



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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## MONEY

When we think of the spiritual life, money is not the first thing that comes to mind. Not only does "filthy lucre" seem far removed from prayer and worship, but the thought of bringing our spending under God's scrutiny and authority makes us uncomfortable. We fear (often rather dimly) that we are too self-indulgent in our spending. There are always worthy causes out there in need of support: am I really doing my part? Can I have a steak today or should I give \$25 to the parish food pantry? Should I try to muddle through with my old Ford for another winter or should I give \$500 to the Organ Restoration Fund? In the first place, we are not quite sure how to apply the Gospel to such choices, and in the second we are not sure that we want to!

We are also tempted to be preoccupied with money. This is possible whether we have much or little. This preoccupation interferes with prayer, as well as with caring for other people. We think that the necessity of making money leaves no time for prayer or any other spiritual discipline. We begin to see life in terms of costs and earnings.

It seems a no-win situation: if we don't give it all away, we feel guilty for not doing our all, and if we do give it all away we will not be able to provide for our real and legitimate needs. Our usual solution is to try to segregate our financial concerns from our Christian life. This doesn't work very well, either, for we are material creatures as well as spiritual. And we are to be Christians with the whole of our being: all of our life is to be lived under the Lordship of Christ.

Fortunately, there are some Scriptural principles which can help us out of our dilemma. In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), Jesus gives us the principle of stewardship. This means two things. First, what we have has been given to us. It is not, strictly speaking, our own, but a gift from God. Remembering this keeps us from grasping our wealth too closely, and from the vanity of thinking well of ourselves because of our money. If we are blessed with riches, it is God's generosity, rather than a reward for our virtue or hard work.

Second, the parable of the talents makes it clear that we have responsibility for the wealth that God has given us. We must use it, trade with it, and not merely hoard it. We will be called to account for what we have done. Judgment follows not just on whether we have said our prayers and gone to church, but on how we have used the wealth God has given into our hands. Our responsibility is real, and we are responsible not to ourselves but to God. We cannot hope to resolve our dilemma without God, for He is the one who will render the judgment.

God has given us the responsibility. We are to take it seriously. This means that there is no automatic formula as to how to use our wealth, for this would deliver us from real responsibility. It was for such that the third servant wished, in hiding his lord's money and returning it intact. His condemnation follows for his refusal to take up the responsibility. Nor can we ignore it or wish it away. God wants us to be responsible, and to learn responsibility by the way we use our money.

We begin to grasp the difficulty of the responsibility when we recall the story of Jesus' anointing with the costly ointment in the house of Simon the Leper. (Mark 14:3-9) Some saw the woman's act as a waste of a precious resource which might have done much to relieve the poor. No doubt they expected Jesus' approval for their murmuring, knowing His commitment to the poor. Yet He rebukes them. Her offering is acceptable, anointing His body for burial beforehand. The uniqueness of His presence warrants the offering. This is something more important than the care of the poor.

I think we have to admit that the appropriateness of the woman's offering is not obvious. We will need God's help if we are to discern how we are to spend our money. The difficulty of the choices we face every day is to make us flee to Him for help. We are to be His stewards, and as such constantly seek His guidance in our stewardship. The woman was able to make her sacrifice -- and ignore those who criticized her -- because she was wholly focused on Jesus. Being filled with the love of God as she was, we will be open to the needs of those around us. "But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" (I John 3:17) The needs around us are daunting, and we may feel a vague guilt at not doing enough. This is a problem so long as others' needs and our wealth abide. The solution lies in putting self aside, and allowing God to fill us with Himself -- just as the

woman was wholly centered on Jesus. Then we can discern the right use of our riches.

The third (and most unsettling) story is of the widow who cast the two mites into the temple treasury. (Mark 12:41-44) Jesus tells the disciples (to their astonishment) that she "hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: for all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living." This is a story of incredible trust. The widow gave her all. She had two mites -- she could have kept one for herself and still made a very solid sacrificial offering. Yet in giving away all to God, she trusted that God would somehow take care of her. She is an example of faith.

While her faith is already a great challenge to us, we are unsettled by the substance of the offering. Compared to the needs of the temple, her offering was negligible. It would not repair the roof or feed the staff. It is hard for us to think of it as a great gift. And yet it is. We will not understand the way money works without God's gift of discernment.

The widow's gift was sacramental as well as sacrificial. In giving what little she had she shows her willingness to give her all to God. Her offering of the mites is a sacrament of her life: it represents her whole life. She wills to live entirely for God, and so disposes of her wealth accordingly.

These principles of sacrifice and sacrament are also expressed in the Old Testament idea of the tithe. The tithe was an offering to God of 10% off the top. Rejects and seconds didn't count: the offering was not a way to cull the defective sheep in the herd. This was a significant offering and no mere token. We sometimes forget this in these days of 20% (or 50%!) income taxes. But think what 10% of your take-home income represents in terms of what you buy for yourself: it is significant. The offering would be sacrificial.

The sacrificial offering is a sign of trust in God. The Israelites could not spend what they had given away (any more than we can). To give 10% to God is to trust that they could get by on what is left. Thus the tithes were not to be withheld until the end of the month. It was the primary commitment, and to be paid first. It was not the cushion to be paid when it was clear that there was enough to go around.

The tithe is also sacramental. The offering of the tenth represents the offering of the whole. Though only a tenth (and not the whole as with the widow's mites) the tithe symbolizes the whole. All belongs to God. Our stewardship must recognize this. The offering of the tenth -- a substantial portion -- does this in deed and not just in word.

Here are the principles we need to resolve our own questions about the use of our wealth. First, we hold it as stewards. It is to be used for God's

service. While we may earn our earthly wages by our labor, we should still regard our wealth as God's gift. This is especially true if we are blessed with some riches. Our pride is ever ready to take credit for it, and think that it is a reward for our virtue or hard work or talent. But we have nothing that we have not been given. Our right use of wealth depends upon our recognition (believed with the heart and not just with the head) that all we have is God's generous gift to us.

Second, we need His guidance (which comes from being filled with Him rather than self) to discern the right use of riches. We should ask for this insight, that we may see what He saw in the widow's gift and in the anointing in Bethany. Otherwise we will never be able to integrate our spiritual life with the place wealth has in our lives. The two will remain in separate, water-tight compartments, governed by disparate sets of rules. The goal of an integrated and whole Christian life will elude us, and our wealth will be used not spiritually but earthily. This discernment is essential if we are to be good stewards.

Third, our use of wealth must express our trust in God. Whenever we use it to secure our own position, we get into trouble. The wealth of the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-22) apparently kept him from being able to give his whole trust to God. We are tempted to secure our material position for ourselves, thinking that then we will be able to devote ourselves to the service of God without having to worry about money. This is a dangerous enterprise, as Jesus warns us in the parable of the rich man who would build greater barns in which to store his wealth (Luke 12:14-21). We will have to give account not just for what we have but for how we have used it. Neither wealth nor poverty is an excuse for putting off our Christian duty.

Fourth, our giving to the church is to be both sacrificial and sacramental. Offering a set percentage of income seems to be a good way of accomplishing this. The percentage must be high enough to be sacrificial, as in the tenth of the Old Testament Law. Only when the offering is substantial can it truly represent (symbolically) the offering of all that we have received at God's hands. If it is to represent the offering of all to God, then we must offer it "off the top" -- at the beginning of the week (or month), trusting that God will accept the offering, and get us through with what is left. Otherwise the offering can become a tip to God, or a kind of protection payment -- neither of which is worthy of us or Him!

While these principles give us the foundation for dealing with wealth as Christians, we must still go and do it. There is no magic answer which delivers us from the need to be responsible about it. So we must get on with it, as God's stewards, sharing our decisions with Him, seeking His help in discernment, asking His help to trust and depend upon Him in whatever situation we are. With thankfulness and trust we will not go far wrong.