

Sermon from Sunday, April 25 Worship Service  
Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy

## **Jesus Was Not a Capitalist But We Are**

I John 3:16-24

Sometimes I say things at parties just to get a rise out of people. Here's one of my favorite party lines: "Jesus was not a capitalist." I even do it at church gatherings. Is your blood pressure rising? You look like you just bit on a pecan shell in a pecan pie. Criticize capitalism?

Like a grizzled Marine officer in a movie, growling, "You want me on that wall, you need me on that wall," we keep saying, "We need Jesus to be a capitalist." Surely God ordained the American dream, "the city on a hill," though it has been a long, tortured nightmare for millions. Some folks remind me that Jesus was a carpenter even though there is no mention in the Gospels that Jesus hung out his carpenter shingle, but he was strung up on a pair of crossed wood boards. "They put him to death by hanging him on a tree" (Acts 10:39).

Folks like to think that Jesus must have been a first century Chip Gaines from Fixer Upper or that he made cabinets, dining room tables, and other pieces of furniture for an high-end dealer in North Carolina. One preacher pointed out that Jesus says, "My yoke is easy," literally means "My yokes fit well" and suggested that Jesus hung that sign over his carpenter's shop. Jesus did not come to "flip properties" but to turn the world upside down." Jesus did not come to make a trillion, but to save a world.

We have been unwilling to turn a theological eye to the dangers of capitalism. This is odd since when the early church was rounding up the cardinal sins, most of the vices were associated with the love of money: lying, lust, gluttony, greed, pride, evil, and avarice. That's 6 of the 7. Instead, we have turned the capitol vices into capitalists virtues as capitalism has been baptized, confirmed, and made a member of the holy of holies. Both parties are up to the flame of the Statue of Liberty in corporate money. To choose one or the other is a like picking between the left-wing and right-wing versions of wealth. The money parties differ only in how to divide the loot.

In our wholesale endorsement of the god of Mammon – “Show me the money,” – we have allowed “Free market fundamentalism to trivialize the concern for public interest.” The dogma of the Market God has captured the soul of America. It elevates and worships the individual who is becoming rich. “The overwhelming power and influence of the plutocrats and oligarchs in the economy put fear and insecurity in the hearts of anxiety-ridden workers” (Cornel West, *Democracy Matters*). Americans are on the watchtower looking out for any Marxists or socialists, while runaway capitalism destroys our nation’s soul.

If I have anything to say to the church, it is to herald the tragic and hopeful reality that sustains and empowers the “least of these” to resist the forces that seem designed to destroy every ounce of dignity in their souls and bodies. How can we reconcile the gospel of the least of these, the gospel of “blessed are the poor” with the injustice and oppression of the politics of wealth, power, fear, and violence? I believe that the theology of promoting wealth as the end of life is bankrupt because it has so often failed to engage in the struggle for justice.

Capitalism has too many casualties. There are too few winners and too many losers to use our own awful terms. There’s a “Dead Zone” in our American dream and it is littered with bodies like a valley of dead, dry bones. Unexamined and unquestioned philosophies of wealth have overwhelmed the teaching of Jesus. An American historian says, “Put simply, most Americans have fully adopted the consumption ethic that was rising in the 1920s but was briefly reversed in the Great Depression. We have become accustomed to buying as a way of life and to living in the moment.”

Look, Jesus didn't have a house – “nowhere to lay his head.” Jesus didn't own property. No bank account. No portfolio. No shoe deal. No golden parachute. No retirement. At his death all he had was the clothes on his back. He was a traveling rabbi supported by a group of women followers. There’s nothing of Warren Buffett or Jeff Bezos or Bill Gates in Jesus. There's just no biblical evidence to support Jesus the capitalist, Jesus on the Forbes list of richest persons in the world, Jesus as a billionaire, Jesus as member of the 1%. Joel Osteen tools around Houston in a Lamborghini; Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey.

Jesus never asked for donations, but his preachers can't stop. A televangelist asked his followers for \$80 million to buy a private Lear Jet; Jesus sent his followers out “like lambs into the midst of wolves, with no purse, no bag, no sandals”. Jesus warned of the dangers of riches, but his followers can’t get enough of it. Jesus said we couldn’t love God and money and we are determined to prove him wrong. Some members of my tribe

invented a whole new gospel. It's called the Prosperity Gospel, or Name It and Claim It!

There is a spiritual cost to the American dream of riches untold. The price tag on the American work ethic belongs on East 57<sup>th</sup> Street at Tiffany & Co. Almost no one has noticed the price we have paid. "I'll take it." Out comes the American Express gold card – "swipe and dash." No one notices the shattered lives scattered across the American landscape.

John Brueggemann's *Free, Rich, and Miserable: The Failure of Success in America*, shows how the power of the market is stealing our neighborhoods, our families, our time, our lives. (Glen Stassen). Brueggemann says we live in the grim moral universe of an America where markets have overwhelmed civil society, a culture where the center of power has shifted from the church on Main St. USA to the corporations across the land.

Money's corrupting influence spreads across the land like a bayou morning fog. Greed, selfishness, vanity, narcissism, materialism – the whole gang has invaded our homes. Buy a championship. Buy an election. Buy a mansion. Once money made political power a purchasable commodity, it was only a matter of time before truth would also be a commodity. The person with the biggest media audience could offer as truth the lies of the devil. Truth could now be bought and sold and discarded at will. This means trouble for the community who follows the one who says, "I am the Truth."

More people have been tricked and deluded by the American dream than any other dream in the world. One doesn't ever have to achieve the American dream; all they have to do is keep thinking about it, wanting it. And now we have even invented a way to keep the dream alive for millions: The Mega Lottery.

I want to look at a biblical alternative. The values of community, cooperation, justice, and sacrifice are the alternative I offer. There are two pictures I want you to hang in the living room of your mind: "I shall not want" and "this world's goods." Now I am making one claim: We can't get to "I shall not want" through this world's goods. In our New Testament Epistle reading, John matter-of-factly says: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?"

Those who love God will meet the human need of brothers and sisters. Instead of "Name and Claim It," we are to "See the Need and Meet the Need." Can we grasp that we really are all in this together? In *An Inspector Calls* J. B. Priestley does not treat it as an obligation, but as an imperative:

"We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish." The alternative to looking out for number 1 is to look out for others. Instead of making more billionaires, the church needs to produce more saints.

The alternative to the rat race is about following the leadership of God. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. The shepherd teaches us to live without the anxiety of want: He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. But this is about one thing and one thing only: restoring the soul.

Sometimes life knocks the starch out of us. In a Lee Smith short story, "Tongues of Fire," the owner of a printing shop suffered a nervous breakdown. The maid, explaining to another maid next door, said, "He have lost his starch, is all. He be getting it back directly." We have lost more than our starch. The American soul has been sold to the highest bidder and we are drowning in our prosperity as the very, very, very rich get very, very, very richer and the very, very, very poor get very, very, very poorer.

We are a culture of violence and death because we worship wealth. Nothing can be allowed to interfere with the cash cow. No one is allowed to mess with the goose that lays the golden eggs. There's death all around us. Dickens, when Joe the crossing sweeper dies, wrote these words: "The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead! Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, right reverends and wrong reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day." People are dying and we are obsessed with making more money and having more political power.

There is another way, another life – a life without want and desperation. If we face our deepest fears that there will not be enough, our fear that being overly generous is something we can't afford, we will receive a gift from our Shepherd: a life without want. Imagine not living under all that pressure. Imagine contentment: "I have learned to be content with whatever I have." Imagine not having to obsess over whether there will be enough money. We have all heard that the love of money is the root of evil. Heard it. Been there. Big deal, but sometimes a verse ripped from its context can cause us to lose the message. Listen to what comes before and after love of money being root of evil: <sup>9</sup>But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. <sup>10</sup>For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith

and pierced themselves with many pains. The pursuit of money meanders through a thankless swamp infested with traps, senseless, harmless desires, ruin, destruction, evil, and pains. Many are they who enter the swamp, and few are they who succeed. And all that nagging want. There is a better way.

The psalmist offers us life with no want: Cup overflows. Bread multiplied. Covered in goodness and mercy. In the house of the Lord. Abundance and then we can cry out, "I have no wants." It's not about socialism or capitalism. Those are political markers. It is about the abundant life. Psalm 23 answers our deepest needs. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is God's alternative to the anxiousness of capitalism, the fear of scarcity, the painful wants and desires of life.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews puts all our readings into a single statement: [Hebrews 13:5](#) – "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be **content** with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'"

Call it the mini-Jubilee. In many ways, the mission of the church is already a mini-Jubilee and I'm suggesting that we intensify those efforts to help people in material need. Do more for the poor, the homeless, the strangers. The "least of these" need more advocates. The poor need more lobbyists. Children need more supporters. Single mothers need more helpers. "You lack one thing. Stop devoting much time to "this world's goods" and give more to the least of these.

Let's start talking about how we can multiply our resources to meet material needs. I am glad that we do so much here at EFC, but it's time now for us to move forward with generosity. With your permission we will attempt to move the needle toward God's Jubilee. Amen.