

Most of you know that prior to my time at Presbyterian College I served a church in Roswell, Georgia, between 1996 and 2007. Wasn't it Chad Echols who answered the question at the Congregational Meeting to vote on my call, "If he is originally from Scotland will we be able to understand him?" Chad's reply, "If he has preached for those folks in Roswell, Georgia, for 11 years and they understood him, we won't have any problems!"

Roswell is an old cotton mill town, but is now very much part of the spread of Metro Atlanta. Located in the very affluent northern suburbs of Atlanta, there was in our time there, fast growth, large expansive, expensive homes, McMansions no less, huge, expensive cars, money seemed to be no object for many people, excess was quite common. One of my pastor colleagues who served a congregation of the Reformed Church in America came to believe and observe two things about the community and its residents – he thought that parents in the community WORSHIPPED their children and that if world capitalism had a Headquarters, a case could be made that this HQ was actually Roswell and the surrounding area.

My pastor colleague concluded that parents WORSHIPPED their children because of the involvement and over-involvement of parents in the lives of their children. It was as if the entire lives of these parents centered on their kids. This attitude was very extreme, very marked, and at times all-encompassing and all-consuming. My colleague insisted that this behavior went well beyond love and support and encouragement, and included the belief that no one need dare ever criticize or correct their child or stand in their way of getting ahead or getting on, so much so that he believed in had turned into "worship".

Evidence for my colleague's second contention, that just maybe the northern suburbs of Atlanta were or are the center of world capitalism may come from the decision to film the recent movie *The Joneses* in the Roswell area. This movie was released last fall and tells the story of "The Jones family" who move into an affluent neighborhood. I believe the actual neighborhood is one called White Columns, lots of nice homes, expensive cars and a great golf course... but I digress....

In the movie, from day one, The Jones' have it all together and have just about everything – the latest gadgets, the most beautiful clothes, the newest vehicles, the coolest toys. Soon their neighbors are ogling at all this great stuff and being encouraged to buy this stuff for themselves. You see it turns out that the Jones' are not a family at all; they are in fact "a Unit". Specifically they are a professional selling unit masquerading as a family and their job is to develop a social network amongst the different demographics living in their neighborhood and sell them on the designer label clothes, the branded foods, the newest high-tech electronics, and even the cars that they "own". Thus the tagline for the movie, "The Joneses": They are not living the American dream; they are selling it."

The Joneses are paid posers whose goal is to make everyone want to be just like them via what they and their handlers at the corporate HQ call the ripple effect. The Joneses do not talk up the products directly, they just use them very publicly and because they wear an aura of success other people starting buying the product and they start talking it up. Before you know it more and more people get attracted to a product and they want to have it for themselves. The ripple effect results when the people who purchase the items modeled by the Joneses begin to brag about them to their own friends and acquaintances until more and more people buy in and make the purchase and brag to their own friends causing the ripple effect.

The Joneses raises great questions about “what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.” These are exactly the questions that concern and were addressed by Jesus in today’s section of the Sermon on the Mount. As we have heard over the prior Sundays Jesus has been teaching the crowds, starting with a challenging set of blessings, blessings for those whom the world usually condemns, dismisses and curses. Then Jesus originates a new set of commandments, guidelines, but more than guidelines for all who are drawn to participate in His new reign, the Kingdom of God.

Today’s reading starts with a proverbial statement from Jesus, “No one can serve two masters.” Specifically Jesus insists, [To live in my Kingdom] “You cannot serve God and wealth”. In Jesus’ mind, in Jesus’ Kingdom there is no place for anxiety over material things. Worry over what to eat – fried chicken, broiled chicken, grilled chicken or chicken livers – guys, it is not allowed! Worry over what to wear – the old blue shoes, the newer blue shoes or the newest blue shoes or the new pair of blue shoes I saw in the store yesterday – ladies, it is not allowed! This is not the kind of anxiety he wants to see in His followers. Replace your anxiety over what you will eat or wear Jesus says by being anxious over, worrying over the demands of living within and in accord with the values of the kingdom of God.

Jesus as much as says “Be anxious” over whom it is you serve, and who is your Master. Since we cannot serve both God and mammon, the Greek word for “wealth”, within the Kingdom you need to serve God and be concerned above all else about the demands of living as a servant of God.

Directly or indirectly Jesus often asked this question of people He met, people drawn to Him by His words and deeds - “Whom do you serve?” Indeed this is still a question that Jesus places before all of us in the church and in the community – “Whom do you serve?”

In the Reformed-Presbyterian expression of the Christian faith we highly value the concept of the priesthood of all believers. This concept could easily be described as the servanthood of all believers because all of us who come to trust the Good news of Jesus Christ, all of the baptized, all of us who have be incorporated into the Body of Christ, are called to be servants. None of us are exempt, none of us are excused, we are called to service as soon as and as part of our call to faith and trust.

Our serving originates in and is shaped by and inspired by our call by God. Within the Church, some are called at different times to particular forms of service – I mention today the call that some hear and receive and act upon to serve as officers of the church – elders or deacons, servant leaders on behalf of the servant community. Out of the call that all of us have received in Jesus Christ we look to encourage those of our number whom God would call to be deacons and elders in this time in the life of OAPC. I encourage you to join with our Nomination Committee in prayer, reflection and action, to nominate people in whom you see the gifts for leadership, so they can discern where and how they can most faithfully express the call that God has for them in their life at this time.

As we devote ourselves to serving not mammon but God we will discover and express what it is to be living within Jesus’ Kingdom. As we focus on our Savior and not on our savings, as we focus on our faith and not on our facebook status, as we spend our time and energy on God’s call rather than on goods, we will be creating a ripple effect that honors God and points people to God and encourages people to be connected with God and with God’s people and with the neighbors God gives us in the

future to which God calls us. The ripple effect of faithful service is what results when we serve God and no other master. To the extent that we are prepared so to live we will find our true calling as friends and followers of Jesus Christ.

For sure as pointed out by Jesus one of the main struggles we face as people, especially as wealthy people, is the struggle between serving God and serving mammon. This struggle continues in our hearts and minds all the time, even when we do not notice it nor want to acknowledge it.

There are it seems to me, two parts to this struggle. One part of this struggle concerns that portion of our wealth and our income and our means upon which God has a direct claim. Whether it is 10% of our income before or after taxes, or whether it is 10% of our profit from the last year or 10% of the growth in our portfolio is not the issue over which we should get bogged down. However we might slice it or dice it God expects God's people to give to God a portion, a meaningful portion, of their means, intentionally, regularly, prayerfully, dutifully, happily, faithfully, and generously. In the end it doesn't matter if we start at 5% or 10% or some other figure, it is the clear tenet and trajectory of scripture and our faith that we, as God's people, are called to give to God. Here we have a place to start, a checkpoint for all of us, ensuring that in this aspect of what it means to serve God rather than mammon, that we are giving our gifts to God. As I saw it put on a church billboard: "You give God the credit, now give God the cash."

The second part of the struggle that we have is over what we do with the other 90 or 95 or 99% of our income, wealth or means. Given these percentages this is arguably the bigger part of our struggle.... though it is obvious isn't it, that increasing our generosity and commitment to God out of all the abundance with which God blesses us would somewhat diminish this huge imbalance, and lessen us having to struggle with quite so much of what we earn or receive or inherit or create or invest or grow.

Jesus saying and Jesus living "You cannot serve God and mammon" means that this teaching applies to everything that we have, to all that we own or imagine we possess. How we react to everything we earn and spend, how we spend or apply or dispose of our income, our attitude towards and our use of our possessions, these are all venues and vehicles that concern God. Everything we do, how we live in relation to material things, will either strengthen our desire and intention to serve God or it will weaken or diminish or impair our stated intention to live as God's people. This is a truth from Jesus, it is a hard truth, a singular truth not open to any equivocation.

EQUIVOCATION – GREAT WORD – WHICH VOCATION WILL WE FOLLOW? OUR DILEMMA – Will we live the life that God has for us to live – our vocation – or will we settle for some other, lesser choice?

Let us hear this truth today not as a negative truth, not as guilt, but as opportunity. For let us imagine the truly amazing, remarkable, life-enhancing, world-changing ripple effect that will be unleashed as we better align our lives with following the Master Jesus rather than the master mammon. Freed from things, freed of things, freed to share things, freed to give, we will discover that we are freed to live lovingly and generously. And as this happens people will more clearly see in us and through us the amazing love and truth and purpose that God has for the world.

Sermon: A Ripple Effect

God looks to us to create a genuine, lasting, faithful, Christ-centered, grace-filled ripple effect – that is what it means for us to be salt and light in the world. From you, from each of you; to those around you, throughout our community and county and state and nation, and to all the ends of the earth, God’s love lived, offered, shared, as a ripple effect. The experience of living within the Kingdom of God, as friends and followers of Jesus Christ – yes we can, yes it is possible. Rippling away as we connect to God, to one another, to the needs of our neighbors and to the future into which God is calling us. Ripple away – beginning with YOU and YOUR living with God as your Master! Amen.