

God, Man, & MAMMON

Navigating the tension between
the material and the spiritual

Chapter 18



with
Mitch
Anthony

IN THIS CHAPTER

NOT WORTH FALLING

We have been too easily convinced that our wealth and resources are separate from our faith and spiritual life. Jesus teaches us that they are intertwined. Our own selfish ambitions are no excuse for putting money on a pedestal.



NOT WORTH FALLING

“Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, ‘What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?’ So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: ‘The one I kiss is the man; arrest him.’ Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, ‘Greetings, Rabbi!’ and kissed him.

Jesus replied, ‘Friend, do what you came for.’”

— Matthew 26:14-16, 48-50, NIV

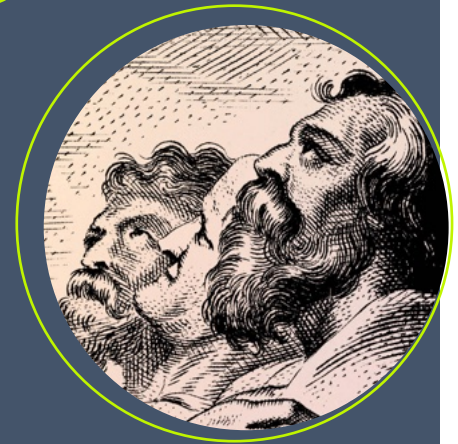
“For thirty coins Judas sold himself, not Jesus.” — Anonymous

In his last interaction with Judas, Jesus addressed him as “friend.” Jesus was never one to shy away from calling people out for what they were. But at the moment of his arrest, Jesus did not call Judas what he was—a traitor, a thief, or a greedy dealmaker—he called him “friend.” It makes me wonder what personal dealings and conversations might have gone on between the two of them in their time together. It stirs fright in me to realize how close someone can be to Jesus and still maintain selfish and greedy inclinations that ultimately serve the kingdom of darkness.

Slip into Judas' sandals and imagine spending three and half intimate years with Jesus, witnessing the miracles, hearing his loving tone to the downtrodden and the searing tones spoken to the Pharisees. Imagine the moments where Judas experienced the genuine love and truth that emanated from Jesus. Imagine the honor he felt being appointed into the inner circle of twelve out of the hundreds that followed.

In our modern telling of the story, Judas is painted in one-dimensional strokes. But like all humans he was a complex creature with many conflicts raging within him. Let us not lose sight of the fact that he left whatever he had been doing to follow Jesus, was appointed with the twelve, gave alms to the poor, displayed remorse, and ultimately meted out his own judgment upon himself.

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But in spite of being in that intimate circle to the most amazing human to walk the planet, Judas could not veer from his own agenda. These motivations destroyed him. The human condition is a frightful thing.

Judas the Puppet

“Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed. So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. ‘I have sinned,’ he said, ‘for I have betrayed innocent blood.’

‘What is that to us?’ they replied. ‘That’s your responsibility.’

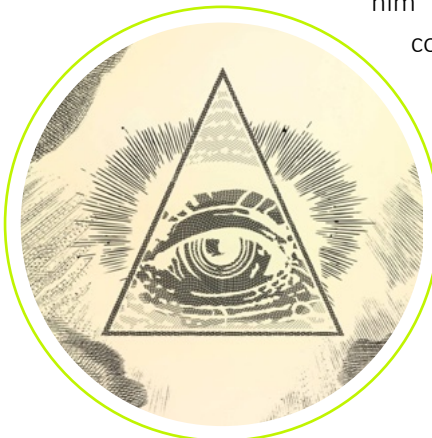
So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

The chief priests picked up the coins and said, ‘It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money.’ So they decided to use the money to buy the potter’s field as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: ‘They took the thirty silver coins, the price set on him by the people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me.’”

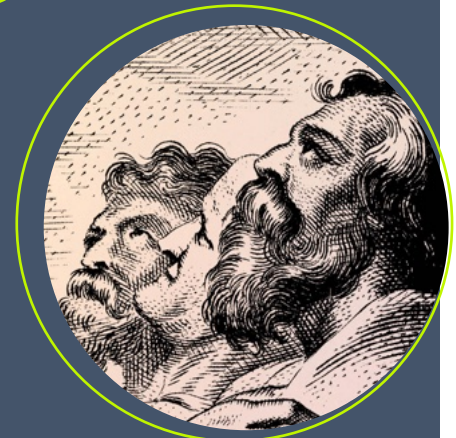
— Matthew 27:1-10, NIV

This story is replete with examples of human contradictions that shortsightedness and greed can produce. *“What is that to us?”* was the answer the chief priests gave to Judas when he approached them, seized with grief and horror over what he had done to Jesus. These priests paid Judas to turn over an innocent man who was now being unjustly put to death—all on account of their political machinations—and they have the temerity to ask, *“What is that to us?”* They had manipulated Judas with the skill of a marionette, led him to his self-made grave, wrested control of Jesus, sent him to his grave, and convinced themselves that they had no blood on their hands.

It’s amazing how everyone involved in this kangaroo court was quick to claim exemption from the deed, to wash their hands of the matter, and to push



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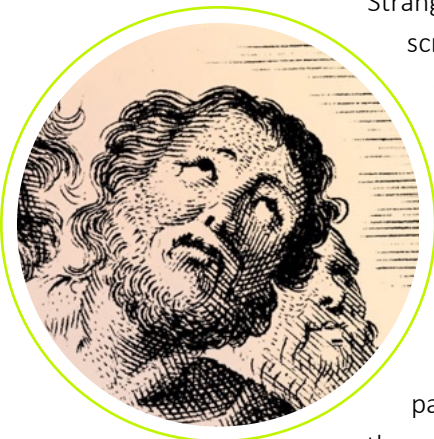
the blame elsewhere. But there would be no bribery without the coins. Who counted out those coins? From what fund did they obtain the coins? Odds are that the bribe came from the temple funds, and yet the priests had the brashness and the nerve to say, *"It is against the law to put this money into the treasury as it is blood money."* So they decided to use the coins for their grave-plot business. Their acts, their dark hearts, and their sinister egos are what made the coins "blood money." Jesus' blood was not only on their hands but on their coins as well.

Did the law they so rigidly enforced have anything to say about paying for murder? About killing a righteous prophet? About letting guilty men go free? Judas, the one solely blamed for this treason, had grossly miscalculated. Some historians say that Judas, coming from a Zealot background, believed that by turning Jesus over he would be forcing his hand to establish his earthly kingdom. He never imagined Jesus responding like a lamb going to the slaughter. Judas' temporal agenda and greed came together to form a twisted braid that eventually got strung around his own tortured neck.

What we do with our money, we do to our soul. One is an expression of the other. We can't invest in an unrighteous act and pretend we had no part in the result. What puzzles me most about this conspiracy is how these knowledgeable priests were able to block out not only the voice of conscience, but also the voice of the very prophecies they taught—in the act of paying for Jesus' betrayal.

Strange, isn't it, that with all the knowledge of scripture present between high priests and elders, that Jeremiah's passage would not come to mind: *"They took the thirty silver coins, the price set on him by the people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."*

Jeremiah not only predicted the amount paid for divine treason but also the name of the real estate purchased with the funds. God knows well ahead of time what lurks in our hearts regarding money. He knows what decisions each of us are pondering and what actions we are preparing to justify. Jeremiah may not have prophesied about our particular money sins, but God knows and has a record before the transaction ever gets made.



WHAT WE DO
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Our Fields

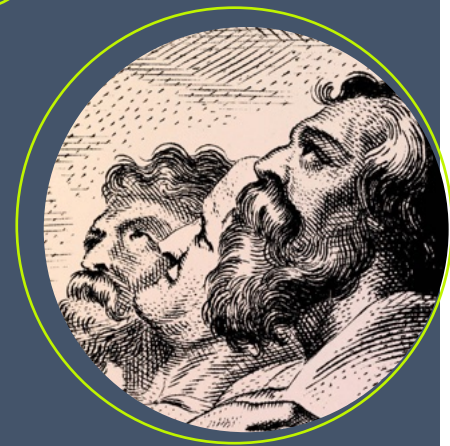
What fields will we leave behind? What legacy to money will echo in our wake when we leave this planet? Will there be those who remember us in bitterness because they felt they were cheated? Probate court logs are jammed with examples of people doing their best to get their hands on money and property they feel they deserve, with little or no thought of the cost in ravaged relationships. Ask estate-planning attorneys about the money-loving instincts they have witnessed in the settling of wills. One attorney told me, "You can't believe how ugly, petty and nasty people can become over a piece of furniture, property, or stock holding, and how they are willing to throw away lifetime relationships in the process." Families are left fuming over the spoils of departure, where pieces of furniture, instead of 30 silver coins, incite betrayal.

I know a woman who lost her husband as a newlywed. In his three-month battle to live, her husband had forgotten to sign over his life insurance policy to his new bride, which meant that the monetary benefit automatically went to his parents. They, of course, would know to give it to their deceased son's widow! But these avowing believers' money logic told them otherwise, and so they kept the money and bought a business—which ironically burned to the ground a short time later leaving behind a field of blood.

Judas, the most notorious but not sole instigator of Jesus' betrayal, is an object lesson for all time as to how hard a person can fall. None of us wants to look at Judas and see so much as a hint of ourselves. But we are made of the same clay from which his greed was formed. It is easy to say we would never have sold out the greatest man to ever walk the planet for 30 pieces of silver. We would never betray the Son of God for monetary gain. We wouldn't follow Jesus and hover over his moneybag so we could personally profit from his appeal. We would never feign interest in a new forward-looking movement to meet our own ends. We would never sell out our better selves and compromise our principles to make a profit. Only Judas would do something like that...so we tell ourselves.

We don't really know what we would do for money until faced with the proposition. In their seminal book, *The Day America Told the Truth*, Patterson and Kim reveal a disturbing picture of our culture. People were asked how much money it would take for them to

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commit a murder, cheat on their spouse, etc. At the time, the going rate for killing a stranger for 7 percent of our population was \$2-10 million. Can we really grasp the ethos of our culture where, if the price is right, one in fourteen of your co-workers and so-called friends would seriously consider running you over? The thought shocks the senses. When asked what they were willing to do for \$10 million, 2/3 of respondents agreed they would do at least one of the following (and some said they would do several):

- Abandon their family (25 percent);
- Abandon their church (25 percent);
- Become prostitutes for a week (23 percent);
- Leave their spouses (16 percent);
- Withhold testimony and let a murderer go free (10 percent); and
- Put their children up for adoption (3 percent).

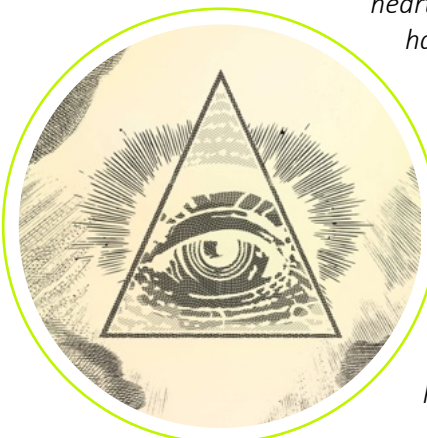
With inflation factored in, I'm sure the price for these crimes of the soul has risen in our times, but the principle is the same: depending on the action required, more than a few people are willing to sell themselves out for cash. There might be a little more of the Judas instinct lurking in our culture and in our souls than we would like to admit. Don't forget that Judas had a conscience—it just kicked in a little too late. He hung himself in the field purchased with blood money. We are told later in the New Testament of another incident where financial gain brought some people down into their graves.

Double Dealing

“Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

Then Peter said, ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God.’

When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the



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young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, 'Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?'

'Yes,' she said, 'that is the price.'

Peter said to her, 'How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.'

At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events."

— Acts 5:1-11, NIV

As disturbing as this story is, I also wonder if we would see more responsibility with money in the church world were we to witness such. The thought of falling over dead and meeting your Maker, on account of greed, might be enough to stir the fiscal conscience into overdrive. What most concerns me about this passage is how little I have heard it preached. If a dishonest soul fell dead during the taking up of offerings, fiduciary sensibilities would certainly flourish: people would think twice about hoarding and clergy would scrutinize and diligently prevent fiscal mismanagement.

This story is in the Bible for good reason.

Luke, the author of Luke's gospel, witnessed Judas' actions firsthand.

He also wrote the book of Acts, where he details the account of Ananias and Sapphira. The lesson is clear: God doesn't want us to fall down on account of money. People fail in integrity over money decisions possibly more than in any other department. One could argue that

ill-guided sexual decisions would finish first, but my money is on money. Sexual sins are much more black and white, and the shame is more easily recognized. In money decisions, however, people have an easier time rationalizing greed, and consequently experience less shame regarding their financial transgressions. Here are some of the most common rationalizations:

"I'm going to keep a little extra...I earned it."

IN MONEY

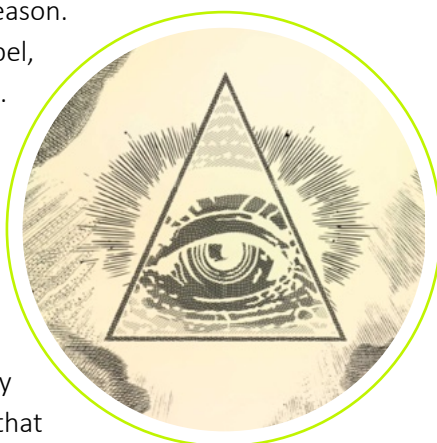
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"I'm going to cover number one...nobody else is looking out for me."

"They would've done the same thing to me."

"I have to provide for my family. I'm just trying to make a living."

"I really need this to pay the bills."

"I will make it up later."

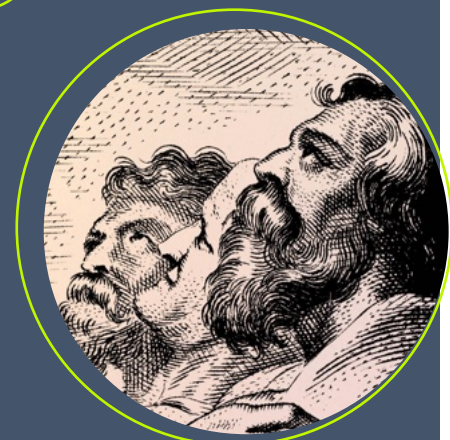
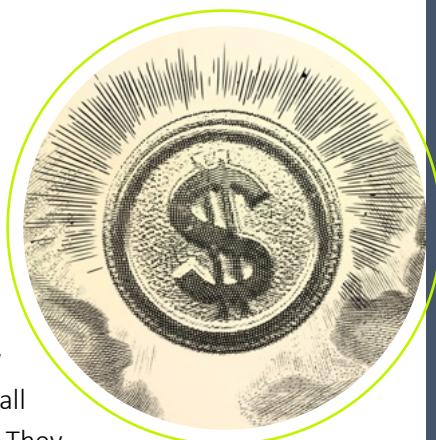
The human mind kicks into a highly creative and self-justifying gear when rationalizing how much money to keep, take, or demand. I think of this part of the mind as the "mammon cortex." It can and often does override the voice of conscience. The mammon cortex is highly sensitized to fear and greed and amplifies these emotions, constructing scenarios that make inequitable money motives seem logical. In the blog, *Simple Money*, I read the following:

"In some ways, most of us lie about money. We create an appearance to others of having more than we do in order to build up a level of respect. We drive more expensive cars than we can afford, buy more expensive clothes than we can afford, and more expensive accessories than we can afford just to appear affluent to others. Even worse, we often directly lie to friends and family about our financial situation, telling them that money's no problem as we spend money we don't really have."

It is often this effort of keeping up lifestyle illusions that cause people to fall...into debt, deceit, mischief, and disobedience. Trying to sell one lie leads to telling a number of lies. The Ananias and Sapphira story is a siren meant to startle us out of the justifications that our mammon cortex is serving in moments of money temptation. Some lessons worth considering from the Ananias and Sapphira story include:

Lesson #1: God knows the "net."

Fancy but fraudulent accounting techniques will be brought to judgment. Ben Franklin lamented the unique human ability to rationalize almost any behavior. Nowhere is this more apparent than with the rationalizations that accompany, "How much should I keep for myself?" We all have witnessed cheaters in business. They talk fast, use fancy jargon, exhibit easy confidence, take a matter-of-fact approach, and do not listen well. But they do



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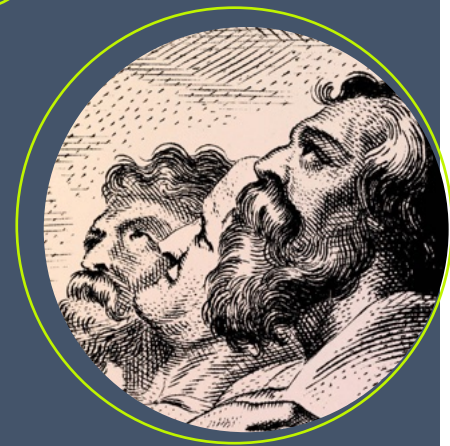
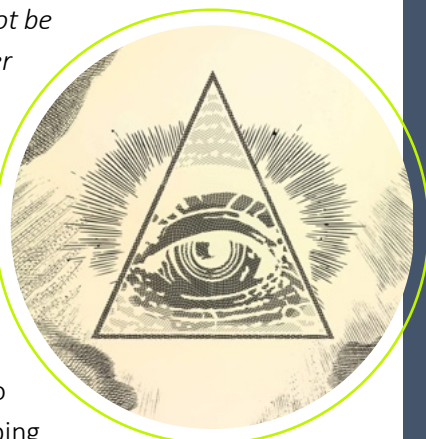
know how to cook the books. They have mastered the art and craft of making profit and loss statements and accounting ledgers say whatever they need them to say. When you are dealing with this type of individual, your money is at supreme risk. There aren't enough country club prisons to house all the fast-talking shysters that belong there, but God will visit with them at a later date. The words of James (the brother of Jesus) could have served as business epitaphs for the Bernie Madoffs, Kenneth Lays, and others of their ilk:

“And a final word to you arrogant rich: Take some lessons in lament. You'll need buckets for the tears when the crash comes upon you. Your money is corrupt and your fine clothes stink. Your greedy luxuries are a cancer in your gut, destroying your life from within. You thought you were piling up wealth. What you've piled up is judgment. All the workers you've exploited and cheated cry out for judgment. The groans of the workers you used and abused are a roar in the ears of the Master Avenger. You've looted the earth and lived it up. But all you'll have to show for it is a fatter than usual corpse.”

— James 5:1-6, MSG

Bernie Madoff is regarded by many to be the portrait of a modern Judas. He stole billions of dollars from thousands of people, most of whom shared his Jewish heritage, and ended up living the horrors described by James above. He had to mourn helplessly and in isolation as his son took his own life and his family changed their names to remove association. He piled up judgment against himself. The cries of the abused reached the Maker's ears—and eventually the investigators' as well.

From Paul we receive this caution, *“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap”* (Galatians 6:7, NKJV). When we do the wrong thing to make a little more money or do the wrong thing to make a lot more money, we mock God by ultimately declaring that our ways of deceit work better than his rules of integrity. By deciding to take matters into our own hands, we are basically “flipping off” the law of sowing and reaping. If God's rules become invisible to our financial lives, he will not be mocked. We are in an indefensible position before God.



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Lesson #2: God only approves a pure gift.

Were Ananias and Sapphira generous people who chose to be dishonest in the particulars, or were they attention-grubbers who wanted public adulation without paying a real price? The first motivation—a somewhat generous person, who has cunningly chosen to be dishonest in the particulars—is the position that I find most troubling. Consider the very likely possibility that these two were decent people (they worshipped God and fellowshiped with the church) who agreed to be a part of a fundraising initiative where individuals pledged to sell personal property and donate the proceeds.

At some point in the process, they began to regret the amount of their pledge. Maybe Ananias' business hit an unforeseen slump. If so, their pledge to give the proceeds from the sale of that land may have seemed a bit too much given their revised economic condition. Maybe Sapphira became irked thinking of the desired upgrade to their home they had been putting off for years. Whatever the rationalization might have been playing out in their hearts, they had a decision to make regarding a promise they had made, and this is where they took a damning turn. Had they realized the gravity of the situation, they most likely would have handled the matter in a more transparent fashion. Note Peter's words to Ananias: *"Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."*

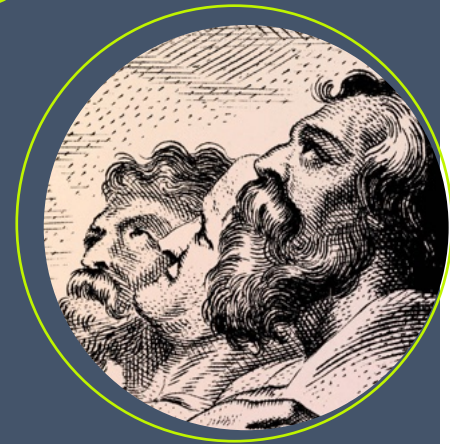
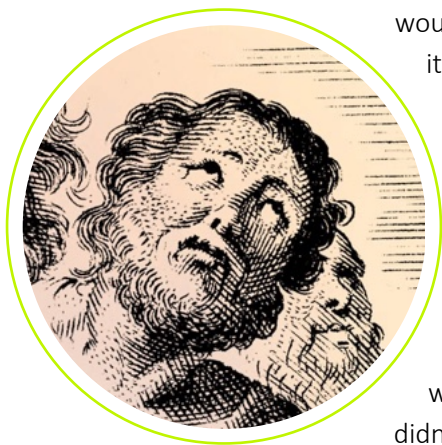
Peter is saying, "You didn't have to give anything. Even after you sold the property, you had the prerogative to change your mind.

Why would you allow yourself to think God wouldn't notice your decision to lie about it?" Dishonesty starts with lying to oneself. I can only imagine Ananias and Sapphira's last conversation together. "Nobody will know the difference," they possibly told themselves when looking at the proceeds. "We'll keep this much and give this much. My goodness, we're being plenty generous here. We didn't see anybody else pledging this kind

of support, did we? We saw a lot of people who didn't pledge a thing." Their lie was now veiled in a cloak of philanthropy.

From the famous love passage in 1 Corinthians 13, we read the words, *"And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor...but*

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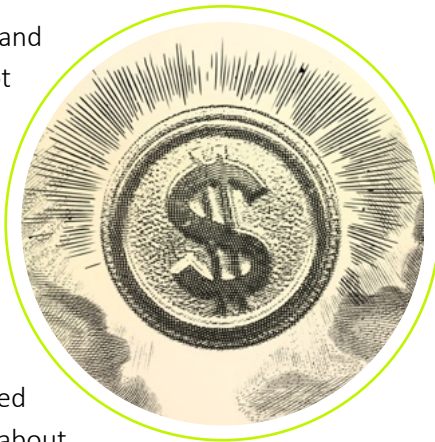
have not love, it profits me nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:3, NKJV). Do we truly understand God's logic regarding our attitude in giving? If we gave everything away, most people would call it most admirable. According to the logic of a God of love, the act is not admirable if the motive was outside of true compassion. Once actions roam outside the borders of love, like in trying to outdo someone else's gift or trying to impress others with the act, God is no longer impressed. Do you remember the poseur who jumped into the Boston Marathon years ago with only about a ½ mile left in the race so he could hear the cheers of the crowd as he crossed the finish line? His glory lasted a few minutes until everyone realized he was a fraud. That's a portrait of how well the wrong motive will serve us—the act that appears good until interpreted through integrity.

Lesson #3: Dishonest decisions can seriously distort us.

"Give a man everything he wants and at that moment everything will not be everything." - Immanuel Kant

Why do humans condescend to demean themselves so shamefully over money? Read the news about the amount of money thieves steal and the years in prison they give up to obtain these limited and vaporous sums. I'm not talking about junkies holding up convenience stores but rather people who embezzle from cities or corporations or non-profits, or officials on the take from special interests or who accept bribes. They get \$500,000 and lose everything—their life, their time with family, the respect of children and community, everything. And for what? The biting reality that \$500K really can't change their lives all that much. What are they going to buy that is going to make a difference? I recently read a case about a prison guard who took bribes totaling \$3,500 from inmates and now is facing up to 30 years in prison himself for the crime. He surely never stopped to do the risk/reward math on that exchange. It works out to just over \$100 for each year of life forfeited. Greed surely comes with blinders.

I remember hearing the story of a distant relative of mine who had been accused by the family of manipulating a dying relative to rearrange her will. This individual was soon seen around town driving a brand-new Cadillac. As I was listening to the story, I was thinking to myself, "Not really a rare a storyline in this world"—until I heard the punch-line: the person who perpetuated the fraud was 80 years old. So much for the idea that people mature out of their materialistic instincts. Some people do and others don't.



ONCE ACTIONS
ROAM OUTSIDE
THE BORDERS OF
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Imagine falling down over money in this fashion at 80. Apparently, deception is no respecter of age.

We can fall down at any age, tripping all over ourselves to get more, to be somebody, to hold back some extra for ourselves. Maybe if there were hearses parked in front of our churches as a reminder, we would see higher integrity among parishioners during the week. All of us will get carried out eventually. What matters most is the story that will be told...after we are carried out. If we don't want to find ourselves falling down, we must make the choice to always take the high road wherever money is concerned.

