Solomon asked for a “listening heart,” the ability to hear people’s cries with compassion and to act always guided by God’s spirit of justice.

God promises to give Solomon what he asked for—a wise and discerning mind—and to give him what he didn’t ask for: riches and honor. It all seems very good. But Solomon is an ambiguous figure, like every one of us. We all have good moments and bad moments. A wise mind still needs to be used in order to be effective. Solomon was wise in composing proverbs and wisdom literature for his people, but he was also foolish in some of his policies. Solomon built the first temple to God in Jerusalem. Yet to do so, he forcibly drafted 30,000 men to hard labor in the forests of Lebanon and 70,000 to dig in the stone quarries. He built the Jerusalem temple 70 by 20 cubits in size, but he built his own palace 150 by 50 cubits. And Solomon left a very mixed legacy, in that the first act following after his death was the splitting of his kingdom into two different nations perennially at war. So, was Solomon good? Was Solomon bad?

As I mentioned earlier, there was a lot of speculation about the “money” commercials when they first aired in New Zealand, because the commercial never said for whom they were advertising. There were billboards saying “Money is good.” There were slogans drawn on buildings and sidewalks saying “Money is bad.” Only a few weeks later did the Bank of New Zealand acknowledge they were behind the ad campaign. They issued a new commercial that combined the two previous ads, and then concluded with the narrator saying this: “Money is neither good nor bad. It [all depends on] what you do with it.”

Suddenly the power of money is deflated; its mystique popped like a balloon with a pin. Money itself has no true power. It is a means to an end and just one of the many currencies we exchange each day that either give our lives value or make our lives more difficult. Everything that passes between two people is a type of currency: money



exchanged, words spoken, curses shouted, smiles, frowns. A hand extended helps an older person get on the bus, a quick comment alerts a distracted mother that her wallet fell out of her coat pocket; a hand held back or a voice kept silent makes no connection with the bus rider or the distracted mother. The currencies of life are neither good nor bad in and of themselves: a dollar bill is just a piece of green paper; love and hate are both just four letter words. It all depends on what you do with them.

Now, I know it may be hard to imagine that money has no real power when an eviction notice is on your kitchen table or a credit card bill totals more than you can ever hope to repay. In those cases, a different conversation may need to happen and some real, hard choices will have to be made. But all of us can benefit from thinking about money in a different way through three little steps. First, be intentional about money and start small. Every quarter, every dollar bill can be important if we take time to notice how we're spending them. Think of it this way: We take dozens of bites of food every time we eat a meal, but the more you slow down and are aware of the flavors of each bite, the more you will enjoy the meal and eat healthily. Or, each day is full of hundreds of breaths. By being conscious of how you breathe, you can actually lower your blood pressure and remember how precious it is to be alive. In the same way, money has no power over you; you have power over money. A quarter can be put in a parking meter or tossed in the bottom of a purse; or it can be placed in a child's outstretched hand or dropped in a donation box at a checkout counter. It's the same coin, but your intent and spiritual connection to the money are much different in the last two examples. As Jesus said, "Those who are trustworthy in little things will be responsible for great things." (Mt 25:14-30) What is true of quarters is also true of dollar bills, tens and twenties. Don't just use direct deposit and electronic banking. Take time to hold cash in your hand and pay it out with intentionality. Notice where your money goes, and you immediately re-claim your power over it.

Second, learn to silence every voice talking about what money can do for you. If you thought it was hard enduring the political ad season, brace yourself for the Christmas ad season. Money cannot talk, but often it stands next to people who do a lot of talking. The dollar bill smiles politely as the salesman says, "Buy this today with no payment due until next summer." The cashier says, "Open a store credit card today and save 15% on your purchases." The bad-math lottery vendor says, "Happiness will come if you scratch off these tickets and perhaps win a million dollars." To be intentional about your money requires that you silence the voices talking you out of your money so you will make spending decisions that are thoughtful, appropriate and grounded on what is important in your life. King Solomon went to Gibeon to rest and to pray to God. In that quiet place, he was able to hear a life-giving word from the Lord that changed his life.

Let me offer a more contemporary example. Craig Venter is an American scientist and wealthy businessman who played a key role in the first sequencing of the human genome: mapping our DNA. When people talk about the future, Venter notes that the voices around him always describe lots of new innovations that will make our lives simpler: a pill to make us lose weight instantly, a flying car that reduces rush-hour gridlock, a computer screen you can roll up and put in your pocket. But by silencing those voices for a moment, Venter suggests that we realize the innovations that really matter in the long term may not involve technological advances at all. Perhaps the progress that really matters is simply working to make sure that the basic needs of health and life are available to every person here on earth.¹ Not gadgets and gimmicks and space-age robots, but quieting ourselves down and picturing a world where every



faucet from Stanton Heights to South Sudan produces fresh, clean water. *That* would be using our money wisely.

Quiet focus marked Solomon's prayer time with God while at the temple in Gibeon. Quiet focus, as opposed to ostentatious display, marked the poor widow's offering as witnessed by Jesus in the temple of Jerusalem. Quiet and intentional focus should mark your own giving on this Stewardship Sunday. As controversial as this might be to say, you should not give indiscriminately to any group, including churches or religious organizations. There are times when your money can do better elsewhere. You need to always think and pray about how best to be a good steward of your God-given resources. And churches, including ours, need to remember that the offerings we receive should always be spent with both prudence and faith. You know that we ask for pledges at ELPC as a way to establish a budget to support the ministries, the building and staff of this congregation. As recently as six years ago, we were taking almost twice as much out of our savings as could be sustained. Through some hard discipline by church leaders and real generosity on your part, we have greatly reduced our dependence on our endowment and are within 5-8% of fully living within our financial means. Your continued giving allows us to keep doing good works, to keep making our building available to this community, and thanks to our staff and volunteers, to keep serving young and old and all ages in between after the loving example of Jesus Christ our Lord.

1) Be intentional in how you use your money, even small amounts;

2) Silence every voice that may distract or falsely persuade you how to spend your money;

And lastly: 3) remember what God said to Solomon long ago. The young king needed wisdom if he was to rule well over the people of Israel. But God's first words to Solomon were "Ask what I should give you."

Before we make our requests, before we spend our money, we are to ask God what is needed right now. Jesus said: "Seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all [other] things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33) Is money good? Is money bad? It all depends on how you use it. God still calls to us today and says, "Ask what I should give you." Trust in the Lord who asks us to ask. That is the beginning of all spiritual and financial wisdom.

AMEN

¹Wil S. Hylton, "God of Small Things", *New York Times magazine*, June 3, 2012, p. 70.

