



Giving Up Allegiance

Ephesians 1:15-23

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This morning, we are finishing our November worship series on Giving Up. As we are fully immersed in the early stages of Christmas shopping extravaganza, we're considering how we might right our relationship with wealth so that we might more faithfully be stewards of the resources that are under our control.

In the past three weeks, we looked at Giving Up Control, Giving Up Wastefulness, and Giving the Benjamins. The invitation to have a better relationship with wealth begins with acknowledging God is in control. We continue to better that relationship by seizing the invitation to use our resources by participating in the work of God in the world. And we are invited, as part of that work, to give – to give to the church and to help care for all who have need.

This morning, fittingly on Christ the King Sunday, we consider the final invitation to give up our *allegiance* to wealth.

We learn from an early age that Liza Minnelli was right in her 1972 Cabaret performance, "Money makes the world go round." Whether it's gold and silver coins, plastic credit cards, paper checks, or cold hard cash – if you don't have it, you want it; if you do have it, you want more of it.

Wealth is such a determining factor for our lives, even early in our lives, that teenagers will start to change the clubs they join, the sports they play, and the volunteer hours they work knowing that these changes will have implications on which colleges they are accepted into. When applying for colleges, many high school grads will consider the financial expectations of the occupations associated with their projected major.

I remember, even some 20 years ago when I was applying for colleges, the average life-time earnings of each major were printed in the college's marketing materials. Students weren't just invited to consider a career path based on their personal gifts and passions, they were being nudged to pursue a path that would make them more money.

I don't want to sound too critical of these decisions, because they are hard decisions, but I lament that anyone has to give up pursuing a career where their passions and gifts are best aligned simply because that career path won't provide "enough" financial support.

One area where this is wreaking havoc on society is in the medical field. Students who have pursued a medical degree have been abandoning their desire to be a family practitioner or local physician

because these jobs don't pay enough to cover their medical school loans. This has been an really big issue in more rural communities with some small towns being left without family practices at all.

I was grateful to hear about the changes at New York University in recent years to address this concern. The university found that students in the Medical Doctor program who had a passion for being a family practitioner or a licensed physician were abandoning these pursuits to become surgeons to ensure they could afford to cover the cost of their student debt. They realized how this was negatively impacting communities across the nation. To help address this concern, New York University's Grossman School of Medicine is now a tuition-free medical program. Students can now pursue whatever medical specialty they desire without worry about the capability of paying off any student debt.

I know this kind of shift is unlikely to take root in every university, or in every career field, but just imagine what such a change might mean for the mental health of our nation. How different might our world be if every one of us pursued our careers not in hopes of making more money, or even making *enough* money, but instead, we pursued careers where we were the most gifted, and where we found the most passion, and where we found the most personal joy? What if didn't give up our longing to be an electrician, or plumber, or teacher, or janitor, or chef, or scientist, or fire fighter, or environmentalist simply because we weren't convinced it would be able to afford us the life style that we grew up envisioning for ourselves – a lifestyle portrayed in movies and in the news based on the wealth and luxury of the rich and famous?

What if we didn't determine our future based on wealth? What if our allegiance wasn't to the American dream? What if we forged a new *more faithful* path in the midst of the empirical vision of our nation, which decrees wealth as king?

This is the very intent of the writing of Paul in our scripture this morning, found in the letter to the Ephesians.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians was written around AD 60, about 30 years after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The intended readers were the members of the early Christian church in the city of Ephesus, which is located in modern day Turkey. The city was a major commercial hub, offering a central location between the power centers of Rome and Athens to the west, and the growing nations of Asia to the east. Living in a commercial hub meant that the city was filled with practitioners of a variety of faiths, people from both the east and west, most of which were polytheistic. There were many gods hailed and celebrated within the city among the varied faiths that were practiced.

Paul is writing this letter to urge the Christian church, the early converts to the Christian faith, to remain steadfast in their faith to the one true God: the God of Creation, the God of Israel, and the God who manifested himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

The letter begins in the standard Pauline way: he opens with a word of greeting and then offers a spiritual charge to the community. Ephesians 1, verse 3, reads, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just

as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.”

Paul is known for using the literary practice of pleonasm. Pleonasm is “seldom satisfied with one word or phrase when two or three will do better.”ⁱ ... That is to say, Paul never says in a succinct way what can be elaborated and drawn out. This is the case with his opening blessing, which lasts 11 verses, and is also the case with our text today, beginning in verse 15.

After giving them a spiritual charge, Paul offers a prayer for the early church.

Paul is known to have prayed for his congregations. This prayer in Ephesians 1 includes a “magnificent theological statement” which “celebrates God’s purpose in the resurrection and exaltation of Christ as the church’s Lord and head.”ⁱⁱ

Listen as his prayer begins, “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him.”

There is an expectation by Paul that these early believers will study the word of God, and will be attuned to the will of God, such that they might know God more. He prays that they may have a spirit of wisdom and revelation – he wants them to be more mindful of God.

Only, in the first century, it was still believed that the heart was the center of thinking in the body – not the brain. The heart was not the center of emotion and affection, as it is associated today. The heart was the intellectual center of one’s being, so, Paul continues, “as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which [God] has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.”

In his prayer, Paul is inviting them to know the hope of God in the center of their being. He wants them to know the hope of God as it has been expressed and witnessed in the riches of the inheritance among the saints. You see, Paul too is worried about wealth, but his focus is not on a material wealth. Paul is not worried about the cash cow. Paul urges in prayer that this community might know the wealth of eternal power that is Gods.

In the final few verses of this opening chapter, as he winds down this prayer, Paul is going to give a testimony to the wealth that is God’s eternal power. He again will use the literary practice of pleonasm to say in many words what could have been said more succinctly. But Paul has no desire to say this succinctly, he intends to build it out, to embellish this truth, and to give praise for the power of God in Jesus Christ.

Verse 20 begins, “God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. He has put all

things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

Let’s first look at just how high Christ has been raised by God. Christ is raised so high that he is seated at the right hand of God in the heavenly places. And that place – that throne seat – is far above all rule ... and it’s far above all authority ... and it’s high above all power ... and it’s high above all dominion. In fact, it’s so far up, it’s so high up there, that it is above every name that is named ... but not just in this age, Paul keeps going – it’s higher than every name that is named both in this lifetime and in the age to come.

Paul doesn’t want there to be any doubt on just how high Christ has been raised.

Remember, the Ephesians are living in a community where there are many gods who are worshipped. There are a plethora of Roman and Greek gods, and there would have been a smattering of gods being worshipped from eastern religions. Paul doesn’t want there to be any doubt. No matter how high your neighbors think their god may be, they are still not as high as God has raised Christ. Christ is the one who is higher than all others, both in this lifetime and in the age to come. And let there be no doubt, he is as high as he is because the power of God has put him there, and there is no power as powerful as God’s power.

And lest we think this prayer of Paul’s is specific only to the spiritual realm, let us not forget that Caesar himself was considered to be a god. Paul’s prayer is as political as it is religious, and the power of Rome is called into question against the power of God; the height and authority of Caesar is called into question against the height and authority of Christ.

In this place of ultimate authority (in this place that is so high), Paul relegates the church to its rightful place under Christ. Verses 22 and 23 close out the prayer. Using Young’s Literal Translation, the text reads, “All things God put under Christ’s feet, and God gave Christ, the head over all things, to the church, which is Christ’s body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

Notice it doesn’t say Christ is the head of the church, it says that God gave Christ, who is the head over all things, to the church. To say Christ is *only* the head of the church is to limit just how great the power of Christ is. Christ is the head of all things, and as such, is also the head of the church.

But the church is not just another worldly entity. The church is given a special relationship to Christ.

It is important to note that the church is not Christ. “[The Church] is intimately related to Christ. It exists in solidarity with Christ.”ⁱⁱⁱ But the Church is *not* Christ. Instead, Paul writes, the Church is the body of Christ – we are the fulness of Christ in the world. The church is given a special role as the witness of Christ’s presence.

It is this special role, it is this identity as the body, that calls us as the Church to reflect on where we give our allegiance. Paul lays this out clearly in his prayer: there is only one to whom we should give our allegiance, for he is above all – higher than every name, in this age and in the age to come.

Kristofer Phan Coffman notes in his commentary that Jesus is not just another earthly ruler, content on selfish gain. To proclaim that Christ is King is to give up our allegiance to every other entity – including wealth. Christ the King Sunday, he writes, “is the assertion that faith in Jesus and love toward all the saints triumphs over the naked power of government”^{iv} and all who profit from the power of government.

To proclaim Christ as King is both a religious and political statement, both in the context of Paul’s letter, and even still today. It is a statement that professes our belief in the rightful seat of Christ at the right hand of God the Father, and it is a statement against the rule of every empire on earth (yes, even our own). It is a proclamation that individual lives are more important than corporate entities. It is a proclamation that says the community’s well-being is more important than any individuals. It is the affirmation that no person, queen or president, is worthy of allegiance over Christ, who is head of all. It is a statement about our role and purpose as a collective of faith, a called out gathering who are given one purpose, which is the glory of God. It is a statement that sets as our north star one person, who is the witness of God’s perfect love, who is the Lord Jesus Christ.

The final step in righting our relationship to wealth is to give up our allegiance to wealth (and all that comes with it), and to claim and proclaim the goodness of God in Jesus Christ our Lord, who is far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. May we give up our allegiance to everything else, so that we may live as Christ’s body, unified as one under he who is the head over all things. For the glory of God, forever and ever. Amen.

ⁱ Allen Verhey and Joseph S. Harvard. *Ephesians (Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Ralph P. Martin. *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Verhey and Harvard.

^{iv} Krisoter Phan Coffman. “Commentary on Ephesians 1:15-23.” <http://workingpreacher.com>. Retrieved November 21, 2023.