

# “Wealth”

*Proverbs 23:4-5; Job 1:20-21; Ecclesiastes 5:18-20;  
Matthew 6:19-21; Philippians 4:10-14;  
1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19*



## **Why is so much said in the Bible about the dangers of wealth?**

Who hasn't read a few essays or heard a few commentators go on about America's worship of the "almighty dollar." I doubt that there are any among us who haven't heard the siren song of wealth, who haven't struggled with conflicting needs and desires pulling on a too-meager bank account.

The truth is that though we may love our 401k, God doesn't. The Bible isn't filled with conflicts and turmoil around the topic. Here are a few simple biblical perspectives on money:

1. As Job points out, naked we came, naked we go. We leave this life with just as much money as we brought into it – zero. As Paul wrote: “. . . for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.”
2. All we have, all that we acquire is a gift from God. As the Teacher of Ecclesiastes writes, “Yes, we should make the most of what God gives, both the bounty and the capacity to enjoy it, accepting what's given and delighting in the work. It's God's gift!” We work hard and we strive to provide for our families and our future – but even the talents and the drive that we apply to that work is a gift from God.
3. God's expectation is that we will use a portion of what we have been given for our use and a portion for God's purposes. That portion is often called a tithe.
4. Every dollar bill should come with a warning label: “Danger! This dollar could be dangerous to your health.” The Bible doesn't see money as evil in itself, for it is merely a representation of the value of what we've been given by God and what is produced with it. Rather, it is our love of the dollar bills that poses the threat.

A warning label? Yes. Jesus, for example, has a great deal to say about the dangers of wealth. In Luke's gospel, Jesus has more to say about the dangers of wealth than in any of the other gospels. Beginning with Jesus' command that his disciples are to “leave everything” to follow him, there is an unrelenting emphasis on Jesus' radical demand. “Blessed are you who are poor . . . But woe to you who are rich” (6:20,24). “Sell your possessions and give alms . . .” (12:33). “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (14:33).

By the time that we get to Jesus' encounter with the rich, young ruler, we aren't the least surprised when Jesus tells him to sell everything and give the money to the poor (18:18-30). The question seems to be whether disciples can be both affluent and faithful – and the answer seems to be clearly “no”! Yet, no sooner has Jesus sent away the rich, young ruler than he invites himself to the home of a tax collector, Zacchaeus (19:1-10). Zacchaeus gives away a large portion of his wealth and makes amends to those he has cheated, but he does not give away all that he has and Jesus never tells him too.

What is going on? Perhaps it is something like this: the rich ruler has money and loves the money whereas Zacchaeus has money and loves Jesus. Going further, I suspect that Zacchaeus has come to realize that the wealth is not really his but God's. He is a trustee charged with managing and using well what God has entrusted to him. This is not so much a matter of bank accounts as it is a matter of the heart. In today's passage from 1 Timothy, Paul does not say that money is the root of all evil; rather, it is the love of money

## What exactly does God want us to do?

Early in 1 Timothy, Paul writes, “And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for [immediate] family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (5:8).

Let me get this straight: we are to place our trust in God, not in our bank accounts, yet we are to manage our money so that we can provide for those in our care, and we are to be generous and ready to share all that we have.

How do I sort through all this? What is God’s will for us? Yet again, the Bible resists easy or simple answers to so many of our questions.

I do trust God. I do put my hope in God. But I’m also concerned that Angee and I do our best to provide for our own financial security and for those in our families who might need our help. How do we go about this? How do we know when we are really trusting in our 401k and not trusting in God? Angee and I try to be generous—even sacrificial—givers ...but, again, how far does God want us to go in this?

Our financial commitments to God’s church brings all these questions to the forefront, don’t they? Of course, perhaps this really isn’t an issue of financial security at all. Perhaps it is really a question of lifestyle. Perhaps I cling too tightly to some of the “stuff” and privileges that I enjoy...God is always tugging at me!

and, I would add, the love of what money can buy, whether it is stuff or status. The question for us is this – where is our heart?

### ***Longing to be rich – or at least look rich!***

The heart. Look again at what Paul writes to Timothy: “people who long to be rich . . . the love of money . . . craving money.” Longing, loving, and craving are all matters of the heart. Who or what do we love? Who or what do we long for? Who or what do we crave? Do we strive first for wealth or do we strive first for the kingdom? Is it God that we worship or is it the all-American Idol of wealth?

Paul lived two millennia ago in a world far different from our own. But when it comes to the dangers of pursuing wealth, his world must have been much like ours. I could not count the number of people I have known whose pursuit of wealth has wrecked their lives. For many, their pursuit of wealth was successful. They achieved fat bank accounts, piles of stuff, and the status that goes with it. Yet, they also reaped lonely, isolated lives filled with brokenness and pain. One of my classmates served a long sentence in prison because of his love of money. So many temptations. So many harmful and foolish desires. So many bad choices.

### ***“Do good . . . be generous and ready to share”***

What is possible in life? What does it mean to really live? Admittedly, today’s passage from 1 Timothy is one that can make us uncomfortable. As we’ve seen, in the New Testament there are many such passages, passages about the dangers of wealth. With one voice, the New Testament writers scream at us to run, run fast, from the idol of wealth. Indeed, there are so many warnings that it is easy for us to misread them.

James Dunn is one of the most prominent New Testament scholars working today. In his commentary on 1 Timothy,<sup>1</sup> the section on 1 Timothy 6 is titled, “Putting Wealth in Its Place.” He didn’t entitle it something like, “No Wealth is the Only Good Wealth.” *Wealth can be used for great and good purposes – but the challenge is to keep it in its place.*

It is clear from the New Testament writings that there were wealthy Christians in the early church. Indeed, early Christians met in the homes of the most affluent members of the churches. Paul never condemns the wealth of the affluent per

se, but he does warn them: “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains” (1 Tim 6:10).

I understand that there are very few people in this world who consider themselves to be rich. But I think we know that even in the context of America, many of us at First UMC are, to put it bluntly, rich . . . or at least in the ballpark. We know that Paul is speaking to us. As tempting as it might be for us to put our hope in our

---

<sup>1</sup> from Dunn’s commentary in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Abingdon Press, 2000.

bank accounts and 401k's, Paul urges us to put our hope in God, for it is God "who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (6:17).

### ***Contentment and the godly life***

Paul gives Timothy two pieces of practical advice for avoiding the trap named "the pursuit of money, stuff, and status." First, he urges Timothy to learn the art of contentment. Despite the numerous hardships of his own life, Paul has "learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need" (Philippians 4:11-12, a letter written from prison). How has Paul learned this? He has learned this from God. It is God who gives Paul the strength that he needs to be free from worry and anxiety.

Second, Paul urges Timothy to pursue a godly life rather than pursue wealth or possessions or status. Timothy has his life headed in the right direction, but there are many potential wrong turns and dead ends ahead that will tempt Timothy and few of them are more attractive than the love of money. Timothy must ignore the traps, even stepping on the accelerator to hurry past them. He must actively pursue his life with God, never taking it for granted.

We live in an anxiety-filled world, where contentment and peace seem endlessly elusive. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Earthly possessions dazzle our eyes and delude us into thinking that they can provide security and freedom from anxiety. Yet all the time they are the very source of anxiety. If our hearts are set on them, our reward is an anxiety whose burden is intolerable."

And all the while . . . Jesus stands ready to take our burdens for himself, if we will just loosen our grip on them.