

# God, Man, & MAMMON

Navigating the tension between  
the material and the spiritual

Chapter 21



*with*  
Mitch  
Anthony

## IN THIS CHAPTER

### SEND IT AHEAD

The world teaches us to collect as much as possible, promising that these goods will fulfill some need or prevent future disaster. When we find ourselves with excess, Scripture encourages us to look to the needs of others.



## SEND IT AHEAD

*“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

– Matthew 6:19-21, NIV

Almost 1 in 10 American households, according to a recent survey, owns self-storage space—an increase of some 75 percent from a decade ago.<sup>1</sup> Most operators of self-storage facilities report at least 90 percent occupancy. Over a billion and a half square feet of storage space now produces more capital than the revenues of Hollywood. Some of this increase in storage can be explained by E-bay traders and people in between homes, but according to Tom Vanderbilt, “For a resolutely banal landscape feature, self storage is a surprisingly fertile cultural indicator,” and the obvious suspect is American consumerism.

No other country in the world comes close to spending as much on consumer goods. How deep into the storage shed has our culture crept? We now have retail stores like the Container Store that sell us stuff to hold our stuff. There are also television shows and magazines strictly dedicated to helping people figure out how to organize all their possessions. This in spite of the fact that the average square footage in the American home increased over 50 percent in the last 30 years despite having less children living in these houses than a generation ago. Apparently in many modern homes, space abounds. Children have been supplanted by pets and possessions.

Jesus speaks directly to the squirreling impulse—gathering for gathering’s sake, with no realistic quota on how much to gather. And like the squirrel, we may have forgotten exactly what and where we have buried. Jesus offers an alternative storage program:

- 1) take what you have but do not need and transfer it to someone with legitimate need; and
- 2) log the item into Heaven’s ledgers and store in eternal spaces.

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Three compelling questions stand before us in this matter:

- What do I have that I do not need?
- Who has need of it?
- How do I make the transfer?

The easy answer is to take the items to Goodwill or Salvation Army or some other charitable middleman and let them handle the disbursement. This requires minimal effort and fills many a need. If you want to invest your heart as well as your resources, you'll need to start rubbing shoulders on a regular basis with those who lack the provisions we take for granted. Somewhere not so far from your zip code is someone desperate to have a bicycle to ride to their minimum wage job—a bicycle just like the one sitting and gathering dust in most of our garages. You are freely invited to participate in the alternative storage program.

Many lessons Jesus intended as literal truth are instead spun by interpreters as metaphorical illustrations. Being limited by earthly senses and constraints like time and space make it difficult to wrap our minds around ideas like “forever” and “omnipresent.” If Jesus is precisely who he says he is, and if Heaven is what he reports it to be, then it is the literal destination for those who believe in his words—and it stands to reason that the features he attributes to the place can be taken at face value.

What if that was the case for the passage directing us to store up for ourselves treasures in Heaven? What if there were accounts in Heaven containing the amounts we gave away on earth with a Heavenly interest applied? These accounts would be akin to alternative storage units, albeit everlasting. In his book, *My Time in Heaven*, Richard Sigmund describes seeing angels assigned the task of entering in a ledger all gifts given on earth—noting both the amount and the attitude of the giver in each instance. If in fact we do have accounts in heaven, they are akin to an eternal annuity, a supply that can never run out as long as we live. The possibility

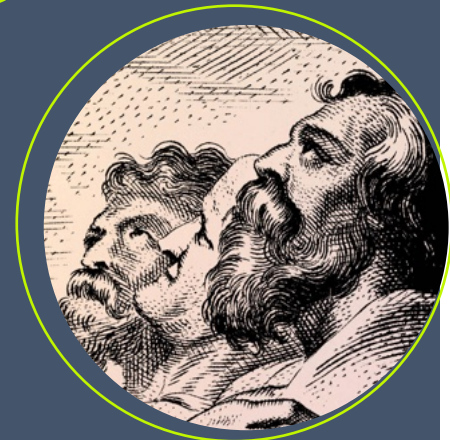
brings into focus a stunningly clear contrast

for the management of excess supply: give and rejoice both now and then, or buy and worry over theft and lament over decay.

Possessing excess is an advertisement to thieves. If you have ever been robbed, you understand this reality vividly. A friend and I both had our homes



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robbed of watches and jewelry within a year of one another. We reached the same conclusion—they're not worth having if the attention they draw results in risk and fear of invasion and loss.

All earthly possessions fall within the fate of the material, which is eventual and assured disintegration. Jesus offers an alternative: that which is given here is stored in Heaven. When you arrive at your eternal destination, you will be rich beyond imagination. Jesus, the earthly carpenter's stepson, declared: *"I go to prepare a place for you"* (John 14:2b, NKJV).

All we collect here must be protected. But there is no real protection against fear and lamentation. Every material thing is destined for breakdown and decay. Others will want what we have and attempt to take it. These are the emotional dilemmas an earthly collector must confront. Alternatively, the Heavenly collector is rewarded in the now and in the hereafter. The reward in the now is the joy of disbursing toward need and the liberty of not being materially attached. The joy in the hereafter is a bounty that can only be imagined until realized, but a real bounty nonetheless. Jesus reiterated this theme in his manifold encouragements toward generosity.

#### A Party Without Strings

*"Then Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'"*

— Luke 14:12, NIV



Imagine the potential offense to the host of the dinner. "What gall and temerity," this host must have thought. "I invite him to dine and he critiques my invite list!" Much of the giving that takes place on our planet is lightly camouflaged influence peddling, designed to curry favor or garner attention. Jesus discourages

this practice of using wealth to attract the affections of those with wealth, instead encouraging his followers to pour extravagance and blessing upon those who could neither afford it nor ever be in a

A dark blue vertical banner with decorative circles in shades of green and black. The text is centered and reads: "JESUS DISCOURAGES THE PRACTICE OF USING WEALTH TO ATTRACT THE AFFECTIONS OF THE WEALTHY." At the bottom, there is a circular illustration of a man with a beard and long hair, looking upwards and to the right, framed by a green border.

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position to repay it. *"You will be repaid,"* is a promissory note from God—a check we can cash as we cross into our eternal abode. Our management of the material is a spiritual test of our hearts: how our heart weighs our own interests against those with greater needs than our own. In Heaven's ledgers, no generous deed falls off the radar.

*"Whoever receives a preacher who speaks for God because he is a preacher, will get the reward of a preacher who speaks for God. Whoever receives a man right with God, because he is a man right with God, will get the reward of a man right with God. For sure, I tell you, anyone who gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he follows Me, will not lose his reward."*

– Matthew 10:41, NLV

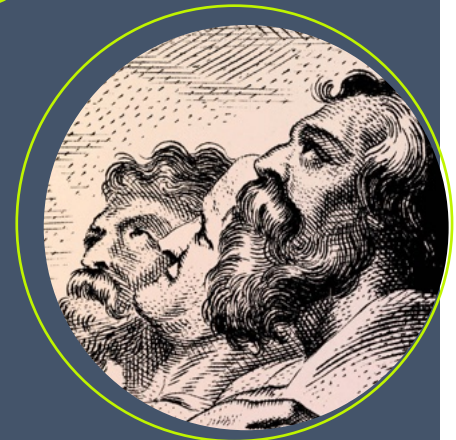
Here Jesus is addressing those who are benefactors of ministry efforts. He is encouraging those who receive to take care of the needs of those being sent. By hosting a person of God, they receive an equal reward. What a terrific bargain this is! Simply give a cup of cold water to one of God's people and your giving will be logged into Heaven's ledger. Not one infinitesimal detail of generosity or stinginess goes without notation.

Ponder the ledger in your "giving" life so far. What does it reveal about your life? It would seem that the record not only contains what you did but also what you didn't do when confronted with an opportunity to help or host.

This causes me to contemplate the times in my own life when I allowed judgment to cloud mercy—times when I wouldn't help someone in need because I didn't agree with their lifestyle or thought them foolish. Their ignorance or lack of prudence may not hold up as legitimate excuses should I be confronted on the basis of heartfelt mercy. Sometimes we are simply looking to legitimize, through intellectualization, our lack of concern. Reasons for not giving are easily accessible and include:

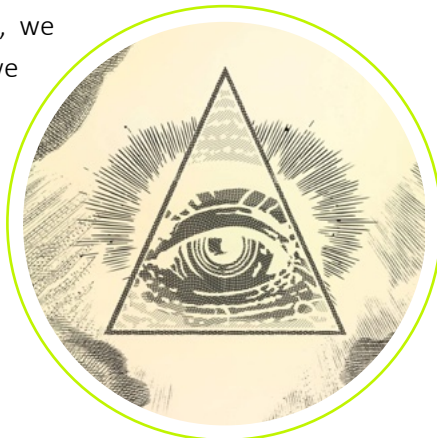
- Having been burned in the past;
- Not knowing which causes are legit; and
- The abundance of requesters wearing out their welcome.

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I could write an entire chapter on the people I have supported who proved unfaithful—those who made promises they didn't keep, those making claims they could not confirm. I have poured large amounts of support into the coffers of God's workers who then facilitated the opportunity those resources afforded to turn away from their mission. Possibly I was unwise in giving enough to turn off their incentive, but it was a painful experience for my wife and I as givers to watch once-faithful warriors for heaven turn to tarnished testimonies—bowing banally to seduction. Through it all, I have sensed that my heart was being tested. Would I use these incidents as an excuse to disengage or as an incentive to distribute with greater discretion?

If we are known as givers, we will likely be pursued by a periphery of manipulators, shameless petitioners, and the indolent as well. We must protect our hearts through the trial of mercy so that we do not lose sight of the authentic needs at the core of hunger, lack, and desperation. We are surrounded by critical needs that are dismissed daily because of critical hearts. Clearly, we are not required to give to every supplicant or manipulator, but the record being kept is focused on the willingness of the heart, the openness of the veins of mercy, and the sensitivities being on alert. When skepticism turns to cynicism, and when cynicism corrodes into coldness, we are in danger. It is then that we excuse our lack of mercy as we consume against a waning ability to enjoy the excess we have gathered. Jesus gave strong exhortation on this very point:

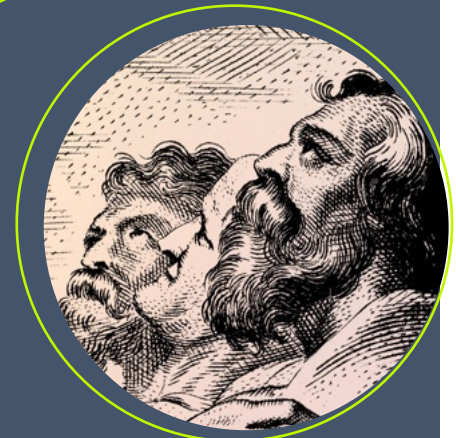


*“What sorrow awaits you who are rich, for you have your only happiness now.  
What sorrow awaits you who are fat and prosperous now, for a time of awful hunger awaits you.  
What sorrow awaits you who laugh now, for your laughing will turn to mourning and sorrow.”*

— Luke 6:24-25, NLT

We're all familiar with the phrase, “fat and happy,” which speaks to the self-satisfied state that prosperity can infuse into the soul. Jesus warns against the dulling effect of riches. Jesus is not castigating riches but the accompanying opiate that dulls people into thinking they don't have to tend to their spiritual needs and the needs of their “neighbors” simply because they have money.

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## Long-Term Thinking

Much of Jesus' advice is concerned with helping us to think beyond the moment and the immediate. At the moment it may seem prudent to hoard against a rainy day or a dry year. Our own needs are the most obvious to us. We do not possess the level of understanding of the gestalt of universal need that Jesus comprehends.

To a degree, faith is deciding to trust his other-worldly logic and to not lean upon our own limited understanding. Jesus not only sees every need on the planet, but he also sees into the needs on the horizon—those needs that do not yet exist. By following Jesus' code of generosity and the charitable instincts his Spirit places upon our hearts, we become integral parts of his cosmic blueprint for meeting needs.

We become his hands, administering supply on the planet. Great impediments to his plan are the manner in which we are taught to think about resources and the world's systems of supply and distribution that do not lend themselves toward Heaven's model for meeting earthly needs.

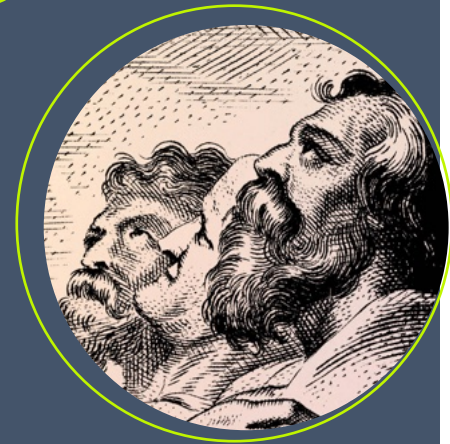
I once attended a lecture by international banking expert Bernard Lietaer, where he talked about the systemic failures of our money systems. He asserted that paying interest and dividends only encourages hoarding, inevitably leading to deep want on one end of the spectrum and hoarding at the other end. This lack of balance leads to the collapse of money systems. We have seen this scenario of collapsed currencies played out around our planet from Argentina to Zimbabwe.

Lietaer offered demurrage (a form of negative interest that discourages hoarding) as an alternative. For a historic example of demurrage, he told of Joseph, leader in ancient Egypt; Joseph, son of Isaac, who wore the coat of many colors. If you remember the story in the Bible, the brothers of Joseph were set up in an

extraordinary reunion on account of a great famine that had persisted for seven years. Egypt alone had been prepared against this enduring drought and had a system in place to preserve its people.

This demurrage system was the brainchild of Joseph. Hoarders were penalized with a negative interest rate for not placing resources

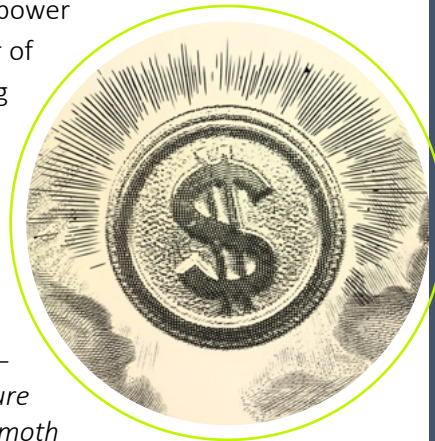
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into circulation. Consequently, producers were rewarded for a distribution mindset. When trying times came, there weren't people starving while others sat guarding their hoards. What if such a mindset proliferated in our world today where so many starve while multitudes gorge on excess? Joseph's system took into account present needs but also anticipated future need and the inevitability of trying times. Joseph's system was operational for centuries.

A consequence of this forward-thinking system, Lietaer stated, was that the Egyptians were long-term thinkers who thought generations ahead in their business decisions. They built buildings that were designed to last forever—and are still here today. Ask yourself which structures in your city would still be standing, should visitors come sightseeing in the year 4020 AD?

Systems that encourage hoarding are shortsighted. Our corporations operate on quarterly earnings schedules. Our citizens operate on interest-only credit card payments and mortgage payments that stretch their earnings power to their limits. We are in constant fear of running out of our provision. Hoarding is the natural response—and it is as destructive to our societies as it is to our souls.



*“Don't hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or—worse!—stolen by burglars. Stockpile treasure in heaven, where it's safe from moth and rust and burglars. It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is the place you will most want to be, and end up being.”*

– Matthew 6:19-21, MSG

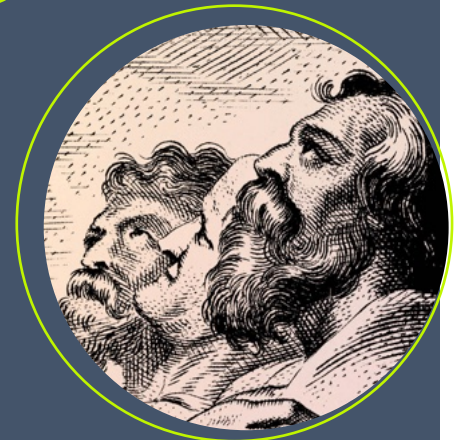
Frost & Hartl's Definition of Clinical Hoarding:

“the acquisition of, and failure to discard, a large number of possessions that appear to be of useless or of limited value.”

To avoid the hoarding impulse, the following exercises may prove helpful. The distribution lifestyle is not a “one and done” decision. Temptations to over-gather and hang on too long will continue to bombard our lives. Some processes we may want to visit on an annual basis:

- Take seasonal inventory of clothing, shoes, and such, and if you haven't worn it in a year, give it to charity.

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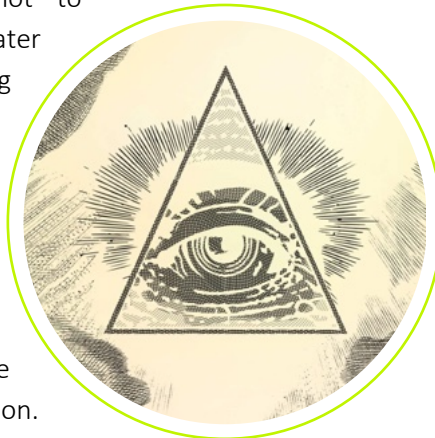


- Take inventory of possessions that provide limited enjoyment for you, but could create greater value to someone in need (i.e. car, bicycle, moped, or a boat).
- Schedule forays into less-fortunate circumstances. Let your eyes and ears take in others' realities. Tune your ears and eyes toward the orphan, the widow, the poor, the disadvantaged, and the suffering. Your ears and eye inform the soul. On that wavelength you will discover the pulse of Jesus and a transcendent reason for being.
- Gather your family for distribution discussions. Ask about needs they have observed and causes that move them.
- Provide a Christmas gift of money that family members can direct to a charity of their choice.

### The Line Between Indulgence and Extravagance

God created the raw materials that we enjoy and the five senses and emotions that rejoice in periodic indulgence. Eating, for example, is a replenishing pleasure but each individual can locate the line in his or her life where culinary delight crosses into gluttony.

Ben Franklin quipped, "Drink not to elevation, eat not to dullness" (he later admitted the difficulties in keeping this simple rule). One of these excesses is about getting a buzz. The other excess deadens your senses and introduces inertia, thus making the buzz and the buzz kill the two endpoints of the gluttony spectrum. Focus on drink, and the substance animates you past reason.



Focus on sustenance, and the substance docks you below the tide of motivation. Neither end feels good in the end, but the temptation is there, nonetheless, drawing us in. We are creatures vulnerable to whimsical discipline—and not just in regards to eat and drink. Fashion can become an obsession, and curiosity can become wanderlust.

Another border worth drawing concerns vacuous acquisition. Is there an area where we are collecting and acquiring more of something than we could possibly begin to enjoy? Is there an area where we are acquiring simply because we can? I once owned a small piece of hunting land with woods and water. It's a retreat, and I enjoy sharing it with others. Recently while casting a line in the pond with a local who often fishes there, the topic came up of a similar piece of land just across the road that was also for sale. He

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told me it would be sold at a public auction in the next month. I said something to the effect, "Maybe I should check it out."

A few moments later he mentioned that a friend and his wife had always dreamed of owning that place and fixing up the old farmhouse on the property. He didn't know if they had the resources, but he was guessing that they would be at the auction. I knew that my whim was not on par with their dream, and that my purchase of the plot would easily qualify as vacuous acquisition. With my current work schedule, I don't get enough use out of the land I have now.

If we are following Heaven's pulse and plan, we will be sensitive to the needs, dreams, and hopes of others. Maybe I shouldn't buy this rental property because it is a part of God's plan for some family. Maybe I should buy it because it is his plan to use me to make it available to others. How can one know? By being sensitive to the idea that *"his will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."* Heaven has an opinion on all material matters. This is where sensitivity to the Holy Spirit guides us to the right decisions for ourselves...and for others.

The no-brainer in this equation has to do with excess, that which we possess but do not really need. Somebody "needs" something we simply "have." Jesus' solution is simple and straightforward in this regard, "Send it ahead." Whether it is water or clothing or transport or shelter or cash, if we have it but don't need it, we can invest it in a Heavenly account.

How much have you deposited? It reminds me of the financial discussion around retirement: "How much time do you anticipate in retirement, and how much will you need to live?" How about the discussion, "How much time exists in eternity, and what provisions have you sent ahead?" By following Jesus' instruction to send it ahead, we are fortifying our "forever" and freeing ourselves from the earthly concerns. The moths, the rust, and the thieves can never take what we have sent ahead.

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<sup>1</sup> *Self-storage nation: Americans are storing more stuff than ever.* By Tom Vanderbilt

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