



My Theology of Money

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During the course of my career, I have held multiple positions in the world of finance, ranging from bank examiner to CPA and encompassing bank portfolio management and institutional bond sales and trading. Although my opinions concerning money have been shaped to a certain extent according to the views of the financial world, my current profession as a Christian pastor led me to recognize that applying Christian principles to my thinking concerning money is not as simple or straightforward as I once thought. Even with these multiple vantage points from which to reflect, I recognize that identifying a clear biblical theology of money is problematic. The Bible says a great deal about money, with some people claiming that Jesus discusses the topic more than any other except the kingdom of God. Yet Bible scholars and Christian economists struggle to develop a consistent teaching on the Bible's theology of money.

One reason for this difficulty is that many individuals focus on a single scripture or biblical concept from which to build their theology. Since the Bible deals with many aspects of money in various contexts, this single-focus strategy can lead to a rules-based theology—sometimes with only one rule. Excluding consideration of all the other scriptural references to money can lead to a highly limited understanding of what I think God envisions our relationship with money to be. Moreover, the context of a scripture and the person speaking it should be factored into its interpretation. If a biblical principle concerning money is only mentioned

Christians often have trouble forming a consistent theological understanding of the role of money in human existence. Too often their approach depends on the misuse of scriptural passages taken out of context. A consistent Christian approach to money must be based on acknowledging God as the source of our wealth, and using it for the common good.

once in the Bible, then perhaps basing a whole theology on it is a mistake. What I have discovered in researching the many things the Bible says about money is that biblical scholars and well-informed Christian economists differ drastically on their theologies of money.

THEOLOGIES OF MONEY

Francis of Assisi, for example, grew up in a wealthy home but took a vow of poverty to become poor for Jesus's sake. Whenever he found someone poorer than he, he would take his coat off and give it to that person. It's possible he adopted this practice from reading Luke 3:7–11,¹ in which John called the crowds coming to be baptized a “brood of vipers” and urged them to “bear fruits worthy of repentance.” When the crowds asked John what to do to accomplish this, one of the instructions he gave them was that if any had two coats, they should share with one who had none. This passage suggests that perhaps this sacrifice was a form of repentance rather than direction to be applied universally, but Francis took it as the latter and believed he was called to be the poorest of all.

On the other hand, modern “prosperity gospel” preachers emphasize the many prosperity passages in the Bible that indicate God's desire and commitment to bless God's people financially. There is something spiritually wrong, they contend, if we don't claim it. Deuteronomy 8:18, for example, says, “But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.” Proverbs 10:22 tells us that “the blessing of the Lord makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it.” From the Bible's rich heritage of prosperity scriptures, we learn that we have a rich God who wants us to share in God's riches, but some prosperity preachers go so far as to declare that all we need to do to obtain this wealth is to “name it and claim it,” completely ignoring the fact that the prosperity scriptures focus on the provisions of God's covenant with humanity and the importance of having an intimate relationship with God that is characterized by our loving response. In Malachi 3:10, receiving wealth from God is conditioned upon a person's obedience to tithe to the Lord: “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.” Naming and claiming riches without reverencing and obeying God, including tithing, is destined to fail.

The perspectives of Reformed and Puritan theologians, which include some of my ancestors, are different still, taking the focus from money and putting it on work and frugality. They are not concerned about whether they obtain money, but only about whether they are being obedient to God in acting as good stewards of God's money. In the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30), Jesus identifies the two good and faithful servants as those who invest their master's money and give back

¹ NRSV translation used throughout.

to the owner double what he has invested. The third servant, whom the master refers to as “wicked and lazy,” simply puts the money the owner gives him in the ground without investing it to get a return. That servant was not a good steward, and the money he had was taken from him and given to a good steward. Based on this parable, it is easy to see why Reformed and Puritan theologians may end up being wealthy despite their lack of focus on money: they work hard and manage their money wisely.

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Liberation theology is a prominent system in the Global South, particularly in Latin America, where it grew out of the Roman Catholic Church’s deep concern for the poverty and social injustice of the poor. Strongly influenced by Marxist ideology, liberation theologians argue that the poor are oppressed because of the wealth of the rich. They contend that money should be used to overthrow the rich and redistribute wealth to the poor in the name of Jesus Christ. The church has actively worked to better the lives of the poor in Latin America, although the Marxist contention that the wealth of the rich is the actual cause of poverty is not substantiated by Scripture. However, Proverbs 22:7 does say that “the rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender.” The implication is that being rich puts people in a position to be oppressors and that borrowing money makes people subservient to those from whom they borrow.

Then there is the mission-based theology of money advanced by missiologist and Presbyterian missionary Ralph Winter. He argues that we should use money to win the world to Jesus Christ and has proposed some interesting strategies for doing so. One such strategy is for American Christians seriously committed to Jesus Christ to live on a missionary’s income and donate the rest in support of missionaries. He has calculated that if every Presbyterian in the United States lived on the average Presbyterian pastor’s salary, \$2 billion more would be available for missions. This totals more than three times what all Americans currently give for missions.

THREE TENETS IN MY THEOLOGY OF MONEY

Money Is a Means

There are both positive and negative references to money in the Bible, but essentially the biblical view is that money is good. It is the way we view and use our

money that can be a problem. Genesis 13:2 describes the great godly Old Testament patriarch Abram as “very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold,” indicating that wealth and godliness can be compatible with each other. Deuteronomy 8:18 likewise instructs, “Remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.” The fact that wealth comes from God eliminates any suggestion that wealth itself is an evil thing, and in fact, Proverbs 10:22, as previously stated, acknowledges that “the blessing of the Lord makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it.”

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The endorsement of wealth and plenty is not limited to the Old Testament either, but some New Testament passages provide insight such as 2 Corinthians 9:8 tells us: “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” Here there is a suggestion that how you spend your money is important. If you share what you have, then your heart and your attitude toward money are healthy and godly. If you are impacted by the love of money, however, your heart is not right where money is concerned, and your motives will also be affected. First Timothy 6:10 asserts that “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.”

Loving money is a bellwether, as well, revealing the true state of a person’s heart. When the rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked what good things he must do to have eternal life, Jesus perceived the condition of the man’s heart and said, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” The Bible reports that “when the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (Matt 19:16–22). I know that many of us have seen this as a story about wealth and the power it possesses to block what’s important in this life. And some of that is true, of course. However, I think the deeper truth of this famous story is about earning God’s favor: Jesus wants us to see that if we had to earn God’s favor, none of us could do it.

It would be interesting to have Jesus try the same test on some of us, particularly those of us who have accumulated great wealth. My question today might sound more like, “Jesus, what must I do to live fully, deeply, passionately, meaningfully now in this lifetime and in a way of significance for eternity?” I’ve learned that money has little to do with the answer to this question. A person who loves money cannot serve God with his or her whole heart. Although God has nothing against our having wealth, God does not want it to captivate our hearts, which are

meant to be captivated by God. This is why Jesus says in Matthew 19:23–24, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” These and other verses lead me to the theological premise that God intends money to be regarded as a means and not as an end in itself.

Money Demands Stewardship

Stewardship is using and caring for that which belongs to another. You might wonder why stewardship is so important to God. After all, we have already determined that “the blessing of the Lord makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it” (Prov 10:22); God wants you to enjoy your wealth. A subtle shift can take place in a person’s attitude, however, when prosperity comes, and that change can dramatically alter one’s experience with it. Acquiring wealth gives you power, and when you have power, the limits to what you can do come off. To put it another way, the limits to what you can get away with evaporate. The wealthy person has power over other people. He or she can buy and sell, hire and fire, influence others, and begin to think of himself or herself as greater than their neighbor. This is the antithesis of what it means to be a Christian. We have been called to be servants, not lords—humble, not haughty. Philippians 2:5–7 admonishes us to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,” but thought of himself as a servant.

Christians who seek godly prosperity are in line with what God wants for us. God does not want us to have to beg and borrow but to be able to lend and give. But when people want money so they can exercise power over other people—and other people’s money—their theology of money has become warped. Jesus made it clear that our relationship with money governs the way we live our lives. A Christian with a warped theology of money is vulnerable to greed, covetousness, selfish ambition, and a host of other sins. We need only consider the disciple Judas, who, despite being with Jesus every day, experiencing his love and his ministry, became so tempted by money that he traded Jesus’s life for thirty pieces of silver—this, after he had been entrusted with the role of treasurer for the band of disciples.

As Christians, we are to be prosperous—even wealthy—but our character needs to match the level of our wealth so that we will not misuse our resources or allow the way we think and live to be impacted. Our perspective on ownership will influence our character. John Wesley demonstrated this when his house burned. He exclaimed, “The Lord’s house burned. One less responsibility for me!” When we recognize that God is ultimately responsible for what we possess, it liberates us from greed. This principle was brought home even more forcefully by the nineteenth-century preacher Charles Finney. In 1835, as president of Oberlin College, Finney published a series of lectures on revival that included the admonition

for students to renounce ownership of all their possessions and of themselves, contending that “if they have not done this, they are not Christians.”²

Stewardship encompasses the recognition that we are taking care of something that belongs to someone else. This became clear to me years ago when a friend lent me his brand-new BMW while my own car was being repaired. Had the BMW been my own car, I would have felt comfortable driving and parking it anywhere I wished, but because the car belonged to someone else, I took extra care in choosing where to drive and park it.

The fact that money demands stewardship reflects the principle that money is a means rather than an end in itself. If we do not expect to accomplish anything meaningful with our money, we will spend it freely and without firm direction. If, on the other hand, we view money as a means for achieving something of importance, such as saving lives, helping our brothers and sisters who live on the margins, or providing society with solutions for problems, we will think of our spending in a different way. Money that meets needs and solves problems is more precious to us than money that buys random “stuff.”

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Money Is a God

We may not think we have made money a god in our lives because we do not worship it the way we worship the true God in church. The problem is that many of us prioritize money over God. Money is as much a god as the carved images of the Old Testament or the many I saw in India while visiting a few years ago. It can be loved, worshipped, trusted, and lived for. It has extraordinary spiritual power. However, Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Matt 6:24). It is an either-or proposition. The one you serve displaces the other in your life. Money competes with God for our allegiance, and we unwittingly trust it to do the things God has promised and acted to do for us—heal our illnesses, give us peace and free us of anxieties, solve problems, and give meaning

² Charles G. Finney, *Revival Lectures* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1835), 180, https://www.what-saiththescriture.com/Text.Only/pdfs/Revival_Lectures_Text.pdf.

and significance to our lives. In a materialistic society, money is the god. If you extend this analogy farther, you can see banks as the money god's temples and financiers as its clergy.

UNDERSTANDING WHY WE SPEND MONEY

For people living at a subsistence level, money is a problem-solver. It can buy food, shelter, and other basic necessities. I have observed over the years that for nearly everyone else, however, money is primarily a distraction from the things we do not feel comfortable confronting—boredom, relational problems, money issues, and more. We spend to feel good, and when we invest in activities we enjoy, such as a family vacation or season tickets to the orchestra or the ballpark, spending can bring us lasting memories that we will treasure again and again.

There is a difference, however, between spending to feel good and spending to not feel bad. The latter is an avoidance mechanism that brings no satisfaction in itself but is rather an attempt to salve some hurt or problem by distracting ourselves with something else. This strategy does not bring joy, and even while we are distracting ourselves, we can still be bored. The most worthwhile spending is spending for connection. We may have people over for a gathering or join others in supporting a cause. (One thing to be careful of here is for parents to avoid using money to force their children to connect with them by granting or threatening to withhold connection. Over the years, I've seen that turn out badly.)

One way to analyze our spending triggers and values is to pretend to have \$1 million and think about how we would spend it. After mapping out our imaginary spending, we can go through the spending decisions to evaluate why we made the hypothetical choices we did. Understanding why we made certain decisions might cause us to change them. Of course, we tend to think we will be happier once a life circumstance changes or once we finally acquire something we have been wanting, but Jonathan Clements's 2006 *Wall Street Journal* article, "Nine Tips for Investing in Happiness," suggests otherwise.³ Clements advises spending more time with friends, not expecting happiness to be linked to a pay raise, hesitating before trading up in housing, keeping your commute time short, counting your blessings, enjoying a good meal, challenging yourself, volunteering for something useful, and being patient. Interestingly, none of the nine tips advises buying more things. The implication is that happiness seems to be more related to what we give than what we get. It seems, from my experience, that the best investment strategy for enriching our lives is one predicated on honoring God, honoring our neighbor as ourselves, and finding ways to give ourselves away. By doing this I have been enriched, not materially perhaps, but in ways that truly satisfy and bring joy.

³ Jonathan Clements, "Nine Tips for Investing in Happiness," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 8, 2006.

WHO IS CREATING YOUR DESTINY?

A few years ago, I saw a sculpture titled “Self Made Man.” A description of the sculpture said, “The powerful image of the rugged ‘Self-Made Man’ chiseling himself out of a solid block of rock captures the essence of the freedom philosophy—that left to his own devices, man will use his God-given talents to be creative, productive, and prosperous. Using free will, he will better his own situation and that of those around him, thereby influencing in a positive way his own destiny.”⁴

My father was considered a self-made man in his day. He grew up in Minneapolis during the Depression and attended MIT and Stanford on the GI Bill. However, he recognized that his success was made possible by generous people along the way who put him in the right places, paid the bills, and helped him get the scholarships that brought him to success. It was by God’s gracious hand. Thinking back to the sculpture, I ask you: Can a sculpture chisel itself out of the rock? Of course not. Yet many of us still have the proverbial hammer and chisel in hand and believe we are forming our own lives out of the rock.

Do you really believe you are “self-made”—completely responsible for your own success? Or do you sense that God has been shaping, molding, and providing for you all along in a manner that you do not yet even comprehend? In your heart of hearts, you know the truth. You are not self-made; you’re God-made. Your life is in God’s hands—not to sell or own casually because it satisfies a whim or a need, but to be given to God in humble gratitude. My theology of money over the years has developed in the simple realization that God first gave to me and has been faithful to me. Jesus is what generosity looks like in the flesh to me. And that generosity is the heart of faith.

In Exodus 35, the Israelites responded generously to God’s generosity toward them. They remembered how God continued to give them second chances. They remembered how God constantly saved and preserved their lives. And they found themselves so overwhelmed with gratitude that they had to give back to the one who had given them so much. In my better moments I try to be like this, too. I’m not always successful, but just as God did with the Israelites, in spite of our humanness, God keeps calling us back, loving us and forgiving us. ☩

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⁴ Shambu Nashipudi, “Self Made Man,” *My Alter-ego* (blog), January 22, 2006, <http://iandmyalterego.blogspot.com/2006/01/self-made-man.html>.