

THE SEDUCTION OF WEALTH: WHEN MONEY BECOMES A GOD

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In our first article, we mentioned some of the excesses of the so-called prosperity gospel. But captivity to materialism is in no way limited to the fringes of the charismatic movement, which the prosperity gospel represents. Prior to the 1970s, at least in North America, large and costly church facilities were built primarily by Roman Catholics, with some liberal Protestants following suit. Since then such structures are far more likely to be built by evangelical Christians, charismatic and non-charismatic alike, as our movement has exploded with wealth, while the rest of the Christian world has watched their resources and numbers shrink. Individual evangelicals, however, have more financial assets than ever in history, in both the East and the West.¹ It is important, therefore, in this second article

¹ Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, rev. ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2003), 59-74.

to survey some of Scripture's key teaching about the seduction of wealth—the ways we are tempted to treat it as a god, an entity for ultimate allegiance—and worship it, usually unconsciously, rather than the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I. The Old Testament

1. The Law

In the Garden of Eden, the only prohibition God gave Adam and Eve was not to eat from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Ge 2:17). With such lavish resources, beauty and perfection all around them for their enjoyment, why on earth did this first human couple transgress this lone prohibition? Genesis 3:6 provides at least a key part of the answer: they recognized that it was "good for food and pleasing to the eye," as well as "desirable for gaining wisdom."² Advertising moguls have been utilizing the same strategies ever since!

When Abram desired to separate from Lot, he allowed him to choose the best of the land in which to settle. Lot ignored the fact that his choice condemned him to living with the great evils of Sodom and Gomorrah and the judgment that they would receive (Ge 13, 19). When Jacob grew rich with herds and flocks, it was at his father-in-law Laban's expense. The jealousy stirred up led to their separation as well, including Laban from his two daughters Leah and Rachel and their children (Ge 30:25-31:55). Prior to the Exodus, Pharaoh ten times could not envision losing out on all the wealth created by the

² Derek Kidner (*Genesis* [London: Tyndale; Downers Grove: IVP, 1967], 68) perceptively observes that "this prospect of material, aesthetic and mental enrichment (6a) seemed to add up to life itself; the world still offers it (1Jn 2:16). But man's lifeline is spiritual, namely God's word and the response of faith (Dt. 8:3; Hab 2:4); to break it is death."

cheap, slave labor of the Israelites (Ex 14:5) and ten times reneged on his promises to let the Israelites leave his land in peace.³ The result was the ten plagues, which produced enormous death and destruction of his people and their property and ultimately the loss of a large part of his army in the Red Sea.

During their wilderness wanderings, God kept the children of Israel alive by the almost daily provision of manna. In the name of the Lord, Moses commanded the people to gather only as much as they needed (Ex 16:16). Whether because they strictly obeyed him or because of some miracle, "the Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. And when they measured it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Each one gathered as much as he needed." (Ex 16:17-18) When they tried to hoard more, they found that the mysterious food would just spoil (vv. 19-21).⁴ This would seem to be a strange text in which to find timeless principles for Christian behavior in quite different, later cultural settings. But Paul does precisely this, when he quotes this passage in 2 Corinthians 8:13-15 to justify his principle that no Christian should have either "too little" or "too much." Deuteronomy 6:10-12 likewise warns God's people against hoarding in the Promised Land, where wealth will be far easier to attain, and Moses predicts that their growing affluence will tempt them to forget their God.⁵

The dangers of wealth lead to a large number of the Mosaic laws. The best animal sacrifices prove costly, reminding the Israelites of the high price that must be paid for sin (e.g. Ex 12:5; 29:1; Lev

³ "An important source of cheap labor is rapidly getting beyond reach." John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco: Word, 1987), 191.

⁴ Cf. further, Durham, *Exodus*, 226.

⁵ Peter Enns, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 327.

1:3; 3:1; 4:3; etc.). As King David would phrase it so memorably centuries later, "I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing." (2Sa 24:24)⁶ The Sabbath likewise made the children of Israel recall every week that a person's life did not consist of the greatest possible abundance of possessions, because they were forbidden from working one day in seven (Ex 20:8-11).⁷ Even more directly, the commandments against theft and covetousness recognized the perennial temptation to want more than one rightfully should have and to try to obtain even what one might genuinely need by stealing it from others (vv. 15, 17).

Numerous other laws guard against the idolatrous acquisition or use of possessions, so poignantly illustrated by the incident with the golden calf (Ex 32).⁸ The sabbatical year and Jubilee protected against unbridled greed to even a greater extent than the weekly Sabbath (Ex 23:10-12; Lev 25; Dt 15). Sliding scale offerings kept the temple treasury from becoming quite as well stocked as it otherwise would have been (Lev 5:7, 11; 12:8; 14:21-22). Legal proceedings could not exact as collateral that which formed the very livelihood of the people convicted (Dt 24:6).

Probably the most distinctive laws, by modern economic standards, which prevented ancient Israelites from becoming as rich as they might have, were the prohibitions against usury. Until the

⁶ Bill T. Arnold (*1 & 2 Samuel* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003], 647) stresses that "the cost of Araunah's threshing floor is significant. David insists on paying a fair price, and his assertion about the nature of sacrifice in 24:24 has profound significance. . . . David understands the need to sacrifice a portion of his personal wealth to honor Yahweh. Otherwise, his worship will be cheap and his service meaningless."

⁷ Cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 376.

⁸ Godfrey Ashby (*Go Out and Meet God: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: Handsel, 1998], 130) calls the golden calf "the quintessential symbol of rebellion against God. It represents a turning back to Egypt for security, a return to abject slavery and to the worship of human creation."

time of the Reformation, these were almost uniformly understood by Christians and Jews alike as forbidding all lending of money at interest (Ex 22:25-27; Lev 25:35-37; Dt 23:19-20). With the advent of market economies after the demise of feudalism in Europe, the suggestion became popular that only excessive interest was forbidden.⁹ The meaning of the relevant Hebrew terms has been debated at length, but the consensus of scholarship today is that Israelites were not to charge any interest on loans to their own people, because these invariably were loans to help the poor better their standard of living.¹⁰ Charging interest on those kinds of loans would only hamper the goals behind the granting of the loans in the first place. However, the Israelites were allowed to charge interest on loans to foreigners (Dt 23:19-20), which appear to have been restricted to commercial activity.¹¹ Yet even then the amounts could not become extortionary, like today's credit card interest! Christopher Wright, British Old Testament scholar and director of the Langham Trust, observes that

It is ironic that some of our modern giant financial institutions grew out of smaller, local networks of self-help and mutual assurance, built upon relationships of family or neighborhood trust. The loss of that element is a factor in the rise of gigantic fraud and it is interesting that there has been a resurgence in the forming of local credit unions and neighborhood banking schemes, designed specifically to keep interest

⁹ Aaron Kirschenbaum, "Jewish and Christian Theories of Usury in the Middle Ages," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 75 (1985): 270-89. At the same time, in their personal practice, they could still be strongly against accepting any interest on loans. See esp. Calvin's "Fifth Sermon on Deuteronomy 23," reprinted in Skip Worden, *Godliness and Greed: Shifting Christian Thought on Profit and Wealth* (Lanham, MD and Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2010), 281-85.

¹⁰ Joshua Buch, "Neshekh and Tarbit: Usury from Bible to Modern Finance," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 33 (2005): 13-22.

¹¹ Cf. Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 555.

low (basically to cover costs) and provide genuine help to the needy in a more human, relational, and personal way.¹²

Deuteronomy 6:10-12 encapsulates the perennial temptation to which the Israelites, like countless other peoples ever since, have succumbed: "When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." It is little wonder that the periods of the judges and the kings form cycles of obedience and disobedience, with each new phase of rebellion coming after the Lord had blessed the people with peace and prosperity. It is not surprising that it is the rich in most times and places who are least likely to believe in God, because they delude themselves into thinking they can provide for themselves against all calamities.¹³

2. The Historical Books

Anticipating already in the Law the establishment of the Israelite monarchy, it was only natural that God would declare that a righteous king must "not acquire great numbers of horses for himself" nor "accumulate large amounts of silver and gold." (Dt 17:16-17) But throughout the historical books, or former prophets, many of Israel's

¹² Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy* (Peabody: Hendrickson; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 252.

¹³ The 47-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey found "a strong relationship between a country's religiosity and its economic status. In poorer nations, religion remains central to the lives of individuals, while secular perspectives are more common in richer nations." "47-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey" (4 October 2007), <<http://www.pewglobal.org/2007/10/04/world-publics-welcome-global-trade-but-not-immigration>> (accessed 14 March 2012).

rulers ignored these prohibitions. Nor were only the rulers affected. Already early on in the occupation of the Promised Land, Achan and his family violated God's ban on taking plunder after the battle of Jericho. Achan eventually admitted to taking "a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels" which he "coveted" and hid (Jos 7:20-21). As a result, the Israelites were routed in what should have been an easy victory at Ai, and Achan and his family were stoned to death.¹⁴ Coveting and theft recur in the worst of the times of the Judges (see esp. Jdg 17-18), which the narrator summarizes as a period of rejecting God's Law and of everyone doing what was right in their own eyes (21:25).¹⁵

In 1 Samuel 2:12-36, Eli's sons violate God's law by fattening themselves on the choicest parts of the meat of the sacrifices and thus incur his reprimand and judgment. When Samuel tries to dissuade the people from having a king like all the nations surrounding them, he warns them that a king will require the people to supply him with enough wealth that it will at times create economic hardship for them (1Sa 8:10-18).¹⁶ Nabal's folly amounted to his unwillingness to share his abundance with David and his troops in an hour of their need, whereas Abigail averted disaster through her hospitality and generosity (1Sa 25).

¹⁴ "The fact that his family also shared in that fate may be due to their common knowledge of the crime. After all, the goods were hidden in the parental tent." Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 130.

¹⁵ It would appear that idolatry was viewed by many as financially profitable and theologically compatible with worship of Yahweh during these dark days at the end of the period of the judges. See Michael K. Wilson, "As You Like It: The Idolatry of Micah and the Danites (Judges 17-18)," *Reformed Theological Review* 54 (1995): 73-85.

¹⁶ "Everywhere the lineaments of the Eden story are apparent. We have here a reflection of a traditional pattern, found more than once in the Hebrew Bible, which presents men striving to exceed divinely appointed boundaries and holds the tragic consequence up to view." P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 161.

The monarchy was divided when Rehoboam, Solomon's son, heeded the wrong set of advisors and made Israel's conscripted labor and taxation even more onerous than it had been previously (1Ki 12:1-19). Everyone except the inhabitants of Judah and Simeon followed Jeroboam in rebellion and established the northern kingdom. But Jeroboam, repeated the sin of his ancestors by setting up rival shrines with golden calves at Bethel and Dan (vv. 25-33).¹⁷ A classic example of greed run rampant, of course, is Ahab and Jezebel's murder of Naboth, simply to add one more vineyard to their holdings (1Ki 21). Hezekiah pridefully shows all of his riches to Babylonian envoys, leading to the prophecy that Judah will be exiled in their very nation (2Ki 20:12-1; 2Ch 32:25).

Nehemiah 5 confronts the very sin of usury that the Law prohibited. Here the people respond positively and appropriately, restoring the interest they had charged to the people to whom they had granted loans (v. 12). Chapter 9 rehearses the nation's past sins, including the episode with the golden calf. When the people promise to obey God's laws, they specify not transacting business on the Sabbath, allowing the land to lie fallow during sabbatical years, and cancelling debts every seventh year as well (10:31). In chapter 13, Nehemiah has to reestablish timely payment of wages to the Levites (vv. 10-11) and to rebuke some of the Judahites for working on the Sabbath and then waiting all night outside Jerusalem's locked gates so that they could resume their commerce the next morning as early as possible (vv. 15-22).¹⁸ One thinks of today's stores and businesses that increasingly

¹⁷ In both cases what may have begun as a syncretistic form of Yahwism degenerated into full-fledged idolatry. Cf. Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings* (Waco: Word, 1985), 162.

¹⁸ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 273. H. G. M. Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah* [Waco: Word, 1985], 396) thinks, on the other hand, that the merchants were hoping to attract some of the Jerusalemites outside the city to purchase their wares even on the Sabbath. D. J. A. Clines (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* [London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984], 244) combines both views.

stay open for longer and longer hours, sometimes every day of the year, and the way people will wait in long lines, even early in the morning, for special sales, occasionally even trampling others to get the best deals available. And when any of this occurs at the expense of worshipping God, it proves all the more tragic.¹⁹

Vast amounts of wealth enable Xerxes to display huge quantities of it for six months in Persia in order to flaunt "the splendor and glory of his majesty" (Est 1:4), behavior appropriate only if honoring the true God of the universe. Such riches likewise enable Haman to bribe the king to issue his edict against the Jews in the land by offering ten thousand talents of silver to the royal treasury (3:9). To imagine a contemporary parallel we would have to envision one of today's billionaires offering most of his wealth to a president or prime minister in return for some political favor!²⁰ In an example of the ultimate come-uppance, however, Haman's boast about his vast wealth (5:11) leads only to his hanging on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai instead.

3. Wisdom Literature

Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes all depict various ways in which the wicked gain wealth unjustly, often at the expense of those already poor. Thus, while poverty can indeed result from laziness or unrighteousness, it can also afflict innocent victims of oppression from the powerful. Job, of course, is the most dramatic example of this, with Satan being given the freedom behind the scenes to do everything

¹⁹ "How sad it is to place the quest for money above the quest for union with God! The book of Revelation depicts such tragic focus on money, exposed on the day of judgment as an effort to cling to what is passing away... (Rev 18:15-17);" Matthew Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 207.

²⁰ Debra Reid (*Esther* [Nottingham and Downers Grove: IVP, 2008], 93) calls the amount "ridiculously excessive (possibly about two-thirds of a year's revenue from the whole empire)."

possible short of taking Job's life to try to get him to renounce God (at which point he would die anyway). Ultimately, he fails, however, and God is vindicated in his praise of Job. We must be careful in applying Job to the age of the new covenant, because Christ's conquest of Satan on the cross means that he has much more limited power and authority than in Job's day (Lk 10:18-20). But we are reminded of how spiritual warfare is often occurring behind the scenes in ways we cannot now recognize (cf. Eph 6:10-20).

Psalm 10 affords an excellent example of the cluster of relevant themes often found in the Wisdom literature. Verses 1-11 depict the arrogant, care-free attitude of the wicked who exploit the weak, are motivated by greed and do not believe in God's coming vengeance. But verses 12-18 shift to a plea to God to intervene on behalf of the oppressed who turn to him. The psalmist knows that God sees all injustice and cares deeply about its victims. These themes recur in numerous psalms (e.g. 12:5; 25:10; 68:1-6; 74:21-23, etc.).²¹ Psalm 49 reminds the wealthy how fleeting life is, and thus how foolish it is for them to boast in their treasures. Psalm 62:9-10 puts it quite memorably: "Lowborn men are but a breath, the highborn are but a lie; if weighed on a balance, they are nothing; together they are only a breath. Do not trust in extortion or take pride in stolen goods; though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them."

Better known is Psalm 73. After beginning with an acknowledgment of how his feet had almost slipped when he saw the apparent impunity with which the wicked prospered, and poverty and affliction the only reward for certain righteous individuals in Israel, Asaph recognizes that final judgment will right all wrongs that

²¹ Samuel Terrien (*The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 54-55) discusses God as "the Protector of the Poor and the Healer of the Sick" as one of the eight main themes of the Psalms.

this world has not sorted out. Psalm 82 berates the "gods" in Israel (probably referring to the highest judges of the land²²) for defending the unjust rather than the weak, fatherless, poor and oppressed (vv. 2-4). In Psalm 115, the author anticipates a common theme in the Prophets about the folly of idolatry: people worship lifeless idols that they themselves have fashioned out of inert matter. Psalm 140 pleads for protection from evildoers because God "secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy," (v. 12) while Psalm 149 praises God for the victory he has given those in humble circumstances over the unrighteous but more prosperous nations.

The Proverbs regularly recount the folly of trusting in material possessions. Those who aspire to "ill-gotten gain" "ambush only themselves." (Pr 1:18-19) Theft leads only to death (Pr 9:17-18). Even before that, often "dishonest money dwindles away." (13:8) What is needed is contentment without constantly striving for more. "A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones. He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God." (14:30-31) In view of the antithetical parallelism between the rest of these two last clauses, it appears that the opposite of generosity is oppression! Withholding one's surplus from needier people is a form of exploitation just as surely as more active mistreatment of them.²³

The most significant of all the biblical proverbs on money matters may be Proverbs 30:8b-9: "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but

²² Mark D. Futato, "The Book of Psalms," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, vol. 7, ed. Philip W. Comfort (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2009), 270. A majority of commentators, however, take it to refer to a divine council or assembly in the heavens.

²³ "Proverbs that commend generosity toward the poor (14:21, 31; 19:17; 22:9; 28:27) are addressed to anyone who is able to help the destitute and save them from starvation." Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), 607.

give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God." Both extremes lead to potential of sin, so Agur asks for a golden mean. We immediately recall the balance between "too little" and "too much" with the manna in the wilderness. Most likely, Jesus had this proverb in mind when he taught his followers to ask merely for their "daily bread" (Mt 6:11; Lk 11:3).²⁴ Those who promote the prosperity gospel and those who promote an ascetic lifestyle both founder on these teachings.

Proverbs further stresses that numerous dimensions of life are more important than riches. One should choose Wisdom's (= God's) "instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold." (8:10-11) "Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death." (11:4) Therefore, "whoever trusts in his riches will fall." (v. 28) Poverty "with the fear of the Lord" is better "than great wealth with turmoil," and a simple vegetarian meal in a loving household is preferable to "a fattened calf with hatred." (15:16-17) Proverbs 16:8 generalizes succinctly: "Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice." Numerous other texts repeat these ideas (e.g. 16:19; 17:1; 19:1; 21:9; 28:6, etc.).

Descriptive proverbs observe how money can buy favors in this life, but the practice is not being commended. Thus we read that "a man's riches may ransom his life, but a poor man hears no threat." (13:8) This is not good, but it happens. So, too, 14:20: "The poor are shunned even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends." These, like numerous other texts that could be listed, so obviously cut against the grain of biblical ethics that the reason they are included,

²⁴ Cf. Christine R. Yoder, "On the Threshold of Kingship: A Study of Agur (Proverbs 30)," *Interpretation* 63 (2009): 262.

even without comment, are to dissuade God's people from behaving similarly.²⁵

Ecclesiastes' main contribution to our topic is to highlight the futility of setting one's heart on the acquisition of riches, including as a means of seeking pleasure (Ecc 2:1-11). The law of diminishing returns quickly comes into play and they satisfy less and less (cf. 5:10). Meanwhile, the good that one's resources could be accomplishing is invariably neglected, to one degree or another (cf. Jas 4:17). As Duane Garrett elaborates, Qoheleth's "claim that he retained his wisdom [v. 9] is an assurance to the reader that he did not go berserk in his quest for luxury and pleasure. His problem was not lack of self-restraint; but any attempt to find a rationale for existence in pleasure and affluence is bound to fail, even if that attempted is sobered by self-control."²⁶

4. The Prophets

Prophetic passages so frequently rebuke the Israelites, and occasionally their neighbors, for their economic sins that we could not begin to list even a representative sampling of all the texts.²⁷ We must content ourselves with a handful. Right at the outset of the prophetic literature, Isaiah 1:10-15 discloses God's disgust at the Israelites' worship because the rest of their lives were characterized by sin, oppression and injustice. J. J. M. Roberts observes,

Despite record-breaking attendance and offerings, God, like many contemporary Christians, found the whole experience of public worship a tedious, unbearable burden. In Isaiah's day the human crowds were

²⁵ Cf. Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), xxii-xxiii.

²⁶ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 292.

²⁷ See, e.g., Morris Silver, *Prophets and Markets: The Political Economy of Ancient Israel* (Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1983), 123-76.

still present for worship; it was God who had opted out. [Perhaps, we, too, today] are spending far too much energy trying to figure out how to adapt worship so as to interest and attract a disinterested public. Perhaps we might better spend our time trying to attract and please a potentially disinterested and increasingly irritated God.²⁸

The same observations also hold true for those who cling to the last generation's forms of worship but show no inclination to be about God's kingdom business outside the church's walls.

Many prophetic texts comment wryly on the expense of fashioning, purchasing and worship lifeless idols. Even if people didn't worship them, they are an utter waste of time, talent and treasure. There is probably no more bitterly sarcastic passage on this topic than Isaiah 44:9-20. Over and again, the prophet drives home the point that those who bow down before statues of gods, acclaiming them as their saviors, are often the very ones who fashioned the idols out of metal or wood. Of all people, they should know the true lifelessness of these supposed deities. Traditional Eastern religions often reproduce this identical form of idolatry. But our increasingly secularized world is scarcely immune from them. We may not fashion literal statues of our gods. But we still invest billions of dollars in our societies to try to secure our futures against all possible catastrophes, and we spend billions more on entertainment, recreation, travel, sports, hobbies, politics, war and countless other activities that provide no ultimate peace or happiness and that leave us as alienated from God as before all our costly expenditures!

²⁸ J. J. M. Roberts, "Contemporary Worship in Light of Isaiah's Ancient Critique," in *Worship and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. M. Patrick Graham, Rick R. Marrs and Steven L. McKenzie (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 269.

Jeremiah 9:23-24 reminds us of the perennial danger of boasting in our wealth, just as some take undue pride in their intellect or physical prowess. "This is what the Lord says: 'Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,' declares the Lord." Paul alludes to this very text in 1 Corinthians 1:31 as he reminds the believers in Corinth that only a few of them were wise, influential or wellborn by worldly standards. But God tends to choose the foolish, the lowly and the despised so that his followers will not be tempted to boast in anyone or anything but him.²⁹

Sodom and Gomorrah are probably best remembered for their homosexual debauchery (Ge 19:1-10). But Ezekiel 16:49 adds a second dimension to their sin: they were "arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy."³⁰ This may explain why Lot's wife looked back, despite God's command not to do so, and became a pillar of salt (Ge 19:12-29). Luke 17:32 sandwiches Jesus' command to "Remember Lot's wife!" in between his notice on the day of the Son of man not to "go home to retrieve possessions" (v. 31) and his warning that "whoever tries to keep their life will lose it." (v. 33) It would appear that her longing for material prosperity is what did Lot's wife in!³¹

²⁹ Thus forming a sharp critique of the surrounding non-Christian culture. See Andrew D. Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1-6* (Leiden: Brill, 1993; Milton Keynes and Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 95-99.

³⁰ This in no way contradicts the Genesis account. Indeed, the "detestable things" of v. 50 may well refer to the sins of Sodom in Genesis 19, because this expression frequently appears in Scripture for homosexual sin. See esp. Horace D. Hummel, *Ezekiel 1-20* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2005), 485-86. Cf. also Iain Duguid, *Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 214.

³¹ Luke T. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: What Faith Demands*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 2010), 55-56.

Sexual sin and the profit motive are not so unrelated that we have to accept only one of the two as accounting for Sodom and Gomorrah's particular wickedness, as many have alleged.³² The same combinations have recurred throughout history and appear today, for example, in the pornography industry, prostitution and human trafficking. It is scarcely coincidental that the most aggressive gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and queer lobbies occur today in the wealthiest of the world's countries. Despite their insistence that they be grouped together with other oppressed minorities, very little in their agenda shows any concern for the heterosexual poor and needy worldwide. If ever there was a movement based on immediate gratification and the freedom to pursue the satisfaction of any bodily desire no matter the consequences, it is the contemporary GLBTQ movement!³³ Most of the world's residents have neither the leisure time nor the financial support to produce so-much skewed propaganda for their cause or such vindictive rhetoric and censorship of anyone who disagrees with them as this lobby does.

Ezekiel 28 records a unique prophecy against the king of Tyre, which includes language that seems to go beyond what would apply to any earthly monarch.³⁴ Of him, the Lord declares, "You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were

³² Of many possible examples, see Victor P. Furnish, "The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Text in Context," in *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, ed. Jeffrey S. Siker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 19-20.

³³ See esp. throughout Linda L. Belleville, *Sex, Lies and the Truth: Developing a Christian Ethic in a Post-Christian Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), who also discusses the dramatic departure, just in the last generation, from the historic Judeo-Christian ethic in *heterosexual* practices.

³⁴ Most commentators today, however, following both Calvin and Luther, reject this interpretation. Instead, they see the language as mythopoetic and recapitulating the experience of Adam, and they attribute Ezekiel's referent entirely to the human monarch. See Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 25-48* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 117-21.

in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you.... You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you." Not only was this "king" adorned with every kind of precious gem, but also through his "widespread trade" he was "filled with violence" and "sinned." So God expelled him from his holy mountain. It was this king's pride in his beauty, wisdom and splendor that had corrupted him, so he was cast down to earth and punished unmercifully (vv. 12-19). One can understand why a significant interpretive tradition throughout church history has understood this to refer to Satan, the true power behind the throne of Tyre. Even if, with the majority of contemporary commentators, this view be rejected, we nevertheless see yet another example of great wealth leading to autonomous pride that rejects serving the living God. But after pride comes the great fall (cf. Pr 16:18).

Powerful, memorable denunciations of the carefree wealthy appear also in Amos. First addressing the women, Amos rants, "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, 'Brings us some drinks!' The Sovereign Lord has sworn by his holiness: 'The time will surely come when you will be taken away with hooks, the last of you with fishhooks.'" (Amos 4:1-2)³⁵ Two chapters later Amos addresses the men: "Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria, you notable men of the foremost nation, to whom the people of Israel come!" (6:1) "You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on

³⁵ That women are included as equally accountable as the men is unusual for an ancient Near Eastern document of this time. See Hans W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 207.

choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end." (vv. 4-7)

What might today's equivalents be—the huge amounts of money our peoples spend on entertainment, food and drink, and fancy rooms in luxury hotels for business and academic gatherings, vacations on extravagant cruise liners or at costly theme parks, or even the "routine expenses" of regularly eating out in nice restaurants, precisely while people we could have helped are dying of preventable illnesses all around the world?³⁶ Perhaps those Christians who could never have imagined joining any congregation under a certain size and level of prosperity, with just the right ministries *for them* undertaken exactly to suit *their* preferred styles, will one day hear from God something like Amos 5:21-24:

I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings [our contemporary church meals?], I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps [or pianos, or guitars or drums?]. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!³⁷

³⁶ For other contemporary equivalents to the situations addressed by Amos, see M. Daniel Carroll R., *Amos—The Prophet and His Oracles* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 53-72.

³⁷ M. Daniel Carroll R. (*Contexts for Amos: Prophetic Poetics in Latin American Perspective* [Sheffield: JSOT, 1992], 249) highlights here "the inseparableness of faith and ethics. National religious activity is discredited here, as in 5:4-6, 14-15, because of its lack of moral concern."

Not unrelated are Jeremiah's words in Jeremiah 7:3-4. Addressing those who cry repeatedly, "this is the temple of the Lord," as if their mere presence in the Israelite house of worship guarantees their spiritual safety, the prophet proceeds to predict the sanctuary's destruction and the people's exile unless they dramatically change their behavior with respect to social injustice (vv. 5-29). Might today's equivalents include the aging, shrinking congregation that believes that as long as they keep faithfully attending church God will be pleased with them, no matter how disinterested they are in the lost world around them during the rest of the week?³⁸

Micah 3:11 narrows the prophetic focus to Israel's religious leaders, lamenting that "her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money." But they remain oblivious to the impending disaster God has in store for them. Micah cannot be objecting to ecclesiastical leaders receiving any form of remuneration for their services, because the Torah arranged for priests and Levites to be taken care of materially from the sacrifices and temple gifts. In the New Testament, both Jesus and Paul will clearly enunciate that religious workers deserve their wages (Mt 10:10; Lk 10:7; 1Co 9:3-12a, 13-14). Yet, as D. A. Carson aptly puts it, "the church does not *pay* its ministers; rather, it provides them with resources so that they are able to serve freely. The church recognizes that those who serve in this way must be 'kept,' and are worthy of it. In practice, this means that the ideal situation occurs when the church is as generous as possible, the ministers do not concern themselves with material matters and

³⁸ The people probably thought of the temple as an inviolable refuge against God's enemies. Put simply, they imagined that "as long as it stood on Mount Zion, God was in his heaven and all was right with the world." Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20* (New York and London: Doubleday, 1999), 462. The threefold repetition of "the temple of the Lord" may have functioned in their minds like some magical formula to ward off all evil. See J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 277.

are above selfish material interest."³⁹ The crucial issue is our motive for ministry. Do we serve the Lord in paid, professional capacities for the money, the prestige, the power or the status, or because we are fortunate enough to be able to wed our spiritual gifts with a vocational career, but we would use those gifts every bit as passionately for the building up of the work of the church whether or not we ever got paid for it?⁴⁰

Zephaniah makes it clear that judgment based on the use of one's wealth is universal. If Israel alone received promises about material blessings for spiritual faithfulness, every nation will be judged on the basis of its stewardship. Doubtless to its astonishment, Judah is treated as just one more "shameful nation" (2:1), alongside Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Cush, and Assyria (vv. 2-13), representatives of God's judgment on all the nations (1:2-3).⁴¹ Every land will experience the loss of material prosperity as God's response to their sin. But this includes even Jerusalem: "Wail, you who live in the market district; all your merchants will be wiped out, all who trade with silver will be ruined." (1:11) In what ways has contemporary Christianity simply become an alternative outlet for the same kind of commercialism as the secular world? In its music industry? In radio and television? In novels and other fictional literature? In T-shirts and stickers, pins,

³⁹ D. A. Carson, *When Jesus Confronts the World: An Exposition of Matthew 8-10* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 125.

⁴⁰ In Micah's context, accepting "bribes to pervert the rules of religious conduct" was probably part of the leaders' sin. Delbert R. Hillers, *Micah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 48. But in other cases, it was simply that "gain had become the overriding basis of the practices of leader, priest, and prophet alike. Then the obligation to God and neighbor had little chance." James L. Mays, *Micah: A Commentary* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 90.

⁴¹ Appropriately, therefore, "Zephaniah 2:1-4 constitutes the formal core of Zephaniah, on which the overall syntactical and rhetorical structure of the book as well as its generic character are based." Marvin A. Sweeney, *Zephaniah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 111.

tattoos, and countless other kitch alternatives to the frivolities of the culture around us?⁴²

Haggai seems quite different, with its emphasis on rebuilding the temple with all the costly and ornate adornment that comes with it. Countless Christians have justified lavish expenditures on buildings by appealing to the Old Testament model of the temple, forgetting that the New Testament has no temples. The church is the outgrowth of the Jewish synagogue, a consistently far more modest structure, not of the temple. The distinctive feature of the temple was that it was the one legitimate place for offering animal sacrifices, and in Christ those are done away with. The New Testament can speak of a congregation of believers forming a temple (1Co 3:16-17), or of Christians' individual bodies functioning similarly (6:9). But Jesus is the truest fulfillment of the Old Testament temple. He is the one by whom we now have direct access to God (esp. Jn 2:19).⁴³ No longer need there be a uniquely holy land, uniquely holy spaces or uniquely holy buildings; God may be accessed and worshipped anywhere, as long as the worshiper does so "in Spirit and in truth." (4:24)

Zechariah 11, finally, laments the shepherd-rulers in Israel who are more concerned about fleecing the flock than with tending the sheep (esp. vv. 5 and 16). It is no wonder that just after this time Malachi berates the priests for offering defiled food, along with lame or diseased animals for sacrifice (Mal 1:7-9). We should not be

⁴² Darrell L. Bock, in several public lectures in recent years, has commented on how only a few million dollars would enable the production and telecast of a truly balanced documentary on the life of Jesus, and the networks have already agreed to broadcast it, but fund-raising attempts to date have failed to yield the money. Yet the Christian music industry raises multimillion dollar amounts annually just to keep artists of varying abilities employed and ministering primarily to the saved.

⁴³ See esp. Nicholas Perrin, *Jesus the Temple* (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010).

surprised when he prophesies, as a result, that the Lord will suddenly come to his temple, to purify and refine his people, burning off all the dross (see esp. 3:1-4 and 4:1-3). The day of the Lord will be splendid for those who are serving him but dreadful for everyone else (4:5).⁴⁴

II. The New Testament

1. The Gospels

Jesus uses the Aramaic word transliterated into Greek as *mamōnas* to highlight the stark alternative between serving God and possessions. "Mammon" might today better be rendered as "materialism." It refers not merely to material possessions but to treating them as if they were a god. A case can be made that the New Testament sees mammon as the biggest rival to Jesus for worship; perhaps the same is even truer today in our almost entirely capitalist world.⁴⁵ One of the three key temptations by which Satan tried to lure Jesus from his divinely appointed mission was through the promise of receiving all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor in return for worshipping the devil himself (Mt 4:8-9; Lk 4:5-7). Of course, he would receive all these from his heavenly Father anyway, but only after following the agonizing path of the cross. Satan offers him a shortcut, bypassing the suffering. But the price is too steep—the

⁴⁴ See further Craig L. Blomberg, "Elijah, Election, and the Use of Malachi in the New Testament," *Criswell Theological Review* 2 (1987): 99-117.

⁴⁵ Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 245. Cf. Charles Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ's Message to the Modern Church* (Nashville: B & H, 2011), 257: "it is false religion at its worst." Hans Dieter Betz (*The Sermon on the Mount* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], 458) notes that giving materialism a foreign name is equivalent to designating wealth or property, when it takes control of a person's life, as "magical" and even "demonic": "The relentless pursuit of money and possessions is tantamount to the worship of a pseudo-deity."

unending punishment that awaits anyone who sells his soul to the devil (Rev 14:9-11)!

In his great Sermon, Jesus poses the dramatic contrast between storing up earthly and heavenly treasures (Mt 6:19-20). In modern economies, where a certain measure of saving for the future makes good sense, the key in this text is Christ's concern that moths and vermin⁴⁶ can destroy and that thieves can steal. Property and money that are being put to work are not vulnerable to destruction and theft in the same way as unused possessions are. Jesus is not forbidding all surpluses, but he is focusing particularly on *unused* surplus. Verse 21 goes to the heart of the issue: "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." A wealthy philanthropist who makes the safest possible investments for the purpose of increasing what he can give away has his or her heart in the right place. Poorer individuals who remain stingy with their giving because they are eager to become wealthier for self-serving goals have their hearts in the wrong place. In a world in which a "master" demanded absolute allegiance over all of one's life, it was literally true that no one could serve two masters, unlike today when people can work numerous jobs at the same time. So Jesus is reminding us that *ultimately* either possessions will master us or we will use them to serve Christ as our sole master (v. 24).

Matthew 6:25-34 and parallel, which we have previously discussed a little, disclose another key factor in discerning our true master. To what extent are we consumed by anxiety about our possessions or our future? Jesus is not excluding thoughtful planning. The recurring verb in this passage is "worry" (vv. 25, 27, 28, 31, 34).

⁴⁶ Most translations render *brōsis* as rust, but the word means "eating" or "consuming." In combination with "moth" one would expect some kind of insect or animal. *BDAG*, 185, finds no known usage of the word elsewhere to mean rust or corrosion. Cf. also H.-J. van der Minde, "βρῶσις," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, 229.

The underlying Greek, *merimnaō*, means "to be apprehensive, have anxiety, be anxious," or "be (unduly) concerned."⁴⁷ If we are obsessed with the things of this life, it means we are not adequately focusing on the next. The seed that fell among the thorns in the parable of the sower likewise stands for those whose potential for true faith is choked out by "the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth." (v. 22) Matthew 16:26 sums up matters concisely: "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

The Pharisees were the best-loved of all the leadership sects in first-century Israel. So listeners would have been shocked when Jesus unleashed his woes against at least one group of them in Matthew 23. Among other things, Christ berates them for being preoccupied with externals, while inside "they are full of greed and self-indulgence." (v. 25) They would have been equally stunned at Luke's assessment that the Pharisees "loved money" (Lk 16:14), especially because they were not that much more well-off than most people. But what begins as a passion for doing God's will can easily, over time, slip into a desire to become more prosperous, especially when remuneration for ministry is possible.⁴⁸

Exactly why Judas betrayed Jesus remains something of a mystery. The most probable suggestion is that he wanted a militaristic, nationalistic Messiah, like so many other Jews did, and gave Jesus every possible chance to become one, even when most others had lost hope. But when he finally realized it was not going to happen, he

⁴⁷ *BDAG*, 632. D. Zeller ("μεριμνάω," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 408) describes it as "that which monopolizes the heart's concerns."

⁴⁸ See further Jacob Neusner and Bruce D. Chilton, eds., *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007).

turned on his master.⁴⁹ Financial greed, however, is the one explicit motive that the Scriptures do mention (Jn 12:6); thirty shekels (Mt 27:3) amounted to almost five months' wages for a day laborer. Jesus has already itemized theft and greed as among the things that come "from within, out of a person's heart," and which defile them, rather than the external sources of ritual uncleanness as enumerated in the Torah (Mk 7:21-22 par.; cf. Lk 11:39).

Luke's version of the beatitudes is only half as long as Matthew's but he includes corresponding woes which Matthew does not. Two of them lament the final destiny of the rich and well fed, for they have already received their comfort and will one day hunger (Lk 6:24-25a). But just as Jesus' blessing on the poor in Luke refers to those who also suffer for righteousness' sake (vv. 20, 22), so the rich who are condemned are the godless rich. Everyone speaks well of them because they are false prophets (v. 26).

The parable of the rich fool (Lk 12:16-20) at first glance seems to depict a farmer who is condemned for no other reason than that he built bigger (underground) silos to store up a surprise surplus harvest. On closer inspection it turns out that he was "not rich toward God" (v. 21). But the only way we recognize this in the parable is that he speaks only about himself. In a culture in which the handful of rich were expected to help care for the many poor in their immediate vicinity, what is striking are the fifteen times Luke's Greek contains a word or suffix for "I," "my" or "self." Yet not a word appears about any concern to give any of his bumper crop to the needy.⁵⁰

The temple clearing in John 2:14-16 focuses on the commercial corruption that had intruded into the selling of the sacrificial animals

⁴⁹ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 831.

⁵⁰ Cf. Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 109.

and the exchanging of currency. The Synoptic incident at the end of Christ's ministry (Mk 11:15-16 par.) also speaks of Jesus driving some of the merchants out of the temple precincts and overturning the moneychangers' tables. The accusation, "you have made [the temple] 'a den of robbers'" (v. 17 par.) has often suggested to readers similar financial corruption, but it may refer to turning the building into a "nationalist stronghold" instead, especially in light of the context of Jeremiah 7:11.⁵¹ Nevertheless, it is an important reminder that ecclesiastical business should be the paragon of ethical practice, even though historically it has often been far from that.

2. The Acts of the Apostles

The first internal threat to the fledgling church in Jerusalem involves lying with respect to finances. Ananias and Sapphira are not judged because they failed to give a certain amount of the proceeds of the sale of their property to the common treasury, but because they claimed to be giving all of their earnings when they weren't. We are profoundly grateful that God does not normally judge our sins so severely, but incidents like this do remind us that "the wages of sin is death." (Ro 6:23) Commentators regularly note the similarity of this incident to that of Achan in Joshua 7, even down to the rare word for "swindle" appearing in both Acts 5:2 and Joshua 7:1. Apparently, such flagrant disobedience and the potential division it would create were particularly crucial to nip in the bud at the outset of each of the two covenant communities with a form of judgment more severe

⁵¹ Both in the sixth-century B.C. and in the first-century A.D., key Jewish leaders had become so ethnocentric that they assumed God would not destroy his holiest of buildings, no matter how immorally the people behaved (Jer 7:10) and despite the explicit purpose of the Court of the Gentiles—to be a place of prayer for God-fearing foreigners (Mk 11:17). The den of robbers is best interpreted as a "nationalist stronghold." C. K. Barrett, "The House of Prayer and the Den of Thieves," in *Jesus und Paulus*, ed. E. Earle Ellis and Erich Grässer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1975), 16.

than God normally inflicts.⁵² But the episode does highlight the need for full transparency and honesty about an individual's or church's expenditures—precisely an area where it is easy to manipulate the numbers to make us appear more generous than we really are!

When Philip the evangelist brings the gospel to Samaria, one Simon the Magician appears to convert from his sorcery to following Christ (Ac 8:13). But when Peter and John arrive from Jerusalem, lay hands on the new believers and they receive the Spirit, Simon sees this and asks to buy such power from the apostles. Perhaps he views it as simply a stronger form of the magic he had previously practiced. Peter replies, literally, "May you and your money go to hell!" (v. 20) and declares that Simon has "no part or share in this ministry" because his "heart is not right before God." (v. 21) Peter calls Simon to repent and Simon asks Peter to pray for him. Luke does not make it clear if he understands this as full-fledged repentance or not. All of these factors combine to suggest that Simon had not previously made a true commitment to Christ. But why does Luke even include the story, then? Presumably it is to warn us again of the seductive power of materialism.⁵³ One wonders about certain televangelists whose constant harangues for money overshadow their preaching of the true gospel. At some point, one crosses a threshold of being so obsessed with the potential material rewards for ministry that the genuineness of one's salvation should be called into question.

⁵² Richard N. Longenecker, "Acts," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary Revised*, vol. 10, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 786. David R. McCabe (*How to Kill Things with Words: Ananias and Sapphira under the Prophetic Speech-Act of Divine Judgment [Acts 4.32-5.11]*) [London and New York: T & T Clark, 2011], 30) persuasively defends the thesis that "Peter's words utter an apostolic-prophetic indictment against the couple... which brings them under divine judgement." In other words, via speech-act theory McCabe makes the case that Peter's "inquisition and indictment *perform* the judicial death sentence and the execution of divine judgement."

⁵³ Cf. John B. Polhill, *Acts* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 220: what is condemned is "any attempt to manipulate God for personal gain."

The wrong, materialistic use of spiritual power reappears in the account of Paul and the Philippian slave girl (Ac 16:16-21). The woman had a presumably demonic spirit by which she predicted the future and Paul eventually cast it out. But her owners, who cared nothing for her emotional or spiritual health, only lamented the loss of the income that her spirit had generated for them.⁵⁴ To this day, Christian churches and organizations sometimes treat their employees in ways that cost as little as possible, even though they are damaging to the individuals so treated, sometimes in less considerate fashion than the secular world behaves around them. What a damaging witness this is to a watching world as well.

The guild of silversmiths in Ephesus likewise profits from their idol-making industry, until Paul's preaching makes such a dent in the city that their business is suffering. New believers are obviously no longer buying the idols (Ac 19:23-27). Demetrius, the guild's spokesman, couches the problems in religious terms—the great goddess Artemis is being disgraced—but makes it plain that the real issue is financial. There is the real danger that their "trade will lose its good name." (v. 27)⁵⁵ Would that contemporary industries like the illegal drug trade, pornography or gambling would complain that they were in danger of "going under" because too many people involved were coming to Christ, and because no Christian paid a penny to support such industries, instead of the rampant amounts of support so-called Christians currently spend on them!

⁵⁴ Cf. C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27.

⁵⁵ "To understand rightly the Christian mission is to perceive the danger (κινδυνεύω) posed to Artemis of the Ephesians. It is, consequently, to witness to the prospective disintegration of religious dependent economics." (Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 46).

3. The Epistles of Paul

Theft, greed and covetousness appear regularly in Paul's vice lists (Ro 1:29; 1Co 5:10-11; 6:10; Gal 5:20-21; Eph 5:5; Col 3:5; 2Ti 3:2). The texts in Ephesians and Colossians equate greed with idolatry—the worship of a false god—which Brian Rosner aptly defines as "that which one trusts, loves and obeys above all else."⁵⁶ In Romans 13:8, Paul stresses that debts should be repaid as quickly as possible; better yet, they should not be entered into at all.⁵⁷ Those who "use the things of the world" should not be "engrossed in them" (1Co 7:31). Paul stresses that "unlike so many," he and his co-workers "do not peddle the word of God for profit." (2Co 2:17; cf. 7:2). There *were* times he accepted money for ministry, though never from the congregation to whom he was currently ministering (Php 4:10-20; cf. 2Co 11:8), probably because too often such arrangements came with "strings attached" in a culture of patronage and reciprocity.⁵⁸

The Corinthian church displayed a remarkable amount of immaturity in its lifestyle. It is interesting to note how many of the issues Paul addresses can be readily accounted for on the hypothesis that the handful of rich and wellborn (1:26-29) were disproportionately a large portion of the cause of the problems. Only the wealthy owned homes large enough for significant numbers of believers to gather in house churches; as hosts and former patrons, they could easily

⁵⁶ Brian S. Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 179.

⁵⁷ Verse 8: "does not forbid a Christian from ever incurring a debt; it rather demands that Christians repay any debts they do incur promptly and in accordance with the terms of the contract." Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle of the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 812. Cf. also Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 806.

⁵⁸ See esp. Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); cf. also John K. Chow, *Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992).

have still believed the mantra that "one good turn deserved another" and have begun to create the factionalism of chapters 1-4. The only possible reason the Corinthians failed to discipline the church member living in incest 5:1-5 is because he was a wealthy power broker on whose benefactions the rest depended. For the most part, only the rich sued the rich in antiquity and that to gain public honor and shame their opponent (6:1-11). Prostitution, of course, has always cut across all socio-economic strata except the very poorest who could not afford to pay for sex, but it is interesting that a coming-of-age party for Greco-Roman young men regularly permitted them access to courtesans for the first time (cf. 6:12-20). Those who couldn't dissociate eating meat sacrificed to idols from idolatrous worship may well have been those so poor that they ate meat regularly only at the free festival meals each month in the pagan temples accompanying Greek and Roman holidays (cf. 8:1-11:1). Women allowed to participate actively enough in worship services either to flaunt the standard "dress code" (11:2-16) or to speak out inappropriately (14:33-38) were probably primarily the wealthy women; riches have regularly earned women opportunities denied to the majority of their gender even in very patriarchal societies. Those overeating and overdrinking at others' expense during the Lord's Supper were almost certainly the rich consuming some of what should have been saved for the poor (11:17-34). Finally, mismanagement of the public gifts of the spirit in general (chaps. 12-14) would have again disproportionately involved the rich, who naturally would have been turned to as congregational leaders. While not quite covering all of the topics in 1 Corinthians, this survey shows how the disparities between rich and poor in the church could have led to or exacerbated a substantial majority of the problems Paul has to address.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ See further esp. Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). Closely parallel was the quest for honor in public contexts; see Mark T. Finney, *Honour and Conflict in the Ancient World: 1 Corinthians in Its Greco-Roman Social Setting* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2012).

In Ephesians 4:28, Paul commands those who have been stealing to cease and work for their living instead. Similar language involving work with one's own hands recurs in 1 Thessalonians 4:14, where Paul discourages dependence on anyone else for one's livelihood (v. 12). If patron-client relationships are involved, some of the newer, poorer Christians may have continued an inappropriate reliance on their former patrons for provisions when they could have earned their keep independently of them. Christianity was the first and major ideology to challenge this pervasive Greco-Roman institution, so that it was eventually abolished. But it scarcely disappeared overnight.⁶⁰ Indeed, Paul has to give even stronger commands in 2 Thessalonians 3:8-15, calling for those who are not willing to work when the opportunity presents itself not to be allowed to eat (v. 10)—probably denying them participation in the Lord's table, the one meal Christian leaders had control over.⁶¹ This would be only partial disfellowshipping, which fits well with Paul's command at the end of the passage "not to regard them as an enemy," but to "warn them as you would a fellow believer." (v. 15)

It is always intriguing to see which of the criteria for overseers and deacons in 1 Timothy 2:11-3:13 churches apply very strictly, which more lackadaisically, and which not at all. Often gender or marital status falls into the first of these categories, while management of finances falls into the last! Yet Paul stresses that church leaders must be free from the love of money (*aphilarguros*—3:3) and not pursue foolish gain (*aischrokerdēs*). A number of Bible translations

⁶⁰ See further Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Leicester: Apollos; Grand Rapids: Cambridge, 2002), 208-9.

⁶¹ See esp. Robert Jewett, "Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church: The Implications of a Form-Critical Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 3:10," *Biblical Research* 38 (1993): 23-43.

render this second term as if it applied specifically only to ill-gotten gain but the Greek word basically means just "shamelessly greedy for money."⁶² No doubt it is much easier to find church leaders who do not lust after money to be acquired wrongfully than those who never lust after money at all, which explains the popularity of the narrower translation. But elders/pastors and deacons must not be excessively motivated by the desire to improve their financial lot even when possessions are ethically obtained.

Finally, Paul rebukes those "who think that godliness is a means to financial gain" (*porismos*—a means of procuring or acquiring⁶³ —1Ti 6:5). Rather, we should be content no matter what socio-economic situation we find ourselves in. "Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." (v. 9) The next verse has often been misread, mistranslated or simply misinterpreted (v. 10). Paul does not say that "*money* is the root of all evil." He does not even say "*the love of money* is the root of all evil," though that rendering at least completes the sentence. Rather, as in the NIV, "the love of money is *a* root of *all kinds* of evil."⁶⁴ Yet even this statement implies a solemn warning. The second half of the verse supplies the rationale: "Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."

⁶² BDAG, 29; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1 (New York: UBS, 1988), 292. Balz and Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, 41.

⁶³ H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon, Abridged Edition*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 578.

⁶⁴ Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove and Nottingham: IVP, 2006), 287.

4. The General Epistles and the Revelation

Hebrews has little to say about money matters. But 13:5 does reiterate the warning to "keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have." James 2:1-4 cautions us neither to show favoritism to the rich nor to discriminate against the poor in our assemblies. After all, it was the rich who were dragging them into the courts (2:6; probably debtors' courts) and eventually throwing them into prison when they could not pay back their loans (5:6, understanding the murder as metaphorical and judicial⁶⁵).⁶⁶ Nevertheless, it is not merely the rich who are in danger of coveting. The poor, too, in their haste to try to pay off their debts can make rash vows (5:12). In their frustration against absentee landlords, they can take out their anger on their Christian brothers and sisters (4:1-3).

First Peter 5:2 parallels the Pastoral Epistles with its admonition to church leaders not to pursue foolish gain. The word is the adverbial form (*aischrokerdōs*) of the adjective used previously, with the identical interpretive issues attached to it. The false teachers of 2 Peter and Jude are condemned for various sins, but a central one is greed (2Pe 2:3, 14; Jude 11). First John 2:15-17 commands us not to love the world or anything in it because of its transience. Verse 16 spells out what worldly things involve: "the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does." Commentators throughout church history have often commented how well these three sins match the sins of Adam and Eve in the garden and the three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness.⁶⁷ Genesis 3:6

⁶⁵ Daniel C. Doriani, *James* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007), 172.

⁶⁶ See Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 114-15.

⁶⁷ E.g., Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 108. John Christopher Thomas (*1 John, 2 John, 3 John* [London: T & T Clark; Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004; Blandford Forum, UK: Deo, 2011], 120) adds, "through this example the readers are warned about the seduction of wealth, a seduction which can result in a false confidence in one's possessions or abilities."

describes the allurements of the forbidden fruit as "good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom." Luke 4:1-11 and parallel depicts Jesus' temptations as the devil's call for him to turn stones into bread, to receive all the kingdoms of the world in return for worshiping Satan, and letting angels rescue him from certain death after he jumps off the top of the temple. Probably every human temptation falls into one of these three categories.⁶⁸

The worst of the seven churches of Revelation—the church in Laodicea—is berated for boasting in its material riches, which delude it into believing that it needs nothing else (Rev 3:17). As God unleashes his judgments on the earth during the last days before Christ's return, riches become meaningless and irrelevant. Rich and poor alike will try to hide from God and his punishments; when they cannot, they will then cry out for instant death rather than prolonged suffering (6:15-17). The mysterious mark of the beast will enable people to buy and sell during these days, but those who refuse to receive it are in turn prohibited from trading in the marketplace (13:16-18). The great, evil, end-times Empire appears in Revelation 17 as the "whore of Babylon," with seemingly unlimited political and religious power, just like first-century Rome. Chapter 18, though, adds the imagery that shows it to be the most economically powerful empire of its day as well. When it is destroyed, what people miss and lament the most is the lack of trade and commerce. The list of cargo that no one purchases any longer reads like a bill of sale on a boat filled with luxury imports taken from the subjugated nations when it docks at Rome (vv. 11-13). Eugene Peterson captures the contemporary significance of this imagery aptly but frighteningly:

⁶⁸ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John* finds the parallels "too striking to be insignificant."

In the great lament of Revelation 18 over the Great whore's demise, the longest and most detailed lament is from the merchants and sea traders (Rev 18:11-19). In Whore-worship they got everything they wanted, their lives overflowed with things, and now it is gone, wasted, up in smoke. They are bereft of everything they were promised and invested in and enjoyed. It is not their businesses that have collapsed, but their religion, a religion of self-indulgence, of getting. Now it is gone: salvation-by-checkbook is gone, god-on-demand is gone, meaning-by-money is gone, religion-as-feeling is gone, self-as-(temporary)-god is gone. They are left with nothing but themselves, of whom after a lifetime in the whorehouse, they know nothing.⁶⁹

Contemporary equivalents to ancient Rome, with its combination of religious, political and economic power can be found throughout the developed world today, crossing national boundaries to embrace multinational corporations, so we dare not be overly obsessed with looking to the Middle East to find such an "empire."⁷⁰

III. Conclusion

In my first article, I stressed the inherent goodness of wealth or material possessions, along with God's concern, precisely because of this goodness, that all people have a chance to enjoy material blessings. In this article, we have stressed how throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, many texts highlight the dangers of riches. It becomes so easy to forget that they are merely on loan from God and to begin to imagine that we actually own them, deserve them

⁶⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 148.

⁷⁰ Cf. esp. Craig S. Keener, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 442-43.

and have a right to them. Personal property and the perennial desire to have more become seductive, tempting us to sin in countless ways, especially by making them our gods—what actually controls our lives and determines our decisions and priorities—rather than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Idolatry, however, forms the heart of rebellion against God (Ro 1:18-32). That is why Jesus calls it *mamōnas*, virtually turning it into a pseudo-deity by naming it. No other competitor for human allegiance seems to play as dominant a role as materialism in the Old and New Testaments. We are reminded repeatedly that we will have to give an account for its use, for our stewardship of all of our time, talents and treasures, but especially our treasures. How then do we guard against the inherently good material possessions of this life turning into idols that steer our hearts and our lives away from the living Lord? My next article will address that question.

ABSTRACT

For every passage in Scripture that touts the goodness of material possessions there are five or six that warn against its dangers. The desire for greater and greater wealth is a major seduction to sin through the Scriptures. Money quickly becomes a god for many and thus forms the heart of much human idolatry. Riches per se are not sinful, nor even the desire to acquire them, so long as they are used for godly purposes. But contentment in all economic circumstances forms a Christian ideal.

撮 要

聖經中每段吹捧物質擁有的經文，就會有五或六段警告隨之出現。聖經描述，對財富愈來愈大的渴望是誘人犯罪的一種主要因素。對許多人來說，金錢迅速成為一個神明，成為人類偶像的重心。財富本身並沒有罪，即使渴望擁有財富也不是罪，只要財富被用於敬虔的事物上；但無論處於何種經濟狀況都感到滿足，卻是理想的基督徒表現。