

**Letter From a Birmingham Jail:**

*“There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.”*

**Revelation 18:4-5**

*Then I heard another voice from heaven say: **Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; For her sins are piled up to Heaven, and God has remembered her crimes.***

If you start reading the Bible from the beginning as many do in January, there is something fascinating about reading about God’s first impressions with humanity...

**Genesis 12:1-3...**

*“Leave you country, your people, and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing... all the peoples on earth will be blessed by you.”*

**Hebrews 11:8**

*“It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance... he didn’t even know where he was going!”*

*“Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase” - MLK*

Talk about challenging the perspective of “me and mine.” Put yourself in Abraham’s shoes. Everything that you consider me and mine – my family, my land, my comfort, my security... Leave it and follow God.

In a passage that echoes God’s words to Abraham in Genesis encouraging him to check out the expansive territory he was giving him, Paul writes to the church in Corinth in 2 Corinthians 6:

*Dear, dear Corinthians, I can’t tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. We didn’t fence you in. The smallness you feel comes from within you. Your lives aren’t small, but you’re living them in a small way. I’m speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection. Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively!*

***Any time we cling to me and mine, we end up living smaller than God’s will. But when we open up our hands to embrace God’s calling, we live openly and expansively.***

Jesus’ invitation to any who would follow him?  
***Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.***

But that’s all I know... deny yourself. But that’s my security... deny yourself. But that makes me happy... deny yourself. Not so you can live less restricted and less than, but so you can live openly and expansively in all God has for you.

See, everyone wants the measure of blessing Abraham walked in, but few of us truly live as open handed as he did... willing to let go of everything and follow God.  
Part of that reason - we're drunk off the cup of me and mine.

When we become tied to the American Dream, our security can be tied to our bank account.  
When we cling to the American Dream, our identity can become tied to our career or our assets.  
When this is the case we too easily step into what Mark Batterson calls:  
**Irresponsible Responsibility** = *turning responsibilities into excuses that keep us from pursuing God fully.*

In our flesh and in our culture's perspective - the responsible thing for Abraham to do would be to stay amidst his father's people and everything he had. There was security and clarity there.  
AT LEAST wait for some directions!!

***But any time we cling to me and mine, we end up living small.  
When we open up our hands to embrace God's calling, we live openly and expansively.***

God says to Abraham at the outset of chapter 12:  
***"I will make your name great."***

It is an echo and a juxtaposition to the passage that immediately precedes the story of Abraham. Because there at the outset of their attempt to build a tower at Babel that would reach to the Heavens, the builders say: ***"let us make a name for ourselves"***  
...but instead God squashes their efforts and confuses their language to force them to separate.

God dispersed these people at Babel by cutting off their singular language as a means of communication, all but forcing them to part ways.  
But it was a mercy as much as it was a judgment.

The land around this region would later become home to Babylon.  
Babylon became synonymous with 'empire' and is named some 290 times in the Bible.  
Babylon is named in the sin-filled vision of evil we studied last week in Revelation 17.

**Key to Babylonian worship? Ziggurats, these stepped pyramid structures that were believed to be a stairway to Heaven. It's notable that in this location no structure or pile of bricks would ever reach heaven, but the sins of the empire would.**

**Revelation 18 says the sins of the empire "pile up to heaven."**

*Why all the dense, shrouded and sometimes wild imagery like we see in Revelation 17 and 18?*

John is writing a bold and subversive letter to the church telling it to divorce itself from the sinful culture of the Roman empire... while imprisoned by the Romans.  
No doubt this letter would have had to pass through Roman hands to get to those churches.

Does the book of Revelation have prophetic significance for both the present and the future to come? Absolutely.

But we can't also miss the direct meaning of the letter to those churches John was writing to in the middle of the Roman empire.

Lucky for us, accounts and quotes from early Christians who lived out this initial, messy collision between the Kingdom of God and man's Empire have been recorded for us.

**Justin the Martyr:**

*"[God] called Abraham and commanded him to go out from the country where he was living. With this call [God] has roused us all, and now we have left the state. We have renounced all things the world offers."*

It flows in obedience to **Revelation 18:4**

*"Then I heard a voice from Heaven say,  
Come out of her my people, so that you will not share her sins."*

**Athenagoras** – *"they charge us on two points: that we do not sacrifice and that we do not believe in the same gods as the State"*

And its from this two-fold charge that early Christians received some of their names...

For one, if we were a part of the early church, we would have been known as **atheists**. The early church was called this because they no longer placed their faith or hope in the Roman state or way of worship.

Christianity was also known as **"the way,"** because of the stark contrast between the Christian way of life and the Roman one.

THIS is what Justin the Martyr was talking about when he said **"we have left the state"**

*"Come out of her my people, so that you will not share her sins."*

This is another sermon for another time, but you could preach a whole sermon from this on the nature of **systemic sin...** those who profit from the sins of a nation share in the judgment.

But I want to look at the nature of this **specific sin...**

But this treatment of empire in a sexual way isn't limited to Revelation and Babylon or even Rome. Ezekiel and Isaiah both prophecy against the economic powerhouse of a nation named Tyre. It too is compared to a prostitute.

What's implied is that there exists a lustful pull toward the things of the Empire in our flesh. And to marry yourself to them was adultery against God.

That same pull exists in our own culture.

This posture of empire to stockpile and accumulate with a focus on me and mine.

**THE AGORA - The Roman empire understood that at the heart of their control was economics. Want to control a people? Control their money.**

To use the market you had to present a sacrifice to Caesar, and to identify who made the offering a system was put in place that marked your hand. This mark on the right hand would allow you to buy and sell – if you worshipped Caesar. In fact, the Hebrew letters had numeric qualities, and when you add up the letters in Nero Caesar, the number is right there in John's letter: 666.

As hard as we try to divorce our faith and our finances, they have an inseparable relationship. The Romans understood this in the way they ran their very economy.

The enemy also understands that money presents a fast track to our hearts and worship.

**William Dyrness on American culture:**

*“In many respects American identity is established in material terms. We define ourselves by our relation to our material environment, perhaps more than our relation to other people (or even to God). That this has resulted in great material prosperity and great technological accomplishment we can readily acknowledge. But we [note] a dark side as well: Americans invariably tend to endow material means with ultimate or final value. Owning a home, for example, is seen as one of the ends of life rather than as a means to other ends. Meaning is attached to accumulation [& consuming].”*

The accumulation of assets without Gospel context will create a God complex.

**Randy Alcorn – “Giving affirms Christ's lordship. It dethrones me and exalts Him.”**

It's not the percentage that pleases God, but generous, open-handed posture of the heart that gives it.

Paul uses 6 different Greek words for the offering in his letter to the church in Corinth. He uses Greek words that mean: collection, priestly service, ministry, blessing, partnership, and grace. None of these words explicitly speak to money. I believe it's because Paul wasn't concerned with the amount as much as he was the posture of their hearts.

Because the posture of empire? Let me store up treasure for myself.

Jesus however, tells his followers to store up treasure in Heaven.

Jesus isn't talking about transferring treasure, but seeking a new one altogether.

Giving is an exercise in recognizing that material things can't compare to eternal things.

Having treasure isn't bad. Otherwise God wouldn't have blessed Abraham with an incredible amount of it. But why was Abraham blessed? Because he had proved a willingness to live with a loose grip on his blessings.

And what was he blessed for? *“[so] you will be a blessing to others.”*

**DON'T LOVE MONEY.**

***LOVE WITH YOUR MONEY.***

Live generously with open hands reaching out.

*What did this open-handed, Kingdom posture look like walked out practically?*

**The Emperor Julian** was a Roman emperor not long after Christ walked the soil of the Roman Empire. Christianity at the time was growing while paganism was on the decline.

*“The religion of the Greeks does not prosper.  
Why do we not observe how the charity of Christians to strangers has done the most to advance their cause? It is disgraceful that these Christians support OUR poor in addition to THEIR own, while everyone is able to see our own people lack aid from us.”*

The Roman culture was operating from a script of US and THEM or US vs. THEM  
Meanwhile - Christians were showing the love of Christ for strangers and even enemies.

It was a far cry from the way most lived: concerned with me and mine.

The Bible doesn't leave room for us to withdraw further into our politicized corners, nor does it leave room for us to place our faith or hope in a nation.

Biblically speaking, we're called to “come out,” living open handed and reaching out.

What was causing the growth of the early Church? Living generously and open handed.  
What was grabbing the attention of the Roman empire? Living generously and open handed.

***Raj's learning to share (“FOR MEEEEEEEEEE”)***

When you're a baby you expect to receive. You expect to be fed.

But when you're mature you learn to give and feed others.

It should be the same as believers. To grow in God's grace should mean we grow in generosity.

If your focus is me and mine.

If your number one concern as a Christian is “what about my needs?”

...your number one need is to grow up.

...to grow more like Christ who didn't cling, but humbled himself and became man.

Who lived open handedly until those open hands were pierced on the cross.

May we too live open handed and reaching out,

Not intoxicated by empires but building God's kingdom here on earth.