

## **Introduction**

I'd like to begin with an image that illustrates an idiom we use. What is it? It's **"the elephant in the room."** *Wikipedia* explains **"the elephant in the room"** this way. It's **"an English metaphorical idiom for an obvious truth that is either being ignored or going unaddressed. The idiomatic expression also applies to an obvious problem or risk no one wants to discuss."** Today, I'm going to preach about the elephant in the rooms of American Christians and their churches. The three texts we read reveal what that is.

## **Worship**

The first is Isaiah 58:1-7. This text is about ceremonial fasting in Judah. Ceremonial fasting was part of the Jew's worship of God and they were devotedly doing it. But notice their complaint in the first two lines of verse 3. Their fasts didn't please Him, and they were right. They didn't. They actually insulted Him instead. Verses 3, 4, 5, and 7 explain why they did. It was because the Jews of Judah were using their money and material resources wrongly, which in turn made their fasts of no account to God.

God articulated the kinds of fasts he desired in verses 6-7. He was speaking metaphorically there. He identified actions that were like fasting, that honored and pleased Him as fasting did. There were two of those. The first in verse 6 was releasing their Hebrew slaves in the Year of Jubilee. God had commanded His people to do that in Leviticus 25. But they were greedy and didn't. The second action in verse 7 was giving liberally to the needy and poor. God had commanded them to do that in Deuteronomy. But again they were greedy and didn't.

Those then were the metaphorical fasts, the two actions that pleased and honored God as ceremonial fasting did. They were to release their Hebrew slaves and to give liberally to the needy and poor. They teach us that using our money and material resources according to God's will

makes our worship pleasing to Him. It enhances our worship. Using our money and material resources contrary to His will makes our worship insulting to Him. It diminishes or even invalidates our worship.

The message of Isaiah 58:1-7 is clear. Worship cannot be divorced from economic realities.

## **Judgment**

Our second text is Ezekiel 16:48-50. Chapter 16 generally records the history of Judah's unfaithfulness to God. In verses 44-52, He declares that it was more culpable in that regard than the nation of Israel and the city of Sodom were.

Consider Sodom for a moment and what happened to it in Genesis 19. Let me ask you, "**Why did God wipe it from the face of the earth?**" Our word "**sodomy**" derives from its name, which shows with what we normally equate the city – sexual sin generally and brazen homosexual sin particularly. The narrative in Genesis 19 makes clear that we're correct in doing so.

But we're incorrect in equating it *only* with sexual sin. There was another sin equally as grave.

Many prosperous people with a surplus of material resources lived in the city. But they didn't "**help the poor and needy,**" to quote verse 49. As the words "**arrogance,**" "**abundant food,**" and "**careless ease**" in that verse imply, they lived lives of luxury instead. They didn't use their material resources as God wanted them to.

Now notice the word "**guilt**" in verse 49. Its citizens not using their material resources as God wanted brought guilt on Sodom. Also notice what verse 49 together with verse 50 and the words "**I removed them**" imply. God judged and destroyed it because of that guilt. The sin of materialism was as equally a factor in its destruction as sexual sin was.

The message of Ezekiel 16:48-50 is clear. Using our money and material resources contrary to God's will brings His judgment and condemnation upon us. Judgment cannot be divorced from economic

realities.

## **The Lord's Supper**

1 Corinthians 11:20-22 is our third text. Its subject is the Lord's Supper, what we call Communion.

In 10:16-17, Paul explains what participating in the Lord's Supper signifies. It's koinonia with Jesus and other Christians. Koinonia refers to a relational union with someone that the Holy Spirit Himself creates. Verses 16-17 teach that relational union with Jesus inevitably engenders relational union with other Christians, and that participating in the Lord's Supper signifies that.

That helps us understand 11:20-22. The first century Christians celebrated a love feast in conjunction with the Lord's Supper. They routinely met together for a regular dinner after which they worshipped and took Communion. Each Christian was supposed to bring whatever food he or she could and share it with those who couldn't bring any. This was a mechanism the church used to help the needy and poor.

But Paul records what some Christians were doing in verse 21. They didn't want to share the food they brought with others. They came early and ate quickly, therefore, so they wouldn't have to, which resulted in some having more than enough and others less than enough

The consequence, in verse 20, was devastating. They were not eating the Lord's Supper. Paul's logic goes like this. Premise #1 – Participating in the Lord's Supper signifies koinonia with Christians. Premise #2 – Those who don't have koinonia with Christians aren't participating in the Lord's Supper. Premise #3 - Those who have the means to give to needy Christians but don't give don't have koinonia with them. Conclusion: Those who don't give aren't participating in the Lord's Supper. They aren't experiencing the spiritual realities in and behind it.

The message of 1 Corinthians 11:20-22 is clear. The Lord's Supper is not a sacrament for Christians who can give to other Christians but don't. Communion cannot be divorced from economic realities.

## Spirituality and Economics

Those then are the three texts and let me quickly review their messages. Worship, judgment, and the Lord's Supper cannot be divorced from economic realities. Those messages imply one of the most compelling principles of our lives. Spirituality (aliveness to Jesus and His kingdom at hand) cannot be separated from how we use the money and material resources God has given us. How we use them dramatically affects our ability to act upon and engage Jesus and His kingdom at hand and to be acted upon and engaged by Him and it.

Let me state it more particularly. Using our money and material resources according to God's will makes us more alive to Jesus and His kingdom at hand. It enhances our friendship with Him and our partaking of His powers. Using our money and material resources contrary to God's will makes us less alive to Him and His kingdom. It diminishes our friendship with Him and our partaking of His powers.

But it isn't just our temporal life, on earth, that's affected. It's our eternal life as well. 2 John 8 teaches that we can "**lose**" some of our reward in heaven. The result, according to that verse, is that we don't receive "**a full reward.**" One of the significant factors in the gain or loss of reward will be how we used our money and material resources.

You can see then that I'm not overstating the case. Spirituality cannot be divorced from the economic realities of our personal lives.

## The Elephant in the Room

That message, I admit, is a radical and convicting one, in the American church at least. That's why almost no pastors and other Christian leaders preach and teach it. They know that their congregations and audiences – their worldviews shaped by our current culture – don't want to hear it and will resent it if they do. So, they just ignore it and let it go, to everyone's detriment, including God's.

The consequence is that materialism (using money and material

resources contrary to God's will) is the elephant in the room of most American Christians and churches today. You and I as Bible-believing Christians need to grasp that. Those in our camp, leaders and laymen alike, identify, discuss, and condemn a host of damning sins – all the while ignoring this one that is the most prevalent among us.

If we open our eyes and ears, we'll recognize that's true. I once heard Jerry Falwell say that if God doesn't judge America, He'll have to apologize to Sodom on judgment day. Or I heard Pat Robertson say that 9-11 might have been God's judgment on America. What were the sins that both Falwell and Robertson mentioned in that regard? They were homosexuality and abortion. But what sin, that is equally grave but far more prevalent, did they not mention? It's materialism. Why is that? Could it be because Christians generally aren't guilty of homosexuality and abortion but are of materialism?

There's no doubt about it. Materialism is the elephant in the room of most American Christians and their churches today.

### **Get Rid of the Elephant in the Room**

For God's sake, the sake of others second, and their sakes, they need to get rid of it. They need to remove it from their rooms. That's our call as well and here's how we answer it. It's by doing three things.

First, learn what God says about money and material resources in the Bible. The Bible does say more about that than almost any other subject. It teaches that none of us own our money and property, that generosity is measured by how much we keep not give, that we should be conscious consumers and liberal givers, and much more. Do you and I know what God says about money and material resources in the Bible? Most Christians, for instance, think He says to give 10% no matter how much or little we make? But does He really? If you don't know what He says, you need to. So, devote yourself to learning it.

We do a second thing to get rid of the elephant in the room. Apply what God says to our personal lives. Application goes to two issues that

each of us needs to address. First, how much of our money and material resources should we keep and use for us and how much should we give away? And second, to what or whom should we give it? We take everything we've learned from the Bible and use it to answer those questions. There are some gray areas in doing that, I admit, but we thoughtfully and prayerfully do the best we can.

I read about a self-absorbed Christian husband and wife who studied and learned what God says in the Bible. They then applied what they learned. First, they determined that they could live on and secure their future with 60% of their combined income and give 40% away. Second, they gave the 40% to several Christian ministries and a ministry they themselves developed. Their ministry focused on giving reliable cars to working individuals who couldn't afford ones.

There's a third thing we do to get rid of the elephant in the room. We live out the application. We only keep what we should keep and give the rest away to whom we should give it. Doing that requires something particular and daily of us. We allow what God says in the Bible to direct all of our financial decisions and transactions. Take something as simple as eating out. We allow what God says to direct how often we eat out and how much we spend when we do. Or take ties. We allow what God says to direct how many we buy and how much we pay for them. Or take vacations. We allow what God says to direct how many vacations we take and how much we spend on them. Our goal in doing so is to be the conscious consumers and liberal gives God wants us to be.

## **Conclusion**

I've written a study titled "**Biblical Economics 101**" that's part of our *Disciples 'R' Us* curriculum. This study reveals in detail what God says about money and material resources in the Bible. You'll find it on line at our web site, [www.bethelfriendschurch.com](http://www.bethelfriendschurch.com). Use it to do three things: learn what God says, apply what you learn, and live it out. You'll get rid of the elephant in *your* room if you do.