

## Learning to Live Without Avarice

September 18, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

### Matthew 6:19-24

*<sup>19</sup> "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup> But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

*<sup>22</sup> "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. <sup>23</sup> But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!*

*<sup>24</sup> "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.*

When was the last time you really couldn't live without something? You thought about it. You dreamed about it. Perhaps you even had to save up a long time in order to get it. Then when you got it, it was nice to have for a while. Perhaps you even took special care of it for awhile. And then, it started to get a little worn, or a new version of it came along, and eventually the thing you once could not live without got thrown in a corner, stored in the attic or simply thrown away. After all, something else came along that you couldn't live without and you needed to start focusing on that instead.

I have lived through several crazes of where people just had to have something and later, once the novelty wore off, it was hard to even sell the things – Cabbage Patch dolls, mood rings, pet rocks, stress spinners. Once we start accumulating stuff, we always want more. Apparently John D. Rockefeller, the wealthiest man in the world, told a reporter that he was not really happy or satisfied. The reporter asked him how much money it would take to make him happy, and Rockefeller said famously, "Just a little bit more."<sup>1</sup> When I was a chaplain for a local fire department, I recall some of the members being very concerned about how some homes are so chuck full of stuff that they would be hard put to help anyone escape a fire. We as Americans have so much stuff that we don't know what to do with that we have helped make the storage unit business a

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, James Bryan. The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ (The Apprentice Series Book 2) . InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

multi-billion dollar industry. According to Mordor Intelligence, “The global self-storage market (hereafter referred to as the market studied) was valued at USD 48.02 billion in 2020 and is expected to reach a value of USD 64.71 billion by 2026, registering a CAGR [Compound Annual Growth Rate] of 5.45% over the forecast period, 2021-2026.”<sup>2</sup>

Avarice, [that is extreme greed for wealth or material gain] whispers to us, “Wealth and material gain will make you happy and secure. It will impress others. It will give you power.” And this, of course, is partially true. Having money does give you a sense of security. Having enough to pay your bills, go on vacation, and enjoy life does bring us a sense of comfort. Having things does give us pleasure, at least momentarily.

But not long after, we lose the elation that we first felt. The toy sits in the corner, the car is not as good as the one we now covet, and the house is just a place to live in—not as nice as our neighbor’s, which leads to covetousness. Many of today’s purchases are tomorrow’s load to the dump. We buy the lie that money and possessions will make us secure and happy, but eventually they let us down. Outside the kingdom of God, money and possessions are about all we can turn to in order to have these needs met. Fortunately, we don’t have to live outside.

... Jesus teaches us that there are two kinds of treasures: earthly and heavenly. Treasures on earth comprise things like money and material possessions. Anything that a thief could steal from us, a moth could nibble on or rust can corrode is an earthly treasure. They are temporary. ...Treasures in heaven relate to the things God is doing. And we know that God is helping people. Thus the best way to lay up treasures in heaven is to live out Matthew 6:33: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.”<sup>3</sup>

In the Scripture about the eyes being unhealthy and opening the whole body to darkness was an idiom used in Jesus’ day. If someone had an “unhealthy eye,” that meant that they were an envious, jealous person. The point is that if you allow greed to enter into your thoughts it will take over your whole being. It will become all-consuming.

In the final illustration, Jesus points out the logical—but not obvious—truth that we cannot pursue earthly treasures and the kingdom of God at the same time. Mammon refers to wealth or the spirit of wealth. Jesus says mammon is a rival god. Scholars have no record of mammon being used in a negative way in Hebrew culture, thus Jesus’ words must have shocked his hearers, who typically believed wealth was a sign

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<sup>2</sup> [Self Storage Market Trends, Growth & Industry Analysis | 2022-27 \(mordorintelligence.com\)](https://mordorintelligence.com/industry-reports/self-storage-market-trends-growth-industry-analysis-2022-27)

<sup>3</sup> James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Life*.

of God's blessing. Why was Jesus so bold as to call wealth a god? Money and wealth are godlike in several ways. First, money outlives us, having an almost eternal dimension. Second, it has a wide circle of influence—everyone respects it. People may not like the rich, but most people respect their money: "Money talks and people listen." Third, wealth pretends to offer what we want from God — security, comfort and happiness. This is why we are prone to "serve" money. But money, wealth and material possessions are not the real issue; our hearts are. It's possible to be very poor and serve mammon; it's possible to be wealthy and have a kingdom heart. The outward issue (money or lack thereof) is not important. The inward issue—where our heart is set—is what really matters. Jesus contrasts God and mammon because they compete for our hearts.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus understood how the kingdom of God operates. The kingdom runs on specific economic principles that contrast with the kingdom of this world. Our kingdom narrative is God will provide for and protect me and mine, and therefore I am free to seek his kingdom and invest the resources he gives me in his endeavors. The kingdom gives a new perspective on money. God is out for our good and has endless resources. We can never out ask God. How does God provide for our needs? Not by dropping money from the sky or secretly depositing it into our bank account. God moves money and resources through people. Always. Kingdom economics works this way. And when God uses money through people, he also gives it back to them. This is another key to kingdom economics. Money given on kingdom principles is never lost.<sup>5</sup>

Treating this as an investment scheme is bad teaching. James Bryan Smith once heard a preacher say, "If you send my ministry a thousand dollars, you will receive ten thousand dollars in return." Then a couple told a story on how they gave their last penny to a certain ministry and then were rewarded by becoming millionaires. That is the prosperity gospel, the gospel of success, and it is not what Jesus is teaching here.

It is about investing in heavenly treasures; that is, investing in what God is doing which will accrue eternal interest.

Stingy people do not understand kingdom economics and are afraid to give generously because they fear it will be lost. And mammon is not the right god to serve; mammon makes no return on investments but merely takes from us and enslaves us. God liberates us from the bondage that comes when we love money

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

more than people. ...When we invest in what God is doing, there is a return for the advancement of the kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

Living in the kingdom requires wisdom. It entails understanding Jesus' teaching not as universal laws (except the Great Commandment, to love God, self, and neighbor) but as insights for kingdom living. We need to examine the ways we spend money, how we think about possessions, and see them in the light of the kingdom of God.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.