

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Acts 16:16-24

Sermon Title: "Messing with the System" (Misuse of Funds Series)

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If you are going to be a disciple of Christ, chances are you might get yourself in some trouble. There will be some injustice that will bother us, something said or something done that we know is not right. If we hope to serve others with the love of God, we may speak out against some injustice we witness, and that could land us in trouble.

One day Paul and Silas are going to a prayer meeting, and a certain slave girl approaches them, who has a spirit of divination. She is a soothsayer, a fortune teller, a person who supposedly looks into the future and tells people what will happen to them. This slave girl follows Paul and Silas and others, taunting them as they walk toward their prayer meeting.

"These men are servants of the Most High God," she says, "who proclaim to us the way of salvation." She does this for days, as the men go back and forth from one venue to another. She follows these men and announces who they are. After awhile Paul becomes greatly annoyed by her display. He cannot stand it any longer, as the other men might not be able to as

well.

The slave girl is not a disciple of Christ who is sharing the word of God like Paul and Silas. By her spirit of divination, she may be making a mockery of who these men are, and who they represent: God himself. Or, is it possible that this young girl is not making a mockery but is crying for help.¹ Maybe deep within her being, she knows she is a prisoner to this spirit of divination that causes her to know things that she doesn't want to know. It makes her do things she doesn't want to do. She is a slave to this spirit that overwhelms her, and so it is possible that she sees Paul and Silas, and needs them to help her escape. She knows these men serve the Most High God, and she wants to serve him as well.

Out of frustration, but also out of the mysterious workings of God, Paul calls for that spirit to leave her. "In Jesus' name, you come out of her now!" he shouts. And the slave girl is free. She will not know evil things but God's things from now on. She will speak the words of God, not what the lying spirit wants her to say.

However, this is only a part of the injustice that Paul and Silas and others witness that day. The other

¹ Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts*, cf. 444.

part has to do with the young girl's employers.

This girl is free from the bonds of evil, but she is still a slave to these men who expect her to line their pockets with money. You see, she used to tell fortunes on the streets, and patrons would pay her, and she would return the money to these business partners who had done nothing for the money they earned. They might give her a corner to sleep in, full of hay on the dirt floor. They might feed her with crumbs of bread and cups of water. The next day she would be at it again, and the business partners would get richer.

Now the business has folded. Their profits haven't sunk; they no longer exist. The business partners and slave owners turn on Paul and Silas with rage. You mess with a person's money, and that person will turn on you. The business partners drag, literally drag, Paul and Silas to the police, and heap all sorts of accusations upon them. The police beat Paul and Silas just as Rodney King was beaten years ago, and they throw them in jail, bloodied and bruised.² If you are going to be a disciple of Christ, chances are you might get yourself in some trouble.

Christianity stands in opposition to the free market system. Believe it or not, as much as we enjoy our

² Acts 16:19, 22-23.

ability to make money and purchase goods, our faith in Jesus Christ stands at polar opposites to our economic system. The point of our economy is to make money. It is assumed that everybody can make money, and should make money. No excuses. Although we would like to think our economy is charitable in some way, it is not. Projected quarterly profits must be made. The company must run in the black at all times. If business fails, then people lose their jobs. A CEO of a certain company may receive millions of dollars in bonuses, while Joe Bagadonuts former employee is struggling to get food on the table. As long as there is currency, we will always have the rich and the poor, and those in the middle will always complain that the rich have too much and the poor don't have enough.³

Our free market economy is not favorable toward charity. And our economy is not favorable toward ethics. You make money however you can, despite people getting hurt along the way. As the famous quote from *The Godfather* goes, "It's not personal; it's strictly business."

Years ago, there was once an interview between two rap artists and a high school superintendent from Philadelphia. The superintendent was annoyed with

³ Cf. Deuteronomy 15:11 and Mark 14:7.

his students' lack of care or consideration, because they were greatly influenced by music that told them to treat women with disrespect, to act like thugs who have money pouring out of their pockets, and to fight authority figures who try to tell them what to do. The superintendent tried desperately to promote love, respect, and self-control among his students, realizing it was an uphill battle. Now, the superintendent had a chance to speak with two young rappers to ask them to change their lyrics. "Change your lifestyles, so the youth would learn to be more respectful," he said. The rappers wouldn't do it. No way, the rappers would never change their image, they told the superintendent. This is a business we're trying to build. We're trying to make money, so we don't have to starve anymore. But, the superintendent said, your lyrics are ruining children's lives. So what, the rappers said, that's not our problem. It's their parents who should be teaching them how to live. But youth aren't listening to their parents, the superintendent said, they are listening to you. You are the role models who can help change their lives. We ain't no role models, the rappers said, we're out for ourselves making money. Those two rappers sat through the interview as though they were disinterested youth sitting in the back of a classroom. The same

disrespect the superintendent got from his high school students was the same disrespect he got from two grown men who were trying hard to make a buck.

Whether it's the music industry or the steel industry or the car industry, people who are making money do not want to be held accountable for their actions. They want to make as much money as possible without people bothering them about morality or ethics. The business partners that Paul and Silas confronted in Acts 16 didn't care to hear how a young girl's life was saved. She was the reason for their wealth. Their pockets were no longer filling with cash like they wanted them to. So, they go after the men responsible for disrupting their free market economy. They turned those men into the bad guys, while those who abused a girl for her evil talents came out of it all smelling of roses.

Now, I am not suggesting that we should start a revolution to overhaul our economic system. I am not encouraging us to visit New York City and join the Occupy Wall Street protests. What I am saying is: if we have to live with our particular economic system, we have to consider ourselves as Christians in it. We should consider how we might disrupt the system in such ways that God would want us to disrupt it.

Jesus is our Lord and Savior who found many ways to disrupt the economy of Rome. He messed with the system through spiritual teachings and practical actions. One of the more famous ways was when he answered a question posed by the Pharisees and Herodians, supports of King Herod.⁴ The Pharisees and Herodians asked Jesus if it was lawful to pay taxes to Rome. Jesus asked for a coin, and then asked whose portrait and inscription was on it. Caesar's, was the answer. "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's," Jesus said, "but give to God what is God's." I love that response of Jesus. "Sure, pay your taxes, but realize that there is One greater than Caesar to whom we pay respect. There is One greater who deserves our unending devotion that goes way beyond money."

At no time did Jesus command the people to overthrow the economy. He just messed with it. Jesus is telling us that the economy doesn't own us. We might be in the system, but it doesn't possess us. God has full possession over us through Jesus Christ. The portrait and inscription of God is written on our hearts. To God we give not only coin but also worship, talents, thoughts, words, deeds, everything. Be a part of this economy but only as those who are influenced by God. As God influences us, we may influence the

⁴ Cf. Matthew 22:14-22.

economy with compassion and care.

Another way Jesus messed with the economy can be found in the Sermon on the Mount. He tells us to do something that would put any company out of business: “If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”⁵ If we ever wondered if Jesus had humor, just read those words from the Sermon on the Mount. The words are ridiculous, aren’t they? Businesses could never stay afloat, if they were constantly handing out free samples. A young man came to me last week asking for help with paying a utility bill. He told me that he tried to get them to form a payment plan, in which he could pay a little per month. Utilities won’t do that, because nobody would pay the monthly payments let alone the entire bill. Utilities are not in business to lose money. Neither is any other company.

Our free market economy cannot afford to be charitable, yet in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus Christ tells us to be charitable. Give to the one who asks, and go the extra mile. Why? Because we are not disciples of this economy. We are disciples of Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit to influence

⁵ Matthew 5:40-41.

others, including our economy, with the saving message of God. In Jesus Christ, we can afford to be charitable. We can afford to reach out to that person in need, and give to him or her that which is necessary for moving forward in life. It costs us nothing to give and go the extra mile. There aren't any bottom lines to meet, and we don't have to run in the black with our compassion. God keep us in the black – keeps our reservoirs of love and grace well filled – and so we can give free samples of God's love at any time, to anybody.

Jesus also says this in a similar Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6: "If you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full."⁶ Our economy expects something in return. We ask for a certain service, and that business expects us to give them cash in hand immediately. Jesus says, "Give and expect nothing in return. When somebody asks you for something, the only payment you receive is the satisfaction of helping another child of God." We do this all the time at the Food Pantry: there is no way those people could pay us back for all the food we give them. They could pool all their resources together,

⁶ Verses 33-34.

and they might be able to give us something significant, but then they would be poorer than they are now. We give to them graciously, with joy, and expect nothing in return. And yet, one Thursday a woman asking for food wanted to donate to our pantry. She gave us one dollar; and I couldn't help but remember the story of the poor widow who placed two copper coins in the huge temple treasury, and Jesus called her the most blessed. That dollar is a great blessing to our ministry to others.

Jesus didn't call for us to revolt against our economic system, just to mess with it a bit, just to prove that it is not master over us as our God and Father is.

The basic concept of making money has no room for compassion. Business partners in Philippi had more concern for their own bank accounts than anything else. Paul and Silas chose to mess with the system, and money was not made that day. The greatest thing that happened was a little girl was no longer a servant of Satan. She became free by the grace of God. If one person can be set free by our economy of giving and giving and giving, it is well worth the effort.