

Sermon: "Not for Sale"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee
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NOT FOR SALE

For sale.

That's the most common sign in the world. And we are a people who love the sale. We sell clothes. We sell cars. We sell homes. We even sell our old "stuff" at yard sales. It always amazes me to see how some people love to buy our old, worn out possessions. Our whole economy is based upon this idea of free commerce.

There's nothing wrong with that. Indeed, I believe our freedom to buy and sell has been instrumental in the prosperity that we enjoy in this country. I am an unashamed and happy capitalist!

But, sometimes we forget that there are some things which are just not for sale. There are some things that are sacred, off limits when comes to buying and selling.

Down through the ages there have been those who have forgotten this most important point. They have traded their morality and their faith for the almighty dollar or for momentary pleasure.

LAW AND GOSPEL

As Christians we have inherited and follow in the tradition of God's people, the Jews. As a result, we believe that there are certain absolute values that are non-negotiable. To put it another way, we believe that life has rules to live by. At the heart of our faith is a belief that there are some things that are always right and some things that are always wrong.

Now this doesn't mean that we ignore mitigating circumstances or approach problems in a simplistic or judgmental way. But, on the other hand, the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and the concepts of sin and forgiveness make no sense unless we believe in a God of justice and righteousness.

To put it another way, unless we have a deep sense of right and wrong, the gospel becomes an answer for a question no one is asking. If we don't believe in a God given standard of behavior, the gospel is robbed of its power. Who needs forgiveness if right and wrong are relative? No one.

The apostle Paul understood better than most the danger of abandoning the law in order to embrace a message of cheap grace. He knew that the message of grace without the corresponding message of sin and forgiveness was a terrible distortion of the faith. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle tried to clear up this misunderstanding. He wrote,

"What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?" Romans 6:15-16

THOU SHALT NOT

Paul was saying that the grace of God should enable us to live in a way that is pleasing to God. We are saved from sin. We are not saved so that we can lay down in the filth of our sin happy in the knowledge that "God will forgive us because He's in the forgiving business." That's nonsense. And more importantly, that's not gospel. That's not good news.

And yet, sometimes in our desire to have what we want instead of what God wants, we have fallen for that nonsense. We have sold our birthright of forgiveness and grace for the thin soup of feeling good and getting what we want now.

I attended my first meeting this past week of a Presbytery Task Force to which I have been assigned. It's a task force designed to respond when there is sexual misconduct by the clergy. Why they give me all the good jobs, I don't know ... but I guess somebody has to do it.

Anyway, we were talking about what our committee would do, and someone from General Assembly suggested that part of our role should be primarily educational leading one and two day "seminars" educating our religious professionals, We should tell them, she said, that certain "boundaries" shouldn't be crossed.

Most of us on that committee didn't like that idea at all. In fact, most of us thought that this kind of educational event would be a waste of time. As one member put it, "This might be a good thing for us to do in a confirmation class, but shouldn't ministers know that it's wrong to have an affair?"

As I like to put it, "Which part of "thou shalt not .." do you have trouble understanding? The problem when it comes to morality is not with understanding. The problem is with the will. And the reason there is a problem with the will is the fact that sometimes we do not worship the one true God. We worship a different "god" a god which bears a striking resemblance to our own face!

"GODS" NOW AND THEN

They say that "the more things change, the more they stay the same." I am struck at how true that old saying is especially when it comes to faith and morality. Take away our technology, and you find that the ancient world was much like ours in many ways.

There were many religions and many gods in the ancient world. The cosmopolitan ancient world looked upon faith as a matter of individual choice. If one god didn't get you what you wanted, there were many more from which you could choose. In fact, many merchants did a booming trade in making little silver models of the various gods. The more gods the merrier. It was good for business.

In the ancient world, the "gods" were literally for sale.

But, if you can buy and sell gods, who's really in charge? You are. Provided you knew the secret word or have the right god or gods on your side. Such a view of faith often led to immoral practices by their religious leaders.

Indeed, the ancient gods even mirrored the immorality and treachery of human beings except on a grand scale.

The ancient gods were like larger than life human beings.
They made god in the image of men and women.

Do we do the same thing today? I think in our own way we do. Many churches today have adopted a market driven approach to evangelism. How do you get people to join the church? By giving them what they want! Just like someone trying to sell a product, you analyze your market and adapt your strategy to fit that market.

Now, let me hasten to add that I do think it is important to be aware of the needs and hopes of the people in our world. However, it is dangerous to adopt a strategy of always giving us what we want.

Why? Because we often want the wrong thing. We invariably choose our way over God's way. The biblical message of sin and forgiveness takes a back seat to the world's message of finding what makes us feel good and doing it.

And quite often what we want is not what we really need. Someone once said that if God really wanted to punish us, God would give us exactly what we asked for!

Human beings need something more than just the sound of their own voice. Human beings need a message that comes from above and beyond. Human beings need a message that is not "market driven" nor based upon the presuppositions of our culture.

And the starting point is just the opposite of where we tend to start. God is not made in our image. The Scripture tells us that we are made in God's image.

That doesn't mean we're little gods or that somehow there's a drop of the "divine" in all of us. That means we are creatures who were made by the one true God, and our greatest purpose indeed our only purpose is to serve that one, true God. We have a God shaped hole in our heart that can only be filled by the presence and power of God.

WORSHIP AND OBEDIENCE

How do we serve that one true God?

Well, the Ten Commandments are a good starting point. We teach them to our children in Confirmation Class. They are an important part of all the major catechisms of the church. And Jesus himself gives us a guideline for interpreting the commandments.

Our Lord was once asked what was the most important commandment. And Jesus replied,

"The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Mark 12:29-31

Love God. Love neighbor. That's the summary of the Law according to Jesus, and if you look at the Ten Commandments, they can be divided according to those two categories.

Commandments 1-4 are about what it means to love God. Loving God means worshiping the one, true God in Spirit and in truth. Commandments 5-10 are about loving your neighbor as yourself. Care for you parents. Don't lie, cheat, steal or commit murder. Be faithful to your wife or husband those kinds of things.

And the important point is this: commandments 5-10 are based upon commandments 1-4. That is, right behavior toward our neighbor is based upon the prior belief that there is one true God who requires certain things of us.

IDOLATRY

People who wantonly break the commandments concerning our obligation toward our neighbor do so because they do not believe in the one true God. They have multiple gods which can be defined variously as pleasure, money, status, power and so forth. You name it. As Calvin once put it, human beings are a virtual idol factory.

And of course, just as it was in the ancient world, there are always people who are willing to supply our need for false gods. Next time you watch a commercial on TV ask yourself this question, "What are they really selling? Are they selling a product or an image?" Quite often the answer is an image. They are selling you a philosophy based upon one of the false idols that our world tends to worship.

The key to robbing false idols of their power is naming them. For example, one person suggested playing a game of "Who are you trying to kid?" while watching commercials on TV. Do you really believe that you'll be happier or sexier because you're driving a certain car? Who are you kidding?

TURNING GOD'S HOUSE INTO A MARKETPLACE

In today's lesson from the gospel of John, we have one of the few incidents recorded maybe the only one where Jesus "loses it." Jesus actually seems to be overwhelmed with anger. A lot of people use this passage to suggest that Jesus was not really the meek and mild person that was described to us in Sunday School. Indeed, the Scripture tells us that this incident Jesus driving the money lenders out of the temple was a fulfillment of prophecy. In verse 17 we read that the disciples remembered Psalm 69:9,

[17] "Zeal for your house will consume me." John 2:17 (NRSV)

Zeal in this case refers to righteous anger. Jesus, in this passage shows us that there are some things worth getting angry about.

So what was it that made Jesus so mad? What caused Jesus to "make a whip of cords" and drive the money changers and those who were selling animals for sacrifice out of the temple?

According to our Scripture, Jesus was angry because they were "turning his Father's house into a marketplace." Apparently people were more intent on "doing business" than worshipping God. They had sold their soul for a profit.

There are some obvious applications of this verse. Certainly our minds go to the TV preachers who hawk their wares in order to build vast religious enterprises. Perhaps some might think of those who adjust the hard demands of the gospel in order to make it easier to accept in a wealthy society such as ours. Last week Jesus said that those who would be his disciples would have to "take up your cross deny yourself ... and come follow me." Certainly those are not words designed to appeal to a market driven society.

But, I think the mistake which Jesus so roundly condemns in this passage is a mistake that all of us can so easily make. It is confusing worship with the trappings of worship. It is becoming so caught up in the machinery of worship selling sacrifices, exchanging money, planning meetings, leading a building campaign that the true purpose of worship is missed.

The true purpose of worship is to glorify God. And the Bible tells us that this true worship is the foundation for moral behavior and the stability of society.

There is slogan which goes, "The family that prays together stays together." To put it another way, worshipping God is the foundation for a strong family. I think that's true.

And it's not only true of our families but in other areas of life as well. When we put God first, when we seek to worship the one true God alone, we are less susceptible to the false gods which would drain us of true life. We will have a stronger family, a stronger church, a stronger community, and a stronger nation when we remember to put first things first and make worshipping God our number one priority.

Don't sell your soul to the marketplace. Put first things first.

THE FINGER POINTING THE WAY

God graciously has pointed us to the right way. In fact, that's what the Jewish word for Law, Torah means ... the way ... or perhaps even more literal "finger pointing the way." God has given us commands to worship him and to love our neighbor as yourself. God didn't do that because He wants us take away all our fun. On the contrary, God's Law can be seen as another form of grace.

G.K. Chesterton once said that if a man is walking and comes to a cliff, and keeps on walking off the edge of the cliff, he will not break the law of gravity. He will prove it! I think that the same can be said of God's law. It's like the law of gravity. If we break God's law, we will hurt ourselves.

If you saw someone about to walk off a cliff, wouldn't you call for them to stop? That wouldn't be judgmental or unkind. It would be the most gracious and loving thing you could do.

So, why are we sometimes willing to sell out our values and principles when others tell us that we are judgmental or unkind? Our worship of the one true God requires us to obey and stand for righteousness in a world that is confused about where to go and what to do.

Our worship of the one true God causes us to say firmly to the world, "There are some things which are non-negotiable. There are some things that are not for sale. There are some things that we do or don't do because of our belief that God has told us to act this way and God has our best interests at heart."

A SHEEP'S TAIL

Abraham Lincoln once asked his advisors, "If you call a sheep's tail a leg, how many legs would the sheep have?"

"Five," they guessed?

"No," said Lincoln, "because calling a tail a leg won't make it one."

And neither can we make something wrong into something right just by saying it is so. As I'm fond of saying, "It's not the ten suggestions, it's the Ten Commandments." We can't pick seven out of ten. We can't think that grace excuses us from obedience. We can't think that financial considerations allow us to put the them aside.

There are some things which can't be changed.
There are some things which are not for sale.

May God help us learn that important truth and point us toward the way of righteousness and life.

Amen.