

Generous The Character of the Christian Tim Challies

Today we continue our series on the character of the Christian. We are exploring how the various character qualifications of elders are actually God's calling on all Christians. While elders are meant to *exemplify* these traits, all Christians are to *exhibit* them. I want us to consider whether we are displaying these traits and to learn together how we can pray to have them in greater measure. Today we will look at what it means for Christian leaders and for all Christians to not be lovers of money and wealth, but instead to be marked by generosity.

Paul tells Timothy, "An overseer must ... not [be] a lover of money" (1 Timothy 3:3). Likewise, he tells Titus, "an overseer ... must not be ... greedy for gain" (Titus 1:7). Finally, Peter writes exiled elders, "Shepherd the flock of God ... not for shameful gain, but eagerly" (1 Peter 5:2). Clearly, the biblical authors understand that the way we use our money displays something very important about our relationship with God. They understand as well that there will always be people who pursue ministry for the purpose of personal enrichment.

In his commentary on 1 Timothy, Philip Ryken points out that there are two grave errors that can come when considering Christian leaders in light of money: "It is a grave mistake to consider wealth a credential for spiritual leadership. Being rich does not disqualify a man from the eldership, but it does not recommend him for it, either. What matters is how he uses his money, and especially how much affection he has for it. An overseer must not be a money-lover." Thus, John Piper writes that an elder's "lifestyle should not reflect a love of luxury. He should be a generous giver. He should not be anxious about his financial future. He should not be so money-oriented that ministry decisions revolve around this issue." The man should be free from both the love of money and the love of the lavish lifestyle that money can buy. He displays his freedom from the love of money through his generosity.

Alexander Strauch explains,

This qualification prohibits a base, mercenary interest that uses Christian ministry and people for personal profit. ... Like a powerful drug, the love of money can delude the judgment of even the best men. ... Elders, then, cannot be the kind of men who are always interested in money. They cannot be men who need to control the church's funds and who refuse financial accountability. Such men have distorted spiritual values and set the wrong example for the church. They will inevitably fall into unethical financial dealings that will publicly disgrace the Lord's name.

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And, indeed, we regularly see men fall into scandal for that very reason. Jesus warned "You cannot serve both God and [money]" for every person can have only one master (Matthew 6:24). It is crucial to the well-being of the church that its leaders are joyfully controlled by the Word of God rather than the desire for wealth.

How about Christians that are not elders? Not surprisingly, God requires the very same standard. Jesus warned, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19–21). Later in his letter to Timothy, Paul warns about the power of money: “Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (1 Timothy 6:7–10). One of the major themes of the Bible’s wisdom literature is the danger of idolizing money and wealth.

It would be a great mistake, however, to think that God only has negative things to say about money. Rather, he tells us that money is a great gift that we can faithfully steward for the most significant purposes. “Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce,” says Solomon (Proverbs 3:9). “The people rejoiced because they had given willingly, for with a whole heart they had offered freely to the LORD” (1 Chronicles 29:9). Paul taught the enduring value of generosity when he wrote the church in Corinth: “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7).

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It is the Christian’s duty and delight to hold loosely to wealth and to give generously to the Lord’s work. Any problem with money is not the fault of the money itself but with the sneaky, sinful human heart. As Thabiti Anyabwile points out, we have something so much greater than money that can captivate our affections in a much deeper way: “The Lord gives us greater loves than money, which makes wings and flies away (Prov. 23:5). He gives us greater delights in Christ, who in fact is the greatest delight of all. What a privilege it is, by God’s rich grace, to preach Christ the Lamb to a world overrun with love for money.”

Self-Evaluation

So, how about you? How do you relate to your money? I encourage you to prayerfully reflect on questions like these:

- Would others say that you are stingy or generous? Would they say that you love money or that you love people?
- When was the last time you denied yourself a material pleasure so that you might use that money to bless someone else?
- Do you have a plan for your giving to the church and to other worthy causes?
- Are you willing to give secretly so that no one knows about it except for you and the Lord? (Matthew 6:1–4)

Prayer Points

God loves a cheerful giver because He Himself is a cheerful giver. So, I encourage you to pray in these ways:

- I pray that you, Father, would make Christ more precious to me than all else—including money.
- I pray that you would give me a generous heart that is quick to identify and meet the needs of others. Help me to gladly lay up treasures in heaven with greater enthusiasm than I lay up treasures here on earth (Matthew 6:19–24)
- I pray that you would help me trust in you at all times—even and especially when finances are tight. Help me to believe that if you care for the birds of the air and if you so clothe the grass of the field, then of course you will provide for me as well (Matthew 6:25–34).
- I pray that I would worship you as I give to your work this Sunday.

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