

Stewards of money

God, money and me
Psalm 24:1-2

"'Your money, or your life.' We know what to do when a burglar makes this demand of us, but not when God does." – Mignon McLaughlin

"They deem me mad because I will not sell my days for gold; and I deem them mad because they think my days have a price." – Kahlil Gibran

God our provider

Lessons in stewardship appear early in Scripture. The first lesson we learn is that God is the Creator (Genesis 1) and because of this, ownership rights are God's. David in Psalm 24 makes the connection that since God is the Lord of the land (landlord), God is also sole owner of all that is.

The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.
– Psalm 24:1-2

It is repeated numerous times in Scripture the ways that God provides for his people. In the Garden of Eden, food was plentiful (Genesis 2:4-9). Escaping Egypt, Israel's provisions were sparse but adequate (Exodus 16:21). During the centuries, God became known as Jehovah Jireh – God Our Provider. In spite of this proven track record, God's people still complained and wondered about where their next meal might come from or whether they would die of thirst in the desert. (Exodus 17:5-7)

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- Have you ever been in a situation where you questioned whether God would provide for your basic needs?
- What areas of your life are hardest to trust God to provide for?



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Money: Master or servant

When we talk about money, people get anxious. It's not a subject we are comfortable discussing. We have a tendency to categorize this subject as private – but how private is it really? We send messages about our financial standing every day in conspicuous ways by the cars we drive, the houses we live in, the clothes we wear, the schools we or our children attend, the vacations we enjoy, the hobbies we embrace – etc. What we are really “saying” when we don't talk about money is that this topic simply isn't anyone's business but our own.

In contrast to our silence on the matter, we discover a completely different attitude about the subject in Scripture. The prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus and the writers of the epistles were anything but quiet about the issue of money. Consider this comparison of topics and the frequency of their appearance in Scripture:

- 50 references to baptism.
- 225 verses related to prayer.
- 300 verses related to faith.
- 700 verses focused on love.
- But at least 2,350 verses in Scripture have to do with money and possessions.
- 16 of 38 parables spoken by Jesus are about money and possessions.
- The only subject spoken of more often is that of the Kingdom of God.

What do these statistics tell us? The prophets and Jesus recognized that money has a god-like power. Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, “You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Matthew 6:24) Money and possessions have been – and continue to be – the greatest obstacle to full and complete loyalty to God. Jesus spoke directly to this fact when he shared these bold words in the Sermon on the Mount. Paul also tells his apprentice Timothy that the love of money can quickly lead us astray from God's priorities for our lives (1 Timothy 6:10).

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Jesus, Paul and money

Jesus and Paul cautioned the people of their day with the same words we need to hear today. We are equally tempted to misuse the money we have been given from God. As stewards, we are called to use money in ways that help fulfill God's purposes in this world. Maybe money is talked about only second to the Kingdom of God because of our tendency to take this tool and make it an end in itself rather than a means of faithful service to God.

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- What becomes our greatest challenge in keeping our priorities in line with the words of Jesus and Paul?
- What would people know about our money priorities based on what they see of our lifestyle and consumer choices?
- What is it that keeps us from talking about our money decisions and dilemmas with each other?
- In what ways does money have a god-like power?

Besides our hesitancy to talk about our consumerism, we have even greater reservations when talking about our giving. The three greatest barometers that determine a church member's commitment to a congregation is Sunday morning attendance, participation in the life of the congregation, and giving. Attendance and congregational participation are fairly easy to gauge. However, in most of our congregations, pastors – who have the responsibility to tend their flock – have no idea of the giving practices of their people.

I know of pastors who do not want to know who gives what. In many congregations, everyone knows what the pastor makes, but we don't think the pastors should know what the people give. I think there may be good reason for pastors to know the giving practices of their members. It not only is a barometer of an individual's commitment to the congregation, but a way to gauge an individual's and family's well-being should the giving go down over time.

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- Do you think the privacy or secrecy concerning giving patterns of church members is helpful or harmful? Explain.
- What does Matthew 6:1-4 mean when it says not to let your left hand know what your right hand is doing?

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. – Matthew 6:3-4a

- Is the caution here about church leaders not being aware of our giving practices or about not broadcasting to others what we may – or may not – give to those in need?
- If we maintain secrecy in giving, is it because we want all members treated equally by the leadership? If so, are all visited equally, are all represented on committees equally?
- In what ways does secrecy surrounding our money practices give money a “god-like” power over us?

In Acts 2:45, we have a wonderful story of generosity demonstrated by the early church as a response to the empowerment of the Holy Spirit following Pentecost. Generosity to the point of sacrifice was a supernatural manifestation of the Spirit. By that I mean it's not something most of us would practice separate from our commitment to following Jesus and feeling compelled to give to others instead of keeping it for ourselves.

Maybe you have that natural gift of generosity. I, for one, don't. My natural tendency is to look out for myself. Except for my decision to follow Jesus and my sense of call to serve others, it is not “natural” for me to give away a significant portion of my income. It is beyond my nature – or supernatural – to part with the money I have earned.

Discerning God's call for my life

Jesus associated with people of all socioeconomic levels. He showed no favoritism and spoke about the various barriers people face related to their entrance into God's Kingdom. Below are several texts that identify ways Jesus related to and challenged people concerning their relationship to money and possessions.

*Money, as a tool, has the power to accomplish much for us. Money also has the power to influence how we see ourselves and where we fit in society. Though it is limited, money's power is godlike and competes with our loyalty to God. But God alone is the source of our life and invites us to celebrate and be content in God's goodness and provision. (Edwin Friesen, **God, Money & Me**, Mennonite Foundation of Canada, 2004, pg. vii)*

Discuss as many of the texts among yourselves as time allows, and suggest any common themes or lessons you observe based on the following questions. You may want to divide these texts among several pairings of class members, then report back to the whole group what you have learned.

Name	Text	Lessons
Zacchaeus	Luke 19:1-10	
Joseph of Arimathea	Matthew 27:57-61 Mark 15:42-46 Luke 23:50-53	
Women Followers	Luke 8:3 Luke 23:55-24:10 Mark 15:40; 16:1	
Roman Centurion	Matthew 8:5-13 Luke 7:1-6	
Rich Young Ruler	Matthew 19:16-30 Mark 10:17-31 Luke 18:18-30	
Philemon	Philemon 1	
Joseph, called Barnabas	Acts 4:36-37	
Ananias/Sapphira	Acts 5:1-11	
Rich Christians	James 2:1-13	
Lydia	Acts 16:13-15, 40	
Cornelius the Centurion	Acts 10	
Ethiopian Treasurer	Acts 8:26-40	
Simon the Sorcerer	Acts 8:9-25	

Adapted from *The Word in Life Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 118.

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- What is it that each of the characters did with their wealth prior to meeting Jesus?
- How did their attitudes toward wealth change after encountering Jesus?
- What lessons do we learn from their transformations – if there was one?
- Is there one particular lifestyle or model identified for all Christians to follow based on these texts? If so, what is it? If not, what might this suggest?
- What is God calling *you* to do – and be – in relation to your use of financial resources?

Conclusion

Some portions of Scripture are clearly prescriptive for all followers of Jesus, such as the 10 Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Other teachings are descriptive of how Jesus related to one particular individual based on a unique set of circumstances. An example of this is Jesus' call to the Rich Young Ruler to sell all he had and give to the poor and follow him.

Since this scenario is descriptive, there are truths for all of us to learn, but I don't believe that what Jesus says to this one person is what we are all called to do in all circumstances. Since the young man in this story was clearly tied too strongly to his stuff, this was the only way for him to be challenged to free himself from the god-like power of wealth that had gripped his heart.

Our challenge is to read the stories and teachings within their particular context and determine how the truths of these lessons apply to us today. For this, we need to be in a trusting relationship with each other. We also need to be able to talk about subjects that may typically be difficult and out of our comfort zones. Since we are all life-long learners when it comes to following Jesus, we can all contribute to the conversation and benefit from the experiences others bring. May God grant us wisdom and joy in this journey of discovery and faithfulness.

Additional reading and small group discussion resources

Dungan, Nathan. *Prodigal Sons & Material Girls: How Not To Be Your Child's ATM*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons INC, 2003.

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Student handout

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Getting started

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