

THEO-CULTURAL REFLECTION ON “HOW MUCH A DOLLAR COST”

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In college, I was pursuing a degree in Music Business that I eventually earned in 2018. One of the most valuable lessons I learned was to never turn your nose up at a piece of music just because of its genre. Like many people, for the longest time if someone asked me my favorite genre of music, I would say “everything but country and rap”. In college, though, my answer was quickly corrected. Professors told me that in order to work in the music industry, you must respect and appreciate music in all of its forms. So with that, I was introduced to rap music. Their goal was to show me that rap was a valid artform that tells compelling stories worth listening to. One of the first rap artists I was introduced to was Kendrick Lamar, and I was quickly enticed by his musical complexity and the depth of his storytelling. We listened to some other rap artists, but in my opinion, Lamar’s artistry was unmatched by any of the others we listened to. So I started listening to more of his music.

I distinctly remember the first time I heard this song “How Much A Dollar Cost”. While on a year-long mission trip called The World Race, we were en route to India from Peru - a journey that ended up taking 6 days with pit stops on Bogata, London, Edinburgh, and Dubai. On the train from London to Edinburgh, I was listening to music and put my Spotify liked songs on shuffle, and I forgot I had liked the entire Kendrick Lamar album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. On that overcast spring morning, while I was reclining in a train seat, this song came on, and nearly took my breath away. It caused me to reflect on the real conflict many face when presented with the opportunity to help those in need, or walk away. Indeed, these were situations we were even encountering on the mission field. I listened to this song several times, and despite its genre and its crass words, it spoke to me almost like a psalm of lament, as the author encounters a homeless man who asks for just a single dollar. The author refuses, assuming the man will use it on drugs

or alcohol, but the man assures him that is not his intent. He then reveals that he is God, and the author's pride and selfishness have cost him his place in heaven. There are several theological implications made by this song, with a powerful overarching point - "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." (Matt. 25:44-46).

Context

The Big Picture

This song is the 11th track on the album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, which was released in 2015 and met with almost immediate accolades (including Barack Obama) for how it artistically explored how young black artists trapped in challenging systems who have endured great trauma are exploited by the music industry - given a platform to share their stories, but lacking the support and resources to process their history. Greed, lust, gluttony, and pride are significant pitfalls Lamar has to navigate, wrestling with each of them, and ultimately falling into them all. The entire album is linked together with the following poem that explains these themes, as each stanza introduces the next song in the album:

I remember you was conflicted

Misusing your influence

Sometimes I did the same

Abusing my power, full of resentment

Resentment that turned into a deep depression

Found myself screaming in the hotel room

I didn't wanna self destruct
The evils of Lucy was all around me
So I went running for answers
Until I came home
But that didn't stop survivor's guilt
Going back and forth trying to convince myself the stripes I earned
Or maybe how A-1 my foundation was
But while my loved ones was fighting the continuous war back in the city, I was entering
a new one
A war that was based on apartheid and discrimination
Made me wanna go back to the city and tell the homies what I learned
The word was respect
Just because you wore a different gang color than mine's
Doesn't mean I can't respect you as a black man
Forgetting all the pain and hurt we caused each other in these streets
If I respect you, we unify and stop the enemy from killing us
But I don't know, I'm no mortal man, maybe I'm just another n****

The song "How Much A Dollar Cost" begins after the poem's line "But while my loved ones was fighting the continuous war back in the city, I was entering a new one". This song represents a turning point for Lamar - it represents his conflict with pride and greed, as the poem says he was "going back and forth trying to convince myself the stripes I earned". This "back and forth" can be seen with his interaction with this homeless man and his own internal conflict as he tries to justify his reasons for NOT wanting to give him a dollar - ultimately being proven wrong.

Setting and Characters

This story takes place at a gas station in South Africa in Lamar's luxury car. The homeless man on the corner asks for "ten Rand" initially, which is the currency of South Africa, which is approximately 1 dollar. The characters at play in this scene are the author (Lamar), Marcellus, and the homeless man. Marcellus is only mentioned once, and his role in the unfolding drama is unclear. He could be a gas station attendant, a reference to a childhood friend as he recalls a memory of being called "Dumbo", or some kind of chauffeur. The main conflict happens between Lamar and the unnamed homeless man, who reveals his identity as God at the end of the song.

Theological Themes

The main theme of this song is the ultimate cost of greed. However, there are clear theological implications made in parts of this song - humans wrestling with and justifying sin, how humans react to theophanies, and the eternal wages of sin.

Humans Wrestling with Sin

Christians know full well that humans were made in the image of God, but live in a broken and sinful world as a result of the fall. Because of this, in our current state, humans are constantly wrestling with sin, trying with their own judgment to do what they believe is best, but that can only truly be accomplished through faithful submission to God. Although sin can be hard to define, one of the simplest definitions is that "sin is culpable shalom-breaking"¹ This means that sin is anything that breaks the intended wholeness and holistic peace that God intended in creation. It encompasses harm done against people, nature, God, and ourselves in all

¹ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be : A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI. Eerdmans, 1999), pg. 14.

physical, emotional, and spiritual senses. The primary sins Lamar is wrestling with here are greed and pride. In his greed, he declares to the homeless man “Every nickel is mine to keep”. But this greed is not unfounded - at least in Lamar’s mind. He had to struggle to earn what he got, sometimes no more dignified than the man before him. He has seen people struggle to make ends meet, but spend the money they stole, begged, and borrowed to get on vice. Recounting Lamar’s own personal struggles, he says “When I was strugglin', I did compromise, now I comprehend. I smell Grandpa's old medicine, reekin' from your skin”. He doesn’t deny this man a dollar because he’s never seen a homeless man and has been sheltered from the struggles of life. In fact, it’s his own struggles, and the compromises he has seen people make when they were in dire straits that informs his hesitation. But is that justified? We learn in the end that it is not. Lamar thinks he is in the right here for not feeding a man’s laziness and addiction, when in reality his inflated sense of morality of how he would have been in the same situation keeps him from fulfilling a humble man’s simple request for one single dollar.

Sometimes it is harder to have sympathy when we see people struggling with the same things we struggled with. Anyone with boomers for parents knows this. “I had to walk 5 miles to school in a snowstorm and no one held my hand!”. Often people think suffering is a rite of passage, because we can’t handle the fact that our suffering was not worth something. Not unlike the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16. The workers who struggled to work the entire day got the same wages as those who only worked only a few hours in the afternoon. Those who struggled and suffered resented those who were given the same amount but didn’t “earn it”. But the moral Jesus offers is simple: “So the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matt. 20:16). When we understand this, we know better how God should treat His children; that is the sin of pride, and greed is often informed by pride. We become puffed up with our own work, the things

we earned, bought, and the accolades we have received. We hoard these things to boost our own egos, and because these things feed our pride, we don't want to give them away to any old bum on the street who asks for a dollar. We may not all drive luxury cars and have millions of dollars, but all of us know this feeling of seeing a beggar on the street, and passing by because we think we know better what they need, and it's certainly not our hard-earned cash that they should go get a job to earn for themselves.

Theophanies

The central point of this song is made when it's revealed that this homeless man is God. This is the Christian God because, because he refers to himself as "the Messiah, the son of Jehovah, the higher power... the Holy Spirit... I am God" reflecting the Christian understanding of the trinity. This is what is called a theophany, which comes from 2 Greek words meaning "appearance" and "God"². While there are not many theophanies in scripture, there are a select few that we can reference to compare to the theophany referenced in this song. One theophany is the burning bush Moses encounters in Exodus 3, and since this song references Exodus 14 (parting of the Red Sea), this Mosaic reference precludes an encounter with God. Much of Moses's leadership was defined by his humble submission and unique access to God. Moses saw God in a burning bush, on Mount Sinai, and God's presence led them by a cloud through the wilderness. The humility and faith of Moses in Exodus is a sharp contrast to how Lamar is acting towards this homeless man. A New testament Theophany can be seen when Jesus is baptized in the River Jordan in Matthew 3:14-17. The heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and God speaks. This theophany is triune in nature, so this corresponds with the triune appearance of God in this homeless man. We also get a clue that there is a reference to this

² "10 Things You Should Know about Theophanies," *Crossway*, last modified February 11, 2018, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-theophanies/>.

scripture in Lamar's first interactions with the homeless man when he says he was "stressin' about dry land, deep water, powder blue skies that crack open". Lamar interprets this as the homeless man wanting crack, when it seems like he was alluding to the sky opening up in the "deep water" of the Jordan river.

Whenever it is revealed that this homeless man is God, Lamar's response is humility and repentance. This is consistent with theophanies in the scriptures. Even when men encounter angels, they prostrate themselves, feeling unworthy to be in that holy presence. And this is Lamar's reaction - reflecting on the faithful practices he did, and admitting that when it came down to it, that wasn't enough. He then says what sounds like a prayer of repentance, asking God to "turn this page, help me change, right my wrongs". He also seems to admit some of his own inherent sinfulness in humility "shades of gray will never change if I condone" seems to imply a brokenness about his human existence, and that there is an escape from it only when we reject those "shades of grey" and allow God to help us turn away from them.

The Wages of Sin

The most poignant point of this song is made when the homeless man, revealed to be God, answers the question posed in the title: "and I'll tell you just how much a dollar cost, The price of having a spot in heaven." It's a powerful point, but there are some issues theologically with this. If we take God's word here, it seems to imply that at any time we fail to pass a test he puts before us, that can cost us our eternal salvation.. If we assume that Kendrick Lamar is a born-again Christian, we know that salvation is not so easily lost (John 10:27-30, Romans 8:38-39, Ephesians 1:13-14). While his sins of pride and greed are great, a loving God would not set up tests and traps to keep people out of heaven. Now if Kendrick Lamar is not a born-again believer, and if what God is doing here was intended to initiate his humble repentance and a

faithful commitment to him, then that was successful. The statement that those sins keep us from entering heaven is not untrue. The wages of sin is death - we know this from Romans 6:23. So anyone in a state of unrepentant sin would be costing themselves their place in heaven for acting in these ways. However, we have reason to believe that Lamar is in the faith, at least in some sense, because he mentions “I washed my hands, I said my grace. What more do you want from me?”. We have to assume that he faithfully said these prayers at one point to God, and he is now praying this prayer again, faithfully repenting and asking for forgiveness.

This whole song and this final point made by God parallels the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. It's a similar point, but we know that the people condemned to Hell were not faithful believers, which is why the rich man in Hell wants Jesus to warn his friends and family so that they don't have to like him. In a similar way the rich man commits the same sins as Lamar does here, and the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

It's important to recognize that this is a poetic allegory, and recognize the limitations of that. Is it possible for God to be a homeless man at a gas station? Perhaps. Is it possible to lose your salvation as a faithful Christian for mistreating that homeless man? Scripture tells us - probably not. It's definitely not great, and certainly not showing the fruit of the spirit, but the faith evidenced by Lamar's repentant prayer shows that there is eternal hope for his soul after all. He will not be condemned to Hell for failing this test if he is a faithful believer, as he seems to be. In an interview, Lamar even said this was based on a real encounter with a homeless man in South Africa and he said “I felt God speaking through him to get at me”³. Lamar clearly recognized this as some kind of spiritual encounter initiated by God to teach him something, and that is reflected in this song.

³ Danielle Harling. "Kendrick Lamar Breaks Down ‘Mortal Man,’ ‘u’ & Other ‘To Pimp A Butterfly’ Tracks". HipHopDX, (April 7, 2015).

Conclusion

There are so many layers of this song. There's the story of what's actually happening between Lamar and this homeless man, and there's the spiritual element of what's going on, as he realizes he's encountered God and it leads him to pray a prayer of faithful repentance. But even beyond that, this idea of finding God in unexpected places is what this song really symbolizes to me. 10 years ago, I would have never thought this kind of music could be so impactful. In the same way that Lamar looked at this homeless man, I looked at this genre of music with an upturned nose and disgust. But since I've taken the time to hear these stories and see just how powerful they can be in this medium, I've seen how transcendental truths about God can be revealed in unlikely places. The song may not have been intended to be a worship song or a theological manifesto of any sort, but what is clear is that Lamar has some degree of faith and respect for God, and has expressed that in a really unique and beautiful way in the song. On many levels, the song goes to show that God can reveal timeless truths about himself anywhere and in any way he would like.

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APPENDIX - "HOW MUCH A DOLLAR COST" LYRICS

How much a dollar really cost?

The question is detrimental, paralyzin' my thoughts

Parasites in my stomach keep me with a gut feeling, y'all

Gotta see how I'm chillin' once I park this luxury car

Hopping out feeling big as Mutombo

"20 on pump 6," dirty Marcellus called me Dumbo

Twenty years ago, can't forget

Now I can lend him a ear or two

How to stack these residuals tenfold

The liberal concept of what men'll do

"20 on 6," he didn't hear me

Indigenous African only spoke Zulu

My American tongue was leery

Walked out the gas station

A homeless man with a semi-tan complexion

Asked me for ten Rand, stressin' about dry land

Deep water, powder blue skies that crack open

A piece of crack that he wanted, I knew he was smokin'

He begged and pleaded

Asked me to feed him twice, I didn't believe it

Told him, "Beat it"

Contributin' money just for his pipe—I couldn't see it

He said, "My son, temptation is one thing that I've defeated

Listen to me, I want a single bill from you

Nothin' less, nothin' more"

I told him I ain't have it and closed my door

Tell me, how much a dollar cost?

It's more to feed your mind

Water, sun and love, the one you love

All you need, the air you breathe

He's starin' at me in disbelief

My temper is buildin', he's starin' at me, I grab my key

He's starin' at me, I started the car, then I tried to leave

And somethin' told me to keep it in park until I could see

The reason why he was mad at a stranger

Like I was supposed to save him

Like I'm the reason he homeless and askin' me for a favor

He's starin' at me, his eyes followed me with no laser

He's starin' at me, I notice that his stare is contagious

'Cause now I'm starin' back at him, feelin' some type of disrespect

If I could throw a bat at him, it'd be aimin' at his neck

I never understood someone beggin' for goods

Askin' for handouts, takin' it if they could

And this particular person just had it down pat
Starin' at me for the longest until he finally asked
"Have you ever opened up Exodus 14?
A humble man is all that we ever need"
Tell me, how much a dollar cost?

It's more to feed your mind
Water, sun and love, the one you love
All you need, the air you breathe

Guilt trippin' and feelin' resentment
I never met a transient that demanded attention
They got me frustrated, indecisive and power trippin'
Sour emotions got me lookin' at the universe different
I should distance myself, I should keep it relentless
My selfishness is what got me here, who the f*** I'm kiddin'?
So I'ma tell you like I told the last bum
Crumbs and pennies, I need all of mines
And I recognize this type of panhandlin' all the time
I got better judgment, I know when n****s hustlin', keep in mind
When I was strugglin', I did compromise, now I comprehend
I smell Grandpa's old medicine, reekin' from your skin
Moonshine and gin, n**** you're babblin', your words ain't flatterin'

I'm imaginin' Denzel but lookin' at O'Neal
Kazaam is sad thrills, your gimmick is mediocre
The jig is up, I seen you from a mile away losin' focus
And I'm insensitive, and I lack empathy
He looked at me and said, "Your potential is bittersweet"
I looked at him and said, "Every nickel is mines to keep"
He looked at me and said, "Know the truth, it'll set you free
You're lookin' at the Messiah, the son of Jehovah, the higher power
The choir that spoke the word, the Holy Spirit
The nerve of Nazareth, and I'll tell you just how much a dollar cost
The price of having a spot in Heaven, embrace your loss—I am God"

I washed my hands, I said my grace
What more do you want from me?
Tears of a clown, guess I'm not all what it's all meant to be
Shades of grey will never change if I condone
Turn this page, help me change to right my wrongs