

"THERE ARE PRIORITIES, AND THEN THERE ARE PRIORITIES"
AUGUST 5, 2018
Matthew 6:19-24

[Jesus told them:] "Don't hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or—worse!—stolen by burglars. Stockpile treasure in heaven, where it's safe from moth and rust and burglars. It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being.

"Your eyes are windows into your body. If you open your eyes wide in wonder and belief, your body fills up with light. If you live squinty-eyed in greed and distrust, your body is a dank cellar. If you pull the blinds on your windows, what a dark life you will have!

"You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can't worship God and Money both.

Forty-five days before the film, "All the Money in the World," was to screen, a crisis came to the attention of its Director, Ridley Scott. This had been an expensive movie to make, aren't they all? The shooting schedule was tight and the many filming locations had the actors and crew traveling world-wide. The editing of all the footage was a giant project. It was all wrapped up.... and then it wasn't.

Just 6 weeks before the film was set to hit the theatres, one of its major stars was exposed as a serial sexual predator. An adult actor claimed that at age 14 years, he had been molested by the man. The actor who was cast as a lead actor to play the part of J. Paul Getty

didn't deny the allegation. He said that it "might have happened when he was in a drunken stupor."

The floodgates opened, and a long list of males involved in both the film and television production industries filed claims against this very well known, successful actor. Too many claims sprang forth, too many to be ignored.

Ridley Scott came face to face with his priorities. It was his job to get the movie out on time, in finished form. The film had to be edited, reviewed, scenes reshot, promoted, produced within budget, and sent out on schedule, or as he would pronounce it, on "shedual." It was *not* his job to be a social critic, a playground supervisor, or a morals judge. He was the Director. He had made a terribly good film. And he had his priorities.

He had his priorities and the studio had theirs. Jesus says you can't serve *God* and serve money, too. That's the exact theme of the movie, the true story of the 1973 kidnapping of J. Paul Getty's 16-year old grandson, Paul. Paul is kidnapped in Italy and held ransom by petty criminals and then by a ruthless, highly-organized crime mob. They want the richest man in the world to pay them \$17 million dollars for the return of the boy.

J. Paul Getty seems unperturbed. He goes about his daily routine, which has a lot to do with counting his money and greedily making more and more of it. He has his priorities, after all. Offering no solace to

Paul's mother, his daughter-in-law, and offering no money for the return of his own flesh and blood, he sheds not a tear; he displays no inner conflict in the choice between his money and his grandson's life. He has his priorities. Money is his god.

At one point a man working for Getty, but behind the scenes also working with Gail Getty for Paul's safe return, asks him to pay the ransom. Getty tells him rather matter-of-factly, "I have no money to spare." The man then challenges him, "With all due respect, what would it take for you to feel financially secure?" The old man looks his employee square in the eye and replies, calmly, "More."

More. We need and want more. Sometimes we are guilty of needing and wanting more money, not more God. Sometimes, we have our priorities all out of whack. We all do it. Jesus knows we all do it. He calls it out and we are indicted. We all are indicted. And so, we bargain. We give just so much to worthy causes. We put just so much aside to support the work of the local church, the wider church, and the underground church, that being those causes and persons who sponsor, in the name of God, private opportunities for giving.

J. Paul Getty is an extreme example, to be sure. But as despicable as he is, he does speak a truth we all like to deny when he tells his family, "When a man becomes rich, he has to deal with the problems of freedom." What does that mean? I think it means that a person with

money more than what is required to meet the basic needs of life has a lot of choices to make about what to do with that money.

And for some folks, that's a problem. For *Getty*, he chooses to invest in *things* rather than in people, including his family. He apologizes—sort of—to his adult son who has come to him for financial help, protesting, "I know you understand. I had to focus on my business. I couldn't be weighed down mentally by a family."

We like our things. We like our money. I saw it time and time again in divorce court how people would "*Getty*" when given the choice between children and money, between fairness and the love of things. Divorce, of course, by definition destroys relationships. But in our country today, divorce too often becomes all-out war and I don't have to tell you who are the biggest losers in that situation. It's the main reason I switched from litigating these cases to mediating them. And even then, it's still brutal. We have our priorities, after all.

Lest you think this is a "downer" sermon, let me come back to Ridley Scott and his movie, "*All the Money in the World*." Mr. Scott did a brave thing, made a bold move. He chose Justice over Money. You might say he heeded Jesus' admonition and chose the way of God over the love of financial gain. He made the decision to fire his male lead, replacing him with Christopher Plummer, a consummate actor and gentleman.

Well, sort of. As Plummer tells the story, he was passed over for the lead role initially and when he was called to fill in after the news came out, he told Ridley Scott "no" in rather pointed language. It was only after he found out about the many, many allegations being made against his former fellow actor that he changed his mind, considering all the people who worked so hard on the film who were innocent victims of the scandal.

Michelle Williams (*Gail Getty*) offered to re-shoot her scenes for free. She also gave up her Thanksgiving holiday. Mark Wahlberg was paid 1.5 million for the re-shoot, but then he donated 100% of his extra pay to "Time's Up" Legal Defense Fund, a fund established to help victims of sexual assault, harassment, and retaliation in all industries, especially women and people of color. There are priorities, and then there are priorities.

Some powerful people did the right things. They chose Justice over Money. They chose compassion over compensation. They said "enough is enough" to persons who use their freedom to deny others theirs. All the money in the world did not stop Ridley Scott from doing the right thing. It did not control Michelle Williams' decision either. In the end, money did not take precedence over Mark Wahlberg's conscience and social justice heart. And at age 88, and with only 9 days to learn the part, Christopher Plummer saved the project for the whole of the production, for all those names that scroll

along largely disregarded in the end credits. Plummer was nominated for an Academy Award for his work on the film, but his contribution was so much more.

And so, Mr. Getty, money is not all there is in the world. There is love, there is charity, there is justice, and there is compassion. May we choose rightly. May we put money in its proper place in our lives. May we live wide-eyed so that the light can come into our hearts and cause us to live a servant's life. May we never get squinty-eyed with greed and distrust so that our lives reek of the dank cellar about which Jesus warned. God is good. Let's worship God instead.

May It Be So.