

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
“A Tale of Two Cities, Part I”
Revelation 17-18
13th Sunday after Pentecost
August 14, 2016

One of the things that has been deeply apparent as we have moved through this summer series on the New Testament book of Revelation is that God’s deepest desire is for all people to know Christ so truly that they are empowered to stand up and stand out against anything in life that is oppressive, anything that chokes off the light and air and freedom that God intends for the cosmos and each creature in it.

Today’s Scripture lesson buttresses this message.

We are coming down the home stretch in Revelation. The final chapters of Revelation, beginning in chapter 17 and continuing through chapter 22, might bear the title made famous by Charles Dickens, “A Tale of Two Cities.” The first city is Babylon, and it is the subject of today’s Scripture reading. The second city is God’s New Jerusalem, and it will be the subject of Scripture readings on the last two Sundays of August.

Babylon represents Rome, the Empire which was at its height during the time that Pastor John of Patmos was writing Revelation. John’s description of Rome/Babylon is horrendous. The Empire Rome/Babylon is described as a prostitute. The Empire is doomed. It is not a pretty picture.

If you viewed this week’s online introduction to today’s Scripture lesson, you heard Jesse Jones speak of how he is a fan of Bob Dylan and how today’s Scripture reminded him of Dylan’s music, specifically these lyrics:

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.

(You will notice that I stopped short of the line: You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride!)

There was no question in Pastor John’s mind regarding whom most of the populace of Rome was serving.

They were serving the devil, represented in several different ways in Revelation. However the devil is represented in Revelation, it is the Roman Empire who was the devil. And Rome was the money machine. There was hardly a person in Pastor John’s day and time who was not willing to sacrifice relationships to get more, more, more...more fine linen, more scented wood, more incense, more fine wine, more olive oil. People loved the Roman Empire because Rome was the strongest economy on earth; Rome made money for people.

Ah, but that was Rome.

That was centuries ago. Millennia ago!

Perhaps.

Or perhaps not.

Did you happen to catch the commercial that ran countless times during the last Super Bowl (and which we likely all saw countless times because the last Super Bowl was between our Carolina Panthers and that other team, and we were all watching live, right?)

The commercial went this way:

Here's what we were thinking.

What if we did for mortgages what the internet did for buying music and plane tickets and shows?

You would turn an intimidating process into an easy one.

You could get a mortgage on your phone and if it could be that easy, wouldn't more people buy homes?

And wouldn't those buyers need to fill their homes with lamps, blenders, and sectional couches with hand-lathed wooden legs?

And wouldn't that mean that all sorts of wooden leg making opportunities for wooden leg makers?

And wouldn't those wooden leg makers own phones from which they could quickly and easily get mortgages, further stoking demand for necessary household goods flooding our country with a tidal wave of new homeowners who now must fill their homes with things...

And isn't that the power of America itself?

The power of Rome/Babylon...the power of America itself.

Hmmm.

Pastor John called his readers in the first century to stand up and stand out against the excesses of the Roman Empire. And his words in Revelation continue to call us to stand up and stand out against the excesses of the culture in which we live.

One of the most honest books I have read in a long time about the American Christians and our addiction to money is *The Christian Wallet*. The name Mike Slaughter may ring a bell with you. Several years ago, we read his book *Change the World* here at DCPC. He is also the author of the book bearing the provocative title, *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday*.

In *The Christian Wallet*, Mike Slaughter capsulizes for today what Pastor John was saying to Christ-followers living under the power of the Roman Empire:

- All my wallet's contents, every single penny, come from God. I am the steward not the owner.
- My wallet is one crucial form of God's provision within my life. It enables me to take care of my family and myself and to serve others. My intent for deploying its contents is to be focused on others, not on myself. I am responsible for asking myself daily, "How can I live more simply so that others can simply live?"
- Gratitude is critical. I will never enjoy what I already have...if I fail to have an attitude of gratitude.
- My wallet's contents are an investment tool for God's kingdom purposes, not intended for self-centered hoarding. I either trust God for my daily provision, my daily bread, or I don't.
- Earthly treasure is temporal, not eternal. I cannot take it with me and suspect I won't even want to when I reach the end of my life. My Christian wallet is to focus on that which will outlast my physical presence on planet earth.
- My wallet is to be used to accomplish God's good, never to propagate evil, including the exploitation of other people or reckless, unthinking destruction of the earth's resources.
- Money is not something I should spend every waking moment thinking or worrying about. Money in and of itself is not evil; it is simply provision. But as we read in I Timothy 6:10, the love of money could get me into all kinds of trouble.
- Money will never bring me contentment—no matter how much or how little I have. Contentment is found in relationship with Christ and with one another. (1)

Sometimes I hear people say that preachers talk too much about money. My own response to this is that there is not a preacher anywhere who talks about money as much as Jesus talked about money.

Actually, most preachers hesitate to talk too much about money. And there are at least two reasons for this, at least as I see it.

The first reason that we hesitate to talk about money is that we are caught up in the same addiction to money, the same fears and worries about money, that you are. To stand in front of you and talk about money, with all your eyes upon us, is to make ourselves vulnerable. And this is a scary thing for every preacher that I know.

The second reason is that we know very little about your individual situations regarding money. Church people entrust their pastors with all kinds of secrets, and we take that as a great privilege. But church people tend not to share much about their finances with their pastors. Money is one of the great secrets that people keep close. Many of us don't share these secrets even within our own families.

But you know, just enough pain of what some of you are experiencing surrounding the subject of money leaks out. And we pastors see it. We pastors feel it. The pain is especially intense, I think, in communities like this one...where we are surrounded by affluence, where many are educated and with the education comes the thinking that we ought to be able to solve our money problems all by ourselves. Your pain surrounding money leaks out, and we preachers hesitate to preach about money because we simply are fearful of adding to your pain.

We know the pain is there, however. And thus, our Stewardship Committee has had some initial conversations regarding the possibility of offering some classes and coaching regarding personal finances, getting out of debt, spending and giving that is in line with our walking in the way of Christ.

In closing, did you catch verse 20, "Rejoice over her, O heaven, you saints and apostles and prophets! For God has given judgment for you against her." These are words which are meant for you, to the end that you stand up and stand out against the excesses that would keep you separated from God and neighbor, that you breathe out worry and fear about money, that you breathe in the light and air and freedom of God.

1. Mike Slaughter, *The Christian Wallet* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 204-205.