

God, Man, & MAMMON

Navigating the tension between
the material and the spiritual

Introduction



with
Mitch
Anthony

IN THIS ISSUE

OUR MODERN DAY, MORAL TUG-OF-WAR

How are we to balance the practical need for money in our daily lives with the necessity of focusing on the life Jesus calls us to live? Luckily, the teachings of Jesus provide answers to living a truly fulfilling and Kingdom-oriented life.



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“Competition in the market puts people under great pressure to break the ordinary rules of decent conduct and then to produce good reasons for doing so. It is these rationalizations—the endless self-deception necessary to meet the bottom line and still feel okay about it—that corrode moral character.”

– Michael Walzer

People often lie for money—maybe not always outright lies—but embellished rationalizations to get what they need at the moment. They know they are not telling the truth but believe the money gained by misrepresentation will make a difference. Ask any insurance claims adjuster how often a claimant is caught fabricating damage or loss for monetary gain. How many times has a “financial professional” told clients that an investment was “good for them” when it was good only for the vendor. The Markopolos report of Bernie Madoff’s demise reveals the deceptive approaches and cunning delivery animating the embellishments he sold. Told with frequency, the lies soon took on a life of their own.

People cheat for money. Sometimes they cheat their own spouses and children and mothers and fathers. Ask an estate-planning attorney about the number of times she has witnessed families unraveling over money. They cheat business partners, clients, suppliers, creditors—and anyone else they suspect they can gain an advantage over. Our society is replete with sociopathic liars who invent tangled schemes and concoct phony paperwork to divide good people from their hard-earned dollars. Oftentimes, they go unchecked because they calculate ahead of recompense that their victims won’t have the resources to pursue them in the courts.

People kill and maim for money—and not just the mafia. Ask a police detective how frequently money plays into murder, assault, and other violent crimes. I still have a vivid memory indelibly etched into my consciousness from when I was eight years old and overheard my parents talking about a man down our road who shot someone to death over a torn \$20 bill. At age eight, I couldn’t

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understand why he didn't just tape it back together. Sometimes the money crime is committed against oneself and one's potential.

People pretend for money. They will put on a face and feign interest to get close to people with money—a form of play-acting that is a violation of personal integrity. It's just a matter of time before they forget who they really are. Some people ignore their calling for money. They discard true avocation for incremental gains in income. This is a matter of personal responsibility.



How do we utilize our life force? Is the primary aim to accumulate? Do we sacrifice meaning for the sake of means? What designs are upon us—the actions and services wired into our DNA—that are being ignored while we are in pursuit of increase? The long and short of the money dilemma is that much of what ails us individually and collectively as humans can be traced back to our beliefs about what money can do for us. Many have been instructed to get it at any cost, ultimately leading to a shadowed life or a shipwrecked existence.

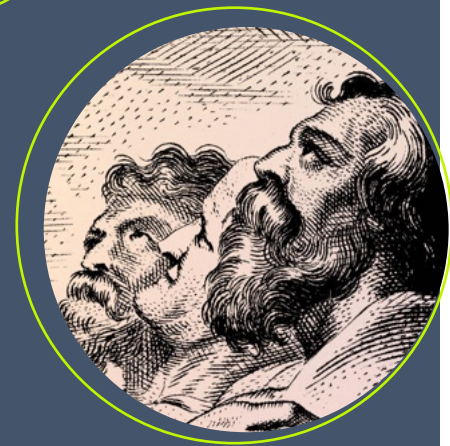
The question I wish to pose is, "What did Jesus have to say about this litany of existential damage at the hands of money?" Surely the role of money in sabotaging lives did not escape his notice. I am convinced that Jesus' thoughts on the topic have been underreported and selectively distributed. Our lives would have been better had we better understood his views on money.



The late great philosopher and theologian Dallas Willard once stated: "I think we have to say that Jesus' enduring relevance is based on his historically proven ability to speak to, to heal and empower the individual human condition. He matters because of what he brought and what he still brings to ordinary human beings, living their ordinary lives and coping daily with their surroundings. He promises wholeness for their lives."

Jesus' philosophy for a fulfilled life is applicable to every aspect and neglected corner of our lives, including the back right pocket. Jesus spoke profoundly and profusely on matters of money, but his views have not been properly reported and appropriately published. I have come to consider Jesus to be history's paramount financial philosopher. He understood both the

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complexity and fickleness between spirit and substance, speaking cogently and clearly on the concept. He understood that our lives are torn between being a person *of substance* and being a person *with substance*. This tension is our modern day, moral tug-of-war.

Jacob Needleman, philosopher and author of *Money and the Meaning of Life*, affirms, “We are reaping the legacy of a long historical encounter between specific spiritual teachings and the necessities of material life—or, more exactly, the encounter between the striving of man to make contact with God and the needs of man to survive in the world of nature and society.”

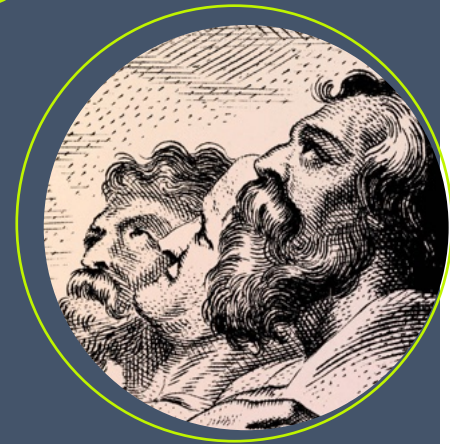
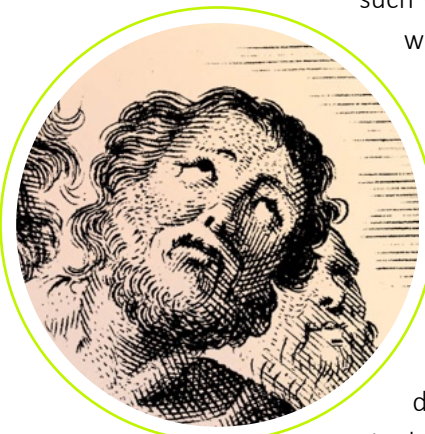
Jesus’ views on money receive little modern notice. A significant obstacle in presenting Jesus’ views on money has been that a good number of those who represent him (or claim to represent him) have been caught up with money themselves. This same issue was prevalent in Jesus’ day as well, and he railed against the clergy for placing more emphasis on money than on true worship (Consider that his first public criticism was turning over the money tables in the temple). Some modern religious leaders will quote carefully selected and inappropriately contextualized words from Jesus to get money to move—from your account to theirs. The result of

such weakness and duplicity is that the very words meant to free us from the bonds of money now send us into the chains of cynicism. “How dare they try to use the Bible to manipulate me into their schemes?” burned-out believers ask—as they hold on tightly to what remains.

For enlightenment we must return directly to the source of Jesus’ teaching.

In the Gospels, we gain a full view of what he taught about money. If we desire to know the truth about money—the spiritual truth—we need to get to the place where we are capable of handling the substance without catching its toxic side effects. Only then will we be able to scrutinize Jesus’ thoughts on the topic. He offers very specific instructions for inoculation.

After multiple readings of the Gospel of Matthew, I discovered that Matthew, a former tax collector, not only provided an important perspective of Jesus as Messiah—but also between the lines—an introduction of Jesus, the financial philosopher. Formerly employed in the money business, Matthew’s words contain nearly 90 references to money themes. My curiosity was drawn to Matthew on account of the work he did prior to the life-changing meeting and invitation of Jesus to “*Follow me*,” as he sat in his tax collection



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booth. Matthew responded immediately. Jesus had instant appeal to a man with a huge empty space in his soul—left by his, not always scrupulous, pursuit of wealth.

Take the loathing you might anticipate toward an IRS agent knocking on your door, multiply that level of disdain by a hundred, and you are close to the feeling of antipathy toward Matthew and his peers. These tax collectors ran willy-nilly in Israel—every agent for himself, as owners of tax franchises on “behalf of Rome.” As matters proved out, these tax collectors were working more for their personal interest than any foreign concern. To be compared to Matthew’s former trade was the lowest form of insult. Consider these statements from Jesus about tax collectors:

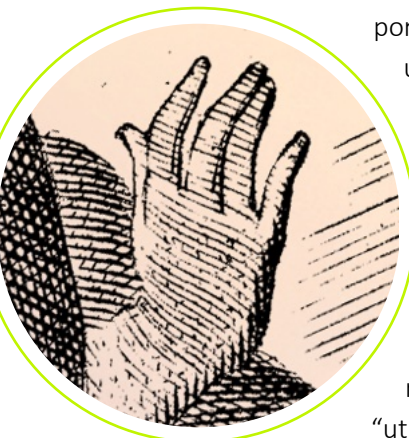


“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” -Matthew 18:17, NIV

“If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?” -Matthew 5:46, NIV

Also, consider a common criticism leveled at Jesus by religious leaders because of his open-door policy toward the unwanted and disgraced: *“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?” -Matthew 9:11, NIV*

In the eyes of the public, men like Matthew were plain and simply the scum of the earth. Yet it is from the heart and soul of Matthew—the very description of a man sold out to greed and financial corruption—that we receive a theological portrait of a Savior for mankind who also saves us from the snares and traps of money-obsessed living.



Jesus’ financial philosophy, first and foremost, recognizes that money is necessary (a utility) for carrying on our daily lives. But concurrent with this positioning of the material, Jesus also recognizes the inherent dangers of what this “utility” can become if not properly managed.

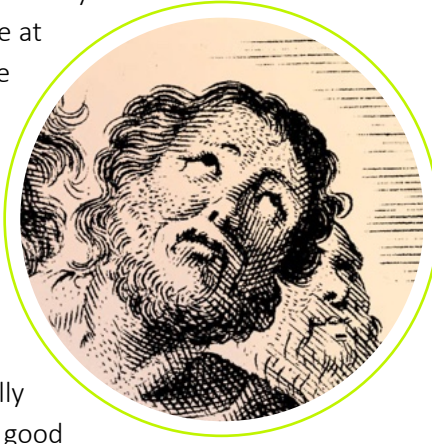
This potentially dangerous force is like mixing water and electricity—it becomes dangerous only when not properly managed and insulated. Every utility has great potential for

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improving our lives, but left unchecked, possesses the potential to erode and scorch our lives...and so it is with the money utility.

Jesus offers soundness and wholeness, while allowing for practical management of the substance itself. He recognized the transcendent power within the substance—the otherworldly grip that can infest our souls. We are not and cannot be “whole” without first making peace with the force of money in our daily lives and in our existence at large. Until we reach that point, we remain susceptible to misdirection, churning our energies for a life that produces fruit far below our designs.



When money is properly ordered in our lives, we can begin to live a “true life”—or the life Jesus personally designed for us. It is a life of doing good and feeling good about it. It is a life designed around Jesus’ intentions for us with the limited time we have on this planet. Money is a key part of that life—but only for the sake of keeping the lights on. In the eyes of the world, however, money is much more than that.

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