

How to manage money: Jesus on ambition

Extreme Makeover: Soul Edition (Episode 4)

Matthew 6:19-24

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 12 June 2005

Introduction

A few weeks back I heard a story about a lawyer who parks his brand new Porsche in front of the office to show it off to his colleagues. As he's getting out of the car, a large truck comes hurtling past too close to the curb and takes off the door before speeding off. Distraught, the lawyer grabs his cell phone and calls the cops. Five minutes later, the police arrive. Before the cop has a chance to ask any questions, the lawyer starts screaming hysterically, "My Porsche. My beautiful silver Porsche. It's ruined!" After the lawyer has finished ranting, the policeman shakes his head in disgust and says, "I can't believe how materialistic you lawyers are. You're so focused on your possessions that you don't notice anything else in your life." The lawyer snaps back, "How can you such a thing at a time like this?" The policeman replies, "Didn't you notice that your right arm was torn off when the truck hit you?" The lawyer looks down in horror. "Oh no!" he screams. "Where my Rolex?"

Now it's not just lawyers who are materialistic. Last year the newspaper carried a story with the following headline: *\$8.5 million: the real cost of happiness*. In a survey conducted by Yahoo and Citibank, 5,370 people were asked what they would buy if they had unlimited cash. What would you buy? People wanted flash sports cars, luxury cruises, lavish mansions with expansive sea views. The survey showed that the average cost of buying happiness was around eight and a half million dollars. People think that for eight and a half million dollars you can buy happiness.

We don't like to talk much about money in church. But Jesus talked about it a great deal – more than he talked about heaven and hell. And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that those who follow him will stand out from their culture not just by the way they handle conflict – by the way they love those who hurt them, as we saw last week – but by the way they manage money (Matthew 6:19-24):

¹⁹Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.

²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²²The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. ²³But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

²⁴No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

Basically Jesus says, "When it comes to money, you've got to make a clear choice." And he puts the choice in three different ways. In effect, he asks three different questions. Let's tease them out and see how we would answer them.

Where is your security? (19-21)

Jesus starts by saying: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth." What does Jesus mean by that? What is he forbidding? He's not saying that all Christians are required to give away everything they have. In only one recorded case does Jesus tell someone to give everything away (Mark 10:21). During the rest of his ministry he was supported by wealthy people (Luke 8:1-3). And Jesus is not saying here that it's wrong to invest or make money. His parable of the talents speaks positively about making money. Some people, it seems, are called to make loads of money and invest it in building his kingdom. Jesus is not saying it's wrong to save money. Scripture praises ants for storing in summer the food that they will need in winter (Proverbs 6:6ff), and condemns believers who make no provision for their families as being worse than unbelievers (1 Timothy 5:8). Nor is Jesus saying that it's wrong to enjoy the good things of life. The Bible says that God has provided us with all things richly to enjoy (1 Timothy 6:17). So what is Jesus forbidding? The *selfish* accumulation of wealth and possessions: "Do not store up *for yourselves* treasures on earth." Jesus is concerned not so much with money as with the *love* of money (1 Timothy 6:10). Treasuring money. Trusting in money. Thinking that more money, or a better house, or a nicer lounge suite, or a slimmer body, or that next promotion will make us happy and give us security.

Because it won't. These kinds of things can be eaten by moths, or corroded by rust, or stolen by thieves. Today we might replace moths, rust, and thieves with inflation, depreciation and recession. Earthly treasures are not safe. The very things that promise security lead, instead, to perpetual insecurity. That's why George Harrison, despite all the money he had made as one of the Beatles, said, "For every hundred pounds you earn, you get a hundred pounds worth of problems." Catherine Deneuve, regarded as the most beautiful woman in the world was once interviewed and she spoke about her fears of growing old: "It worries me, and it bores me. It is very painful to look in the mirror every day and watch yourself aging." Her treasure was decaying. I know how she feels. The worse thing is that earthly treasure is that it can lead us away from God: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (20). That's why Jesus says, "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." He's not saying we can somehow earn our way to heaven. He's simply saying, "Do now on earth things that will last for eternity. Put your time and talents and treasure into people. If it's a safe investment you're after, nothing could be safer than this. It'll last forever. To exchange what's temporary for what's eternal – that's a good deal. You won't get a better return anywhere." So when it comes to money and possessions and success, the first question Jesus asks is this: Where is your security: on earth or in heaven?

What is your focus? (22-23)

Jesus then goes on to say: "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness." What does he mean? The eye is the lamp of the body in the sense that if your eyes are working, you can see where you are going – you have light. But if you're blind – if you have no eyesight at all – you live in darkness. Sheila Hocken, a lady who had been blind since infancy, had her sight restored at the age of twenty-nine by an amazing and complex operation. She wrote of the moment when the bandages were removed: "I was suddenly hit, physically struck by the brilliance, like an immense electric shock into my brain. It flooded my whole being with a shock-wave, this utterly unimaginable brightness. There was the white of a nurse's dress in front of me, a dazzling white I could hardly bear to take in, and behind her a vivid blue sky. It was fantastic. I felt that the whole of creation had been laid on for my personal benefit."

So on a physical level the eyes are lamps for the body. But Jesus is speaking metaphorically here. He says, "if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness." The word "bad" there means literally, "evil." In Hebrew thought an "evil eye" is an eye that is fixed on selfish gain, an eye that enviously covets what belongs to someone else. If your focus in life is ultimately on yourself, your success, your status, your wealth, you'll end up groping around in moral darkness, resentful, jealous, without any real sense of direction and fulfilment. But if your eyes are focused on God and his agenda in this world – and the word for "good" here means literally "single" – if your single-minded ambition is to serve God and to serve others – a sense of purpose and purity will flood your life and light up the world around you. I was fascinated to read a while back a news story about Bob Naegele, former owner of the Rollerblade company. One December all 280 employees of the company received a Christmas card from him and his wife. Along with the card was a cheque made out to each employee. The amount of the cheque was \$160 for every month that they were employed by Rollerblade. For some employees it was a very significant amount of money – in excess of twenty thousand dollars. The total cost was estimated to have been about one-and-a-half million dollars. There were reports of the employees' excitement, surprise, laughter, tears and joy when they received their cheques. When one of them said to Naegele, "You can't imagine the impact you have had on everyone," guess what he said: "That is just what I wanted to hear. This is not mine. It is a gift I had to share." At the very centre of the Christian life is this secret: the best way to be happy and fulfilled in this life is to share. Is that your focus? This is the second question that Jesus puts to us this morning: Where is your security? Earth or heaven? What is your focus? Gaining or giving?

Who are you serving? (24)

But in the final part of this passage, Jesus asks a third and even more fundamental question: Who are you serving? God or Money? "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the

other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money". The word "Money" here means literally – and is translated in some Bibles as – "Mammon." Mammon was the Carthaginian god of wealth. Jesus is saying that money is not a neutral medium of exchange. It has all the characteristics of a pagan god. It seems to offer security, freedom, power, and influence. It is capable of inspiring trust and devotion. And it demands sacrifice – ultimately human sacrifice. Many people sacrifice their health for money, through long hours at the office. Worse still, some people sacrifice the lives of others: they have no time for their family, their children, their friends, or God. John D. Rockefeller, founder of the Standard Oil Company in America, was once asked, "How much money does it take to make someone happy?" He answered, "Just a little bit more than he has." That's the danger with wealth. We think we own our money but, if we're not careful, it ends up owning us. Enslaving us. That's why Jesus warns us that you can't serve God and Money. "You'll hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to one and despise the other." The word for "despise" here means "to be indifferent towards or unconcerned about something." Isn't that exactly what's happened to the church in the West? Living in a consumer culture where materialism has flourished, where the advertising industry and media daily preach the message that having a little more will make you secure and happy, we have become less and less concerned about God. Bill Hybels quotes from the journal of a Ugandan church leader who was able to leave the country in which he'd suffered so much, and move to America. A move from poverty to riches. But this is what he says happened:

In Uganda I prayed with a deep sense of urgency. I had to. I refused to leave my knees until I was certain I had been in the presence of the resurrected Christ. It was not just a gift I needed: I needed to see the giver. I needed to know that the God of widows and orphans and the God of the helpless had heard my prayer.

Now after a year in the United States the urgency was gone. When I prayed publicly I was more concerned to be theologically correct than to be in God's presence. Even in private my prayers were no longer the helpless prayers of a child, they were spiritual tranquilizers, thoughts that made no contact with anything outside of themselves. More and more I found myself coming to God with vague requests for gifts I did not expect to receive.

Sound familiar? I imagine that man, after reflecting on his life, made some changes. What about you? Where is your security? What is your focus? Who are you serving? Let me quickly suggest four ways to make sure you're serving God.

- Acknowledge that all you have ultimately belongs to him. When considering a major purchase, for example, the question should not simply be, "Do I have the money?" but "Would God want me to have this?"
- Hold loosely to your possessions. Be like John Wesley who, when he heard his house had burnt down, exclaimed, "It is the Lord's house. Let him see to it."
- Decide to become the most generous person you know. Generous and cheerful giving breaks the power of materialism like nothing else.
- If you haven't already, ask Jesus to become your Master.

Questions

1. How much of a priority for you is the acquisition of money? Why?
2. In what ways has Jesus' teaching about not storing up treasure on earth been misinterpreted? What *does* it mean?
3. What is wrong with seeking security by making lots of money?
4. In practical terms, how can we "store up treasures in heaven"?
5. What does Jesus mean, "Where you treasure is there your heart will be also"? In what ways have you found this to be true?
6. In what ways is money like a pagan god?
7. Is money your servant or your master? How do you know?
8. How can the power of materialism be broken in our lives?