

**Sermon for Sunday, November 7, 2010**  
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**What are your Gifts? Or: Fear of Loss and Joy in Giving**  
**Romans 12:6-8, 2 Cor. 8:9**

There is something about the topic of money that elicits dark humor, like "Money can't buy friends, but it can get you a better class of enemy." Spike Milligan or Groucho Marx said, "Money frees you from doing things you dislike. Since I dislike doing nearly everything, money is handy." Someone else said, "I have enough money to last me the rest of my life, unless I buy something."

Money is many things. It's a social convention, a medium of exchange. Because an official entity prints the number "20" on a piece of paper, you can trade that paper for a meal. By showing people a piece of plastic, you can spend a week in Paris. Because money has these powers and many more, it can lead us to think hard about life. Almost everyone prefers riches over poverty, yet almost everyone knows wealth cannot guarantee a good life. "It is pretty hard to tell what [brings] happiness; poverty and wealth have both failed." Plato said, "Wealth is the parent of luxury and indolence, and poverty of meanness and viciousness, and both of discontent."

But money is more than a means of exchange, social oil, more than a marker of social position. It can become a god. Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matt 6:24). He also says God will ask for an account of the resources he gives – or loans – to us (Luke 12:15-20). Jesus also said things that surprise us. For example, "Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves" (Luke 16:9). Is Jesus serious, and if so, what does he mean?

I know this isn't standard, that it may sound too much like a lecture and not enough like a sermon, but today I feel compelled to survey all the Bible says about money/wealth and then consider a few questions that may help us decide what to do. Let's start with Bible history. Pattern: God gives his people wealth and poverty; what they do with either test what's in their hearts.

**Biblical theology of wealth**

**Abraham and the plunder:** Abraham was prosperous when God called him. He lived in a thriving city, Haran, and was flourishing there. When he set out for Canaan, as God commanded, he took his family and "all the possessions they had accumulated and the [servants] they had acquired" (Gen. 12:5). This appears to be part of God's protection for Abraham, and a sign of God's favor, in the form he could grasp, for he knew so little of God and his ways.

Yet Abraham never lived for wealth. It helped him, but it always had a secondary place, as we see from early episodes in Canaan. First, God so prospered him that the land barely had enough water and grass for his herds. He decided to divide the family and let his nephew Lot take about half of the possessions. When he did, he let Lot choose where he would go. Lot chose lands with more water and grass and Abraham affirmed it.

That decision eventually led Lot to move to the city of Sodom. War broke out and Lot was captured. Abraham rallied all his men, 300 strong, counterattacked the invaders, and rescued Lot, along with many other captives. Thus Abraham took control of a great deal of plunder. The king of Sodom met Abraham and made an offer: Let me have my people and the plunder is yours. Abraham released the people, but refused the plunder:

I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, 'I made Abram rich.' (Gen 14:22-23).

He wanted no ties with a wicked king, no debt to a godless man. He wanted to be free to serve God

without entanglement, so he refused riches. That is part of the genius, the faith of Abraham. He had a single-minded willingness to follow God. He let nothing stand in the way – not security, not his family, not his wealth. This is what we can learn from Abraham:

We should never compromise our faith, our principles, or ability to serve God or man for the sake of wealth. Abraham knew – the Lord will provide. That confidence liberates him and us from love of money. To take a job that pays less or work hard, for free, on an important task. The more the patriarchs walked with God, the more generous they became, the smaller the role of keeping my money. So – do you walk with the patriarchs?

### **Moses and the law**

Much like Abraham, Moses had privileges and the prospect of a life of comfort and power. While Moses was born a slave, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him. He was talented, attractive, bold, and bright. But Hebrews 11:24-26 says:

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

God had a unique call on Moses' life. He had native gifts and then the unique training of a member of Pharaoh's house. These two prepared him to lead the oppressed, enslaved people of Israel from Egypt and into the Promised Land. But to do that Moses first had to sacrifice the riches of Pharaoh's house. Moses delivered God's laws on the right use of wealth, but first he gave up the luxury of the palace and served God in the desert. Why there?

Because after the exodus, Israel rebelled against God and had to wander in the wilderness for years. To preserve his people, the Lord sent something like bread, called manna, which fell from heaven every night and spoiled within twenty-four hours. It was impossible to save manna. God made it impossible to hoard his gift. Instead Israel had to depend on God for her daily needs. That principle – not keeping the best or hoarding for oneself - shows again and again.

Consider the tradition of consecrating the first born to God. The lesson: we give whatever is most valuable to us, as an offering to the Lord.<sup>1</sup> But remember: the man who said that gave up every natural good and comfort to hear God's call. More, the Lord who gave the commands gave his first born Son, Jesus. And Jesus too gave up every natural good, for our sake.

The Bible approves of saving. Paul says parents should save for their children (2 Cor. 12:14). I don't know when sensible saving becomes harmful hoarding, but hoarding is wrong. Proverbs 11:26 says "People curse the man who hoards grain" in time of famine, "But blessing crowns him who is willing to sell."

Notice that the farmer sells his grain; he doesn't give it away. That fits the Bible's affirmation of private property. God's law declares and protects the private ownership of land and animals (see boundary markers Deut. 19:14, 27:17). Trained farm animals like oxen were the capital of the day, so there are stiff penalties for stealing oxen (Ex. 22:1-9).

Yet there is no absolute right to property. There were limits on the accumulation of property. No massive farms. Jubilee law said the land returned to the original families every fifty years. Isaiah 5:8 says, "Woe to you who join field to field till no space is left [for other farmers] and you live alone in the land."

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<sup>1</sup> Bloomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, p 38.

The law prohibited farmers from harvesting every scrap of fruit or grain from their fields. This was not voluntary charity, but law. The poor had the opportunity to "glean" remnants of the harvest that fell to the corners of the fields. It was hard work, but they could survive, with dignity Deut 24:19-22. So God's law affirms ownership yet governs it, so it is neither absolute nor selfish. (Slaves were set free with resources every seventh year (Deut. 15:12-18).

### **David and his generosity**

The history of Israel is all too often a tale of the violation of these laws. The powerful piled up riches and oppressed the poor. David was different. Born to a prosperous family, God anointed David king when he was eighteen or nineteen. But before he took the throne, jealous king Saul deprived him of everything. Perhaps that helped David become a king who *didn't care too much about money*. He was generous in small but telling ways. His best friend, Saul's son Jonathan, was killed in Saul's last battle. Jonathan's son Mephibosheth was permanently crippled at that time. And David cared for Mephibosheth for the rest of his life.

That's small, but details are often most telling. We also see David's generosity when he decided to build God's temple. The Lord said no, David had shed too much blood. The privilege of building would go to his son Solomon (1 Chron. 22:8-10). David accepted this and decided to do what he could: he prepared everything possible for the construction of the temple:

"I now give my personal treasures of gold and silver for the temple of my God, over and above everything I have provided for this holy temple." So David gave vast quantities of gold, silver, wood, and stone as to pay the craftsmen and to construct and beautify the building. Then he invited Israel's leaders, "Now, who is willing to consecrate himself today to the LORD?" Leaders joined David and the people rejoiced (1 Chron. 29:3-9). So, one person can stir another to generosity. Do you?

King David became very rich, but in his fifties and sixties, he gave most of it away and found blessing in that. David's life displays two elements in the wise use of money. First, it simply wasn't all that important to him. Second, he was willing to give it up, give it away for a good cause; it wasn't his god.

What about you? How important is it to you? Can you give it up to care for one person in need? For a week, for years, as David did for Jonathan's son? Can you give it cheerfully for a cause? Do you inspire others to join you?

### **Solomon and his gold**

David's son Solomon took a different path. When we first meet Solomon, he is a humble young king who loved the Lord and obeyed his law. Shortly after he became king, God appeared to him at night and said, "Ask what I shall give you." Anything was possible. But instead of wealth or power, Solomon asked for wisdom – "Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong" (1 Kgs. 3:3 English Standard Version; 3:9, New International Version). But Solomon had a hard time staying true to his first convictions.

For years, Solomon and Hiram, the king of the neighboring land of Tyre, had a peaceful, affectionate relationship. Solomon was the senior partner, but fair and respectful in his dealings. Hiram supplied timber, skilled carpenters and gold to Solomon as he built the temple. In payment, Solomon gave him twenty cities near the border between Israel and Tyre. This is strange and unjust. Solomon simply gave his own people and their lands to another king? But it's also unfair to Hiram, for the cities are poor and small.

Solomon's building projects brought him glory. But he used conscripted labor, taking non-Israelites who lived in the land, as a sort of short-term slave labor to complete the project. Conscripted labor is a hallmark of kings who rule for themselves, not the people.

Solomon did many things well (9:23-28). He organized public works. He went to worship, offered sacrifices. He led extensive, profitable trading ventures. His ships plied the entire region and brought great sums of gold (420 talents, (9:26-28)).

Solomon's power grew, his wealth increased constantly, and his reputation for wisdom spread. The great Queen of Sheba came to test his wisdom and observe the order of his palace, his food, house and servants. She marveled: "In wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report (10:1-13). Then the *queen gave* gifts from his royal treasury; but Solomon made out better in the exchange.

### **Solomon's focus on wealth**

Kings hints that something is amiss. We see repeated references to wealth (repetition functions like italics)! The queen of Sheba brought "camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones... And she gave the king 120 talents of gold, large quantities of spices, and precious stones" (10:2, 10).

A paragraph later, we hear more about gold. "The weight of the gold that Solomon received yearly was 666 talents." Next we hear of golden shields, a gold and ivory throne, golden goblets. Everything is made of gold. Through trade, he reaps more gold, silver, ivory, apes, baboons (10:14-22). In forty-two verses, we see "gold" sixteen times: "King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth" (1 Kgs. 10:23). The focus of Solomon has shifted from his people to his gold.

- In 1 Kings 3, Solomon asked for wisdom and made no mention of wealth.
- In 1 Kings 10:7, Sheba marvels at Solomon's wisdom first, and wealth second.
- In 1 Kings 10:23, "King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth." Now wealth is first.

Solomon's wisdom became selfish. It always led to gold for decorations and treasuries, more wives for political alliances. At first, Solomon's wisdom brought bounty to his people and the nation (4:24-25). Now Solomon brings bounty to himself. Solomon multiplied chariots and horses – purchased in Egypt, contra God's law. Gold was common and silver was like a paving stone. Practical wisdom said a strong, wealthy central government creates a strong nation. God had said that wealth and military might creates a nation that forgets him (Deut. 17). In the end Solomon trusted his *worldly wisdom rather than God's instructions*.

Henri Nouwen was a beloved Christian writer, professor, and speaker. Around the age of fifty, he asked himself a simple question "Is becoming older bringing me closer to Jesus?" He wasn't sure of the answer. He was praying poorly, isolated from others, busy with "burning issues." Everyone said he was doing well but he felt that his soul was withering away. So at fifty-four, at the height of his success, he stepped away from it all to care for the sick.

What of Solomon? He was doing so well, but his soul was withering away. He brought a booming economy and peace to a nation that had been poor and weak sixty years earlier. But Solomon didn't ask himself hard questions. The more he succeeded, the more he received admirers, the sicker his heart became.

Do you know this? It's possible to do very well on the outside and to wither away on the inside. Everyone can say "you are doing well" because you are successful, prosperous, or influential, at the top of your game, at the top of the class. But something nags.

You don't like the way you sound, tenderness is declining. You notice that you feel a sense of entitlement. You're looking for a new thrill and not finding it. But everyone says you are doing well; they point at your gold and wisdom. But you sense that they are becoming idols and it seems impossible to pray about it. We need to pray to the Lord; we can also look to Jesus' life.

## Jesus life and teaching

Jesus taught more about money than any other ethical topic. But let's remember Jesus' life before his words. Jesus created all things and is king of heaven, therefore he is infinitely wealthy. Yet he gave it all up, and became poor for us. How poor? Born in a poor century, in a poor land, to a poor, working class family, where father and sons worked wood and stone with their hands.

Don't misunderstand, Jesus didn't live for pleasure, but he wasn't an ascetic. He never said physical poverty is a holy estate. God takes no pleasure in poverty. The ideal is in "There *should be* no poor among you" (Deut 15:4). Jesus went to parties and had such a good time that his critics decided it was a weakness. Their malice found something to criticize, "He is a glutton and a drunkard."

Jesus could happily live with abundance or next to nothing. Could you? Jesus had "nowhere to lay his head" and the next meal was uncertain. He was willing to enjoy material pleasure, but he certainly didn't live for money. But Jesus knew people who did – including two rich men, in Luke 18-19.

## His encounter with a ruler and a tax-man Zaccheus

We call one the rich young ruler. He came to Jesus one day and asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He had already done all he could, including absolute devotion to God's law. What more? Jesus said, "Sell everything you have and give to the poor... Then come, follow me." This is the only time Jesus said "Sell all" but this man needed to hear because he was rich and loved his wealth more than anything – he couldn't do it and left grieving.

A little later, Jesus met Zaccheus, another rich man who had lived for wealth, wealth he largely gained by defrauding his own people. When he met Jesus, before Jesus even raised the topic, he said, "Look Lord! I'm giving half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody, I'll repay it fourfold." What a contrast. Again, it leads us to ask "Where do I fit in these stories?"

## What do you fear?

The stories of giving are stirring, but a bit frightening and perhaps closer to home than they were before the last two years of economic challenges. Some of us have lost jobs or become underemployed. Others work, but have lost most of our life's work. That brings a lot of stress.

But the experience has its blessings, lessons. We don't just endorse our desires any more. We don't just think, "I want it, how can I get it?" We think "I want it; but *should I* want it?" We know there are more important issues than "what I want, what I possess, what I consume" (strange word). Such as: How are my relationships? Am I investing myself in the people and causes that matter most?"

I talked to a man whose income has dropped by 50% since 2008. Yet he and his wife had not reduced their giving to the church or any kingdom cause. He added comment "This economy had better improve, because I'm giving away 40% of my money right now and it's getting hard to keep it up!"

Paul says some people have a special gift, a grace to give generously, and inspire others to do so. If that's not your gift, you should still give generously to the Lord's work, and to the poor. God's plan is simple. The norm, per the law, the prophets, and Jesus, is the tithe. Some will say it's legalistic, an Old Testament idea, to give the tithe. Fine with me, because you move to the New Testament, I think you'll be giving more, since Jesus gave more truth, more grace. If Jesus is our model, we will give more than 10%, for Jesus gave himself to us, generously and sacrificially.

## How shall you live?

A passage in the law of Moses presents God's ideal: If the people follow the Lord and walk in his ways – very big conditions – God promised to protect and prosper Israel. The law says "There *should be* no poor among you, for... the LORD... will richly bless you..." (Deut 15:4).

Yet God knows the people will not perfectly follow him. Sins and disasters will bring poverty and we should plan to mitigate it. Therefore, the law also says "*If there is a poor man among [you]... do not be hardhearted or tightfisted... lend him whatever he needs.*" Be generous. Loan your wealth. Even if a fellow Israelite becomes so destitute that he or she falls into slavery, here is how that ends (Deut 15:7-8, 11-12).

Then the law's realism: Sadly, you will always need to help the poor and work to release slaves and prisoners for "There will always be poor people in the land" (Deut. 15:11). Helping the poor isn't a pointless task, but it's a never-ending task. People are sinful and broken, they rebel, things go wrong.

Jesus never stops restoring the poor, as Paul said, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

Then, as Jesus said, we can use money to make friends (Luke 16). Our use of money shows our friendship with God. We make friends when we help the poor, in Haiti, in India and Kenya. And one day, in the new creation, we may yet meet someone who wants to be our friend, because we gave to the ministry that preached the gospel, which they heard and came to faith – because we joined our Lord and became poor for the sake of others.