

W. Danaher
Rector's Forum
Meeting 1

Finding Your Treasure: Money and Possessions in the Bible and in your Christian Life

Introduction: Why Money Matters

We tend to separate our faith lives from our economic life, but people have long realized that this separation is false and wrong:

1. Early Christian writers took at face value the following from the Gospels of Luke (Lk 6:30-35) and Matthew (5: 42):

Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return (Lk 6:30-35).

Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you (Mt 5:42).

- a. This condemnation of *tokas* ("fruits") or *usura* ("usury") lasted until the late 16th century - the 19th century in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. It primarily took the form of a prohibition against the practice of taking interest by clerics and the characterization of the practice by laity as "shameful profit" (*turpe lucrum*). This prohibition was based partly on a concern for the poor and the risk involved in an agrarian economy - in a context where the weather played an important role in commercial success or failure, the person who is somewhat isolated from this risk by loaning money - the "money-lender" would not have a popular place in society.
- b. Also, there was the concern that allowing money to "breed" was an abomination. The Latin equivalent of *tokas* is *foenus*, which is derived from *fetus*. This latter characterization was indebted to Aristotle and the understanding of natural law that operated at the time.

- c. Other ways of handling this prohibition - while allowing for profitable loans of some sort - was to allow partnerships to form, called a *societas*, in which the one who contributed the money and the one who contributed the labor would share in both the risk and the reward.
- d. Another was to treat the repayment with interest as an “annuity” or *census*. So, instead of loaning money, there was the purchase of future returns for a fixed number of years. For example, I would buy the next three years of tomatoes from Christopher wells for \$100, with the understanding that I would get 10% of his tomato crop each year.
- e. This prohibition and these moral distinctions still operate in Muslim communities and inform many *sharia*-based banks. In fact, one influential writer on the early Christian accounts of usury - John Noonan, whose work I have relied on for this review, reports that his historical work on usury in the Christian tradition has been consulted by the chief judge of the *sharia* court in Pakistan (John Noonan, *A Church that Can and Cannot Change*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 136.
- f. This very brief and partial historical review establishes a basic point: Money matters. It mattered to the early Christians and the civilization that they inherited and shaped for centuries. Christian thinking about money worked with the Scriptures, but also reached out to draw in different ideas from philosophy to understand what God required them to do in their own context. This is what we will do as well.
- g. More importantly, it helps us see that we never take up the topic of money from a neutral position. We come upon discussions of money like a good story - we begin *in media res*, “in the middle of things,” with a history that we have inherited and attitudes and sensibilities that we have gained along the way.

2. Money Matters today, more than ever.

- a. In a recent publication on economics, the theologian Kathryn Tanner writes the following:

The economy dominates our world today as never before, for better or worse. Economic goods bring every other sort with them. If you have money, you can have a good education, good health care, the respect of one’s peers, a political post, and so

*on. And therefore every other sort of good is often simply geared to gaining the goods of wealth and economic security. What is an excellent education worth, for example, if it doesn't mean a well-paying job upon graduation? In short, all goods in our world tend to turn on the hinge of money - as either what brings money in or what money buys (Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, 2005), ix.*

- b. However, money is more than just a vehicle for serving our self-interest. Money shapes our identity in the way that makes it an almost mythical force. The psychologist Earnest Becker in a book entitled *Escape from Evil* (1975) developed the term, "immortality symbol" to describe the role that money plays in our society. Here is what Becker wrote:

*Money gives power now - and, through accumulating property, land and interest, power in the future. . . The symbols of immortal power that money buys exist on the level of the invisible, and so crowd out their invisible competitor. . . No wonder economic equality is beyond the imagination of modern, democratic [persons]: the house, the car, the bank balance are [our] immortality symbols (Becker, *Escape From Evil*, Free Press, 1975), 84-85, taken from David Goetz, *Death by Suburbs*, 2006), 41-42.*

- c. Therefore, the only way for us to handle money is to spend time in some sort of contemplation, self-examination, and study. Here again, we are not operating from a neutral place, but we are already entering an area that has many moral, psychological, and cultural forces interacting.

This need to step back from our immediate drives and desires is recognized even by those who speak to entirely secular audiences. In a book that is designed to help its readers build up their personal wealth. Gary Keller and Jay Papasan share the following "ancient tale."

Upon coming out of his palace one morning and encountering a beggar, a king asks, "What do you want?" The beggar laughingly says, "You ask as though you can fulfill my desire!" Offended, the king replies, "Of course I can. What is it?" The beggar warns, "Think twice before you promise anything." Now, the beggar was no ordinary beggar but the king's past-life master, who had promised in their former life, "I will come to try to wake you in our next life. This life you have missed, but I will come again to help you." The King, not recognizing his old friend, insisted, "I will fulfill anything you ask, for I am a very powerful king who

*can fulfill any desire.” The beggar said, “It is a very simple desire. Can you fill this begging bowl?” “Of course!” said the king, and he instructed his vizier to “Fill the man’s begging bowl with money.” The vizier did, but when the money was poured into the bowl, it disappeared. So he poured more and more, but the moment he did, it would disappear. The begging bowl remained empty. Word spread throughout the kingdom, and a huge crowd gathered. The prestige and power of the king were at stake, so he told his vizier, “If my kingdom is to be lost, I am ready to lose it, but I cannot be defeated by this beggar.” He continued to empty his wealth into the bowl. Diamonds, pearls, emeralds. His treasury was becoming empty. And yet the begging bowl seemed bottomless. Everything put into it immediately disappeared! Finally, as the crowd stood in utter silence, the king dropped at the beggar’s feet and admitted defeat. “You are victorious, but before you go, fulfill my curiosity. What is the secret of this begging bowl?” The beggar humbly replied, ‘There is no secret. It is simply made up of human desire.’” (Keller and Papsan, *The One Thing*, Bard Press, 2012), 140-141.*

The authors then go on to say, “One of our biggest challenges is making sure our life’s purpose doesn’t become a beggar’s bowl, a bottomless pit of desire continually searching for the next thing that will make us happy. That’s a losing proposition...**Happiness happens on the way the way to fulfillment.**” The key is to determine your purpose and then determine the financial requirements that need to be in place to attain that purpose.

3. How Money Matters to You and Me

If all of this is true, then Christians have to address questions about money. Money Matters to you and me. How we understand it and live with it has been shaped by generations of thinking and forces larger than ourselves.

- a. However, when looking at money as a topic, it is common to let our discussions to take one of two forms:
 1. The first is to throw up our hands and to give up. The wider culture of money is so embedded in our psyches and social context that studying it only reinforces in us a sense of powerlessness.
 2. The second is to assume a position of power -- that we can control the levers of the economy like the chair of the federal reserve.

Neither position is helpful, and both forgets that we are members of a community - our church - that can help us imagine new ways forward.

- b. Christ Church Cranbrook, for example, was built to instill in its parishioners a “gift economy” founded on generosity and giving rather than an “exchange economy” built upon transactions concerning goods and services.

In the first kind of economy, there are relations of grace built around what Kathryn Tanner would call “noncompetitive” relations of “equal regard” or “unconditional regard.” Each of us matters because each of us matters.

In the second, there are relations built upon contracts regarding goods and services. These relations are judged on the basis of “competitive” relations regarding “greater” or “lesser” value and “fair” or “unfair” prices.

Few of us are ever able to completely transcend “exchange economies.” However, one way for us to think about money is to ask ourselves what would it take for us to participate in the gift economy that George and Ellen Booth started.

One example of this is to think of Ben Snyder, who taught at Cranbrook Schools from 1948-1990, whose life we will celebrate next week. During his tenure at Cranbrook, he served in a number of capacities: history teacher, track coach, Assistant Head, and Director of Special and Summer programs. However, his greatest legacy is the Horizons Upward Bound (HUB) program he founded at Cranbrook in 1965 to give low income youth from inner city Detroit an opportunity to realize the advantages of higher education. HUB has served over 2000 boys and girls from Greater Detroit for 50 years.

Like every other kind of economy, gift economies have multiple benefits. But they also require a different kind of investment in persons at every point in the supply chain, as it were. They require virtues of generosity rather than, say, thrift. Consider the following reminiscence from Tom Mecsey, one of the teachers that Ben mentored:

My life as an educator literally began when Ben Snyder agreed to take on a young, inexperienced student-teacher

into the HUB program in the science department. On my best days that summer, he was at my side celebrating success with me. When I had days of challenge and disappointment, he would pull me aside to offer words of encouragement, as only the most-experienced coach could. In the days between, I was often surprised when I stopped by my mailbox to find that he had written a personal note of support to me. I wondered how such a busy and important man could devote so much of his precious time inspiring one of the lowest persons on the HUB totem pole that summer. My internship came to an end and I soon became a teacher. I remained involved in both the summer and winter HUB programs, largely because I knew I still had a lot to learn from Ben. Ultimately, I was able to secure a teaching assignment on the boys' middle school campus at Cranbrook, principally as a result of a recommendation from my mentor, Ben Snyder.

Throughout my career, I have thought of you often, Ben. As a tribute to your guidance and encouragement, I have tried to be the best teacher and administrator I could possibly be. I have thought of you often and wished the very best that life had to offer upon you and Margot. I will always remember you for as one of the wisest, kindest and most generous man I've had the pleasure to know. Not many have influenced the lives of thousands for the better as you have I am happy to be able to count myself among those you have touched. Requiesce in pace, mi magister.

4. Questions for Discussion/Reflection - How Does Money Matter to You?

Over the many classes that will comprise this course, it will be tempting to fall between the two attitudes I mentioned - feeling powerless, feeling all powerful.

But the best way for us to proceed is to begin by reflecting on not only the role of the church in our economic life, but also on what attitudes and practices we need to make the life of faith real and possible.

This will be important, because the textbook for this course - while important - will constantly tempt us to externalize discussions about money - to distract us with wider movements and economic structures that can derail us talking about money and possessions in a powerful and life-giving way.

The purpose of this class is not to advance one economic theory over another, but to help us live according to the greater economy of grace that God has established through the giving of Jesus, and the Spirit. It will come ultimately through reflecting on the virtues and practices of generosity by people like Ben.

To help us begin this process, let me offer the following questions:

Who taught you about money?

What difference has money made in your life?

If you were to think about all the money you have, earn, and spend, what would this money say about you. What would be revealed as your greatest desire? Your guiding purpose?