

FORTUNE FOCUS

Sermon, September 9, 2018

Texts: Proverbs 22:1-10, 22-25; James 2:1-19

The word “fortune” is defined largely in one of two ways: Fortune as destiny or fate; and fortune as wealth, riches, treasure. My basic premise today is that our heart’s *focus* will largely determine our *fortune*. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

As mentioned last week,¹ the heart has long been a symbol of one’s innermost character, feelings, or inclinations and life-directing principles. “Heart” in this sense occurs over a thousand times in the Bible, making it the most common anthropological term in the Scripture. I mentioned how we should be always on the alert for symptoms of a diseased heart, just as we are with the physical heart. The Psalmist, our Lord Jesus, and Jesus’ younger brother James would all agree that two accurate indicators of the condition of our “heart” are (a) what comes out of our mouths and (b) our observable actions.

I attended a conference at the Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary this past week; one of the conference speakers Thursday drew attention to an excerpt from This Is Water, a rather unconventional commencement speech given by David Foster Wallace at Kenyon College in Ohio May 21, 2005. I tried to keep up with the speaker in scribbling my notes, but thanks to one of Steve’s friends I was able to find the full speech on line. (*Time magazine* ranked it as number one of the top ten best commencement speeches ever delivered. I thought that was generous at best, but it did have its good parts. Also, if you go to the full text as linked in the footnote below, let me give you something of a caution ... his language is fairly, um, colorful in parts.) Here’s the excerpt:

*Here’s something else that’s true. In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is **what** to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God to worship – be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles – is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things – if they are where you tap real meaning in life – then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally bury you. Worship power – you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart – you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.*²

I was glad to be able to find the full transcript, as I had scribbled the following hurried notes as I tried to keep up with the speaker (*intending to fill in the details when recordings of the conference will be made available in a week or so*): “**Worship beauty, you ugly. Worship wealth, you poor. Worship intellect, you dumb. Worship power, you weak.**” I was taken by the insightfulness of the ironic contrasts, and it got me to thinking that the promise of the Scriptures (I John 3) is that if we worship and love God, one day we **will** be like Him ... holy, pure, wise, loving and good. That will be our fortune, that will be our destiny, and that is our uplifting and motivating aspiration and hope. He is not a god who will “eat us alive.” This is almost another sermon, but the Christian understands that everyone shares in a world that is not as it’s supposed to be ... but because of God’s redemptive work through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, one day all things will be well, restored, redeemed. All the atheist has is evolutionary theory ... survival of the fittest ... which means this world IS as it’s supposed to be; this is as good as it gets. I ask rhetorically: Which view gives more hope? And more about THIS at another time, because I just started reading this book, but a related quote from the introduction of a book by John K.A. Smith, You Are What You Love: “*To be human is to have a heart. You can’t not love. The question isn’t whether you will love something as ultimate. The question is what you will love as ultimate. And you are what you love.*” Or probably better expressed, you will **become** what you love.

Speaking of fortunes, we all know about fortune cookies, those crunchy little confections made from flour, sugar, vanilla, and oil with a “fortune” wrapped inside ... a piece of paper with words of wisdom, pithy inspirational advice or a vague prophecy of great success. The treats are usually served with Chinese food in Chinese restaurants as a dessert. A few samples, the first two of which I got from a Chinese restaurant in Cedarville, OH where I had taken Steve and Hannah and some of their college friends for lunch three years ago: “*You learn from your mistakes ... and you will learn a lot today.*” “*To be old and wise, you must first be young and stupid.*” “*It is much easier to be critical than to be correct; try to be the latter.*” “*Before you wonder ‘Am I doing things right?’ ask ‘Am I doing the right things?’*” (This one is a little self-serving) “*A good way to keep healthy is to eat more Chinese food.*” This one I particularly like: “*The man on the top of the mountain did not fall there.*” And appropriately, I close with this one: “*Keep it simple. The more you say, the less people remember.*” Some of

¹ See <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2018/09/word-up-2018.pdf>

² See <https://fs.blog/2012/04/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water> Tragically, despite his brilliant insights, Mr. Wallace did take his own life at age 46; the following article which may be of interest to you appeared in *Christianity Today*: https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/september-web-only/david-foster-wallace-broke-heart-suicide.html?utm_source=ctweekly.html&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_term=22399367&utm_content=606251766&utm_campaign=email

you may remember this interesting bit of trivia that fortune cookies are mostly unknown in mainland China; the fortune cookie seems to have been invented in America. In fact, fortune cookies are now one of the comparatively few items that we actually *export* to China, with fortunes written in English!

Well, people often approach the Bible like a fortune cookie. We crack open this mysterious, old book and look around for a line or two to fall out that might speak to our lives. Now, there ARE pithy, practical sayings in the Bible; Proverbs is full of them! The Bible has its immensely practical and "bite-sized" parts. But we must see the Bible "fortunes" within a greater framework of the totality of the Bible's message. In the time we have here at worship we are only skipping stones across the ocean depths of God's majestic, unfolding plan in these pages, a remarkable plan that involves a total and thorough focus of our whole **heart**. The Bible makes the claim, from beginning to end, that God loves the world He created, has not abandoned any part of it and He is determined by His grace to redeem and restore this world and everyone in it ... and we are given the high calling of being His coworkers, finding our place of service in this grand drama of redemption and restoration with the totality of our lives.

The Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles were not about just giving fortune-cookie inspirational messages; they were passionately preaching this thorough and total and complete life transformation through faith in the living God. They were preaching that we need to be thoroughly turned *inside out* and *right side up*. We need to be turned *inside out*, from being focused inward, self-absorbed, wrapped up with ourselves and the way we think things ought to be, to being focused God-ward, absorbed with love for God and the way He thinks things ought to be, which involves loving all *that* God loves and all *whom* God loves! And we need to be turned *right side up*, because our values are often completely upside down! We need to be turned from worshiping and giving our hearts' devotion and focus to created things to worshiping and giving our hearts' devotion and focus to the Creator. This transformation is not easy, nor is it done once and for all; in fact, some of the most self-absorbed, upside down people we know can be outwardly religious people. The faith transformation God seeks and offers through Jesus Christ and directs throughout the Scriptures is an extensive, intensive and life-long process that must affect our attitude and our affections toward everything ... AND *everyone*, as James rather pointedly puts it.

In today's text, James is writing to a church wrestling with problems of favoritism toward the rich, apathy toward their poor, and the misleading notion that all that is required of church people is "*faith in Jesus*". So, James asks, "*What does real faith look like?*" Can one claim to have faith in God if that faith does not shape and produce behavior and attitudes reflecting the God in Whom we believe? This epistle as a whole has sparked many a debate within Christendom over the centuries over the issue of "Faith or Works?" i.e., are we saved through faith alone, or by a combination of faith and works, or by works alone? Without getting mired in the details of that perennial conversation (*a conversation that has, in my experience, usually produced more heat than light for those involved*), I'll just say if I had to put it in a fortune cookie, I would write: "*The hallmark of being Christian is neither faith nor works, it is faith THAT works!*" (*or, a faith that goes to work*). A FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS A FAITH THAT DOESN'T WORK. And a faith that doesn't work is no faith at all. James underscores that faith not put into action is like a body without an animating spirit; it is dead.

To give an example, James writes in so many words, "*Can we play favorites or have preferences for one type of person over another in the congregation?*" In James' day, it was favoring the rich over the poor; a constant temptation for congregations, especially during capital campaigns! But, what about favoring the young over the old, or the married over the single, or the smart and articulate over the simple and plainspoken, or one ethnic group over another, or the good looking over the not-so good looking ... does God have such preferences? ³ Of course not! James makes it clear that such partiality is simply unacceptable in the sight of God. According to this, how we treat others around us is a direct barometer of our faith relationship to God. Do we love the things God loves? Do we care for the *people* God loves? James takes the question of preference a step further, saying that showing partiality violates what he calls the royal law, "*Love your neighbor as you love yourself.*" Those who dishonor a fellow Christian through partiality are as guilty of sin as if they had committed adultery or murder, says James.

Every single human being ... young, old and in between ... is an *immortal* soul to be valued and treated accordingly! God's love and mercy are for *all*. According to the Bible, this is a direct barometer of our heart's focus: Do we love the things God loves? Do we care for the people God cares for? The faith you and I profess believes in God and understands that belief permeates every area of our lives. Such faith not only believes *in* God, but *believes* God, *LOVES* God, and grows in His likeness accordingly ... as He turns us inside out and right side up.

³ *When we had last looked at this text three years ago, I included the following: "On a related note, at a conference I attended a few years back in Orlando, I was uncomfortable with one of the proposed goals of those assembled: these were people who were concerned for the long-term well being of the church. The proposed goal was something like, "Let's have more baptisms than funerals in our denomination by the year 2018!" Now, on one hand, I get it; we do want the church to grow. However, I was disturbed by an offputting sentiment that I think was inadvertently, but practically, communicated ... "Let's focus on young people!" As if we should somehow focus our ministry efforts on, and reach out to, the young, because Lord knows we have too many white-hairs in our pews. No! We never want to communicate that we somehow favor the young over the old; that's really ... abhorrent! (and I'm not saying that because I am past the six decade mark and have white hair!) Every single human being ... young, old and in between ... is an immortal soul to be valued and treated accordingly! God's love and mercy are for all. To paraphrase our reading from Proverbs, "... the rich and the poor, the young and the not-so-young, the smart and the not-so-smart, the articulate and the not-so-articulate have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all." According to the Bible, this is a direct barometer of our faith relationship to God: Do we love the things God loves? And do we care for the people God cares for?"*