

## “Does It Pay to Have Faith?”

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**New Testament Lesson:** Matthew 6:19-21, 24-26

**Old Testament Lesson:** Psalm 131

With all Jesus said about earthly treasures, money, and wealth, I couldn't help but think of a movie that just came out called *Woman in Gold*. It's about a 1907 painting titled *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*. The painting of Adele is just covered in gold – her dress, the wall behind her and the gold bracelet on her wrist, all of them made of gold leaf. And this is a huge painting – a yard stick and a half across and just as tall.

In the movie, Helen Mirren plays Maria Altmann, the niece of Adele Block-Bauer. Maria is issuing the Austrian government to get back the painting of her Aunt Adele. It was stolen by the Nazis when Germany took over Austria in 1938. The interesting thing about the movie is that as much as the painting is worth – \$135 million – it's not about the money. For the Austrian government and its people, it's about national pride – the painting is a national treasure, kind of like the *Mona Lisa*.

For the niece, Maria Altmann, it's about having her aunt's portrait back in the family where it belongs, and in some small way, standing up to the atrocities of Nazi Germany. Even for Maria's attorney, it's not about the money. As a young man just starting out, he has to quit his job at a huge law firm to pursue the case. And after it's all over, he donates a portion of his pay to the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust.

It's not about the money. It's about self respect, family, and dedication to something bigger than ourselves. When it comes to self respect, family and grand aspirations, Jesus tells us to keep our eyes looking toward heaven, our family loyalties rooted in God, and our life ambitions directed outward, toward others. Jesus also says there is something very powerful that gets in the way of our following his lead – money.

It doesn't matter if you have a lot of money, a modest amount of money, or very little money. In every case, our relationship to money can really mess things up.

Today, we ask the question, “Does it pay to have faith?” And the short answer is yes. OK, we can all go home. No, there's more to it than that. Let's look at each of these three aspects of our relationship to money that Jesus talks about in today's New Testament lesson: having a lot, having a little, and not really having any to speak of.

First, Jesus says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and

where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Jesus is telling us to not hoard money, as if what extra you have is not enough. In fact, he’s saying the extra money we stock pile – or the items we buy that clutter our houses – actually just wither away, or worse. All our extra stuff and the money we use to buy it attract thieves, and so we spend even more money protecting our stuff from other people.

Of course, it’s all about balance. We have to have money to live and so we have to take care of it. The problem comes when we get so focused on taking care of our money and the stuff it buys that we lose focus on more important things, like our spiritual wellbeing and the needs of others.

A woman from a poor village in Bangladesh was visiting a Christian family in Toronto. The morning after she arrived, she looked out the kitchen window of the family’s home. “Who lives in that house?” she asked. “Which house?” “That one right there.” “Oh, that. No one lives there,” said the homeowner. “That’s a ‘house’ for the car.” The woman from Bangladesh was shocked. “A house for the car,” she said. “A house for the car.” “I picture that woman, looking out my kitchen window and seeing my garden shed, puzzled, saying again and again, ‘A house for the shovels. A house for the lawn mower.’”<sup>1</sup>

Actually, Mark Buchanan told that story in a Christianity Today article titled “Trapped in the Cult of the Next Thing.” Yes, we have to protect the stuff we have – our cars and lawnmowers and garden tools. That’s just being good stewards. But we also have to balance our need for stuff with other people’s need for basic necessities. Storing our cars, lawnmowers, tools, kitchen gadgets, video games, and fashion accessories is important. But sharing the blessings of our lives with others is more important, and that includes sharing our wealth. Dedicating our lives to getting more stuff may make us wealthy, but looking after the needs of others makes us good people, in God’s eyes.

We know we’re doing something right when we focus, not on our own wants and desires, but on the needs of others. And in that economic system, everyone benefits. Storing up treasures in heaven – looking after the needs of others – that’s what we are called to do with any excess stuff, whether that’s money or possessions, that we are blessed by God to have and enjoy. After all, there are plenty of rich people who don’t know the joy of being wealthy, of being blessed.

Now, what about those who don’t have much if anything extra – the middle class? What would Jesus say? Here’s what Jesus says to those who are just getting by ok: “You cannot serve God and wealth.” “No one can serve two masters,” he says, “for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.”

Isn’t that the way of it sometimes – when we get a little windfall of some type – maybe a little extra money – we’re all happy and thankful to God. But when

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Buchanan, “Trapped in the Cult of the Next Thing.” Christianity Today, September 6, 1999, 68.

things get tight, we wonder why God has blessed others with wealth and not us, as if God takes better care of some people than others. What we don't see is that it's not about how much cash or savings we have one day or the next; it's about our relationship to money – and to God.

If we devote ourselves to the mighty dollar – chasing after more money because, hey, he's got it better than I do and I want to be wealthy, too – if we devote ourselves to money, we become blind to God and to God's many other blessings in our lives. To show how easily money can distract us from what God is trying to do in our lives, consider this story about a group of Americans touring Old Jerusalem on their once-in-a-life-time trip to Israel.

As they walked around the holy city, their guide paused and pointed to an old brick wall along the narrow street up ahead. "Here is one of the greatest miracles of all," he announced. "You pray at this spot, and money pours out of the wall. Many pilgrims come here to receive the benefits of its miraculous powers." It was only when the tourists came closer, that they saw it was a bank machine. As close as we are able to get to God in this life, the love of money is one thing that will always pull us in the wrong direction.

"You cannot serve God and wealth." And in fact, if we take our fixation on money out of the equation, it's so much easier to do the right thing in service to God and one another.

Finally, what about those people who truly do not have enough money to get by? Jesus has words for that situation, as well, and these words are for all of us, whether you are wealthy, just getting by, or really not making it. "... I tell you," says Jesus, "do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

Doing well in life is not about money or wealth. It's about self respect, family, and being dedicated to something bigger than ourselves. So really, folks, the big payoff in life is not money, it's love.

Jesus says to us, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather (grain) into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" Now, When Jesus talks about value, he's not talking about productivity. He's talking about love – are you not more loved by God than the birds of the air? Birds are very productive creatures, after all. In fact, they spend practically every waking moment looking for food, both for themselves and for their young. Watch for that this spring – a mother bird feeding her baby.

God provides for them young and old regardless of their capabilities, because God love's all creatures, great and small. And out of all the creatures of the earth, God loves us the most, for it is only we who are made in God's own image, with the freedom to do choose right over wrong.

Does it pay to have faith? Yes. But only if your faith is in God, and God's love for you, God's love for humanity, and God's love for all creation. Love is the highest aspiration of all, and the most useful.

For those who are wealthy, God's love pushes the obsession to always be making more out of the way, and this makes room in that person's life for other people.

For those who are just getting by, God's love pushes the worry that there won't be enough out of the way, and this makes room for the certainty that God will provide.

And for those who are really struggling financially, God's love pushes the notion that you've done something to deserve it out of the way, and this makes room for self love, which in turn makes it possible for you to do the next right thing, which God will show to you.

This sermon isn't really about fixing a broken budget. It's about fixing our relationship with God. Do that, and your budget won't matter, at least not near as much as your faith.

Everything we need to live and thrive in this world comes, not through money, but through faith. That, you can take to the bank, and then watch as your faith continues to pay off, again and again, both for you and for those you love. Amen.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

We are so grateful, God, that you hear our prayers. We want to stop in this moment and recognize our great need for you.

Slow us down so that we may acknowledge that all our striving and straining is worthless apart from you.

We need you, O God. Speak to us in this stillness.  
*(Pause for 1 minute of silent prayer)*

Remind us that you are sovereign and in control.  
*(Pause for 1 minute of silent prayer)*

Help us, O Lord, to let go and to trust in you.

We pray all this in your holy name, joining our voices as one in the prayer that you taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive  
our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**