



## Any Questions' Sermon series

Week 2/3: How can we prevent material possessions becoming a barrier to Christ?

### Introduction:

Money is very spiritual! In the gospels, Jesus talks a lot about money! Sixteen of thirty-eight parables were concerned with how to handle money and possessions. It's one of the major themes of Luke's gospel. Luke is conspicuously interested in economic issues and in his gospel we find not only the story of Jesus's encounter with the rich young ruler (Luke 18), but also the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19), the rich fool (Luke 12), the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16), the shrewd manager (or unjust steward - Luke 16), the widow's mite (Luke 21) and of course the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), to name but a few.

Money is very spiritual. Our relationship to money can reveal a lot about our relationship to God.

### Money, money, money!

So, is money a bad thing? Not at all. Wealth is a blessing. Revelation 5:12 has the angels of heaven crying out to Jesus, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and **wealth** and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!" The Jews of the Old Testament certainly saw wealth as one of God's many blessings. And there is no ban on private property in the New Testament.

It's not having money that's the problem; it's our attitude to money that can be. Money isn't wrong; the love of it is. God isn't opposed to wealth; God is opposed to its worship.

Why might our attitude to money not be all it could be?

### Theology of 'lack'

The story of the Creation reveals that the first humans were tempted to believe that somehow God is withholding what we really want, that somehow grace erodes. Humanity is given the glorious freedom to roam the garden of creation and choose from the fruit of all its trees, except one. The serpent latches on to this prohibition and exploits it, suggesting that God, the spoilsport, is somehow withholding something good from us. When we as humans begin to follow that impulse, we end up seeking to satisfy our desires in inappropriate ways because, if God is withholding something, then resources must be limited! We envy and covet because we believe that there is insufficient blessing to go around and so, concerned that we might not have enough, we begin to crave what others have or worry that we might lose what we do already have and find our fingers tightening their grip on our wallets and possessions.

Our theology of lack can cause us to work too hard, to try and 'get ahead' and stake our claim on the 'limited' resources. Evangelist J John humorously points out that '*we lose our health to make our money and then lose our money to restore our health,*' and that, '*God made us a little lower than the angels, but most of us are concerned to climb a little higher than the Jones's.*'

Is that really the reality of things? Does God withhold? Or has God freely given us all things and everything we need for this present moment, and asked us not to worry about the future? Maybe that's not all that's wrong with our theology.

### Whose money is it anyway?

Recently, my term of office on the Board of Governors at Whimble School came to an end. And so, after our Governors meeting, we all went to the pub for a farewell bash. One of the Governors very generously offered to buy a round of drinks for everyone, but she was unable to come to the pub immediately. So instead she gave a wodge of cash to another governor who then became responsible for buying the drinks. As each governor arrived at the pub, the governor with the cash would leap up, rush to the bar and buy a drink. She was heard to comment, 'This is great. It's so easy to be generous with someone else's money!'

Isn't that true? It's so easy to be generous with someone else's money. This is a lesson that the shrewd manager learned in Luke 16. And yet, we often view our money as 'ours' rather than God's, forgetting that everything is God's and that God graciously gives us stewardship of God's resources.

We sometimes pray the prayer at 'the offering' at Communion services which says, "Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour, and the majesty; for everything in heaven and on earth is yours. All things come from you, and of your own do we give you," a prayer that recognises that we are only giving back to God what is rightfully God's in the first place.

If we could see our own possessions and financial resources not as our own, but as belonging to God, who entrusts them to us to use wisely, what impact might that have on our attitude to money, and on our generosity?

And how might it impact on what we spend our money on? Might we use it more for good causes, putting it to work for God's kingdom, investing in what God is doing and bringing? As the saying goes, if you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence on your bank statement to convict you?

### The wallet in your heart

The rich ruler in Luke 18 gets his heart probed and prodded by Jesus. He has done his duty; he has kept the commands. Surely there can't be much else he has to do? As ever, Jesus cuts straight to the heart of the issue and challenges the man about where his security lies. Does it lie in wealth? Or does it lay somewhere greater, where a different kind of treasure can be found, which doesn't wear out and which can never be stolen?

Money is temporal. We can't take it with us. One wealthy man tried. He told his wife that, when he died, he wanted to be buried with all his money. Despite wondering how she might be provided for, she promised him she would. The day came and the wife's friend asked whether she had carried out her husband's wishes and buried him with all his money. The wife assured her friend that she had. He was a wealthy man so the friend asked, 'How did you squeeze it all in to his coffin?' The wife replied, 'I wrote him a

cheque!

“How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” says Jesus. “Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” A modern equivalent might be trying to drive a BMW through the door of a hotel lobby; the driver can get through the door but she’ll have to get out of the BMW first!

The disciples are gob-smacked. If those who are blessed (like the wealthy) can’t be saved, what hope is there for the rest of us? Jesus assures them that he is in the business of heart surgery. “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” Wrong attitudes can be changed by God; hardened hearts can be softened with his love; tightly closed wallets can be opened. Zacchaeus is a prime example in Luke’s next chapter.

Mark’s version of the story of the rich young ruler (in chapter 10 of his gospel) reminds us that ‘Jesus looked at him and loved him.’ There is always love in Jesus’s challenge – he wants the best for us and knows that loosening our grip on the temporal things that we think are important will open our hands to receiving the kingdom treasures that are of eternal importance.

#### Summing up

So, how can we prevent material possessions becoming a barrier to Christ? By examining the thoughts of our hearts – do we have a theology of lack that needs correcting? Whose money do we think it is? Where are we placing our security? And if we find ourselves challenged by what that examination brings, ask for God’s help. God is in the business of heart and mind transformation. Ask God how we might invest the resources entrusted to us into God’s kingdom? Generous giving can break the hold of materialism in our lives.

Revd Chris Martin, June 2017

*A prayer by Henri Nouwen*

*Dear God,*

*I am so afraid to open my clenched fists! Who will I be when I have nothing left to hold on to? Who will I be when I stand before you with empty hands? Please help me to gradually open my hands and to discover that I am not what I own, but what you want to give me. And what you want to give me is love, unconditional, everlasting love. Amen.*