



Bible Study

The Bible on Money and “Stuff”

by Barbara Fullerton

Introduction

- What does the Bible say about money and material belongings and how our relationship with them both *reflects* and *affects* our relationships with God and all others?
- What did Jesus say on the subject?
- How do the Hebrew scripture messages compare with what Jesus and Jesus’ followers said on the subject?

The following Bible study offers an opportunity to think about these questions based on research done by Sondra Ely Wheeler. I first heard Dr. Wheeler speak on this theme at an Ecumenical Stewardship Center leadership seminar. Her book *Wealth as Obligation and Peril: The New Testament on Possessions* was the outcome of her doctoral studies and was part of my required reading for a summer stewardship course at Queen’s Theological College in Kingston, Ontario. Later, I was delighted to study with her during my Doctor of Ministry program in stewardship at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. I found her insights so significant that, when I chaired the planning group for the North American Stewardship Conference in Toronto in June 2004, I suggested Dr. Wheeler as one of the keynote speakers. *Exchange* readers may remember her inspiring messages there.

In our biblical ethics course, Wheeler shared how she had read the Bible from cover to cover, noting every reference on the subject of material wealth. Since most of my studies focused on ethics and social justice concerns, I was not surprised at the results of Dr. Wheeler’s studies. However, opening up this discussion with members of our congregations may offer the opportunity to reflect on something they have not previously given much thought to.

In a world where human identity seems to be associated with being a consumer, it is important for the church to help people think critically about their decisions regarding how they earn, spend, save, and share. Exploring what the Bible says on the subject will offer helpful insights.

This is an exercise I have shared with seminary students, with members at presbytery events, and with congregational Bible study groups. It might also be used for an interactive sermon in smaller churches.

Preparation

- Gather Bibles (one for each participant).
- Write Bible references on chart paper or an overhead, or prepare a handout.
- Write the following four “threads” (themes) on flipchart paper (cover the sheet until it is to be used):

Four Threads in the New Testament

Money/possessions/stuff can be

- obstacles to discipleship
- competing objects of devotion
- symptoms of economic injustice
- resources for human needs

Process

1. Explore the Scriptures (20 minutes)

Divide into five groups with assigned scripture readings. For larger gatherings, form five groups and ask each group to read one of the following lists of Bible passages. For smaller gatherings, have five pairs or partner groups, or five individuals could take one group of scripture selections and work on their own.

- **Group 1:** Mark 10:17–22; Matthew 19:16–22; Luke 18:18–23
- **Group 2:** Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13; Matthew 6:21; Luke 12:31; Luke 12:16–21
- **Group 3:** Luke 16:19–31; Matthew 25:31–46; Matthew 25:14–30; James 5:1–6 (especially verse 4)
- **Group 4:** 3 John 5–8; Acts 2:44–47; Acts 4:34–37; Romans 12:6–8; Galatians 6:6; Romans 12:13; Romans 15:25–27; 1 Corinthians 16:1–2; 2 Corinthians 8:1–7,10–15; 2 Corinthians 9:1–9; Matthew 5:42; Luke 6:30; Luke 14:12–14; Romans 12:20; Galatians 6:10
- **Group 5:** Acts 4:34–35; Matthew 6:25–34 (especially verse 33); Luke 6:35; 2 Corinthians 9:8–12; Psalm 112:9; Isaiah 55:10

Instructions for Reading Scriptures

Each group can choose how to cover the passages. One person might read them all aloud, or individuals might take turns. They may want to read all of them silently. Group 4, especially, may want to divide the passages among themselves, with each person taking one or two passages and reporting back to the group the message in what was read.



Instructions for Groups 1–4

Discuss the following question: What is the role of wealth/possessions in these texts? Considering these Bible passages, finish this sentence: “Money can be....”

Instructions for Group 5

Identify a theme or themes connecting the passages assigned to your group.

2. Identify Themes (Threads of Insight) about Money and Possessions (15 minutes)

Invite small groups back for a whole-group time. Ask them to briefly name some of the stories they read. The following will likely be identified:

- **Group 1:** rich man who did not follow Jesus
- **Group 2:** God and Mammon; heart and treasure; building bigger barns

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- **Group 3:** rich man and Lazarus; sheep and goats
- **Group 4:** stories of early followers of Jesus' way and excerpts from Jesus' teachings
- **Group 5:** will be discussed later in this article

Ask the following questions:

1. What did you discover about the role of wealth/possessions in your group of texts?
2. How did your group finish the sentence, "Money can be...."?

At least one theme will emerge for each group. Write these on chart paper.

Compare the list of themes with the list of four threads. Reveal these on the flipchart list. Say a few words about the work of Sondra Wheeler (from the introduction) and explain that she identified four themes in New Testament messages about money and "stuff" (possessions). These are listed as the four threads, in the same order as the first four sets of scripture passages assigned to the groups.

Four Threads in the New Testament

Money/possessions/stuff can be

- obstacles to discipleship
- competing objects of devotion (that is, idolatry of money or possessions as the primary object of love, trust, and attachment competes with love for God)

- symptoms of economic injustice
- resources for human needs

Point out that Group 5 was reading other New Testament (Christian scripture) passages that connect with Old Testament (Hebrew scripture). Ask Group 5 to identify a common thread linking their passages. As an example, one theme might be the reliance on God for provision of needs (Acts 4:34–35; Matthew 6:33; Luke 6:35; 2 Corinthians 9:8–12).

In 2 Corinthians, Paul is quoting directly from his scripture, which we now call the Old Testament. Compare 2 Corinthians 9:9 with Psalm 112:9, and compare 2 Corinthians 9:10 with Isaiah 55:10.

As they shared what they had and relied on God together, the early church continued to celebrate the Hebrew doctrines of creation and God's generosity. Jesus and his followers did not devalue the material world. They celebrated creation and embraced with joy the gifts of life. Jesus took part in the wedding feast at Cana, where the host ran out of wine. Some even accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard! (See Matthew 11:19.) But his messages about wealth and its uses were clear that wealth belonged to God and was not for individual benefit, but for the good of the whole community.

3. Discuss How These Scriptures Relate to Our Lives (20 minutes)

Invite participants to discuss their responses to the following statements and questions:

The "prosperity gospel" of Proverbs and Psalms is found only in the Old Testament (Hebrew scripture).

- Wealth is sometimes seen as a sign of God's favour.

- Wealth is presented as a fruit of wisdom and diligence.

Those messages are not present in the New Testament (Christian scripture).

- Does it surprise you to discover that the New Testament idea of wealth does not include the concept of wealth as a sign of God's favour? Why or why not?
- How does this change our understanding of discipleship?
- Reflect on this statement: The New Testament tells us discipleship is *costly*!

Questions the Scriptures Ask Us

As you think of all the passages that were read in each group, you will notice there is more than one message about wealth, money, and "stuff." The New Testament gives no rules; its guidance takes the form of significant questions about how we live. Questions were one of Jesus' main ways of inviting people to reflect. Take 15 minutes to discuss any or all of these questions evoked by scripture:

- What do we trust and look to for our security?
- What do we fear most deeply, and how is that bound up with what we own?
- In light of the New Testament passages we read, how do we feel about having so much when many in the world have so little?
- Does God's generosity include all, even those who are ungrateful or who seem selfish?
- Is our care of others an imitation and sign of God's generosity toward all, or do we expect certain things in return?

4. Summarize (5 minutes)

Money is a spiritual issue. If we don't talk about money as a faith issue, few will listen when we ask for it.

Money is a community issue. If we do not undertake the discussion about our beliefs and practices about money as communities, we will be less likely to change them in a lasting way in ourselves.

Money is a medium of relationship. Money is a concrete realization of our connection to and dependence on one another. How we make decisions about earning, sharing, investing, and spending it both *reflects* and *affects* our relationship with God and all others in creation.

One of Sondra Wheeler's conclusions is that when we change how we live with one another in this world, we change what we do with our money. The gospel says that the one thing worth setting our hearts upon is the justice and peace of God in a world where people don't see anything as exclusively their own and where no one goes without.

Talking about such things requires trust and engagement over a period of time, along with commitment to being honest with one another in community.

- How can we continue to talk about the ideas and insights we have shared today? How can we share them with others?
- Would you be interested in a continued conversation? (Make plans to do so with those who are interested.) **E**

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Resource

Wheeler, Sondra Ely, *Wealth as Obligation and Peril: The New Testament on Possessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).