

Who Do You Trust?

Psalm 20:7, 1 Timothy 6:17, Deuteronomy 8:17

Steve Hollaway
Harbor Church
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Some of you are old enough to remember Johnny Carson's game show in the early 60's called "Who Do You Trust?" Kids watched it because it came on just about the time we got home from school, but it was a show for adults. There were all kinds of silly interviews and stunts, but the game part of it was that a man was asked a question and had to decide whether to answer it himself or trust his partner, a woman, to answer it. Do you trust yourself, or trust somebody else?

By the time I was in high school in the late 60's, youth groups were getting into "sensitivity training" and one of the exercises we'd do were "trust falls." Would one of you like to demonstrate how they work? I don't know if anyone ever learned trust from that experience. The Comedy Central comedian Daniel Tosh nowadays goes up to strangers on the street and yells "Trust fall!" and falls backwards into them. The whole idea of "trust" is made to seem silly.

But trusting God is one of the central themes of the Bible. One of the favorite verses in the Bible is Proverbs 3:5 (KJV), "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not on thine own understanding." Trust was the theme of our Vacation Bible School this past week, as you have seen. For those of us raised in the modern period, the opposite of trust in God—or faith in God—is unbelief. The opposite is atheism. But the Bible doesn't think of it that way. In the Bible, the assumption is that you are going to trust something. The issue is not whether you "have faith" or not, but what it is that you are going to trust. So there are many warnings in the Bible *not* to trust *x* or put your confidence in *y*. Instead of trusting those things, or those people, put your trust in God. Instead of trusting your own understanding, Proverbs says, trust in the Lord.

I want to point out this morning three of those things that are alternatives to trusting in God: trusting in chariots and horses, trusting in riches, and trusting in the might of your own hand.

(1) Psalm 20:7 says—in a verse that has been turned into a song by several Christian bands—"Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God." In those days, chariots and horses were the latest in military technology. The people of Israel were tempted to trust in vehicles and weaponry to protect them, but the psalmist says that Yahweh's people do not trust in such things. They trust in the Lord their God to protect them. Isaiah gave a similar warning about looking to Egypt, one of the superpowers of the time, to protect Israel. Listen to what he said:

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help,
who rely on horses,
who trust in the multitude of their chariots
and in the great strength of their horsemen,
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel,
or seek help from the LORD (31:1).

Psalm 33 (16-18) gives another warning about trusting in military might:

No king is saved by the size of his army;
no warrior escapes by his great strength.

A horse is a vain hope for deliverance;
despite all its great strength it cannot save.
But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him,
on those whose hope is in his unfailing love.

So if you look at America today—or if you simply look in your own heart—who do you trust? Do you trust in military force and technology to protect you, or do you trust God?

Our motto, of course, is “In God We Trust.” But have we ever trusted God to protect us? The motto was adopted in the early days of the Cold War to differentiate us from the godless Communists of the Soviet Union. It was a case of understanding the opposite of trust as atheism. The motto helped to frame the Cold War as the pro-God forces versus the anti-God forces, but anyone with their eyes open could see that there were two nations striving to be the dominant power, each accusing the other of building an empire. Theology had very little to do with it. But during the Cold War, did we actually trust God to protect us? No, we trusted in nuclear weapons, and submarines, and bases in a hundred countries.

What about on a personal level? Do we trust God to protect us, or do we trust in technology and weaponry? It seems to me that on a personal level the equivalents of chariots and horses are handguns and shotguns. Are we going to trust in violence or the threat of violence to protect us? Or are we going to trust in God—as Jesus demonstrated in such a radical way.

What do you think? Can we trust God in the face of violence? The psalmist was not a pacifist. He did not practice nonviolence as Jesus taught it. But he knew that if the Israelites were to win a war, it would not be because of superior weapons but because Yahweh had acted on their behalf—sometimes by scattering the enemy, sometimes by having an outside party intervene, sometimes by giving the Israelites strength in battle. But you couldn’t take credit if you were a faithful Jew. And you couldn’t trust in the size of your military budget rather than God himself.

(2) A second alternative to trusting God is to trust in wealth. 1 Timothy 6:17 is the apostle Paul’s advice to the young pastor Timothy. I like the sound of it in the King James: “Charge those that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who gives us richly all thing to enjoy.” The twin dangers for rich Christians are that they will be proud and that they will put their trust in their money rather than in God.

It was not just Jesus who warned about riches being a danger to the soul; it’s all through the Old Testament too. Proverbs 11:28 says, “He that trusts in riches shall fall.” Period. Psalm 52 pictures the righteous laughing at the evil doers and saying:

“See the one who would not take refuge in God,
but trusted in abundant riches,
and sought refuge in wealth” (v. 7 NRSV).

The whole of Psalm 49 is about “those who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches” (v. 6 NRSV). They can never be rich enough to pay God for their lives, the psalmist says. You can’t buy eternal life. You can’t pay a ransom to avoid the grave. It reminds us of Jesus’ story of the rich man who built bigger barns and said he would “eat, drink, and be merry,” but then God told him “This night your life is required of you.” When that good Baptist John D. Rockefeller died, his accountant was asked “How much did John D. leave?” The accountant answered, “Everything!”

When we think about it rationally, it is foolish to think that accumulating wealth is going to save us. You can’t take it with you; the hearse doesn’t have a trailer hitch. But there is

something in us—and in our culture—that tells us that we can find security if we can save enough money for a rainy day. So we end up spending most of our time making money however we can and spending very little time cultivating a friendship with God, which is our only source of true security.

(3) The third alternative to trusting God (and it's related to the second) is trusting ourselves. It's trusting in our own ability to do things, our own ability to take care of ourselves. Ever since a seminary class on Deuteronomy in Hebrew, I've loved chapter 8 of that book of sermons given by Moses to his people just *before* they enter the Promised Land. Moses warns the people to remember how the Lord has led them over the past 40 years. In the desert, God both starved the people and fed them so they would learn to trust in him. This is where Jesus got his famous line, "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Now the people are about to come into a good land, a land with streams and springs and wells, a land of wheat and barley and figs and olives, a land with iron and copper. But beware, Moses says, that when you are prosperous you do not forget God and exalt yourself. Verses 17 and 18 (NRSV) read, "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand has gotten me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the power to get wealth."

At least since the time of Emerson, and probably long before that, we Americans have been educated to be "self-reliant." It is a virtue to depend only on yourself. It is a shameful thing to depend on someone else. This pushes against the command to trust God. The Bible is not, after all, a declaration of independence and human freedom. It is a declaration of dependence on God, with story after story showing that people only find freedom in a covenant relationship with God. As Solomon prayed (1 Chronicles 29:14), "Everything comes from you, and we give to you out of your own hand." Whose hand does my wealth and my success come from? My hand or God's hand?

Recently there was a public debate about whether small business owners have benefited from the society as a whole, including government programs, or whether they could rightly say that they built their businesses all by themselves. God didn't even come into that conversation. Moses' point in Deuteronomy 8 is that *everything* we have is a gift from God—the land, the water, the weather, the crops, and even the strength of our own hands. Who made these hands? This is the view of the whole Bible: that every good gift comes from above, that everything is a gift from God but a gift for which God will hold us accountable—a gift that is not to be wasted and not to be claimed as our own achievement.

There are two basic views of the world—in the time of Moses, in the time of Jesus, and today.

View A is that the world and all that we have, including our abilities, are basically *gift*, so that the proper response is to be grateful and generous, grateful to God and generous to neighbors.

View B is that the world is a society humans have created and we have earned what we have, so we are right to be proud of ourselves. Giving very much to others forces them to live in a pretend world of gifts, when what they really need is to learn to depend on themselves.

You can argue among yourselves as to which of these views is true empirically, but as an authorized spokesman for the faith of the church I can absolutely tell you which view is *Christian*. The Christian view is that the deepest truth about life is that we can trust God—not only because everything in the world is a gift from him, but also because he has given us the gift of eternal life (which we could never earn or buy) through his son Jesus Christ.

In evangelical churches especially, we talk a lot about “trusting Jesus.” What does it mean to trust Jesus? Yes, it means to believe that the story is *true* that Jesus died for our sins and was raised to life. But it also means to trust that Jesus is *right* about depending on God, right about not returning evil for evil, right about violence, right about the danger of wealth, right about giving to all who ask. It means trusting Jesus as our teacher about how to live in relationship with the Father. Trusting Jesus means making a decision every day to depend on Jesus instead of weapons, to depend on Jesus instead of money, and to depend on Jesus instead of our own abilities. I close with the words of Isaiah (26:3-4 NRSV):

Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—
in peace because they trust in you.

Trust in the Lord forever,
for in the Lord God
you have an everlasting rock.