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TEARING DOWN AND BUILDING BIGGER



AGAINST-THE-GRAIN ECONOMICS

BY JACK REESE

This address was given at the Pepperdine Bible Lectures, May 1, 1998.

I will never forget his voice. I don't think I can remember exactly what his face looked like. As I recall, he had blue eyes and blond hair, but I don't know for sure. I'm guessing he was about five. But I remember his voice because it was so sweet and cheery. I was at home alone with my twelve-year-old son that evening when the doorbell rang. That, in and of itself, was not a surprise—the doorbell had rung about ten times in the previous half hour. After all, it was Halloween. All the neighborhood children had come to the door in their various costumes hollering, "Trick or treat!" We gave them candy, of course. So it was no surprise when the doorbell rang. But this time, when we went to the door, we saw standing in front of us three children who were not from our neighborhood.

We could tell they were not from our neighborhood by the way they were dressed. Only one of them had a costume—it was a little sheet with a hole cut out so he could put his head through. He was probably only three. The girl, perhaps eight or nine, had not combed her hair that day. I am not sure she had washed it in weeks. There was no set of parents out at the curb in a nice Suburban watching with delight as their children went to the door with their little orange jack-o-lantern baskets to receive the candy. Rather, they held out little blue Wal-Mart sacks.

What the boy said was not, "Trick or treat." What he said—almost cheerily—was, "Are you rich?"

I was absolutely stunned. I was speechless. I was trapped. There was nothing I could do. There was no place

that I could go. I stood there for what seemed like half a minute, paralyzed. It may not have been more than three or four seconds—I don't know. But I had a flood of thoughts going through my mind.

I could not help but remember all the study that I had done over the years on the Old Testament prophets and their messages about wealth and poverty; all the study on the teachings of Jesus; and all the study and sermons I had done on the Gospel of Luke, James' message about not giving special privileges to the wealthy, and Paul's concern over greed. Literally, all those thoughts came into my mind in those moments.

To make matters worse, I stood there with the heavy presence of my son, who was waiting to hear the answer to the question. I will confess to you what I wish I had had the courage to confess in the presence of my son to that five-year-old boy on that day: "I am a liar."

I said, "No, I'm not rich."

So I reached into the bowl and gave them extra candy. They were poor children, you know, so I gave them extra candy. That's one of the things that we rich people can do. We can give a little more because it helps to justify our existence.

I stand before you today as a person who is rich, speaking to a people of wealth. And it scares me to death, because I know exactly what Luke and Jesus will say to us this day. I will tell you in all honesty that I did not want to speak on this topic. This was not the topic of my choice. I found myself, during the past couple of months, almost

paralyzed in my preparations—but not because I did not have enough resources. I have plenty of resources. I have studied Luke for years. I have preached on Luke a number of times. I know what the text says. It was not because I did not know what Luke says that I was paralyzed in my preparations. On the contrary, the texts are clear.

Over the years I have quoted many times a passage from Stephen Spidell, which I feel to be especially appropriate. It is from an article he wrote in *Mission* magazine in 1982 concerning preaching.

The preacher standing in his pulpit may seem the paragon of virtue and piety, strength and objectivity, dispassionate yet inflamed by his love of the truth. But more accurately he is more of a survivor, and sometimes just barely, of a great battle, a conflict made all the more costly because it has been fought out entirely inside himself. In the pulpit he is but a messenger from the battle ground, bringing the news of its outcome to others. At best the battle is like Thermopylae; sometimes it is more like the Alamo.

I will tell you in all honesty that I have spent the last several weeks in a foxhole, surrounded by the enemy. And upon close examination of my life, I will tell you the honest truth: I do not have any words to speak to you today.

It would have been nice if I could have drawn on some old sermons I had preached on the dangers of wealth, but I had none. It would have been good if I could have referred to the sermons I had heard preached throughout my years on the dangers of riches. But I had not heard more than two or three in my life. And I find that number an amazing contrast to the preponderance of texts found in Scripture—over 450 passages in the Old and New Testaments—warning the people of God about riches and wealth. The number of references is second only to idolatry in the frequency of its occurrence. Over a sixth of all Jesus' recorded sayings are warnings to his disciples about riches and wealth, and most are in Luke's Gospel. He spoke more often on the dangers of wealth than he ever spoke on sexual immorality, or baptism, or worship, all of which are of vital interest to the church. The sheer weight of the passages in Luke is staggering; their accumulation is utterly devastating.

- Upon greeting her cousin Elizabeth, shortly after the visit from Gabriel, Mary sings a song, which Luke records: "He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:51b–53).¹

- In the very first sermon that he preaches in his home synagogue, Jesus quotes from Isa 61:1–2: "He has anointed me to

Over a sixth of all Jesus' recorded sayings are warnings to his disciples about riches and wealth, and most are in Luke's Gospel.



bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18).

- In Luke 6:20, 24, he looks at his disciples as they gather around him on a level place and says, "[Congratulations to you who are poor, for the kingdom of heaven is yours.] . . . Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."
- "Take care!" he says, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15).
- He says, "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And then I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God" (Luke 12:16–21).
- "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (Luke 14:33).
- "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:24–25).

I have spent three months looking for a way out. As recently as last week, I was prepared to say that the real issue, the real fundamental issue, is not money; it is not wealth, but it is something more foundational. As of a week ago, that is what I was planning to say.

The problem is that we just don't take the Word seriously enough; the problem is that we don't take the Word at all. We put these texts in the same pile of Scriptures into which we place Jesus' statement about hating our fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters, or the texts about women's wearing veils, or washing each other's feet, or greeting one another with a holy kiss. We can mine

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some general lessons from these, of course, but Jesus could not have meant them literally. And he couldn't have meant literally these harsh statements about wealth.

After all, what does it mean to be rich? Everyone in America is rich, are they not? And the answer to that question is yes. They are. My daughters are capable of earning in a week more than the average family salary in East Africa. Even if we sold our homes and lived in trailers, even if we lived in the streets among our cities' homeless, we would be among the most advantaged people in the world. And so since all of us, in some sense, are rich, then these passages are almost nonsensical, are they not? We are all rich, which is to say that it's really all irrelevant. We cannot get poor enough. So there is not really anything to worry about. And so we don't.

In a recent survey done by Robert Wuthnow, recorded in his wonderful book, *God and Mammon in America*, religious and non-religious people were all asked the same question: Why did you choose your present vocation? The top answer, overwhelmingly, of both groups was "money." Only 10 percent of Christians chose their vocations for any particularly Christian reason at all. And these views are not just held by a bunch of materialistic Americans around us or just some selfish, rich Christians who don't

understand the true cost of discipleship.

The problem is with me. And the problem is with money.

In Luke 16:13, Jesus uses a word in Aramaic, his own language, that Luke chooses not to translate into the Greek. Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and *mammon*" (RSV). And what is clear in its usage—the reason that Luke does not translate this common word meaning "wealth" or "riches"—is that Jesus seems to be using it in a unique and special sense. He seems to be equating *mammon* with a god. You cannot serve both this God and that god.

Money is a kind of power, not some kind of vague little power, but the kind of power you see referred to over and over in the Scriptures, among the powers and principalities, the rulers and authorities of this world, the spiritual forces that move in dynamic ways in and through this world. It is a focused power. It is an orienting power. It is a power that moves things. It is a law unto itself. It has value and meaning and direction. It is a personal force.

Jesus said that God and *mammon* are in a fundamental conflict and that *mammon* can be every bit as much your master as God can. He can be your personal master. We may say to ourselves that we just use money, but that is a delusion. It is money who uses us. It is money who makes us his servant. It is money who makes us subordinate to his will. And the use of it becomes for us a kind of holy thing, something we don't even talk about in polite society.

When our family was in Thailand a couple of summers ago, we found many of the Thais asking us, "How much money do you make?" We were shocked and embarrassed. What for them was absolutely normal in their context and culture seemed almost scandalous to us. Now, if they had asked us, "What are your religious views?" we would have been happy to tell them—but not how much money we made. That's a kind of holy thing, a social error to discuss in public ways.

Maybe the closest statement of what money can mean to us as a god was made by John D. Rockefeller, one of the richest people in the world of his day, who responded to a reporter's question, "How much more money do you need?" His answer was, "Just a little bit more."

Just a little bit more. We need just a little bit more for our house payment. We need just a little bit more, and we will be out of debt. We need just a little bit more, and we will pay off our credit cards. We need just a little bit more, and we can get the extra car. We need just a little bit more, and we can add on to our house. If we can get just a little bit more, we can buy more clothes. If we had just a little bit more . . .

And I declare to you that when all we need is just a little bit more, we are under the control of the god *mammon*. And in that light, I declare that most of us, and certainly this speaker, are guilty today of the sin of idolatry.

One of the things that is most frightening about Luke's Gospel is that it is an upside-down world and an upside-down economy. Everything is turned on its head. The first are actually last. The free are actually enslaved. The greatest are actually the least. And the rich are actually poor.

I want to speak to you as clearly as I can today. We as Americans and as Christians have too often thought that our relative wealth in the world is a sign of God's blessing. And Luke declares to us that it is not!

Let me speak even more plainly to us in Churches of Christ. We have spent the last fifty years moving from the rural areas and the inner cities out into the suburbs. Over the last fifty years, we have continually spent more and more money on ourselves, more and more money on the monuments we have created for ourselves, more and more money on our own programs, our own budgets, and our own things. At the very same time, over a fifty-year period, evangelism and missions in our own fellowship have almost died out.

I grew up in a church that spent over 50 percent of its budget on missions every year. There may be churches today that spend that kind of money on missions and evangelism, but I don't know about them. I know that within the world of Christendom at large, by the year 2004 there will be more Christians and Christian churches on the continent of Africa than there are in America. I know, more specifically, that within the fellowship of Churches of Christ, by the year 2000, according to Wendell Broom and others, there will be more Christians and congregations of Churches of Christ on the continent of Africa than in America, because they are growing rapidly in the midst of their poverty, and we are sitting in our wealth and doing little but spending it on ourselves.

This is not a lesson about evangelism and missions. It is a lesson about priorities.

One of the ironies is that there are many and increasingly more Africans who are coming to do mission work in America because we desperately need it. And my prayer is that they will not become caught up in worshipping the same god whom we worship. We live in opulent church buildings and spend on ourselves openly. Is that a sign of God's blessing? Is that a sign that God has blessed us more? Are we blessed more than the Laotian Christians who have been in prison for their faith for weeks? Are we blessed

more than the African who has sold his family cow, who has sold everything he had, his livelihood for himself and his family, in order to go to the Great Commission School in Nairobi to learn how to preach? Are we blessed more than he is? We have confused success with faithfulness.

I declare to you today that our wealth is not necessarily a sign of God's favor, but may very well be a sign of our abandonment of the values of the kingdom of God.

We as Americans and as Christians have too often thought that our relative wealth in the world is a sign of God's blessing. And Luke declares to us that it is not!



I have a friend who said to me a few days ago, in the context of missions and evangelism, "I wish we had a lost person in every eldership." By that he meant, "I wish that at the table in elders' meetings there would be a person who would say, 'What about me? All these plans and programs—what about me?'" I declare to you, I wish that every eldership had at least one person of abject poverty who could say to us, "What in the world are you doing?"

In that same light, I wish to expose what I believe has been one of the most insidious teachings in our fellowship over the last several years—which I believe is more American than it is Christian, because I do not believe that it is Christian at all. It is the message that says that if we give money to the Lord generously, God will give us back more money in return. I hear stories about people who give 10 percent of their income for the first time, and God doubles their income. And I admit to you that I am embarrassed. I know many, many people who have had their incomes doubled, tripled, and quadrupled who have no Christian faith at all. And I know many faithful Christians who have gone belly-up bankrupt, and it has had nothing to do with their faithfulness.

I am embarrassed in the light of all the Christian martyrs throughout Christian history who have given their lives and received nothing materially in return.

And I am embarrassed that a passage found in Luke's Gospel, of all places, would be the linchpin of such teaching: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:38). This is a passage that is clearly in the context of passing judgment on one another.

And I want to be careful not to pass judgment on those who assume it is about money.

God never promises wealth. He never did.

The story of the early church in Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, is not a story about the riches of the early Christians, about increasing wealth, about giving and receiving more in return. Rather, it is about martyrdom and bloodshed. It is about giving one's life for the sake of the cause and not putting down one's roots too deeply here. The message Luke wrote to Theophilus is, "Be careful, because *mammon* can control you."

And when we spend more of our time worrying about our money, staying up at night worrying about our bills and our finances, worrying about what we have that we can't pay for, and what we want but can't have; when we spend our time worrying about our things, our stuff, our possessions, our income, our houses, our livelihood, our stature in the world; when we are more concerned about *our* things than the things of God—missions and evangelism, helping the poor, helping to build up families, serving the world in the name of Christ—then we fall down on our knees and worship the god whose name is *mammon*. That's what it means to be rich.

I declare to you today that I am rich man, speaking to a people of wealth, and I am frightened to death.

I so much wanted to end this sermon on a positive note; you cannot imagine how hard I searched for it. I kept reading Luke trying to find a way out. You know, you go to a lot of the Psalms and you read the message of the Psalmist who cries out against God and it just kind of brings you down. But almost always at the end there is a

message that is positive and hopeful—"But even then I will give my praise to the Lord"—and it kind of ends on an upbeat. Not all of them are like this, but so many of them are. And I kept trying to find that same conclusion in Luke in relation to riches and wealth. If I could find just a trace. You know—there are some women who supported Jesus and his disciples in their ministry out of their means. There is a man named Joseph who was wealthy enough to own a tomb in which Jesus' body was laid.

But the bottom line is that Luke never takes it back. He says it baldly, and he never takes it back. He never says, "You know, the rich could redeem themselves if they gave generously." And he never says, "Having money can be a blessing from God." But rather, he stands firmly on the words sung by the mother of our Lord: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away . . . [He has sent the rich away] empty" (Luke 1:52–53).

There is a knock on your door; it is not one that you will want to answer. On the other side is a little boy, haggard, poor, with a little blue Wal-Mart sack in his hand. And he says to you—almost cheerily—"Are you rich?"

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Notes

¹Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).