

“Your Money or Your Life”

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I don't know how many times I've told the story about Jack Benny meeting a robber one night on a dark street. Jack Benny died in 1974, thirty four years ago, I know I was telling this story even before he died. You know, the robber says to Benny, “Your money or your life!” There is a long pause, and finally Benny says, “I'm thinking, I'm thinking!” For Benny then, or us now, it might be good and go back to thinking again, what's really worth giving your life for?

Your money or your life? Here we are on Memorial Day weekend, and even the price of gasoline is making people think twice about how much their money is worth. I still find it hard to believe that gasoline is selling at some Washington area stations for \$4, and I have a hard time absorbing the fact that I'm getting only half the interest on my money market account than I was getting this time last year. It all seems to give a sharper relevance to the main point of the gospel today, “You cannot serve God and wealth” You cannot serve God and Mammon. Mammon the consumer God, who calls us to pursue what really are the trivia of the world: bigger cars, bigger houses, more belts and shoes, cellphones with new colors, different buttons, different programs.

In 1989 lyricist Don Henley produced an album entitled “*The end of Innocence.*” That title seems appropriate for the times we're living in now, another time for a “Bonfire of Vanities.”

Certainly some of his lyrics should strike home: *From Main Street to Wall Street to Washington; From men to women to men; It's a nation of noses pressed against the glass . They've seen it on TV and they want it pretty fast. You've spent your whole life just piling it up there, you've got stacks and stacks. Then Gabriel comes and taps you on the shoulder; but you don't see no hearses with luggage racks.*

Now I think there's a deeper problem than just our hunger and thirst for more and bigger things or more and smaller gadgets for our computers, it's the problem of identifying *who or what really is the God in your life.* Bob Dylan was right in the 70's when he wrote “You gotta serve somebody”—but who is that somebody?

In his book “*Actions Speak Louder Than Verbs*”, Herb Miller relates the story of two Kentucky farmers who owned racing stables. Over the years a keen rivalry had developed between the two farmer. One spring, each of them entered a horse in the local steeplechase. Thinking a professional rider might give him an edge on his friend, one of the farmers engaged a crack jockey.

Minutes into the race, the two horses were neck and neck, with a large lead over the rest of the pack, but as they came around the last turn, both suddenly fell, unseating their riders. The professional jockey remounted quickly and rode on to win the race.

When the winning jockey returned to the stable, he found the farmer fuming with rage. "What's the matter?" the jockey asked. "I won didn't I?" "O yeah," roared the farmer. "You won all right, but you crossed the finish line on the wrong horse!"

In Bob Dylan's words " you may be an ambassador to England or France, You may like to gamble, you might like to dance, you may be the heavyweight champion of the world, you may be a socialite with a long string of pearls—But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed, you're gonna have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord; but you're gonna have to serve somebody."

We have to serve somebody, but it is very easy to settle on images of God which somehow fit well enough into all the other images we have of a good, well-ordered, comfortable life. Since we're finding that a good, well-ordered, comfortable life isn't quite as available on demand these days, maybe we're called to think again on what Jesus meant when he said, in many different ways and occasions, what we hear this morning, "You cannot serve God and wealth, God and Mammon." We had better not count on winning by riding on the wrong horse.

In times like these we should be considering a lot of things more seriously, how we spend our money and our time and what kind of a God is it that we're really serving. Last Sunday, Trinity Sunday, was a good time to identify a faith big enough to live by, a horse—so to speak—big enough to ride on.

This is a faith you can bet your life on, a faith big enough to hold ALL truth in his loving hands. That is the God we know as the ever-creating God in this world of change, the God we know as the ever-redeeming God who calls us back over and over again to his loving purposes, the God we know as the Spirit of ever-sustaining power for us to really live in these awesome and mysterious times. That, my friends, is a Trinitarian God who yet is beyond any of our descriptions, a God big enough for the long ride, big enough and strong enough to withstand all the shaking and rough patches that inevitably come to all of us.

If we read the whole Gospel passage this morning it's possible to get a little confused. "Don't worry," Jesus says. "Don't be anxious, everything you need will be provided for." We're either too realistic or too cynical to believe that a few bible verses will keep us from worrying or being anxious. We have always been taught to work hard for all we get. And in this consumerist society that ALL of us live in, where achievement is measured by material rewards, and where there is the inevitable itch to want MORE of everything, we can't help being confused by what looks like mixed messages here.

So I think it's important to remember that this is not a "prosperity Gospel" Jesus is preaching. The focus of Jesus' message doesn't really have to do with our needs, with our desires, really with us.

The basis of Jesus' message is God, that the hope of Israel, the coming of God's kingdom is even now happening in their midst. So the hope for the followers of Jesus is not for the self so much as it is for the kingdom of God. And that kingdom deals with such things as compassion, grace, justice, and love, rather than individual achievement or gain.

For us to say that the message of Jesus is just, "don't worry, God will take care of you, so you can rest comfortably" would put the focus back on us, not God.

What Jesus does say is that for all of us there come turning points in our lives. That was true for Joshua in the Old Testament, who realized that Moses' vision of the promised land had not yet been fulfilled and knew that this was a time for the people of Israel to make a choice: to "choose this day whom they would serve."

In such a way we too are called at special times to either choose to serve God, or in fact to get more and more bogged down continuing to serve the consumer God Mammon. We are called to choose the best, to look for the important, to look for the real meaning of our lives, to set our priorities in order, to stay the course-- to ride the right horse! Even this day, right now, God says to US in our day to day choices, "Choose this day whom you will serve!"