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Reading: Matthew 6: 24-34

The Message: the Diderot Effect

[Video](#)

Have you woken on the first day of the month and said, “rabbit, rabbit, rabbit?” Evidently, there are a lot of people who do, believing if they do, they will have good luck the rest of the month. The superstition places the importance on the first thing you say on the first day of the month.

“First” things. First date, a baby’s first steps, a first job, a first impression. What comes first is something that manages to grab our attention and finds a place in our memory.

Jesus hoped his followers would put the right things first. Matthew 6: 24-34

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

‘Wealth’ in this translation is ‘mammon’ in others -- mammon means the worship of wealth.

Mammon is more than wealth; it’s really the worship of wealth. Placing wealth, the possession of things as the ‘first thing.’ In the series *The Simpsons*, Mr. Burns, the rich and callous boss of Homer, lives at 1000 Mammon Lane. It is always clear what Mr. Burns puts first.

Jesus words to “seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness” had everything to do with doing the right things and above all right relationships. Jesus wanted his followers to live meaningful lives.

Have you heard of the term, the Diderot Effect? The scholar Grant McCracken identified this concept inspired by the French philosopher Denis Diderot.

Diderot lived in poverty. Despite his lack of wealth, he was famous for co-founding one of the most comprehensive encyclopedias of the time. But when his daughter was about to be married, he couldn’t afford a dowry.

When Catherine the Great heard of Diderot’s financial troubles she offered to buy his library from him for what would be approximately \$50,000US today. Suddenly, Diderot had money to spare.



Shortly after this lucky sale, Diderot bought himself a new scarlet robe. That’s when everything went wrong.

He wrote an essay about the disaster entitled, "Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown."

I quote:

“Why didn’t I keep it? It was used to me and I was used to it. It molded all the folds of my body without inhibiting it; I was picturesque and handsome. The other one is stiff, and starchy, makes me look stodgy.

(My old dressing gown announces the litterateur, the writer, the man who works. I now have the air of a rich good-for-nothing. No one knows who I am.)”

Diderot’s scarlet robe was beautiful. So beautiful, that he noticed how miserable his other possessions looked next to it. He found himself buying new things to match the beauty of his robe.

- He replaced his old rug with a new one from Damascus.
- He decorated his home with beautiful sculptures and a better kitchen table.
- He bought a new mirror to place above the mantle
- and his straw chair was relegated to the antechamber and replaced by a leather chair.

The Diderot Effect states that buying one new thing often creates a spiral of consumption which leads you to acquire more new things. As a result, we end up buying things that our previous selves never needed to feel happy or fulfilled.

Jesus saw what the Romans strove for with urgency: what they would wear, what they would eat, what they would drink.

Jesus knew what his listeners sometimes forgot, that we weren’t created to live out of a sense of urgency about all this stuff and all of the pressure and meaninglessness that can be associated with constantly acquiring.

So he sat on a hillside and taught. Jesus pointed to the birds who were flying about in the air. He took the time to notice and wanted others to notice those flowers growing in the grass next to them and how they somehow seemed to flourish. A sense of urgency about amassing wealth is replaced with a sense of appreciation and mindfulness. There is no urgency, just of the immediacy of God’s kingdom. The ever present reality of God’s Kingdom in their midst.

Living in the urgent categories can blindly take us from one perceived need to the next or from one crisis to the next. I have to admit that sometimes I get caught up in this mode of living. Yet what Jesus reminds us is that as a people of faith, first things begin with God.

I am thankful for all who have supported us in 2020, and for those who have pledged to continue to support our ministry and mission for the coming year. If you haven’t had a chance to figure out how to support us, I urge you to listen to our stewardship team, to search our website, to send in your pledge or request a form from the office. We are in the search for a new minister and I pray that candidates will be able to look at our financials and identify us as resilient in these difficult times.

I remember a stewardship chair, who stood in the pulpit and announced, “Great news! We have all the money we need!” He paused. “We just have to figure out how to get it out of your pockets.” Only you can help us to continue to have superpowers of caring. And if it pinches a bit to give, remember the Diderot effect and the image of Jesus sitting on a hillside, surrounded by all the riches of creation.