

God, Man, & MAMMON

Navigating the tension between
the material and the spiritual

Chapter 17



with
Mitch
Anthony

IN THIS CHAPTER

Faith is Not a Get Rich Scheme

Rather than shy away from difficult conversations about money, Jesus confronts them head-on. From the beginning, he asks those who are eager to follow him, "What will you give up?"



FAITH IS NOT A GET RICH SCHEME

“When Jesus saw the crowd around him, He gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. Then a teacher of the law came to Him and said, ‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.’ Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.’”

– Matthew 8:18-20, NIV

The Cost of Following

Suppose for a moment that you own an enterprise and an intelligent, extremely capable individual approaches you and says, “I’m ready to give my life to be a part of what you are doing.” You begin the interview immediately. It doesn’t happen so quickly when Jesus is conducting the interview. He requires more than whimsical devotion and emotional arousal. In the text above, a highly esteemed law professor approaches Jesus saying, “I’m ready to follow you wherever you go.” Jesus answers, “I am not going to hide anything in the fine print. You need to understand what you are getting yourself into. Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but I, the one you want to follow, has no place to lie down and rest.”

Jesus typically met the candidates who possessed fresh fervor with immediate impediments to test their sincerity and stability (obviously with full understanding of the whimsicality of the human impulse). As a teacher of the law, this man had been accustomed to a degree of privilege, and so Jesus went right after the entitlement mentality by asking, “Do you want to follow me, even if you have to sleep outdoors?”

The Lack of Money—The Root of all Evil

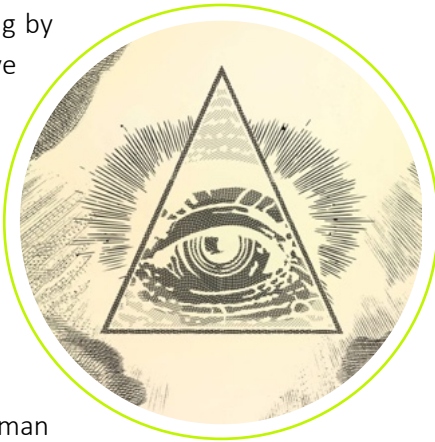
This incident is especially telling when examined in light of the lavish lifestyles of some modern ministries exposed in a congressional inquiry some years ago. The government grants special exemptions to church groups that abide by guidelines for tax-exempt status. Apparently \$30,000 gilded toilets and \$4.5 million parsonages fall outside of these guidelines. These examples are just the tip of the iceberg of how some of “God’s servants” serve themselves.

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There was an outcry against Senator Grassley, the leader of the inquiry, from many defendants and their defenders in the ministry community demonizing him and his actions. They failed to note that Senator Grassley (who has a sterling reputation as a person and a lawmaker) has attended an evangelical church for over 50 years and claims a personal faith in Jesus Christ. Senator Grassley's response to the demonization was, "Jesus rode in on a donkey and I find it difficult to see why any pastor needs to ride in with a Rolls Royce."

It's an old story— people using the gospel as a means to their own cupidity. The most convenient method for justifying material longing is to preach prosperity to your flock and then claim that you are leading by example. Compare these excessive examples against Jesus' caveat offered to the zealous seeker that he must first accept the fact that if he decides to join in the cause, there are no material guarantees and no promises of creature comforts.



We are not told whether or not the man followed Jesus, but it's a safe guess that he took some time to think it over. How many of us would lay down our lives for a cause if it meant laying our heads down in low budget motels? It's not always easy to sleep well on a low-quality mattress. And who doesn't prefer linens with a high-thread count? I suspect that an honest answer here goes farther with Jesus than pretentious service. If creature comforts mean that much—as they do to many—there are other ways to make ourselves useful.

If at the outset, when emotions are flying high and the spirit is infused with fresh vision, the seeker is deterred by the prospect of unpredictable lodging, one can just imagine how flimsy the so-called calling is. To point this out, Jesus describes a disturbing impediment to this potential devotee. Jesus is dropping the inference about "having a nest" to help this seeker clarify precisely how much this world means to him.

Is the cause more important than potential accoutrements? Are there people today who walk away from their callings if they can't maintain a certain lifestyle? I believe so. Eventually the love of this world and the bounties it offers will be the issue that sidetracks whatever vision and energies a person thinks he or she possess for God's sake.

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Just because Jesus postured the desire for creature comforts against discipleship in this particular case does not insinuate that the person serving him will not experience some degree of creature comfort and the warmth of the hearth. But attitudinally, Jesus requires the willingness to be put in that place, which expresses the realization that this world and all its amenities echo hollow in contrast to the transcendent joys of being a contributor toward the Kingdom of God. But the fact remains that there are many that want to have it both ways—preaching the word and reaching the heights. Here is a sampling of the incidents I have encountered in my life:

Evangelists flying to meetings in private chartered jets that cost 40x what a commercial flight would cost.

Pastors living material lifestyles two to ten times beyond their congregation's average lifestyle.

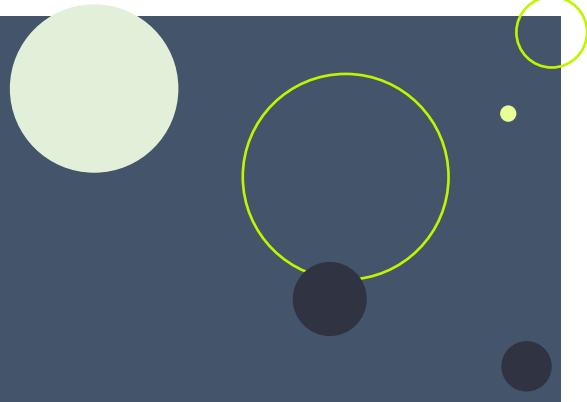
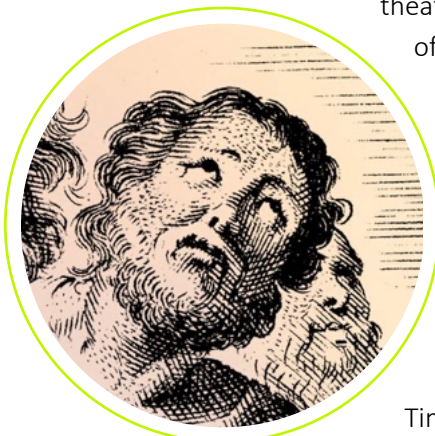
Ministries making impassioned pleas for money to save souls and rescue youth, and then using the funds to pay down debts resulting from foolish decisions.

Ministries raising funds for noble future projects, having the projects not materialize, and then not returning the funds or reporting the truth about the matter.

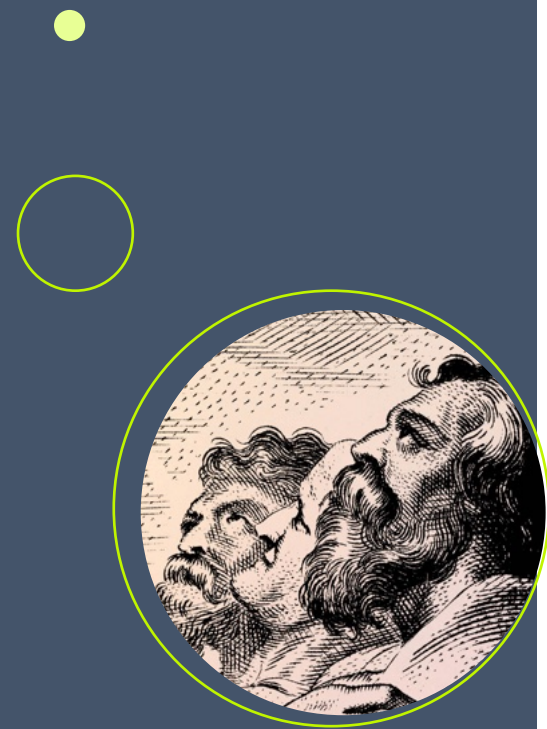
A Pastor in a small rural town convincing people in his congregation to donate toward a home for him by borrowing from their retirement funds (with the promise of paying them back when they sold the house someday) then selling the home, pocketed the proceeds, and leaving town.

Many years ago I heard a radio preacher who went by the name of “Reverend Ike” (Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter II) and would rant to his audience “the lack of money is the root of all evil.” His crowds would hoot and holler to his every suggestion of riches and prosperity. It was all quite entertaining, if not sacrilegious. Eikerenkoetter had fully restored and owned the Christ United Church, a former Loews

theatre in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan. In looking back, I almost respect the guy when I compare him to the carefully “sanctified” materialism of today—at least he was honest with his intentions! Where he wasn’t honest was in his adulterated interpretation of the verse, which states, “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10, NIV).



IF ONE DECIDES TO
JOIN JESUS' CAUSE,
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“Be wary of false preachers who smile a lot, dripping with practiced sincerity. Chances are they are out to rip you off some way or other. Don't be impressed with charisma; look for character. Who preachers are is the main thing, not what they say. A genuine leader will never exploit your emotions or your pocketbook. These diseased trees with their bad apples are going to be chopped down and burned”

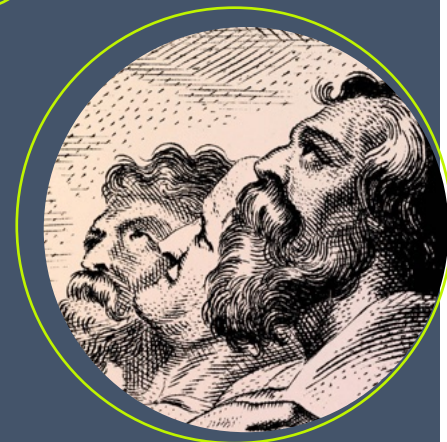
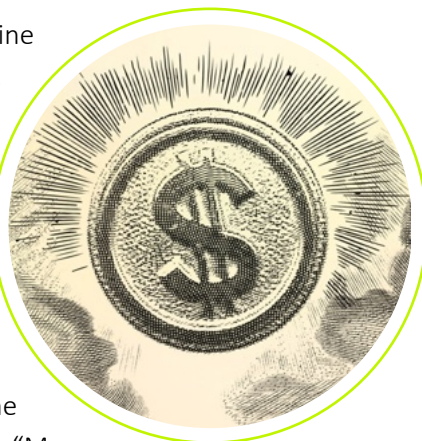
– Matt. 7:15-20, MSG

There are more than a few professing believers that truly believe faith in God manifests itself in material form. To these individuals a luxury car is a sign—even a symptom of a developed faith. I've heard preachers and parishioners in these churches talk of “Cadillac faith” and excuse their rapacious material appetites with statements like, “king's kids ought to dress like a king's kids” (because Jesus is the King of Kings).

One Sunday my son and I drove to a small church in the neighborhood where, I had heard, they liked to preach “prosperity.” It was a rag-tag group of about 20-some people, and I knew it would be difficult to blend into the woodwork there. We walked in as worship was beginning and found seats in the back, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible.

When the preacher rose to speak, he looked out into the crowd and, noting new faces (ours), said, “Well, I had prepared a message on such and such a topic today, but I feel like the Lord wants me to preach about prosperity.” It was quite apparent that everyone in the room had heard this message before (to little effect) and his message was clearly aimed at me. He was hoping to convince me, as I'm sure he did every visitor, that it was OK to be rich, and so began his pitch for shameless, Bible-based acquisition. It was one of the most hideous distortions of scripture I have ever witnessed—greed compounded by ignorance.

He preached, “Jesus wore such a fine garment that the Roman soldiers at the cross gambled to see who would get it. He rode into Jerusalem on the finest transportation of the day (a donkey?) and he had his own personal treasurer (Judas) to help manage his money.” Ahhhh... nothing but the finest for Jesus, the King. I don't know what he did with the verse where Jesus tells Pilate that “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36, NIV). In this preacher's



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version of the gospels, one's faith was the treasure chest for the absolute best the world could offer.

Ironically, this preacher was wearing a cheap suit and his parking lot was replete with old, rusted out cars. I had witnessed this same juxtaposition of message and materiality in other places, which indicates that the prosperity gospel is as much an elixir for wannabes as it is an anesthetic for the greedy. As soon as the service ended, I grabbed my son's hand and made a beeline for the exit. But we weren't quick enough. As soon as we sat on my motorbike, the preacher came darting out the door toward us to make an introduction. He asked my name and then immediately, what it was that I did for a living. No surprise there.

I told him I consulted in the financial world. "Oh," he replied. "I'm involved in investments as well." He began to describe a multi-level investment opportunity. I soon recognized that the venture he described had managed to skirt all regulatory agencies and was a Ponzi scheme. When he wasn't relieving people of their money in his "business" during the day, he was doing it from his pulpit on the weekends.

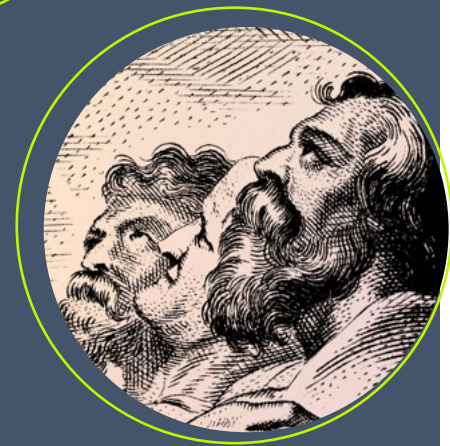
Paul the Apostle warned his protégé, Timothy, about this sort of minister, describing them this way, "They do not have the truth. They think religion is a way to get much for themselves" (1 Timothy 6:5, NIV). Paul corrects that attitude by writing further, "A God-like life gives us much when we are happy for what we have" (1 Timothy 6:6, NIV). The King James Bible translates this as, "Godliness with contentment is great gain." To listen to many of the prosperity-evangelists, you would think it read, "Godliness with great gain is contentment."



Paul concludes the money discussion with a sobering reminder, "We came into this world with nothing. For sure, when we die, we will take nothing with us. If we have food and clothing, let us be happy. But men who want lots of money are tempted. They are trapped into doing all kinds of foolish things and things which hurt them. These things drag them into sin and will destroy them.

The love of money is the beginning of all kinds of sin. Some people have turned from the faith because of their love for money. They have made much pain for themselves because of this." (1 Timothy 6:7-10, NIV)

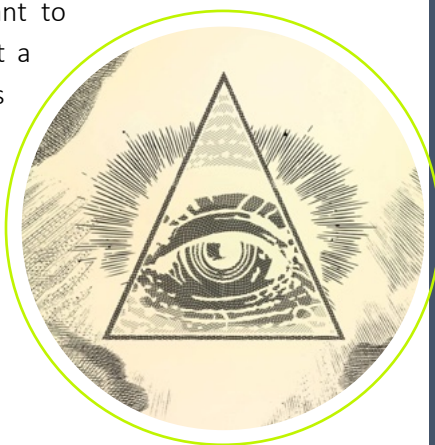
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The long and short of what Paul is trying to tell us is this: If we continue our obsession with monetary gain, we'll screw up whatever good life God has prepared for us. The last place we need to be tempted to think about more money is at church. No wonder Jesus went into a rage and dumped out the cash registers after witnessing the merging of the marketplace into the temple.

It is refreshing to see ministers like Rick Warren, author of *A Purpose Driven Life*, who speaks out against the excesses of those who claim to be Christ's servants. "Success in any area often creates a spirit of entitlement—'I deserve this'—that is the exact opposite of servant leadership," Warren says. "It is evidence of insecurity and low self-esteem. Insecure people show off. Secure people serve."¹ Warren walks the walk as well—giving away 90-percent of his significant book royalties, accepting no fee to speak (he could easily demand five figures), and taking no salary from his church.

There is no reason a minister should not enjoy the creature comforts of a good home, transportation, and wardrobe. But such a calling comes with restraints on the material impulse. Jesus' declaration, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matt. 8:20, NLV) is an indication that if having the finest is a prerequisite to service then one should pass on electing to serve. I have always been morally repulsed by those who claim to serve yet are living opulent lifestyles far beyond the reach of those they supposedly serve. We may end up with wonderful creature comforts, but we are not to make it a prerequisite of our faith. Jesus imposed a restriction on material appetite for those who want to volunteer into his service. It was not a vow of poverty he asked his followers to accept, but rather a disclaimer on material guarantees. If we need "stuff" to make us happy, then we clearly are not grasping his message.



¹ Rick Warren quote from USA Today, Monday, Jan. 7, 2008, p.11a.

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