

The First Commission: Go, Sell, Give and Follow

The Final Great Commission of Jesus (Matthew 28:16-20) was preceded by this First Commission of Jesus in Matthew 19:21 - Go, Sell, Give & Follow. This instruction followed the all-important question, "What must I do to be saved?" In this well-known and challenging encounter, we hear Jesus making a connection between stewardship and discipleship.

Some people would suggest that discussing finances is not appropriate Sunday morning conversation. Maybe we can get away with talking about giving in church, but we certainly shouldn't be talking about selling and commerce. We have enough other important business to be about than to be discussing money.

If this is the case someone should have told the prophets, Jesus and the disciples about this taboo of talking about money because they certainly did not get the memo. It's been stated that between the prophets of old and the teachings of the New Testament there are over 2,350 references about money and possessions. Compare this to 50 references to baptism, 225 references to prayer, 300 references to faith, and 700 references to love. Based on these statistics and our commitment to being people of The Book, we should probably be talking more about money in church – not less.

The question that begs a response is whether this, "first commission" is an isolated case or part of a larger collection of texts? Is this instruction given by Jesus to the young ruler in Luke 19 prescriptive for all followers or descriptive of what this one man in particular needed to do in order to be saved? Maybe your curiosity is activated by this as it was for me. I went on a search to see if there were other places in scripture where similar teachings were given by Jesus to, "Go and Sell," and here's what I found:

Audience	Teaching	Text
Young man	Go, <u>sell</u> all and give...	Matt. 19:21
Disciples	Man <u>sold</u> all to buy...field...pearls	Matt. 13:44-45
Disciples	<u>Sell</u> your possessions and give	Luke 12:33
Disciples	<u>Sell</u> your garment to buy a sword	Luke 22:36
Followers	<u>Sold</u> possessions, goods and gave	Acts 2:45
Followers	<u>Sold</u> lands and houses	Acts 4:34-35
Barnabas	<u>Sold</u> a field	Acts 4:36

Some lessons learned

1. Money is an important topic to discuss.

Jesus didn't shy away from the topic of money, and he clearly viewed money as a tool with great potential for both good and ill. Jesus was clearly concerned for the poor but it's fair to say he was equally concerned for the rich. He met with Zacchaeus in his home and that encounter turned this former tax collector's life around (Luke 19). He was friends with the wealthy and influential Joseph of Arimathea who even offered his own family tomb to be used by Jesus after the crucifixion (Luke 23:53). In truth this may not have been too gallant of a gesture since he probably believed that the tomb would only be needed for 3 days. Joseph is described as a... good and upright man... who was awaiting the Kingdom of God (Luke 23:50-51).

Jesus also befriended many women with financial means who followed him and probably contributed to the needs of Jesus and his roving team of disciples (Luke 8:1-3). It's not money that was a problem for Jesus; it was the potential use and misuse of it that he spoke to.

2. Investments were common in Jesus' day.

Investments in property were common and were not condemned by Jesus. For persons who had money, the safest way to keep from losing it or having it stolen was to invest in property. Property was regularly bought and sold as cash flow and money needs required. Where you and I might make a withdrawal from one of several credit union accounts, people of Jesus' day would need to sell something – to divest of one's goods in order to invest in a field (Matthew 13).

A very interesting related story is where God instructs the prophet Jeremiah to go and buy a field just before the Babylonian army overran Jerusalem. This financial transaction was a means by which God declared through Jeremiah that one day Israel would return to the land of Israel even as they now faced imminent defeat and exile (Jeremiah 32). In what ways do our financial investments give testimony to our kingdom values? How conscious are we of working to integrate our faith with our financial decisions?

3. Giving is a supernatural spiritual discipline.

The book of Acts provides a wonderful look into the life of the early church. In Acts 2 we can relive and imagine the tremendous thrill of the arrival of the Holy Spirit in the violent winds, tongues of fire and people speaking in numerous languages. Unfortunately, we often stop here in the reading of this text. If we continue reading to Acts 2:45 we discover another

supernatural act every bit as miraculous. People sold their goods and shared with others as they had need. This is the backdrop to Acts 4 where we are introduced to Barnabas. The first act of discipleship we read of about Barnabas is that he sold a field and gave the proceeds to the disciples (Acts 4:36). Note that Luke says he sold "a" field suggesting that other fields owned by Barnabas may have gone unsold.

Giving doesn't come easy for me. I'm not generous by nature. It is beyond my natural inclinations and as such is supernatural. If I wasn't concerned about being a disciple of Jesus I would not give money away to the church or to other deserving ministries. It's not in me – except for my desire to follow Jesus I give out of obedience. Cheerfulness and joy often follow my supernatural acts of generosity. I find generosity acted out in my life and the lives of others every bit as much evidence of the activity of the Holy Spirit as any of the other supernatural acts described in the earlier parts of Acts 2 – and maybe even more so.

A call to action – go, sell and give

Jesus seems to be discouraging his disciples concerning accumulating stuff. He calls on them to divest themselves of their belongings in Luke 12 & 22. If anything, our current culture suggests just the opposite. What would it mean to enter into a 30-day experiment that calls for us not to add to what we have already accumulated? What would it mean if for the next 30 days that if we buy something new, we will also sell or give something away?

We have become a society of bigger houses and yet at the same time a new industry called storage units has developed in the last few decades. And why do we need bigger houses and storage units? How will we know when we have enough stuff? Maybe one way to keep us more conscious of our tendency to accumulate is to give away or sell something every time we decide we need one more thing in our life. Jesus said, "If you want a sword – go sell your garment (Luke 22)." If you see someone in need, don't just write a check or give cash but actually divest yourself of something tangible and give the proceeds away.

Conclusion

The pathway to salvation and following Jesus does not mean that all are called to sell everything they have and give it to the poor. The story of Jesus and the rich man in Luke 19 was unique to that man in that context. But that doesn't mean that we are off the hook. All of us need to think through our use of money, our accumulation of possessions, our investments and giving practices. These all matter and they are just as much an issue in our day as they were in the time of Jesus. Unfortunately, we don't talk about it because, well, we just don't. But maybe we should.

Maybe we need to talk more about the 90 percent and less about the 10 percent. Only when we figure out what to do with what we keep will we be in a better position to understand what it is God is calling us to invest in the work of the Kingdom. And maybe only then will we realize that 10 percent is not so much a finishing line as a starting line.

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