

When is Enough Enough? Greed as Idolatry



Dr. Leonard Lovett

I was intuitively urged to explore the biblical notion of greed as a form of idolatry after reading a scathing article in the Washington Post by Michelle Singletary in her **The Color of Money** column.

The title of the article was engaging: ***“Where Money Meets Faith, bring Skepticism...Be careful your pastor isn’t fleecing his flock.”*** She discusses Rev Robert “Dr. Shine” Freeman, a fifty-six (56) year old Maryland minister who was recently sentenced for twenty seven (27) months in prison pleading guilty to obstructing bankrupt court proceeding. That Shine took the command “let us pray” into “let us prey.” He preyed on people. He hid assets to avoid paying hundreds of thousands of dollars in debts. Shine was ordered to pay more than \$650,000 in restitution to four (4) church members who took out loans to buy cars and a mansion. What Freeman did comes under the category of “affinity fraud.” Affinity fraud occurs when people use a personal connection such as religion or ethnic status to gain people’s trust and their money.

Nearly one in four Ponzi schemes involve- affinity group targets according to studies by several reputable consulting firms. The three (3) most common affinity groups targeted by Ponzi schemes, accounting for eighty-five (85) percent of such cases, were the elderly or retired, religious groups and ethnic groups. Whenever a too-good-to-be-true is coming from someone you trust or respect and endorsed such as your pastor, raise the red flag. Freeman used his church members in the name of Jesus, to get what he could not afford, eleven (11) luxury vehicles worth a million dollars, a leased jet, a \$1.7 million 9000 square foot house purchased by a member. Recently, a Bishop asked me whether I could recommend a “name” speaker to complete his conference calendar. I replied, do you want someone who can “entertain” or “challenge” the people? Entertaining, “grab your neighbor” false prophetic fundraisers are a “dime a dozen.” To find someone who will “stretch your people” to new levels of maturity and growth requires different search engines. Your ministry is like a tree, when it stops growing it is preparing for inevitable death.

In his book ***Sunday Morning Stick up***, David Lee Richardson described all sorts of ingenious ways churches use “guilt trips” to induce giving. David who once wrote about tithing as a rip-off in ***What Your Pastor Doesn't Want You to Know About Tithes***, once held a leadership position in the Potter's House-TD Jakes, pastor. Richardson sued Jakes after being fired. As soon as the title of the book was announced, Pastor Cheryl Brady received permission from Jakes to remove Richardson from his leadership role and stripped him of his ordination license after twenty years in ministry. In doing ministry we must make sure that we do not use the Word of God as a veneer to push finance, goodwill, entertainment and popularity. There are people who view large crowds as a forum to exact greed. Please do not displace God at our National Conferences by pressure for more money. Our Program Committees tend to select speakers on the basis of kinship, affinity and popularity, with no interest in hearing from God. Fees and assessments disregards poor struggling pastors and members who will pay exorbitant fees for minimal recognition. That God has *“a preferential option for the poor,”* is a page from Latin American liberation theologians and proponents of Black theology, is a signpost that we might need to heed, lest we invite Judgment within the House of God.

Rev Franklin Anderson pastor of a church in Limerick Maine remarked, *“I think that the church is in part responsible for inadequate supervision of its accounts and its pastor.”* *“Under no circumstances am I allowed to borrow money from members, or accept personal gifts or loans for more than twenty-five (25) dollars from members.”* It would be taking advantage of their trust in me by virtue of my being their pastor for my personal gain. At times gifts from members can become a form of control and should be carefully monitored lest as a leader you are placed in a position of compromise. The way you view and handle money (mammon) has far reaching moral and ethical implications.

A high profile official in our denomination commented that while sitting comfortably on the platform of our Annual National Conference in St Louis, he saw one of his senior pastors in what is referred to as the “nose bleed” section of the convention center trying to find a seat. I countered with a rhetorical question, *“would it be great if a senior pastor could be afforded the honor of sitting in the gold/platinum section without charge as a way of saying we appreciate your years of labor and endurance in ministry?”* Should profit be the primary purpose of a Conference? Should the primary purpose of a conference be to meet the total needs of conferees, break even, or make a profit? Is the Church a corporation or a fellowship, an organization or an organism? If it is an organism then love (*agape*) and fellowship (*koinonia*) should be primary.

Why are we so overly concerned when people say negative hurting things about us? When people give us false praise they are usually playing into our vanity. It is beneath my dignity to pursue one lie told on me. Every lie has a

funeral date. The truth is eternal and will stand on its own. We tend to be captivated by public relation images, not realistic issues as we are bombarded by the mass media. We compromise moral principles but not issues. We have lived with an economic downturn for some time which has forced most of us to live with scarce resources. Should people be pressured to give unreasonable sums of money each time they enter the House of God? Should registrants for a conference be bombarded with unreasonable special offerings just to be seen? What is the message about stewardship conveyed to participants? When we give for name recognition, is this biblical? Is this another form of oppression? Is this a form of affinity greed? I suggest holding leaders accountable.

During early Christian times, Greed is listed among the seven deadly sins, also known as capital vices or cardinal sins. The other sins listed are sloth, wrath, pride, lust, envy and gluttony. Each is a form of idolatry-of- self. **Ephesians 5: 5** “*You can be sure of this: The Kingdom of Christ and of God will never belong to anyone who is impure or greedy, for a greedy person is really an idol worshiper...he loves and worships the good things of this life more than God...for the terrible wrath of God is upon all those who do them. Don't even associate with such people.*” Paul the Apostle defines a greedy person as an idol worshiper. After Moses had received the **Ten Commandments** in **Exodus 20: 1ff.** by **Exodus 32:** he is engrossed in deep intimate communion with God on Mt. Sinai. The people got impatient and restless at the bottom of the mountain and turned to Aaron for help. Aaron initiated the “wrong offering” when he requested that everyone should give him their golden trinkets. This resulted in the creation and adoration of the **Golden Calf**, an idolatrous cultic image, that was an affront to God. They became victims of a severe form of amnesia (memory loss). Throughout the history of Israel, the primary problem was not unbelief in God...it was idolatry. The very nature of God defies competition, for He is jealous of other gods. When we place money above people at our conferences we are building a **Golden Calf**. When we take money through cleverly devised schemes in the church, we are not only building the **Golden Calf**, we are modern idolaters who worship the creation more than the Creator. The only thing I can guarantee is that “*God will have the final say.*” In the meantime: **1. Support good leadership 2. Challenge systemic greed wherever it is. 3. Hold leadership accountable in every phase of institutional life including the Church**

Dr. Leonard Lovett, **Chief Editor, The Agora Blog:**

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