

Title: Fool's Gold

Text: Matthew 6.24

Theme: Stewardship

Series: Living for Eternity – 2006 #3

Prop Stmtnt

It was 1987. Cathi and I had just become parents and two weeks later, moved to Detroit from Canton, Ohio. In my home town of Canton, there was a TV station that was one of the very first in the country to become an all religious station. In fact, it was the station that gave birth to a small, local, religiously embarrassing and extremely tacky program called the PTL club. That program became a network and eventually an empire that at its height was pulling in \$100 million annually just from TV viewers. Then it imploded. In 9 months, the stories of greed, excess, adultery, bribery, and extortion that surrounded the two people at the top of the organization fueled a media circus called the Holy Wars. During that same time the TV evangelist who exposed the PTL mess, had also exposed another TV evangelist's sin, only to have that one hire a private detective to follow and publicly expose his sinful activities. Still in the same 9 months, another prominent TV pastor told the country that unless he raised \$8 million for a medical scholarship program that God was going to take his life. So, now we have God not only portrayed as greedy, but as a seedy loan shark. At the last minute, a race-track owner gave the pastor \$1.3 million stating that he thought the pastor needed psychiatric help. The pastor then said that God had changed his mind that he did not need to raise money for the scholarship program, and that he, over the phone, had healed the one troubled TV evangelists' problem with lust.

Some of you remember those days. They were awful. Ministry, to many became a mockery. I hated it. Those were the times when I became Senior Pastor. It seemed that all of these religious TV programs ended their shows with tearful appeals for money. I resented that. I basically made up my mind that I would not preach about money because I did not want to be associated with that crowd. In hindsight, I can see that I reacted. It seemed spiritual, but it was short-sighted. I did not want the leadership of the church to be viewed as being materialistic. I knew that a materialistic church could never reach and change a materialistic world. I figured that if I just preached the Word, and if we did things right, that people would just automatically connect the dots, and would be so excited about what they were learning and excited about the church that the finances would take care of themselves. After all, I was just preaching the Word and the church had been steadily growing, so things ought to be fine. Over time I began to learn, that since materialism is so deeply woven into the fabric of our society and our lives, that I could not shepherd this issue from a distance. I had to take on this monster face to face and teach us how to grab this monster by the throat. The tentacles of this issue go far beyond our giving of money to the church. There is a core issue that raw materialism is in bed with and at no time has this been more obvious than at the present. The ground is shifting under our feet. The mid-term elections were evidence of that and I am not speaking of the war in Iraq or the economy. I am speaking of our society's view toward something that is deeper. Embryonic stem cell research is the new frontier of the cultural war. The sobering truth is captured well by columnist William Saletan who recently

wrote about proposition 2 which narrowly passed in Missouri promoting Embryonic Stem Cell Research. Embryonic Stem Cells is based in part on “harvesting” cells from aborted babies. The argument is, if they are going to die, they might as well be useful. Why would you abort a child in the first place? It is not useful. It gets in the way. It messes up my plan for my life. Abortion is a utilitarian view of life. Life only has value if that life fits within my plan. If a life is going to be needy and I don’t want to be a giver, then I exercise my right to kill because I don’t want to give. But, in the execution of that life, if I can harvest some stem cells that will make my life longer, then we ought to be allowed to do that. Create life to harvest pieces of it and discard the rest. This isn’t just the sci-fi movie the Island. This is in our face and in our labs right now. He writes:

*If you block ESC research, you're closing off what might be the quickest path to saving many lives. And if you promote the research, along with the embryonic cloning that makes it therapeutically useful, you're seriously messing with the foundations of life. You're creating artificial human entities. You're turning eggs and embryos into medical supplies.*

Do you get it? The process and cost of saving life comes at the cost of destroying life. Our culture wants the first so bad, it will pretend to be blind to the second, or explain it away through emotional, tear-jerking stories that ignore the deeper dilemma.

*These two truths aren't going away. The life-saving potential of biological research will only increase its political power. The baby boomers are turning 60. They'll reach for any technology that offers hope of staving off illness and death. So will the generations behind them.* I think he is right. We are so used to making decisions based on immediate gratification, with a “who gives a rip attitude” toward future generational consequences in so many areas that we will grab anything that we think will enhance our life, right now, while choosing to remain blind to the size and scope of the monster that we have grabbed by the tail. He goes on.

*Meanwhile, the technology grows more complicated. Stem cells from leftover embryos are only the beginning. To cure people reliably, you have to move on to cloning. To avoid cloning, you have to devise alternatives, such as reprogramming adult cells, which might enable any cell in your body to become an embryo. To eradicate diseases with today's technology, you'd have to screen embryos and flush the ones with bad genes. With tomorrow's technology, you'll be able to re-engineer them. Each of these advances saves life at the price of dissolving it. We're taking ourselves apart.*

*We're so not ready for this. But we can't stop ourselves. So we try to simplify the oncoming technologies, treating them like issues we already know ... A new kind of issue has arrived. It's moral, it's economic, and it's life and death. Biotechnology is here to stay, even if humanity, as we know it, isn't.*

The reason we are not ready for this is because for the most part our values are tied to living for the moment. We make decisions based more on emotion than moral reason and sound biblical principles. Even the Church of England just announced its

recommendation that medical ethics be revised giving doctors freedom to provide limited medical care to pre-born babies who are known to have defects. Why take heroic measures if the child is going to have problems? Parents tell me, “my child has no self-esteem.” No kidding! Can we not connect the dots? If you are not smart enough, pretty enough or talented enough, you just a pile of stem cells, whose only usefulness is to serve the pretty, smart and talented people. Intrinsically, you have no worth as a person. Your life’s value is completely tied to your body – the ultimate materialism. How do we get to this point? Little, by little, we accept the thinking that our life, right now is the most important thing, and that really living is having every thing I want, and filling my senses with every experience that I demand. We are losing what it means to really be human because functionally, we are trying to live now, without God. God is a means to an end. God is here to make me feel good about my life. So, I go to church to feel good, but don’t ask too much of me, because that messes with what I want. So, when we think of heaven, we no longer think in terms of the presence and awesomeness of God, we think of heaven only as some retirement center without the doctor’s appointments. You hear it. Heaven is a place where football coaches watch football and argue about old rivalries. It is where golfers get to golf all day, bowlers bowl, and shoppers shop. Our popular theology about heaven is godless.

Last week I attempted to help you see that God created the entire universe as a kingdom for his Son to reign over. As part of that kingdom, God has designed us for the purpose of ruling and reigning with Christ, the King. Therefore, your life right now is kingdom boot camp. You are being trained right now for your eternal life. Your life, right now matters for eternity. Everything that you do, even homework, changing the oil, changing the air filter and diapers, commuting to work, going to the doctor and eating lunch is Coram Deo – before the face of God. God is testing you and training you right now to see whether or not your faith is authentic and to see whether or not you can be trusted with a responsible position in his government.

Therefore, the way that you handle money is an indication of what you are really trusting in, and whether or not you can be trusted with true wealth. Money is not the problem, loving it, and serving it is the problem because “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” This is not the only time that Christ said this. In Luke’s gospel, (chap. 16) Christ told a parable and then concluded it with these words. “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.”

By the way, there used to be a rather standard test given to people who were applying for a management position in which they were asked a series of questions along this line. Such as: “Would you fire someone for stealing .25 from the company?” Assuming you said “no”, the next question would be something like, “Would you fire someone for stealing \$25,000 from the company.” Assuming you said, “yes” the next question would be, would you fire someone for stealing \$24,000, or \$23,000 all the way down to .25. The point being, stealing is stealing. If someone is willing to steal .25 because they think they can get away with it, they will steal \$25k if they think they can get away with it. A

person who is dishonest with a little is dishonest and cannot be trusted with much. Which is why Jesus goes on to say, “So, if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?” Then he says, “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”

### **1. You are a servant.**

Christ lived in a cultural setting where one half to two-thirds of the known population were slaves/servants. Basically, you either owned slaves, or you were owned. There was not much of what we call a middle class. They understood this. Jesus is telling us, that you are a servant. Someone or something owns you. You live for something. That something is your god.

That which you live for, may in and of itself not be a bad thing. I live to provide for my family. I live to avoid pain and rejection. I live for comfort. I live to avoid loneliness. Then again, it may be a very pathetic thing. I live for basketball, or bowling, or music. What is it that drives you? What do you think about when your mind wanders? What do you wish for from your own life? What would the perfect life look like to you? Those are questions that are designed to help you identify who or what your god is. The critical question is, is your god, the true God? Is your master, the only one who is really worth serving?

### **2. You can only serve one Master.**

A servant could only be owned by one master at a time. Every Roman citizen knew this. No slave was owned by two different people. But, what Christ is saying here is a little different than what his audience was used to. If you were part of the class of people who were conquered by the Romans and were used as the slave population, you were not given a choice as to who would be your master. Your master, for good or bad was the one who bought you. You had no rights and no say in the matter. Here, in this text, Christ is making it clear that while you are a slave, and you cannot change that, you have a choice as to who you will serve.

The language points out an either or. There is no third option. The love/hate here is not so much an emotion as it is a choice. Someone is going to be preferred or given more attention than the other.

There was a man carrying a sign along a busy city street that on the front read, “I am a fool for Christ.” On the back it read, “Whose fool are you?” The issue is not, are you owned, the issue is – Who owns you?

What if you try to serve two masters? It will not work. You see the problem with this all the time in life. If a child is trying to obey both mom and dad and mom and dad are

saying different things, that child is placed in an impossible situation. If your boss tells you one thing, and your boss's boss tells you another, you are in trouble. Even if the two masters you are trying to obey are saying the same thing you will still be more devoted to one against the other. Why will this not work? It won't work because you have limited resources. You cannot devote your heart and body to two different people without destroying the definition of devote. It's like saying, "I am going to run a marathon on my motorcycle." No, no, no, no, you can run a marathon or ride your motorcycle, but you cannot run a marathon by riding your motorcycle." But, who are you to impose your values on me? (Ha!) – another thought for another sermon...Point is, the very definition of a slave, a servant demands ownership by one authority. No girl can marry two men at the same time and say, "I give to you men, my undivided heart." It's already divided!

This text absolutely blows up the notion of prosperity theology. How many of you have heard this line. You are a child of the king and you need to live like it. God wants you to be a good advertisement for him. God wants the very best for his kids. You want a bigger house, go claim it. God wants his kids to have the best. You should be driving a new car, not an old one. If you are a King's kid, you need to live like a King's kid. And on and on it goes. Of course, at the end of this speech is the hook. The secret to you living high on the hog, is to send the TV, or radio person your money, and help them live high on the hog. Then, God will give you even more money. Funny how that works. But stop for a second. It sounds good – you need to live like a king's kid, until you examine, how exactly did the king live? He owned nothing but the robe that he wore and he died an early excruciating death on a cross in public humiliation after being rejected by his nation, betrayed by a disciple and denied and abandoned by the rest. Well, there goes the offering...

Now, let me pause here for a second. There are people who do not teach prosperity theology, but use their religious position, and even feigned poverty as a cover-up for their greedy hearts. The Pharisees were examples of this. Christ exposed their greed as their goal and their religious activities as simply a means to get power and possessions. On the other hand, I know some people who really believe some of this prosperity theology stuff, because they have been taught it, but, are not themselves greedy people. In fact, in some cases I know, they are very generous and giving people. The point is, you can serve God, or you can serve money. You cannot serve both. We try to create a theology whereby serving God, we get more money. It does not work. You cannot use money as a means to get to God. Neither can you use God as a means to get money. This is serious business.

### 3. There is only one Master worth serving.

Money is appealing because it appears to be the key to providing us with what we want or even what we think we need. But, there is a huge problem with that. When God gave you life, he did not make you to be satisfied and full by means of money. Money, will never, cut it. It is like drinking salt water, it only makes you more thirsty. In fact, if you live for something that your Creator did not design you to live for, then you fail to really live. Money has influence over us, because of what can be accomplished with it. The

problem is, we attribute more to money than what it can actually deliver. The key to breaking its undue influence on our thinking is to recognize that the power of money is found in the lie behind it. The lie is this: Money can provide you with anything and everything that you really need. Let's put that to the test.

<u>Money</u>	<u>God</u>
Temporal Health	Eternal life
Youthful appearance	Glorified body
Loyalty	True Family
“Security”	Guaranteed inheritance
Depreciating stuff	Forgiveness
Temporal happiness	Joy
Conflict	Reconciliation
Fear	Security
Lose it ALL!	The Kingdom!

For this and other reasons, I think that J.R.R. Tolkein’s epic story of the Lord of the Rings is absolutely brilliant. The one ring that controls all power in middle earth is the chief object of desire. One hobbit, named Gollum has ownership of the ring, at least until he loses it. His relentless pursuit of it drives him to retrieve it all costs, even to the loss of his own life. As the story unfolds it becomes clear that no one can own the ring, the ring owns them. Every time someone uses the ring, or comes into possession of it, their life is absorbed a little more into the ring. The person may think they are using it, but it is using them. Little by little, the color of life, the true beauty of relationships, the joy of humility and personal contentment is sucked into the vortex of this alluring promise of power. That is like living for money, or anything other than Christ. It may look good and in the case of money, the actual thing itself may not be bad. But when it is given more attention and affection than Christ it takes life from you instead of giving it. It may promise power, influence, control, prestige and image. In the short run you will probably get you a desired response, but imperceptibly, little by little your life is given over to something else. People become utilitarian. Relationships are a means to an end. Solomon said it so well. The man who spent all of his life pursuing money and pouring all of his energies into this race without end, came to the end of his life with a jolt. He had all of this money and no relationships. For whom am I toiling – he asked. There is only one Master worth serving.