

“Freedom from the Grasp of Money”
by Mark D. Baker

How much do we discuss the dangers of money and possessions? As much as Jesus did? He spoke more often about money than about heaven and hell, sexual immorality, or violence. Almost a sixth of his recorded statements concern money. He spoke of it as an enslaving force, saying, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." (Matt. 6:24). Jesus personalized mammon as a spiritual power demanding our service. How do we talk about money?

One common approach focuses on how we obtain wealth. Money earned in appropriate legal ways is considered acceptable. Many Christians would also include a commitment to tithing. People with this view see money as a blessing, and sometimes even view tithing as a way of receiving more money a -- good investment. I held this view for many years.

Since I saw no inherent problem with money I figured I would like more of it than my parents had. I entered college as an economics major considering law school. I told myself I would make a lot of money so I could give it to Christian causes, but deep within I knew I really just wanted to make a lot of money.

The Bible certainly supports earning money justly, but the above approach does not get to the core of the issue. For instance, in the parable of the rich fool who wanted to build bigger barns to store his bumper crop, or when Jesus asked the rich young man to sell all his possessions, Jesus made no mention of how they got their wealth. They seem to have earned it legitimately and legally. If we focus only on the proper way to earn money, we fail to recognize that mammon is a spiritual power.

During my freshman year of college I painted a lawyers' office. After seeing what they did most of the day, I decided not to be a lawyer. I gradually lost my zeal for making a lot of money, but for no particularly spiritual reasons. I began to realize there were other ways to measure a job than how much it paid, although I certainly would have been content to make a lot of money. Then, before my senior year, I visited a friend working with a church in inner-city Chicago. The contrast between the poverty I saw there and the suburbs where I lived spurred me to a new attitude toward money. Something within me revolted against the suburban comfort and luxury of Christians just a few miles from the poverty of the Christians in the city.

I became interested in a simple lifestyle. As a college senior in suburban Illinois I had almost no contact with poor people, and little money. My energies focused more on developing a simple lifestyle than on meeting the needs of the poor. This was a judgmental period of my life. I looked at Christians around me and saw them not living simply. I reached the depth of my cynicism when, as a student leader, I attended a national Christian convention. The opulent hotel and high prices of the dinner meetings disturbed me so much I could think of little else. (I proudly ate peanut butter and jelly in the lobby.)

I focused on the amount of money I should spend, and made this the issue by which to judge others. My focus on money was still different than Jesus'. His concern went deeper than just

teaching how much is appropriate.

In 1979 I graduated and moved to Honduras to teach in a bilingual high school. Things got both better and worse. I now found myself in direct contact with poor people and I had an immediate outlet for the money I saved, making my simple lifestyle less abstract. The poverty of the Hondurans provided an even greater contrast to the lifestyle of suburban American Christians, and I became even angrier at rich Christians in the U.S. I began to read the Bible much more, and found plenty of verses I used to try and convince Christians in the states that they should give some of their wealth to poor Hondurans.

I had made progress since my pre-law days. I now saw the need to help the poor and no longer felt that 10 percent was the cut-off figure for giving. Yet I had become filled with self-righteousness and anger, and after a year or two I realized my life revolved around money as much as any Wall Street investor's. Although I gave more than half of my money away, and had no savings account, money controlled me.

Even though the cause was a good one it left me enslaved. During my first two years in Honduras I remember saving money by not buying ice cream cones, or sitting outside a movie theater grading papers while fellow teachers spent their money inside. I never paid the way for my students if we went out to eat; they all had more money than me. And I did not want to help them, I wanted to help the poor. Money directed my every decision-enslaving me as surely as it had the rich fool.

Money did not enslave Jesus. Although he encouraged using money to help the poor, he also freely let the woman pour out the perfume on his head. Jesus got more excited about a widow giving two coins, because she gave all, than he did about those who gave much more. But I was driven by the quantity of money-I wanted more money to help the poor.

I have grown since then. I began to see the importance of a lifestyle of giving, rather than of stinginess toward the rich and generosity to the poor. I tried to stop evaluating someone's economic status before buying them dinner. Gradually I came to see that my freedom from money interested Christ as much as my using money to help the poor. And, more slowly, I realized how much I continued to value money. Although I would not have said it so plainly, I was a materialist. I believed money would solve people's problems.

I truly saw the depth of my problem when I moved back to the states in 1983. While raising funds to cover my salary with InterVarsity I received a pledge for support from some wealthy friends. I had not expected them to give, and I felt grateful. I found myself wishing that I had enough money to give as they had. I had genuinely changed, wanting the money for others and not for myself. But then it struck me-why did I have to have money to give to others? Don't I have other things of value I can give? Couldn't I write a note of encouragement, or call up a friend? I again realized how truly enslaved I am to this beast, money.

Over the years I have come closer to seeing money the way Jesus did, as a spiritual power. My previous attitudes toward wealth contained truth, but they lacked awareness of this fundamental truth. At first I had sought pleasure and comfort through money. Then I used my material lifestyle

as a way to measure Christian character. Finally I added to this a driving need to solve the problems of poverty through money. All of these missed the point: money is a power that enslaves, not just an entity for use. As I began to acknowledge that, I started to respond to money the way we saw Jesus respond.

Jesus treated wealth as a spiritual problem. He did not just outline rules on how to earn, spend, and save money. Unless we address the fundamental spiritual issue, all our rules will just change the appearance of our enslavement. Jesus said, "Wealth is a power; you must decide if you will serve it or God." Christ desired to free people from something from which they could not free themselves.

In word and deed, Jesus exposed the lies of money, setting people free. He told some people to sell all they had and he sent his disciples out with no money. That created a showdown-if they followed Jesus, they took a step away from mammon's enslaving power. Free from wealth, they would have an opportunity to experience a life mammon would have them believe impossible. Jesus was concerned for the poor, but he asked people to give to the poor for the sake of the giver as well as the receiver.

Giving disarms the power of wealth. Mammon tells us to accumulate, earn more, get bigger and better things, store up. Giving away goes totally against its logic. Interestingly, the more spontaneous the gift, the more it disarms the power. Jesus recognized the widow was much freer than those who gave more in a controlled fashion.

Yet selling all I have does not interest me. I have made a few irrational gifts, and they brought a sense of freedom. As I write this, however, my wife is pregnant, and we are about to move, and I need a job, and I would rather not do anything irrational with what money we have in the bank. I can say, as others have, that Jesus did not command all to sell everything, and that he had some rather wealthy followers. And that is true, but Jesus also said some powerful things about money which I cannot ignore.

Jesus leaves no middle ground -- "You cannot serve God and mammon." Who do I serve? Is it impossible not to be at least partly sucked in by the lies of mammon? Is it impossible not to feel a sense of security from money in the bank, or from insurance policies? If I received a "bumper crop" wouldn't I build new "barns" (open new bank accounts)? I seem to come down in the middle ground between two masters-middle ground that Jesus says does not exist. If Jesus told me to sell my possessions how would I respond? Thinking about it this way, it seems impossible. Yet Jesus also said with God it is possible.

As long as I try on my own to do something about the problem of money it will remain impossible. "Doing" will always, as my story shows, lead to enslavement to mammon. It means treating money as a way to achieve something, whether it is the rich fool seeking security, me in Honduras trying to help the poor, or me today, seeking freedom through giving away money. The focus remains on accomplishing something with money. If that is my focus, money will control me and "though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor ... it profiteth me nothing."

If, however, my actions with money come as a response to the greater reality of Christ, his love and his kingdom, then there can be freedom. Freedom rooted in God's grace, not in my "doing."

Consider Zaccheus. Jesus invited himself to Zaccheus' house. Zaccheus responds by stating he will give half of his possessions to the poor. Why? I see three possibilities. First, Zaccheus might have said he was giving to the poor as a way to seek Jesus' approval. Or, second, perhaps he already felt Jesus' acceptance, but recognized that his lifestyle did not match Jesus' teaching; so he tried to use his wealth to live up to the love he felt. Or, lastly, perhaps he felt Jesus' love, and in light of this encounter his whole perspective on life changed. He could not earn Jesus' love, but was freed by it to give half of what he had. Powers that controlled his life before no longer had him in their grasp.

The second and third possibilities are very close, yet the third is based on God's action, not on Zaccheus'. The second response is like my giving in order to free myself of money, the third would be my giving because I recognize I am already free. Living in the kingdom provides the freedom to give.

Giving in order to seek freedom has value. It is the best human thing we can do against mammon. It can put us in a place to see more clearly the truth about money and possessions, and combats mammon's control of our lives. I believe, however, that the best thing I can do is recognize my inability to free myself, and to ask God to do the impossible. When God allows me to experience his love and the reality of his kingdom, the lies of money melt away. And then because of what I have experienced I will give.

Mammon would tell us that money is of ultimate importance, and the ultimate solution to any problems we might face. Mammon desire to function as an idol in our lives that shapes and informs the way we interpret and live our lives. Therefore to place too much focus on money, even if for reasons motivated Christian commitment like, wrestling as I did to determine how much was the appropriate amount for a Christian to spend, or, ironically, using the giving of money as a tool to weaken the power of mammon can still leave us living life according to the norms and worldview established by mammon. Through Jesus's life, proclamation and death on the cross, however, God provides a different way to understand reality, exposes and disarms powers like mammon, and invites us to place our trust elsewhere. Rooted in that reality we can see the lies of mammon and we are freed to live differently. I give not to make money an object, but because through Jesus I see it is an object and I can give.

Bibliographic Reference:

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