

WHAT MORE CAN GOD SAY?

(Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews)

Study 21

Something Money Can't Buy

An Encouraging Passage to Heed

"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said,

'Never will I leave you;
never will I forsake you.'

So we can say with confidence,

'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.

What can human beings do to me?" (Heb 13:5-6; cf. Deut 31:6; Ps 118:6, 7).

Parallel Passages Worth Considering

Matt 6:25-34; Luke 6:38; 2 Cor 9:6-11; Phil 4:10-19; 1 Tim 6:6-10, 17-19.

An Important Perspective

Money can't buy happiness, but it sure helps. Financial problems can place a huge strain on a marriage. A financial crisis, such as the one we are currently experiencing, takes its toll in all sorts of ways. At the poor end of the spectrum, more people are hungry and some starve to death; at the wealthy end of the spectrum, there is not only humiliation but also debt and desperation and sometimes even suicide.

Churches are not immune from the inevitable impact of a recession; they battle also as people cut back on their giving or divert it because they are aware of parachurch workers who are in dire straits.

Pastors are sometimes urged to preach on giving (or tithing) because of the church's need for more money. It is assumed that they are reluctant to do so because they are afraid of antagonising members who would rather have us stick to "spiritual" subjects. Some assume that the subject of money embarrasses pastors because their salaries are paid from the church's coffers and they might appear to be "singing for their supper." It is even suggested that they get an outsider to speak on this dreaded subject so as to remove the suspicion that they are

feathering their own nests (pardon the multiplicity of metaphors). Then there is the added complication of money-grabbing televangelists. Their horrendous abuses make us reticent to even broach the subject in church. (This, of course, does not apply to *all* television preachers).

Actually, there is no one better to speak on the subject of stewardship than the pastor of a local church. In the first place, there is no *direct* correlation between the giving of the members and the salaries pastors are paid so that they can devote their full attention to ministry. They too give to the church. (This, of course, means that the notion, "we pay you so we [the members] can tell you what you must do," is founded on a totally unbiblical understanding of how a church works). As regards antagonising the members, any pastor who avoids biblical subjects for fear of upsetting some members ought not to be in the pulpit. In fact, we do the members down if we fail to preach and teach "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:20, 27).

The financial needs of the church should be explained to the members as do many other matters. It is *our* church and we should all take responsibility for it. Indeed, *we are* the church. **But that is not the reason pastors should teach on the matter of Christian stewardship!** We are to do so because our attitude toward things affects our walk with God and the way we relate to our brothers and sisters. Few things are likely to arrest your spiritual progress more than an incorrect attitude toward money. Paul was right when he said, "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Tim 6:10). It is a wonderful thing to be set free from the tyranny of possessions.

Genuine Contentment

Of course, greed is harmful whether it manifests itself in children who want more than their fair share of chocolates or adults who accumulate far more than they need, ultimately at the expense of others. Greed should not even be mentioned among us (Eph 5:3) and is described as a form of idolatry (Col 3:5).

But we don't have to be greedy to need money. Whether you are putting food on the table, a roof over your children's heads, paying for an education, or making provision for retirement, most of us have to earn it and to think about it. The thought of living in poverty scares us. We need it to live and in this world living takes (at least) some money.

How then are we going to heed this instruction to "keep (our) lives free from the love of money?" It all starts with what we see as important. Truisms like "money can't buy happiness" or "the best things in life are free" can be irritating. There is

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nevertheless some truth in these clichés. The hold money (what it represents) has on us is broken when we are at peace with God and have our priorities straight. The contentment that results helps to place money in its correct place. Think of some of the things that money can achieve that the true believer no longer needs. We don't need the prestige and snobbishness that are depicted on *Frazier*, nor do we need an array of "toys" to keep us happy.

Of course, we should not be ridiculous. Poverty, as such, is not good. The perspective of Scripture is that we should help the poor, not that we should desire to become poor. There is no general instruction to the wealthy are not instructed to impoverish themselves (1 Tim 6:17-19). But Jesus spoke about "the deceitfulness of wealth" (Matt 13:22), and we ought to be aware of how easily wealth can mislead us.

Someone has said that "it is okay to have things so long as things do not have you." Our passage here (and the others cited earlier) makes it clear that the assurance of the Lord's faithfulness helps to place money in perspective. He never forsakes us and our hope is in him. The most important things in life are inviolable (Matt 6:19-21).

In the context of this letter, the exhortation may have added relevance. Wholehearted perseverance in the faith could result in impoverishment. Some of the Christians being addressed had "joyfully accepted the confiscation of (their) property, because (they) knew (they) had better and lasting possessions" (Heb 10:34). The "love of money" would certainly incline them to soft pedal their faith. To be a devout Christian in those times (and in any time) necessitates release from the tentacles of materialism.

Privileged Stewardship Rather than Legalistic Tithing

As the passages cited above show, this is a massive and a highly relevant subject. It involves far more than a somewhat legalistic approach to tithing ("a tenth belongs to God and nine tenths belong to me"). It *all* belongs to God and he gives me the privilege of administering it to his glory. If God and his kingdom are important to me, it will show in the way I order my life, my support of his work, and my attitude to the poor. Some speak of a "graduated tithe" (the more I earn/have, the greater the percentage I contribute. One way or another, Christian generosity never asks, "What am I obliged to give?" but rather, "How best may I use my possessions to bring honour to God, advance his kingdom, and improve the plight of the poor?" Think of Paul's words to the Corinthians:

In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that

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they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. ⁵ And they went beyond our expectations; having given themselves first of all to the Lord, they gave themselves by the will of God also to us . . .

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich . . .

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work (2 Cor 8:2-5, 9; 9:6-8).

Proverbs

Have you noticed some of the excellent advice we are given in Proverbs?

Better a little with the fear of the LORD
than great wealth with turmoil (15:16).

Better a little with righteousness
than much gain with injustice (16:8).

Those who are kind to the poor lend to the LORD,
and he will reward them for what they have done (19:17).

A good name is more desirable than great riches;
to be esteemed is better than silver or gold (22:1).

Better the poor whose walk is blameless than the rich
whose ways are perverse (28:6).

Give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, 'Who is the LORD?'
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonour the name of my God (30:7-9).

A Huge Benefit

We may approach this whole subject in the wrong way altogether, saying something like this: "Part of the price I have to pay for being a Christian is that I am no longer able to enjoy things. (But see Col 2:20-23; 1 Tim 6:17). I have to feel guilty about my relative affluence (we *are* all relatively affluent here). But it is better to be obedient and unhappy than to enjoy life and be disobedient. So let's grit our teeth and opt (begrudgingly) for an austere way of life." What a *burden!*

Interestingly, generosity is associated with joy (2 Cor 8:2; 9:6-8; Acts 20:35). Here's the correct approach: "In his great love, God has enriched our lives, granting us eternal hope and setting us free from the tyranny of things. We are no longer dependent upon possessions for our security or our amusement. So, why should we be sucked in by the deceitfulness of wealth, forfeiting the gift of genuine contentment? As we walk in God's ways, we are increasingly delivered from greed. With the Lord in our lives, we are less dependent on the crutch of "wealth, which is so uncertain" (1 Tim 6:17). What a *privilege!*

SO WHAT?

1. Do you think much about money? Do you sometimes worry about your financial situation? Do you think this is okay?
2. Respond to the statement: "Money is the root of all evil." Where do you find that statement? What does it actually say, and what do you think it means?
3. As a group, think of:
 - Reasons why we should not love money,
 - Reasons why we don't need to love money,
 - Steps we can take to help free ourselves from the love of money.
4. Do you have a story of God's provision in your life? Perhaps you would like to share it with the group.