

## **Money: As Master**

**Series:** Money  
**Date:** 4 February 2024  
**Location:** St George's Battery Point  
**Texts:** Deuteronomy 8:10-18; 1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19; Luke 12:13-21

In 1886 the novelist Leo Tolstoy published a short story entitled - *How Much Land Does a Man Need*.

The story begins with Pahom, a peasant farmer, who thinks to himself that his only trouble is that he doesn't have enough land. As the story unfolds, Pahom takes an opportunity to buy some land, which is followed by another and another. All the while his wealth increases, but he is never satisfied and always thinks, "if only I had enough land, then my troubles would be over."

Finally, he is introduced to the Bashkirs, and is told that they are simple-minded people who own a huge amount of land. Pahom goes to them to take as much of their land for as low a price as he can negotiate. Their deal is this: for a sum of one thousand rubles, Pahom can walk around as large an area as he wants, starting at daybreak. If he reaches his starting point by sunset that day, the entire area of land his route encloses will be his, but if he does not reach his starting point he will lose his money and receive no land. Pahom is delighted believing he has chanced upon the bargain of a lifetime.

He stays out as late as possible, marking out land until just before the sun sets. He looks up and realises he is far from the starting point and so he runs back as fast as he can to the waiting Bashkirs. He finally arrives at the starting point just as the sun sets. The Bashkirs cheer his good fortune, but exhausted from the run, Pahom drops dead. His servant digs a grave and buries him. The story finishes with these words. "Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed."

This week and next we're doing a short series on Money. We all need it. We could all do with a little more of it. It affects almost every part of our lives. It's very powerful. And because of all that, wealth and possessions are deeply connected to spiritual life, life lived before God. So money is a key area of discipleship - what it looks like to follow Christ. I've called this series Master or Servant, which is taken from Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount.

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.<sup>1</sup>

This week we look at Money as our Master. Next week Money as our servant. Our key text for today is 1 Timothy 6.

I'm sure you've all heard the cliché, "Money is the root of all evil", and when we look around the world money seems to be at the heart of so many of its problems.

But the cliché is actually a misquote from our New Testament reading 1 Timothy 6:10.

Here the apostle Paul says that it's not so much money that's the root of all evil, but the *love of money* that is *a root of all kinds* of evil. Before we come to this dark side of money, the first thing to say about money is that it, in itself, is not evil. In fact did you see what Paul goes on to say verse 19 - yes we're not to put our hope in wealth but in God (more on that later), *who richly provides everything for our enjoyment*. The point is this. God is our Creator and Sustainer. He provides everything for our enjoyment. The good things in his

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:24

creation are there for us to enjoy, and that includes money. It's a good gift from God. Now like all of God's gifts money belongs to him first and foremost. We're only stewards. All Christian ethics are summed up in the command to love our neighbours, so we're to do that with money. But it is there for us to enjoy. Of all the Bible says about money, it never says we should be miserly Scrooges. It is ok to enjoy the blessings that money can buy.

Nevertheless, money does present us with grave spiritual danger. So for the rest of this sermon we'll look at 3 points - the kinds of evil that come from money; the root of these - the love of money; and then the solution - how we can be freed from the love of money.

### 1. The **Kinds of Evil** that flow from the love of money

The Old Testament brings out a link between wealth and injustice. So often the rich fail to act justly towards the stranger, the widow, the orphan and the poor. Instead they use their wealth to exploit the poor and pervert justice.

Job 36:18 says, "Be careful that no one entices you by riches; do not let a large bribe turn you aside." The prophet Samuel's sons are condemned as wicked because, "They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice."<sup>2</sup>

Here we see the evil that can flow from the love of money. If money can buy a favourable verdict in court, then the wealthy will get richer treading the poor under foot.

The prophet Micah writes,

Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds!  
At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it.  
They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them.  
They defraud people of their homes, they rob them of their inheritance.

The prophet exposes the dark side of that connection between wealth and power. Wealth is a source of power, and those with power can do what they can get away with. The wealthy and powerful in government or business can manipulate this to turn more profit or cover up unjust, exploitative, oppressive and illegal actions. We call this corruption. In the end there can be a contempt for human life itself - seeing people simply in terms of their economic value and utility, no different from other financial or material assets.

These injustices or social Evils damage others. How does the love of money damage the self? Read with me from 1 Timothy 6:8,

Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. **10** For 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.

I imagine Paul has in mind the kind of choices that a person makes when they prioritise getting rich above everything else. You start choosing work over spending time with your spouse or your kids. Relationships start to suffer. Resentment grows. There's conflict, estrangement, jealousy, anger. Maybe

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Samuel 8:3

there's not being entirely honest in business, cutting corners that compromise your employees, squeezing them for what they can produce, customers for their cash, rather than treating them first as human beings. All these things can wound the soul and come back to bite, bringing ruin to your life and to those you love. When it comes to faith, Jesus says the deceitfulness of wealth is like weeds that choke the Word and make it unfruitful. Put money before God and you'll remain a spiritual infant, immature, selfish, and in the end your love for God will grow cold.

## 2. The Love of Money - the root

Digging deeper, Paul says the problem isn't money, so much as the love of money.

This goes by various names. Avarice, covetousness, greed. It's not being satisfied with what we have.

Wanting more than you have. Or simply the desire for material prosperity.

I imagine that if we had to name, say, our top 3 temptations or sins, few of us, if any, would say greed.

We all know that's kind of it's not ok but mostly it's not up there with some of the "big sins".

Writing 160 years ago, one commentator suggests that this is because

(1) [Greed] is so common; (2) because it is found among those who make pretensions to refinement and even religion; (3) because it is not so easy to define what is covetousness, as it is to define impurity of life; and (4) because the public conscience is seared, and the mind blinded to the low and grovelling character of the sin.<sup>3</sup>

What was true 160 years ago, is certainly true today. Greed is the creed of western culture, it's in the air we breathe, it shapes us from birth, and because of that it's incredibly hard to see.

Gordon Gekko in the 1987 film the Wolf of Wall Street say:

*"Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right, greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms; greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge has marked the upward surge of mankind."*

We're not so crass as Gekko. Instead we use more sanitised words. The economy. Free market. Choice.

Theologian Brian Rosner writes,

"In western society in general, the economy has achieved what can only be described as a status equal to that of the sacred. Like God, the economy, it is thought, is capable of supplying people's needs without limit. Also like God, the economy is mysterious, unknowable and intransigent. It has both great power and, despite the best managerial efforts of its associated clergy, great danger. It is an inexhaustible well of good(s) and is credited with prolonging life, giving health and enriching our lives. Money, in which we put our faith, and advertising, which we adore, are among its rituals."<sup>4</sup>

In Colossians 3:5, the apostle Paul says that Greed is Idolatry.

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Barnes, Notes Explanatory and Practical on the Epistles of Paul (New York: Harper Brothers, 1845), p. 317.

<sup>4</sup> Rosner, *ibid*.

That is, greed is worshipping something in the place of God - the love of money, rather than God and then our neighbour. We've seen how greed is an idol of our culture - but how does it work internally for an individual?

Idolatry is a fundamental problem for us as human beings. The 16th century theologian John Calvin paraphrased St Paul's diagnosis of the human condition when he said, "The human heart is a factory of idols."

So as we look at how greed plays out in the heart, we can actually get an insight into how idols in general enslave the soul. It's only as we have a diagnosis that we can find a cure. And so I hope that these reflections will be helpful for you in discerning what may be an idol of your own heart - be that greed, or some other vice.

Our first insight comes from Deuteronomy 8, where we read that when Israel is in the Promised land and enjoying its abundance their danger is that they may forget the Lord God. When life is good, then Moses says, "your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."<sup>5</sup>

Greed, the love of money leads to Pride and Forgetfulness.

As the self looms large, God, the source of all good things, is pushed aside. And, not only him, but also his commands, which teach us how we are to treat the creation he has made, not least other people who bear his image.

Second, from Jesus' parable in Luke 12 we learn that greed leads to believing a lie. Namely, that life consists in the abundance of possessions.

"Watch out!" Jesus says in verse 15 "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

But so often we think it does. *He who has the most toys wins.* It's very easy to think that wealth and possessions will bring a better life. As consumers that's what we're being told by advertising every day.

Returning again to 1 Timothy 6, Paul highlights 2 further things that the idol of money, the love of money, can do to us.

*Verse 17: Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.*

Wealth can become for us a source of status and identity - so that we become arrogant, and look down on those who don't have as much as us.

Wealth can also be something we look to for security - something we place our hope for the future in.

But Paul reminds us - no wealth is actually uncertain. In the end it is no guarantee against death. Like the fool in Jesus' parable - our lives may be asked of us this very night and then who will get all that we've stored away?

No, it is God who we can put our trust in, who we can hope in. He is the one who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

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<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 8.14

Ok, so we've looked at love of money. We've looked at the kinds of evils it produces.

What about a cure?

Jesus says that you can't serve both God and Money. How can we not be servants of Money, but use money to serve God?

1. **Hope in God**, not money. He alone has secured our eternal future at the cost of his Son, not money. And the future he has for us is far sweeter, more satisfying, more exhilarating than anything money can buy. It is the new creation where we see him face to face. Don't settle for less!
  
2. If loving money means forgetting God, Then **remembering God** will wean you off loving money. That's what church is all about. Drawing our attention away from all the distractions of the various idols that sing for our affections and centering again on God. Hearing again of his goodness and love and generous provision for us. Praying "give us today our daily bread" - because God will provide, and that is enough. Rehearsing the story of the gospel and our part in it each week in our prayers and our singing and our greeting, the communion and even our offerings so that it sinks down into our bodies and becomes an unconscious habit.
  
3. If greed, always wanting more, is the idol, then the discipline to unseat greed is **generosity**. To break the hold of possessions by holding lightly what we possess. "Command [the rich]," Paul says to Timothy, "to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share." We'll look at this more next week.

The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.

That's the dark side of money. May God in his mercy deliver us from this temptation and renew our hope in him as the one who richly provides all we need. May he give us the grace to be generous. Praise God that many of you know and live this out. May God make this grace abound in each one of us.