

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF “THE WAY”

Your Money Will Trick You

by Trevin Wax

In the church today, it's common to interpret biblical teaching on sin in a way that shies away from specifics so we are able to walk away unscathed.

We walk through the sin lists of Scripture and quietly check off each one, thinking, *Not guilty*. In some cases, we grow accustomed to hearing the warnings of Scripture, falling prey to a familiarity with the words that keeps us from feeling their full force. Worst of all, we read about sin in Scripture and think about *others* who struggle, never letting those unflattering adjectives (“greedy,” “lustful,” “hot-tempered,” “foolish”) come too close to our self-perception. Too often, we think of sins as actions we perform and miss the subtle ways we sin in our attitudes or develop sinful patterns of the heart.

The New Testament on Money

The best example, I think, is the way many Christians in America interpret and apply the clear and consistent teaching of the New Testament on the desire for and acquisition of wealth. Here's how we rationalize: *Making money is a good thing, right? Spending money is neutral, right, as long as it's not on something immoral or unjust? Therefore, as long as I'm honest in how I make and spend money, and as long as I'm sincerely seeking to steward my wealth well, the warnings about wealth don't really apply to me. Sure, there are “greedy” people out there—rubbing their hands together with gleeful anticipation of acquiring more wealth and surpassing others in stature—but that's not me!*

Having adopted this mindset, when we read the account of a man asking Jesus to intervene in an inheritance dispute with his brother and hear Jesus's command to “watch out and be on guard against all greed” (Luke 12:15, CSB), we may hope greedy and covetous people take note, but we don't see any imminent danger for our own spiritual lives. But the inability to hear, truly hear, the seriousness of Jesus's warning is a problem. And it's dangerous. It reflects our obliviousness to the spiritual jeopardy the accumulation of riches brings to the human soul.

Mammon on the Move

Jesus says “Watch out!” and “Be on guard” as if there's a silent, stealthy enemy creeping up on an unsuspecting person, ready to pounce. We like to think of wealth and possessions as inanimate objects, helpful to us if we use them correctly, but basically neutral. And so, in our churches, we warn against the abuse or misuse of wealth, and we teach on good stewardship so we can maximize and increase our wealth. But rarely do we sound the alarming note of Jesus and the apostles in this matter.

Preachers in the United States sometimes come under fire for tiptoeing around sensitive subjects, failing to boldly and courageously take on respectable sins in our society, most notably those related to sexual behavior. But even those who trumpet the warnings of Scripture toward the sexually immoral rarely sound anything like Jesus when he uttered sharp and shocking words to the rich. Again and again in the Gospels, Christ warned about the mortal danger that accompanies the accumulation of more and more possessions. The rest of the New Testament includes similar warnings, as did the great theologians and preachers of the ancient church.

A leader in the third century, Cyprian, spoke of riches as a potential impediment to growth in godliness, seeing possessions as holding people in “chains which shackled their courage and choked their faith and hampered their judgment and throttled their souls.”

Exhorting his congregation, he asked, “How can those who are tethered to their inheritance be following Christ? They think of themselves as owners, whereas it is they rather who are owned: enslaved as they are to their own property, they are not the masters of their money but its slaves.”

Contrast the urgency of this kind of sermon with commonplace teaching in churches today, which rarely includes warnings about the dangers of wealth and focuses instead on maximizing financial gain. The ancient preachers didn’t recommend small tweaks to our financial outlook or offer investment advice so we can manage our money well. They called for a radical overhaul of how we think of money and possessions in the first place. Why? Because Jesus himself warned about the snare of riches—and because the state of our souls is at stake.

Money Lies

In his parable of the sower, Jesus tells us the seed that was sown among thorns and thistles is choked out, in part, by the “deceitfulness of wealth” (Matt. 13:22). In other words, money lies. Jesus implies that wealth takes an active, sinister role in deceiving the human heart.

When Jesus told us we cannot serve both God and money, he used “Mammon,” the personification of possessions, to get the point across, much like we might say today, “The Almighty Dollar.” But don’t miss what’s going on here. The focus isn’t on how we use money (whether responsibly or not, honestly or not). The focus is on the power of Mammon and the subtle, demonic force it exerts on people.

Hazard to Your Health

Everywhere we turn in the Scriptures, we see big flashing lights saying, “Money can be hazardous to your health!” Which means that every time we see an unexpected source of income or a burgeoning bank account, or receive that hoped-for raise, we should acknowledge the increase of wealth as simultaneously helpful and harmful.

The ease with which we spend money can warp our priorities and reshape our hearts until we begin looking at everything and (worse) *everyone* in the world in terms of value and worth *to us*. One way that money changes us, writes Andy Crouch, is that “it allows us to get things done, often by means of other people, without the entanglements of friendship.” Mammon does its work by isolating us from others or by putting us in community with others who size us up based on what we can offer, or by mastering our hearts and deceiving our minds. Crouch writes, “*God wishes to put all things into the service of people and ultimately to bring forth the flourishing of creation through the flourishing of people. Mammon wants to put all people into the service of things and ultimately to bring about the exploitation of all of creation.*”

Our money lies to us, constantly. Whenever we see our accumulation of assets or the increasing dollars in our account, Mammon whispers: *I am your security. I am your hope. I make the good life possible.*

Meanwhile, Jesus is shouting, “It’s a lie! One’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). And the apostle Paul echoes the Savior: “It’s a trap! If you want to be rich, you fall into temptation . . . and many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction” (1 Tim. 6:9).

So, next time you read one of these warnings, or hear a sermon on wealth, or find yourself thinking about money, wishing for a salary increase, or trying to make ends meet, pause. Don’t rush. Listen carefully, so that the warnings of Jesus and the apostles speak louder than the deafening roar of the Mammon monster that grips the society we inhabit.