Sunday, March 8, 1987

MORE MONEY WILL MAKE US HAPPY (NO. 1 IN A SERIES: LIES WE TELL EACH OTHER)

Matthew 6:19-21,24-34

Most of us like to think of ourselves as truth-telling people. We try to teach our children not to tell lies but to tell the truth. Our intentions are good, but there's more to telling the truth than good intentions. We live in a world of lies and we accept these and repeat them to each other without most of the time questioning what we are doing.

Therefore, the purpose of this Lenten sermon series is to explore some of the lies we tell each other in our culture. No doubt some of you listening to these sermons will not like the word "lies," but would prefer a term like "myths" or "illusions." Some of the lies we tell each other are old sayings which we repeat year after year and pass on to the next generation. They may seem harmless, but maybe not. For example, we've all heard and perhaps repeated the saying, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," yet a few weeks ago I read an article by a knowledgeable dog training expert who pointed out that it's easier to teach an old dog new tricks than a young one. Another example: we've heard the saying, "God helps those who help themselves." Some people even think it comes from the Bible. Not so! It may be true in some instances, but it is the testimony of the Bible and of the Christian faith that "God helps those who cannot help themselves."

You will also discover as you listen to this sermon series that what we are calling "lies" may not seem like "lies" to you. They are "lies" in the sense that they are in direct conflict with what Jesus lived and taught. This should not surprise us. The fact is that the culture in which we live is always to some extent in conflict with our faith. This has been true since the church's beginning almost 2000 years ago.

A study of church history shows that the most persistent problem the church has faced through the years is how to keep the values of the world from subverting the church. We are always tempted to substitute "worldly wisdom" for the truth of the gospel. Or to put it another way, the truth of the Christian faith frequently seems like "foolishness" whereas our worldly or cultural wisdom seems more practical. For example, two weeks ago, the sermon was on the subject of "loving one's enemies." According to the standards of the culture, this sounds like nonsense.

So we will be talking in this sermon series about "lies we tell each other." These are lies because they are in contradiction to what Jesus taught.

The first lie we are going to look at this morning is one that is stated in a number of ways in our culture. I've simply chosen one of them, namely, "More money will make us happy." Another way of saying it is, a person is happiest when he or she is consuming or spending. Others say, "If I only had more money to spend, I would be happy," or "If I only had enough money to pay all my bills, I would be happy." "If I only had more things, then all the rest of my life would fall into place." "If I only had a nicer home." "If I only had a better car." "If I only had as much money as so-and-so." I hear people saying all the time, "I need more money, then I would be happy!"

The newspapers are filled with stories which indicate that people believe this lie. A few weeks ago, the papers carried a story about a pregnant woman who allegedly offered to sell her baby for $15,000 so she could buy a car and pay off some debts. Here's part of what the paper

reported: “Joi E. Silverthorne, 27, of Tampa, Florida, was arrested Saturday after a Jacksonville couple, whom authorities would not identify, met her at Jacksonville International Airport. They were to give $3,500 to Silverthorne as a first payment for her baby. Instead, they turned her over to investigators who were nearby and recording the conversation.”

Last week, I also read this story in the paper: He worked himself to death, finally and precisely at 3:00 a.m. Sunday morning. He worked himself to death because he believed that more money and a bigger job would make him and his family happy. The obituary didn’t say that, of course. It said that he died of a coronary thrombosis — I think that was it — but every one of his friends and acquaintances knew he had worked himself to death. He was a perfect “Type A,” a workaholic, a classic, that’s what his friends said to each other, and they shook their heads and thought for five or ten minutes about the way they lived.

The man who worked himself to death because he believed the lie that more money would make him happy was 51 years old, and he was a vice-president. He was, however, one of six vice-presidents and one of three who might conceivably — if the president died or retired soon enough — have moved to the top spot. Phil knew that. He worked six days a week, five of them until 8:00 or 9:00 at night.

He had a lot of people working for him. Three of them will be seriously considered for his job. The obituary didn’t mention that. But it did list his survivors quite accurately. He is survived by his wife, Helen, 48 years old, and three children. A company friend said to his wife, “I know how much you will miss him.” And she answered, “I already have.”

At the funeral, the 60-year-old company president told the 48-year-old widow that the 51-year-old deceased had meant much to the company and would be missed. The widow didn’t look him in the eye. She was afraid he would read her bitterness and after all, she would need him to straighten out the finances — the stock options and all that.

Phil was overweight and nervous and worked too hard. If he wasn’t at the office, he was worried about it. So when he finally worked himself to death at precisely 3:00 a.m. Sunday morning, no one was really surprised. By 5:00 p.m. the afternoon of the funeral, the company president had begun, discreetly of course, with care and taste, to make inquiries about his replacement. One of three men. He asked around — "Who’s been working the hardest?”

More money will make us happy. That lie is expressed in our culture in so many ways — in our working habits, in our day-to-day conversation, in our advertising, and in our mounting personal debt. After all, if you don’t have enough money to make you happy, you are encouraged to borrow it.

Another lie which is a corollary is: “One can never be too rich.” That’s the basic lie behind all the scandals we’ve been reading about on Wall Street — the insider trading and all that goes with it. When it became known on the street that Martin Siegel had pleaded guilty to selling insider information, one of his bewildered friends said to a reporter, “He didn’t need the money.” It was a classic understatement.

In 1985, Siegel legitimately earned $1.7 million. In the past few months, he was able to scrounge up $9 million as part of his deal with government prosecutors. At 38 years old, he had a Connecticut estate, a million-dollar condominium in Manhattan, a family, and a reputation as the best and the brightest of the new breed.

Yet on a number of occasions, the articulate, educated, “secretary of defense” in the takeover world, stood in a public place in New York City waiting for a courier like an ordinary drug dealer. He gave the password and got the cash. Eventually, before his anxiety or his conscience got a grip on him, Siegel had taken more than $700,000 in cash from the godfather of the story, Ivan Boesky.

Why did he do it? Why does anyone do it? Why do we believe that more money will bring us happiness or more happiness? It’s a lie according to the Christian faith! God has not made the world that way.

A second corollary of this lie is that once we have enough money, it will provide a buffer against the desire for more money. But there is no “enough,” especially in a business where money is the product.

There are people we all know, and this includes us, who start out wanting enough to pay our bills, and having gained that, we create more bills. Then we want a fancy vacation and a bigger car, and on it goes.

That’s the strange thing about money. We attach importance to it far beyond its worth. We make it into a god. It is tremendously instructive to stand back and observe the frantic scramble of people for money.

Some of us want more money out of fear. We may fear being without money because our parents were without money. We may fear failure. We may fear success. Our parents may have had anxieties about money which they passed on to us.

Some people even believe that money is a sign of God’s blessing, and hence poverty is a sign of God’s displeasure. This has been turned into a religion of personal peace and prosperity: crudely stated, “Love Jesus and get rich.” That too is a lie.

We who claim to be Christians, followers of Jesus, have to speak the truth — to ourselves, to our children, and to the culture. More money to spend will not bring more happiness.

You may be surprised to learn that Jesus spoke about money more frequently than any other subject except the Kingdom of God. He gave an unusual amount of time and energy to the money question. In the moving story about the widow’s mite, we are told that Jesus intentionally sat in front of the treasury and watched people putting in their offerings. By design, he saw what they gave and discerned the spirit in which they gave. For Jesus, giving was not a private matter.

In the scripture lesson read earlier, Jesus said, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Over and over, Jesus said in all kinds of ways that more money will not bring happiness. He did not say that money was unnecessary or that it was bad in itself. He did say that the love of money is a threat to our relationship to God and to others. Another term for the love of money is greed.

Jesus knew and taught that the deepest hunger we all have is not for happiness. Our deepest hunger and need is to be in relationship to God and with others. Happiness is then a by-product. It is never an end in itself. The wrong use of money can be a block instead of a help in those relationships.

On the other hand, when we become giving people, then money can be a positive force in our lives. Money as a form of power is so intimately related to the possessor that one cannot consistently give money without giving self.

Dr. Karl Menninger once asked one wealthy patient, “What on earth are you going to do with all that money?” The patient replied, “Just worry about it, I suppose.” Dr. Menninger went on, “Well, do you get that much pleasure out of worrying about it?” “No,” responded the patient, “but I get such terror when I think of giving some away.” Now this terror is real. When we let go of money, we are letting go of part of ourselves and part of our security. But this is precisely why it is so important to do. It is one way to follow Jesus’ teaching. It is a way of connecting yourself to God and to others. Learn the joy of giving and you can experience this whether you have a little bit of money or a lot. Once you become a giving person, you will also become a happy person. Happiness is always a by-product of giving. Happiness is never a by-product of keeping more for yourself. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. “More money will make us happy.” How pervasive do you think this “lie” is in our culture? Name some ways in which you have seen this lie expressed in daily life and in your own life.

2. The sermon said that a corollary of this basic lie is: “One can never be too rich.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

3. A second corollary is: “If you have enough money, it will provide a buffer against the desire for more money.” Do you think this is true? In your case, how much is “enough?”

4. For Jesus, the giving of money was not a private or personal secret matter. Why are church members today so secretive about what they give?

5. What makes you hold back in your giving? Are you afraid that you will become too generous and give too much away?

6. Try to think of some other “lies” that are present in our culture which are in contradiction to what Jesus taught.