

The god of Gold by Jeff Strite

Matthew|Matthew 6|6:24|34-6|6:34|34

(Comments before the scripture reading and prayer): This sermon series has been entitled "The Guardrails of Life" with the intention of exploring the guardrails God has set up for our lives to keep us from going off the road in our faith and crashing our lives and relationships. Today's sermon addresses one of the most prominent of God's guardrails.

SCRIPTURE READING

PRAYER

OPEN: In 1980, a man named Kevin Hillier of Australia lived in a trailer park. But he had just gotten a new metal detector and wanted to go out and try it out.

How many of you own metal detectors? (A few raised their hands).

Well, as Mr. Hillier swept the ground looking for signs of hidden metal, he found something he never expected to find in his backyard. In fact the readings on his metal detector were so unusual that he almost didn't pick up his shovel to investigate. But he did.

He dug down a mere foot underground and pulled out a 61-pound... let me repeat a 61 pound ... a 61 POUND nugget of pure gold.

Did I say that he'd been living in a trailer park? Not anymore. Sometime after he and his family discovered the golden rock, they sold it to a casino in Las Vegas, NV called (appropriately) the "Golden Nugget" for a little over a million dollars

Now, this nugget was huge. But it's not been the biggest one ever found.

There have been larger gold nuggets dug out of the ground in the past, they've all been melted down for the gold that was in them. For example...

- There was the nugget they called the MATRIX which contained about 187 lbs. of gold
- The WELCOME STRANGER weighing in at about 148 lbs.
- The 'GOLDEN EAGLE that was 71 lbs.

If you'll notice... each of these nuggets was given a special name. And the nugget purchased by the Golden Nugget Casino was also given a unique name.

(Showed a close up of the nugget on the screen)

If you look at it just right, you can see it looks about like a hand. It looks like a hand with the index and middle finger raised, while the ring and little fingers are tucked down into the palm. And so this famous rock was named (by someone) the "Hand of Faith."

When I first read the article about this particular piece of rock, I was struck by the irony of the name. You don't often think about gold and faith in the same sentence. And yet, that would seem to be a logical concept for a gambling house.

For the owners of the Golden Nugget - and their patrons - gold represents their faith.

Gold is the coin of the realm there.

Gold is what they gamble for.

Gold is the measure of their success.

Thus, the nugget known as the "Hand of Faith" is literally an idol to their GOD.

But you don't have to go to Atlantic City or Las Vegas to bow down to that idol - and that is what Jesus is warning us about in our text today.

In Matthew 6:24 Jesus says "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

As I was working on this sermon a logical question came to mind: why would we WANT to serve both masters? Why would anyone want to have a god made of gold???

Then it occurred to me that one of the first gods of Israel was made of gold.

Shortly after Israel had just left the slavery of Egypt, they were camped out at the base of Mt. Sinai. Exodus 19:16 tells us before Moses went up to get 10 commandments, God came down.

"On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled."

And for the next few minutes God declared to everyone the commandments He expected them to keep. These weren't suggestions. These were laws God was giving to the people He had claimed as His own.

And the very first commandment was "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God..." Exodus 20:3-5

So God spoke His commandments to His people and then had Moses go up on Mt. Sinai to receive His Law.

Moses is gone for about 40 days. That's a little over a month. And eventually the people begin to get a little uncomfortable with the situation. They go to Aaron and say "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." Exodus 32:1b

Aaron listens to them... and guess what kind of god he makes for them?

That's right - a GOLDEN calf.

Now the question is - why would they do something so dumb?

The gold wasn't really valuable to them. They couldn't spend it. It was just a piece of metal out in this desert. And the calf hadn't (and couldn't) lead them out of Egypt - or any place else.

So why would they turn to worship this idol - made of gold... when the real God had just destroyed Egypt's might with 10 plagues, and destroyed the armies of Egypt at the Red Sea? Why worship something so worthless to them as a hunk of gold?

Well, they did it... because they FELT insecure.
Moses was gone.
And God was nowhere to be seen.
In fact... they'd NEVER seen God.

But they could see this golden calf
And they felt secure by being able to see and touch something "real".
And that was the trap.

ILLUS: Years ago I visited a family where the husband and wife were having marital troubles. The wife showed me a box her husband kept in the closet. The box was full of lottery tickets that he had bought. The lottery tickets were worthless. He hadn't won anything with them. But they represented the potential for the wealth he wanted so he kept them in that box in the closet so he could look at them. Touch them. There was no value there. But these tickets (and their potential for wealth) were REAL to him. He couldn't see God (he wasn't a Christian)... but he could touch those lottery tickets.

Now, when people do that with worthless things like used lottery tickets, or old magazines/ or newspapers, plastic bags, cardboard boxes, photographs, etc. – what do we call them? That's right we call them hoarders. And we all know that's not normal.

ILLUS: At my first church I was asked by some members to visit a lonely widow named Wanda . She was a wonderful white-haired woman whose husband had died a few years before... and she had become a recluse. Eventually we got her to come to church and we baptized her into Christ - but when I first visited her home I was struck by the unusual arrangement she had in her main living area: in order to get back to her chair where did puzzles and knitting and reading, I had to weave my way through a path she had formed of stacks of magazines and newspapers. These stacks were EVERYWHERE in the room, standing to a height of about 3 feet. She was a very nice woman... but she was a hoarder. All these magazines and newspapers were worthless... but she collected them. We all recognize that that is not normal. It's not normal to collect such worthless junk.

But we tend to give a pass to people who hoard their money and possessions. These are valuable things. These are quality items they "collect". And God never condemns people who have money or possessions for the most part. God simply condemns those who hoard these "valuable" items.

So, how would you know if you are hoarding stuff - as opposed to just taking care of valuable things, or simply having some money in the bank. When do you know when you've crossed the line into making these things your gods?

One man described it this way:
The problem for God is not when people have money.
The problem is when their money has them.
It's when their possessions possess them.

Jesus said: "You cannot serve both God and Money."
But then he adds an intriguing word: "THEREFORE".

I once had a Bible College professor who said "when you see that word THEREFORE you have to ask - 'what's the therefore, there for?'"

This "therefore" is there for the purpose of explaining the root cause of why people want to have both gods: the real God and the fake one called money. Jesus said You cannot serve both God and Money. THEREFORE I tell you, do not worry..."

Do not worry!
Worry? What's worry got to do with this?

Well, you see, worry is the marker. It's the signpost that our possessions have become our god. Anxiety. Sleeplessness. Nervousness... FEAR! They're all reflections of worry. And they all reflect a desire to have something we can touch and feel.

Do you remember why Israel asked Aaron to make them calf of gold?
Because they were worried.
Moses had gone, and God wasn't talking to them.
So they became anxious and afraid.
And their fear led to desire to be able to see/touch something REAL.
It didn't matter whether it had any real value.
It was only important they be able to touch it... and reassure themselves.

That's why God puts so much emphasis on us not being afraid.
Someone has once counted the number of times God tells us not to be afraid. 365 times - once for every day of the year.

Now, why would God repeat that so often?
Why say it over and over and over again?
Why tell us not to be afraid?

Because we often are.
Preachers, Elders, Sunday School Teachers... some of the most faithful members of any church struggle at times with fear. And so God has to remind us not to allow that emotion to grab hold of our hearts.

Instead - God repeatedly tells us to put our faith in Him.
Over and over and over again (as Jesus does in the Sermon On The Mount) He says "trust

me. I've got your back."

Why would God repeat that over and over again?

Because we tend to forget that truth. And it's critical that we not allow that to happen.

ILLUS: Years ago, when my nephew Joshua was a young boy we were out in the back yard playing tag. He tagged me and then began to run for all he was worth. We were both laughing and running and enjoying ourselves. He looked back over his shoulder at one point and failed to see the tree directly ahead of him. He turned back around just in time to collide into it... and I swear he ate some of the bark off the tree.

He fell to the ground, mouth bleeding - shock, pain and fear all coming on him at the same time.

He began to cry uncontrollably and we carried him into bedroom to try to control the bleeding and to comfort him. But he wasn't to be comforted. He was literally hysterical in his fear.

I sat down beside him and did the only thing I could think to do.

I took him by the shoulders and I said "Joshua, look at me."

His eyes wide with fear, he did so.

"Joshua, do you trust me."

He nodded his head and sobbed "yes."

"Joshua, listen to me. You're going to be OK. The bleeding will stop and teeth will be OK. Do you believe me?"

He nodded his head, and he stopped crying.

Now what made the difference for him?

Why did my words comfort him?

Because his fear was overcome by his faith in me. If I said it, it was true. He stopped fearing when he began to realize he trusted me to protect him.

And that's what God is saying to us.

Two or 3 times in Scripture, God tells Joshua (one of the greatest leaders the Israelites ever had) "Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged..." (Joshua 1:9)

Why would God need to say that to Joshua?

Because Joshua was terrified and discouraged.

He was facing a test unlike any he'd ever encountered and he wasn't sure if he could handle it.

But not only does God tell him not to be terrified or discouraged... He tells him why: "for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

Why shouldn't Joshua be terrified?

Because God would be with him... everywhere.

When the army of Sennacherib surrounded Jerusalem, King Hezekiah tells his people: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him." II Chronicles

32:7

Why did Hezekiah feel it was necessary to tell the people not to be afraid or discouraged? Because they were afraid. They were discouraged.

And they had good reason to be afraid. The armies of Sennacherib were vast and powerful and had trapped the people inside their city. But Hezekiah not only told not to be afraid... he told them why: "there is a greater power with us than with him."

Hezekiah had no idea how God would rescue them from the King of Assyria, but he was confident God would. And when night fell, one angel of God visited the enemy camp. And when the sun rose the next day 100,000 enemy soldiers lay dead in their tents.

Sennacherib withdrew from the city and returned home... only to be assassinated shortly afterward.

There was a greater power with Israel than there was with Sennacherib.

Do not be afraid for God is with you.

In John 16:33 Jesus said it a slightly different way: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

In this world you and I will encounter situations we can't handle. We will have trouble. But we can have peace because Jesus has overcome the world.

Picking up on that truth I John 4:4 (KJV) told us "... greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world."

Now, my point is this: Worry can be why we seek the power of money and possessions. If we find ourselves being worried, anxious and fearful about your bank account or retirement account, etc. etc. etc... we be putting our trust in our wealth (such as it is)... rather than in God.

And that's what Jesus is saying here.

Worry is the disease that robs us of faith. And that disease of worry will never be healed by the amount of money in your bank account.

ILLUS: A case in point is the story of very first person who ever became a billionaire. He was a man filled with drive and ambition and connections. By the age of 23, he had become a millionaire, by the age of 50 a billionaire. But three years later - at the age of 53 - he became ill.

His entire body became racked with pain and he lost all the hair on his head. In complete agony, the world's only billionaire could buy anything he wanted but he could only digest milk and crackers. Someone noted, "He could not sleep, would not smile and nothing in life meant anything to him."

He had an army of personal, highly skilled physicians, and they were so overwhelmed by his condition that they all predicted he would die within a year.

That year passed agonizingly slow.

As he approached death he awoke one morning with the vague remembrance of a dream. He could barely recall the dream but knew it had something to do with not being able to take any of his successes with him into the next world.

(Brett Blair, www.eSermons.com, September 2001)

This was a man who was wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice... but he was dying. He had a disease... but he couldn't buy a cure. His god had been gold... but his god couldn't save him. His idolatry was going to kill him.

But Jesus had a prescription for his disease.

It was a cure that God has often prescribed for this kind of problem.

The cure: when you find yourself being anxious about your bank account... give some of it away. Don't let your possessions possess you. Control them by giving part of it away.

If you can't afford to give the money away, then Scripture has another way of doing this. FAST. Do without food for a little bit.

When you prepare a meal at home, how much does it cost you for what you eat?

(ask for responses from the audience)

\$3. \$4. \$5.

It's not much, but if you fast from that meal, then you have money available that didn't spend on that food. And if you give that money to the poor... God says – that impresses Him.

In fact, in Isaiah 58 God explains that when you deny yourself food and give your money to the poor in His name, it so honors Him that He will literally open the heavens for you and answer your prayers with a special power.

Why? Because it proves that He is more important than your money.

It proves you were willing to sacrifice in order to please Him.

It proves that your possessions don't possess you.

In fact, that's what the concept of tithing is all about. We give a portion of our income to God. If I earn a \$100 and I give \$10 to God it proves my money doesn't own me. God does. That's why Jesus said "...seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." Matthew 6:33

We need to strive to get to the point where we can agree with Paul when he wrote:

"...we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.

But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.

People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." I Timothy 6:7-10

CLOSE: But let me get back to our story about the world's first billionaire. I deliberately didn't mention his name so that you'd wonder just who this man was. But before I tell you

his name, let me remind you that he was...

- racked with pain and he lost all the hair on his head.
- he could buy anything he wanted...but he could only eat milk and crackers.
- He couldn't sleep, wouldn't smile and nothing in life meant anything to him."
- And it was predicted he wouldn't live to see the age of 54.

He was man consumed with the god of gold... and it was killing him.

But then he had that dream.

And the dream convinced him he had a choice in life.

So he called in his attorneys, accountants, and managers and announced that he wanted to start giving his wealth away... to hospitals, research, and mission work.

And on that day, the world's first billionaire - John D. Rockefeller - established his foundation.

And the foundation he established led to the discovery of penicillin, cures for malaria, tuberculosis and diphtheria. And numerous other discoveries that benefited mankind.

But perhaps the most amazing part of Rockefeller's story was this:

From the moment he began to give back a portion of all that he had earned, his body began to heal. Whereas it had looked as if he would die at 53 (long pause) he lived to be 98.

After his brush with death, Rockefeller often taught Sunday School. And one of his observations was this: "I believe it is a religious duty to get all the money you can fairly and honestly... and to give away all you can."

(<http://www.rodneyohebsion.com/john-d-rockefeller.htm>)

Gold is a terrible master. It literally damages the lives of those who worship it.

But by contrast, our God seeks to give us hope and peace and courage.

He loves us so much that He GAVE us the most valuable gift He had.

He so loved us that He gave us His only begotten Son.

And it is through Jesus that we know that we don't have to be afraid or discouraged. It is through Jesus that we know that God will never leave us forsake us. It is through Jesus that we know that the wealth and possessions this world offers are but false hopes.

But until you have Jesus in your life, you have no promise of His peace.

INVITATION