

### **Rich Toward God**

For many, there's more than meets the eye when it comes to money and the Bible.

Some would like to suggest that the Bible has little or nothing to say about it—money that is.

I think that those who hold this view are actually engaging in wishful thinking—either assuming that whatever the Bible might say about money is antiquated and therefore irrelevant to us today, or that there is little said about money because it's not a very important biblical subject.

Others might suggest that while the Bible may have some references to money that when taken in a larger context, it's just another aspect of life, alongside many others that are included in the Bible.

Well, for anyone who holds this idea that mention of money in the Bible is minimal, have I got a surprise for you. Money, and riches, and wealth, and material possessions are front and center in the Bible. Money and wealth are mentioned over and over again in both the Hebrew Bible scriptures of the Old Testament as well as throughout the New Testament.

Now, in the interest of full disclosure, I should point out that part of the blame for this incomplete understanding of money and the Bible can be put on us preachers. This is especially true for those Christians who rely primarily on the preaching and teaching that comes from Christian pulpits for their knowledge and awareness of the contents of the Bible. The truth is that many Christian preachers are reluctant to preach on the topic of money because it can be discomfoting.

Preachers and others who carefully study the Bible know that what the Bible has to say about money can be challenging and even unnerving because it flies in the face of cultural and societal understandings of money. So true is this that even the preacher himself or herself will be so convicted by what is encountered in Scripture on this topic, that it's difficult to preach or teach without at least feeling some irony if not outright hypocrisy.

It's not news to anyone here that money is a taboo subject unlike almost any other in our culture. It is not something that we like to talk about publically anyway. When we do talk about it with investment advisors and financial counselors, it's always done so in a cloak of secrecy and confidentiality. It's considered impolite to inquire of another, his or her financial wealth. And in farming and ranching country, don't expect a straightforward answer to questions about the size of a farm or ranch, or the number of cows or pigs or chickens or sheep on the place. Full disclosure of these details is something that does not happen easily or often—in polite society anyway.

Part of the reason for this taboo is because money talks and it reveals. It reveals a lot. It talks in that it places a numerical value on the life of a person or family or company. Those who have a higher numerical value associated with them are not just more valuable financially—they're more valuable period! Or at least that's what our culture says.

Money talks in another way as well. How money is spent and allocated and used says volumes about the person making the financial decisions for how money is allocated. In spite of what may be thought about a particular person, or what a particular person may say about herself or himself, the veracity of that reputation is either verified by the financial documentation that record the use of money, or they refute it. Money talks when its use is carefully analyzed. While a person may declare what are the priorities of his or her life, the financial report will reveal in actuality what those priorities are. Money talks and it never lies.

So the Bible has a lot to say about money. While this is true overall, it is especially true in the gospels of the New Testament. One professor puts it this way. “Nearly one-third of Jesus’ parables deal with money in one way or another. If there is one thing we humans need and care about, it is money. Jesus, who embraced all aspects of our human life except sin, could hardly sidestep such a fundamental issue as money. It is such a part of who we are.” (Daniel E. Harris, *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 2*, Jarvis and Johnson, gen. eds, © 2014 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 13)

So as much as we may not like it, or at least as it makes us squirm a bit, Jesus makes us stop and think about money from a Christian perspective. Unless we really want to set aside a notable chunk of what Jesus talked about, we need to talk about it in our day as well.

The parable of the rich fool is one such place where Jesus tells it like it is. He tells this parable in response to an interaction with one of the people who was in the crowd who was following and listening to Jesus. This crowd member tries to drag Jesus into a family squabble when he says, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” (Lk. 12:13)

This request of Jesus in itself betrays the importance of money in defining family relationships—at least as far as it goes with this man and his brother. There were strict laws that addressed the matter of inheritance—when it’s to take place, and how it is to be adjudicated at the appropriate time. Jesus knows this as well or better than anyone and therefore refuses to intervene as requested when he responds, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” (Lk. 12:14)

In characteristic fashion though Jesus doesn’t drop the matter simply with his refusal to intervene. Rather he seizes what he sees as a teachable moment for the telling of one of his parables, the Parable of the Rich Fool. Jesus senses that human greed is behind the matter before him. Greed is that desire to accumulate more and more and more—money, possessions, things and stuff. He declares, “. . . one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” (Lk. 12:15)

In this parable there is a rich man. Right from the get go he begins with a man who has more than he needs to live and survive. To be rich in money and material possessions meant that one was free from worry or anxiety about making it in this world—a least from a material standpoint. To be labeled materially and financially rich, in Jesus’ day and in our day, stands in stark contrast with those who do not have enough—the poor.

This rich man in Jesus’ parable is facing a dilemma. The land that is owned by this rich man has produced better than average, with wonderful results. But so abundant is the crop that his storage capacity has been exceeded. Again, he didn’t expect this bumper-crop so he didn’t do anything to prepare for it. His grain bins are already full and now he must find a storage solution for this unexpectedly large harvest.

Notice how this man is using his resources. First he has stored the maximum capacity of his operation. He has saved up enough to live on and then some. He has used his success at raising crops to the point that he personally doesn’t actually need what is being harvested in the latest crop success.

So what does he do? His decision speaks volumes about his priorities. He decides to tear down his existing barns and then build larger ones where he will be able to “store all my grains and my goods.” He doesn’t decide that just a little more would be nice to add to what he has. He doesn’t decide that he can make do with what he has. No. He enters into plans to accumulate even more—“all his grains and goods.” If you were to view the financials on this man’s operation, his true colors show for sure.

There is nothing kind and generous or compassionate that stands out on his balance sheet. No. It's all his and it's all going to remain his. Remember, money talks.

The clincher of the parable then is that the selfish greed of this man is exposed when, before he can even implement his plans to store all that he has in the new barns, his life is ended. He dies. He dies prematurely if we read the parable carefully. All that he had stored up, all that he had accumulated, all that he had hoarded was of no use to him in his death. The question is asked, "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Lk. 12:20) It's a rhetorical question of course. For the man's possessions are of no value, to him anyway. His financial report, at the time of his death, showed only me, me and me. My, my, my. It's all about me. Surely a sad and pathetic ending.

But Jesus goes on to challenge his listeners to learn from this pathetic ending and consider the alternative—that of being rich toward God.

Being rich toward God is to bring into the light our priorities and our commitments and how they are expressed in all parts of our lives.

It's not that saving for the future is bad in and of itself. It's when saving for the future becomes an obsession that blocks out other commitments.

It's not that prudent and careful planning are bad in and of themselves. It's when prudent and careful planning becomes a distraction from other commitments.

Living rich toward God is when our commitment to the well-being of others is demonstrated in how we allocate our resources.

Living rich toward God is when our planning and preparations look beyond the immediate needs that I have and includes the needs of others as well.

Living rich toward God is when we acknowledge that what we have, what we have accumulated, what we earn are all acknowledged as gifts from God who is the source of every good thing in our lives.

And living rich toward God is embracing and cultivating a foundation of gratitude to God that acknowledges our role in sharing the abundance with others.

Discovering, or rediscovering that the Bible is rife with abundant references to our possessions, our wealth, our money, is actually a relief in a way. For again, as we are culturally led to hold our money cards close to our chest, to keep it private and confidential, our Christian faith provides us with tools—evaluative tools—that we're to use to ensure that we're making the best use of them as we seek to live rich toward God.