



“The Games We Play: Monopoly”

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1 Timothy 6:7-10

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The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.

Two weeks ago, we considered The Game of Life, the rules of which state “the player with the most money at the end of the game wins!” Monopoly takes that to another level. The winner invariably ends up with a considerable bankroll, but the goal *isn’t* having the most money. The game is won by *driving all the other players into bankruptcy*. Good times!

But let’s keep things in perspective. It’s just a game. It’s meant to be fun, even if that fun is at the expense of your family or friends. Most of us have played Monopoly at some point in our lives. You probably have lasting memories of playing as a teenager or as an adult with your own kids. Choose a token – the top hat, the dog, the iron, the thimble, or the car (definitely the car!). Buy properties ranging from the bargain Mediterranean Avenue all the way up to the high rent Boardwalk and Park Place. Draw from Chance and Community Chest. And hope you don’t have to go to jail (“Go directly to jail. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200.”)

We used to play the game for hours. (You *had* to play for hours!) We weren’t scarred for life or indoctrinated with fatal moral flaws. Though the last time any members of my family of origin played Monopoly with me was when I was in 7th grade. I not only won the game but threw all my money on the floor and rolled in it. Talk about the root of all kinds of evil – sheesh!

In 1933, Charles Darrow, an out-of-work salesman and inventor, pitched a board game he called Monopoly to Parker Brothers. Initially skeptical because of the complexity of the rules, Parker Brothers turned him down. But Darrow continued to sell it on his own, and as sales of his small production grew, they reconsidered, bought the game, and sold 278,000 copies in the first year. The second year, they sold 1.75 million. Darrow turned from a man down on his luck into a millionaire, seemingly overnight. It’s a great story, isn’t it? Too bad it isn’t true.

At least not all of it. Darrow *did* sell to Parker Brothers, who reluctantly bought what turned into their best seller. But Darrow didn’t create it. He learned it when he and his wife were invited to dinner with friends. After dinner, they pulled out their handmade board for “the monopoly game,” which had been in circulation in some circles for many years, though not commercially produced. Darrow realized it could be his ticket out of financial distress. He asked his friend to type up the instructions for him. Darrow then used the instructions and the prototype to create a reproduction he passed off as his own unique creation.

For their part, Parker Brothers was initially unaware of the fraud. But once they learned about other circulating versions of the game, many of which predated Darrow’s version, they questioned him. He denied it for a time but eventually came clean. Parker Brothers, recognizing their potential legal jeopardy, could have ended their relationship with Darrow and returned the rights to the game to the public domain and donated their profits to charity. But they didn’t. What they did instead, ironically, was buy up the patents to all other versions of the game, with payments ranging from \$10,000 all the way down to \$500, without royalties, giving them exclusive rights to the game – a monopoly on Monopoly we might say – and continued to peddle the falsehood of a down-on-his-luck salesman who invented the game and struck it rich.

In her book *The Monopolists*, journalist Mary Pilon details the roots of Monopoly and its strange journey of mistruths and lawsuits. The original version, called The Landlord’s Game, was the 1903 creation of Elizabeth Magie, an ardent social justice proponent and critic of the baron class. Magie advocated for the Single Tax, a campaign to derive tax revenue solely from property ownership, as a way to create equity and fairness in public funding. Frustrated by the lack of impact that campaigning and writing had in changing public opinion and shaping policy, she developed The Landlord’s Game to teach the evils of unfettered capitalism in a creative way. The game followed a circuit instead of a serpentine path, with nine squares on each side plus corner spaces for jail and payday and a free park. There were two sets of rules: one in which the goal was to create monopolies and one where *breaking up* monopolies was the aim. She

hoped to depict in an hour or so the devastating, compounding effects of property exploitation that might otherwise take years or decades of lived experience to realize.

The game became a favorite of many fellow justice-minded people, especially East Coast intellectuals. A group of Quakers in Atlantic City in the early 20th century renamed the properties from Magie's originals like Poverty Place and Easy Street to names of Atlantic City Streets like Baltic Avenue, Park Place, and Marven Gardens. It was this version that made its way to Darrow's hands, including the curiously miscopied spelling of "Marvin Gardens" (the Atlantic City street is spelled with an E). It remains the predominant version today.

Lizzie Magie patented her game on January 5, 1904. When Parker Brothers approached her in the mid-1930s about buying her game for \$500, she was thrilled. She hoped the increased circulation would more effectively shape public opinion. Later, when she realized her payment had been simply hush money to enable Parker Brothers to record enormous profits and to make Darrow rich, she tried to tell her story. But few wanted to listen. She was further traumatized to learn that not only did most players prefer to play the monopoly version of the rules, but the optional anti-monopolist rules in her original were jettisoned altogether.

Bet you'll never think of Monopoly the same way.

The passage of scripture we read for today warns against making money the goal. Where greed is involved, it's no surprise that treachery and deception follow. To put it in perspective, the First Letter to Timothy is filled with encouragement to stick to sound teaching and avoid falsehoods. Timothy was commissioned as a leader of the church, but he was young. So the letter written to him included both instruction in scripture and life. These lessons weren't meant for him alone, but were to be passed on as instructions for the church he led.

The author, identified as Paul though the letter is not Pauline in structure or grammar, is deeply concerned that Timothy hold fast to what is true so that he may take hold of life, both in the present and in the world to come. He was urged to lead so that the church he served would be the earthly representation of God's kingdom and the embodiment of truth. Earlier in the letter we find this instruction: "Focus on working on your own development and on what you teach. If you do this, you will save yourself and those who hear you." (1 Timothy 4:16)

Here, in the final chapter of the letter, the advice turns to the subject of money. While we don't know the exact circumstances, we know that the pursuit of money was creating conflict in the church. "(Some people) think that godliness is a way to make money." Does that mean that the faith community was being used as a means of economic advancement? Was the practice of shared resources within the church being abused by some members? Or was this an early example of the false doctrine we know today as "prosperity gospel?"

The writer goes on to assert that, indeed, "godliness *is* a great source of profit when it is combined with being happy with what you already have." Then, to clarify the kind of profit Timothy is to have in mind, the letter continues, "We didn't bring anything into the world and so we can't take anything out of it: we'll be happy with food and clothing." In other words, seeking the way of God isn't about material gain, but about qualities of character and spirit that bring us closer to God and godly living.

The letter goes on to administer a stern warning about the dangers of being distracted by financial gain. "But people who are trying to get rich fall into temptation. They are trapped by many stupid and harmful passions that plunge people into ruin and destruction." The writer doesn't mince words about financial matters. The Bible doesn't use the term "stupid" lightly or often. The Greek word translated that way here is *anoētous*, which means more literally "mindless" or "without thinking." If our goal is to get rich, we'll focus on the bottom line without much concern for how we get there. And pursuing anything without conscious thought can be dangerous; even leading to, in the words of the letter, "ruin and destruction."

I met a friend in graduate school who was in an odd relationship. Her boyfriend didn't appear to me to be very attentive to her, but she was drawn to focus and commitment to his goals. He had declared that he would make a million dollars by the time he was 40, something she thought would make him a good provider. She eventually married him partly for that reason. A few years ago, we met for dinner when I was in town for a conference. I noticed that her characteristic joy was diminished. When I remarked on that observation, she confided in me that her marriage was falling apart. They had a good home, two beautiful sons, and all the outward indicators of a happy life. Her husband, it turns out, had achieved his goal. He'd gotten a good job out of college and climbed the ladder in his company. Earlier that year, his savings and investments surpassed a million dollars; money, by the way, he kept in a separate account that she couldn't access. Once he'd reached that milestone, his motivation dissipated. He still went to work, but he'd seemed to lose interest. He was distracted and listless at home. She encouraged him to enjoy what he'd achieved; less pressure

to work extra hours and earn bonuses meant more time he could spend with her and their children. But their marriage and family held no interest for him. In fact, he told her he didn't think he'd ever actually loved her.

The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some have wandered away from the faith and have impaled themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal.

Now, it's worth noting that the Letter to Timothy doesn't say that money itself is bad. My friend's spouse didn't lose his way simply because of what he earned. Financial success isn't wrong. The problem is the pursuit of money *as a goal unto itself*. 1 Timothy doesn't say that *money* that is the root of all evil, but the *love of money* is what leads to trouble. In fact, the writer goes on a few verses later to encourage those who are wealthy to use their money "to do good, to be rich in the good things they do, to be generous, and to share with others." That strategy won't win you any games of Monopoly. But the keys to success in Monopoly are the very things in real life that lead us away from God and the life God wants for us.

Timothy is urged instead to "pursue righteousness, holy living, faithfulness, love, endurance, and gentleness." And twice in this final chapter, he is urged to "grab hold" of that which leads to eternal life, to pursue life and seize what matters most. He is to do so intentionally, in contrast to the "mindless" pursuit of material gain so common in the world around him. Some things haven't changed.

Parker Brothers was initially skeptical of Monopoly because of its rules. It is a complicated game. Most people don't win unless they strategically allocate their resources and invest in the right properties. Just buying up every property can land you in debt quickly; not buying anything means you'll end up paying rent on every space to your opponents. To win, you have to take initiative and make the most of your opportunities.

The same thing is true when it comes to life. We're not called to exploit those around us, snatching up resources and driving others into ruin. We *are* called, like Timothy, to take hold of the life that really is life; to embody the qualities that reflect God's goodness. The best part about pursuing the life to which God calls us is that we're not competing for finite resources. God's grace and love are available in unlimited supply.

Charles Darrow died a wealthy man. At the time of his death, he was heralded as a genius. Only after his death did the true story of the game's origins become public. Lizzie Magie got married and pursued other interests. Upon her death, her obituary encompassed only a few lines, without mention of the game she created or her legacy. I have no idea if Darrow ever came to terms with himself or the lies he told, or whether Magie ever found peace or reconciliation. One had material wealth, the other very little. But their legacies tell a different story; Darrow is an object of scorn, Magie an unsung hero. Pursuing wealth at all costs often leads to ruin and destruction for others in this life, but ultimately comes home to roost in the next. This story lives on as a symbol of the lasting harm caused by greed and moral bankruptcy. May we learn from it, setting our sights on eternal life and saying no to the pursuit of money as a goal unto itself. There's no monopoly on the abundant life Christ came to bring. When it comes to godly living, there's more than enough for all of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

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