

God, Man, & MAMMON

Navigating the tension between
the material and the spiritual

Chapter 7



with
Mitch
Anthony

IN THIS ISSUE

Finding Our Way

Did God do more than simply “create” us, but also set out a path for us? What happens when we pursue (or stray from) this path?

True North

It is easy for the concerns of this world to direct our decisions, clouding our thinking with financial and career concerns. Instead, we must rely on and trust the true direction God has set for us.



FINDING OUR WAY

To discover what our true life is intended to be, let us entertain the idea of creator as cartographer—the idea that God, before forming us, drew a map of what our true life would look like. At any point in this journey we are susceptible to making wrong turns, going miles out of our way, suffering angry backtracks and — to borrow a male cliché — refusing to ask for directions purely out of pride. It stands to reason that if there is a true life then there is a fraudulent version of life as well. We are all susceptible, at any juncture on the map, of choosing fraudulent paths, including:

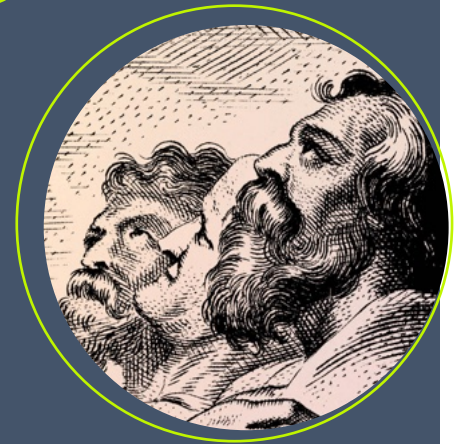
- taking a job for the prestige;
- changing careers for the money alone;
- telling ourselves we worked hard enough and don't need to be concerned about others anymore;
- telling ourselves that there are a lot of people that aren't nearly as good or righteous as we are (as a justification for a wrong turn);
- isolating and insulating our lives from the needs of the world.

At any time on this journey, we may stop, reassess our position on the map, locate the path back to our true-life path, and continue forward on the journey designed for us. We each possess a magnetic sense, abiding in our souls, that affirms when we are moving in a true north direction on the true-life map. It just “feels” right, even if everything is not perfectly settled in terms of circumstances. This spiritual “sixth sense” or “settledness” is the calm that verifies us in our direction. While at times we may feel lost, this sense of “lostness” is what forces us to re-evaluate our situation and examine the paths that brought us to a lonely place.

We can also be in the right place with the wrong attitude. Take for example the man I knew who was running a nonprofit charity and feeling divine nourishment each day, but was worn down to disenchantment by his wife's constant agitation regarding his career choice. “You are so talented,” she berated him constantly. “You could be doing so much better.”

“Better for whom?” and “Better for what?” were the questions stirring consternation within him. The statement illustrated the existential divide in their views of what constituted true life. A step

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out of God's plan is literally a step out of our true selves. By taking a turn that takes us out of our calling, our place in God's grand map, we have not helped ourselves. To step out of ourselves in this manner—for material promotion alone—is akin to purposely injuring ourselves for the sake of a disability settlement. We may enjoy the easy check, but how discomfoting is it knowing we did harm to ourselves for a payoff?

TRUE NORTH

"...some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows"

– 1 Timothy 6:10, NIV

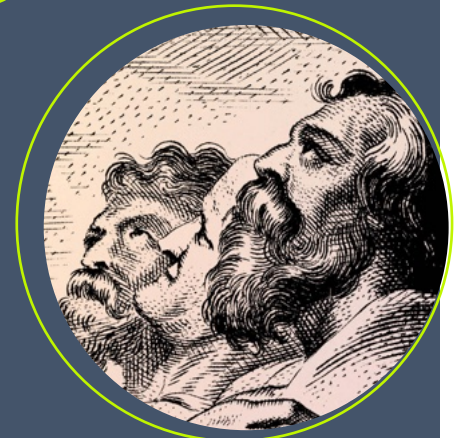
Money is necessary for this journey, but it is not to be confused with true north on the compass. When money becomes the leading criterion for the turns we choose to make, we become lost on the inside. Feeling lost can lead to bitterness and cause deep damage to our faith. When money is the aim, it leads directly toward a life where appearance trumps substance—where seeming to be something is preferred over actually being something. The world sorely needs more clarity as to what money can and cannot do. We are in need of true-life measures—criteria that distinguishes pretense from substance and quality existences from cheap counterfeits.

The following description, by good taste and manners icon Letitia Baldrige, qualifies as a Top 10 list that may be helpful in clarifying the difference:

10. Money can buy a bed, but not sleep.
9. Money can buy books, but not brains.
8. Money can buy food, but not appetite.
7. Money can buy finery, but not beauty.
6. Money can buy a house, but not a home.
5. Money can buy medicine, but not health.
4. Money can buy luxuries, but not culture.
3. Money can buy amusement, but not happiness.
2. Money can buy companions, but not friends.
1. Money can buy flattery, but not respect.



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Baldrige wrote, “Good taste is synonymous with success in all fields of life. It’s not a question of money, but of a trained eye.” This rings true in the material world and it rings all the more true in the philosophical realm when attempting to answer the question, “How then shall we live?”

In recent years there has been a dramatic rise in adolescent depression. I have a friend who specializes in counseling teens/college kids. In his affluent community, these kids can’t understand why they feel so sad. His theory is many of them are depressed because they have everything and can’t find any joy in life. Here again we hear the echo of Jesus’ teaching that true life is not found in the abundance of things, no matter how much a person has.

The fact remains, however, that in a money-driven culture, “How much can I make?” becomes the filter through which most measure their lives. The statistics on affluent teen depression illustrate how early people discover that the abundance of stuff won’t satisfy. There abides a hunger for something more, something meaningful—they are hungering for the very Bread of Life that can nourish the soul. There cannot be a true life without a true north. We find true north with our inner eye. With this eye we see through the pretentiousness of simple advancement, of self-aggrandizing ambition, of gain at the expense of others, of predatory schemes, and of busyness that robs us of purposefulness.



When looking back on our lives up to this point in time, it is a colossal error to measure our lives in material terms. True life is something the world cannot give or take away. Check your own life periodically for true-life indicators. Ask yourself if aspects of a shadowed life have been allowed to creep in. Assess how much you are doing for the eyes and approval of others. Analyze whether “chasing the dollar” is causing you to run past opportunities to make a difference. Most people as they age get a clearer portrait of true life, preferring the satisfaction of the inner life—the simple joys—or as my 80-something friend Lloyd likes to say, “The joy of being vertical today.”

The inner life is where true life abides. We can have everything the world offers but be miserable inside. We can have little to nothing materially but be a vessel of pure contentment. Life is the force within us that defines us. How much we have has nothing to say about how much we live.

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