

The Reward Principle

What Jesus Says about Money:

Luke 16:10-12; Colossians 3:22-24

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The other day, Diane and I saw the movie, *The Pursuit of Happyness*. It is mostly accurate in retelling the saga of Chris Gardner and his little child. As I witnessed his struggle out of poverty, I thought of Genesis, chapter three:

I have placed a curse on the ground. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. All your life you will sweat to produce food, until your dying day. Then you will return to the ground from which you came. (Genesis 3:17-19, NLT)

Chris Gardner invested his life-savings in selling what turned out to be non-essential medical equipment. Bill collectors nipped at his heels. His wife, exhausted from double shifts and disappointments, lost faith and left him. Unusually gifted and amazingly driven, Chris fought relentlessly through painful patches of thorns and thistles to succeed and provide for his young son. Despite heartache and setback, he was able to procure an internship at a brokerage firm that paid nothing, but gave him a chance at a single paid position. During the internship, he and his little son became homeless and camped out in public bathrooms and a shelter offered by a church.

There are gifted and driven Chris Gardners planted in nations all over the world where thorns and thistles choke the national and local economies. There are also less-gifted and driven Chris Gardners who give up or give out as they experience repeated disappointment in places where wealth abounds.

For many of us, earning a buck isn't that hard. We grew up with lots of advantages or blessings we take for granted. Our health, nationality and talent are blessings rather than achievements. Education, work habits, communication, and self-confidence were all parts of our family and community life. We enjoyed these gifts, not knowing that they are rarer than we can imagine. Others of you scrape, scratch and fight self-doubts, discouragement and ill-health every day. In the current economy, the results of your work are meager, and you subsist.

When Jesus discussed money, he did not see it as optional. He said that our Heavenly Father knows what we need. He taught that what we need comes from our Heavenly Father. The companies that employ us, or the businesses we run, are mere agents of our Heavenly Father. They can lose that status for us and others.

The Bible doesn't suggest for a moment that if you just work hard, or somehow do the right thing, you will become wealthy. The thorns and thistles of the curse claw at people and choke a hungry world. Wealth accumulates and health abounds only where God's blessings are. Wealth is not your right. Wealth is not a human right.

From Jesus' perspective, wealth is not a gift either. God does not shift ownership of the world or the things in the world to you, so that you can do whatever you want without any accountability. The Bible teaches:

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.
(Psalm 24:1, NIV)

Whatever title, deed or certificate of ownership you have, it is not absolute. It can be ripped from your hands. You do not have absolute ownership of your land, nor does the United States have absolute ownership of its territories.

If wealth or possessions are not a right or a gift, what are they? Jesus told a story of a shrewd manager who spent the owner's wealth as if it was his to squander. He told about a day

of accountability and how the dishonest manager strategically used the wealth to assure his financial health after the day of accountability when he lost control of it. He then said:

Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? (Luke 16:10-12, NIV)

Money is a trust. It is God who gives health. It is God who gives ability. It is God who blesses a people. It is God who puts resources into one hand and takes it away from another. It all belongs to God. You and I have been given trusteeship, not ownership. So what can we be trusted with? What can God trust our nation with? What can God trust our community with? What can God trust our family with? What can God trust us individually with?

A week ago we learned from Jesus the royal principle: we are royal children on a royal mission. Wealth is not the aim of that mission. It is a resource for it. Jesus did not aim to be wealthy. Making money was not his idea of pursuing happiness. Instead, he pursued the kingdom of God and his righteousness. He obeyed his Father and focused on his Father's business. When the Spirit of Jesus dominates your heart, you'll enjoy things much more. They won't be the prize. They won't be some achievement that you fear losing. They'll be the blessings along the way as you pursue the prize of God's kingdom and righteousness. Wealth, then, is a blessing, a resource and a trust. However, it is something more.

When Jesus in Luke 16 says, ***“If you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property who will give you property of your own,”*** he is asking who will reward you. If you open the Bible in your pew and read it all the way through, you'll find the English word *reward* appears 89 times. Even as Jesus in his famous Sermon on the Mount taught the royal principle, he also taught the reward principle. In this single sermon, he speaks of our reward

eight times. There's a reward for loving your enemies. There's a reward for quiet kindness and secret giving. God rewards secret prayers and hidden fasting. Elsewhere, Jesus teaches that when we welcome and bless people in God's service, we share in their reward. He tells stories that claim we will be rewarded for a good job as God's servant and given more responsibility, which is exactly the nature of wealth. It is responsibility. The author of Hebrews says that without faith it is impossible to please, that whoever comes to God must believe that he exists and also that he "rewards" all those who diligently seek him. Referring specifically to slaves, the Apostle wrote:

Work hard and cheerfully at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. Remember that the Lord will give you an inheritance as your reward, and the Master you are serving is Christ.
(Colossians 3:23-24, NLT)

Slaves were called to put their whole heart into the work, their minds, their emotions, their energy, and their love. In doing so, they were serving God, and God would reward them.

Wherever God has placed you at this stage of life, raising children, earning a living, caring for a loved one, does the work have your heart? There is no place for laziness, vengeance or coasting when you are serving the king of kings. Servants are rewarded in time, whether or not they are employed in a vocation. For Chris Gardner the route out of poverty was so twisted and difficult. In the end his faith and service were rewarded in ways he had not envisioned. That is what the Scriptures teach and what Jesus explained and what his followers have found again and again.

So do you make the king of kings proud in your work? Would you like Jesus to treat your affairs the way you treat the affairs of others in your work? Have you sought God's wisdom and blessing in your work? Remember each day who you are and who you work for.