

Leif Rasmussen: **Money and Goods**

Biblical texts - Old Testament as well as New Testament - in many ways describe how a life according to the will of God should be, and also warn against that, which is in opposition to His commandments. Two areas of ethical misbehaviour are in a special way in focus as temptations, which are drawing away from the Kingdom of God: 1) sexual immorality and 2) materialism. One reason that these areas are classified as being in a special way dangerous for the spiritual life seems to be that both of them represent strong powers in the everyday life of human beings.

Mastership of money may overrule the mastership of God.

Money and goods - the things we own or maybe strongly want to own - may occupy such a position in our minds that - as a matter of fact - they have become an idol. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus states that the mastership of money may overrule the mastership of God: "No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and Mammon" (= Money). (Matth. 6.24.) That is to say that our relationship to money and goods may be in conflict to the first and greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind".

It is worth observing that when Jesus warns against serving Mammon he is referring to two different (two opposite) aspects: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth" and "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink". (Matth. 6.19. + 25 f.) To believe in God is to trust Him as the one, who is safeguarding me according to the love and ability of an Almighty Father, so that I should neither worry nor trust Mammon instead of my Heavenly Father. Paul can talk about those who are rich as being in a special way tempted to put their hope in wealth instead of putting their hope in God. (2. Tim. 6.17.)

The same thing is underlined in a remarkable text from Deuter. 8, in which the people, who is underway from Egypt to the good land, is warned against what might easily happen, when their situation is changed from the forty years in the desert under God's daily care to the abundant existence in the future land. "When you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase, and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud, and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery..... You may say to yourself 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me'. But remember the Lord your God for it is He, who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant." (Deutr. 8. 12 - 18.) God is the giver of wealth and goods. However, too often our hearts are bound to the riches, we have got in our hands, in such a way that we trust them instead of the Giver. Mammon becomes our master. Jesus is very serious, when he says that "it is hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven". (Matth. 19. 23.)

It is necessary over and over again to repeat to our minds - especially when we have been plentifully blessed with everything, we need - that "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luk. 12. 15.)

Also your relationship to your neighbour is challenged by money.

Furthermore, our relationship to money and goods may also lead to conflicts to the other part of the concentrated expression of God's commandments: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Our storing up treasures for ourselves may lead to the consequence that others are suffering. And also it is too often seen that money and goods have become means of sinful overruling of others. There is power in a purse, and there is great power in a heavy purse !

What is expressed in the Bible is not that being wealthy in itself should be considered sinful. Riches can very well be described as a blessing from God, for which we should be thankful and praise His name. (Cf. e.g. Prov. 10. 22.) In fact "those, who are rich in this present world" have a chance (and they are prompted to make use of it !) "to do good, to be rich in all good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share". (1.Tim. 6. 17 - 18.) The attitude which is often warned against as far as goods are concerned is greed, the constant desire to get more, to a great extent without scruples regarding how you get it. It is worth observing that greed is characterized as idolatry. (Col. 3. 5.). "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs". (1. Tim. 6. 6-10.)

The land is mine. You are my tenants.

The basic understanding of money and goods in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament is that the supreme owner of anything is God, the Creator and the Preserver. As human beings we are to be considered as administrators or managers or stewards. "The land is mine, and you are but aliens and my tenants" (Lev. 25. 23.) - "The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord Almighty" (Haggai 2. 8.)

An indication of this basic understanding is given through the rule of Firstfruits, which should be brought to the Lord at the Holy Place. (Deuter. 26. 1-11.) By bringing this sacrifice the Israelite should underline to himself that all that, which he produced, was belonging to God. God should have the first part and the best part. - The same was expressed through the rule about the Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25.)

What is at your disposal - money and goods - is given to you in order that you should administer all of it in the best and most responsible way. What does that mean ?

To be good administrators.

First of all it might be right to say that administering money and goods should be regarded as part of the commission to take care of culturing the creation, - the commission, which God has given to human beings through Adam and Eve: "- subdue the earth" (Gen. 1. 28.)

To do that in a responsible way is to do it under constant consideration of being part of a totality. Resources, which are limited, should not just be consumed in a greedy way without considering others - contemporary groups of people or future generations - who may also have a right to a share, or the nature, which might be brought out of balance through a greedy consumption. To administer goods as a responsible tenant of God the Creator is to let your personal, ego-concentrated wish to store up treasures be limited by consideration of the totality to which you belong.

Sometimes - with reference to the very early Christian community in Jerusalem (Acts 2. 44. and Acts 4. 32.) - it has been claimed that Christians ought to refuse personal, individual ownership, and that a true Christian attitude to goods is the total community of property. However, when we read, what Jesus is teaching, as well as what is said by the apostles, and what is referred to in the Acts, the giving up of personal ownership seems not to be neither normal nor prompted to as the Christian way of life. What is essential to read out of the texts is that koinonia includes mutual care and readiness to help, where needed. Ownership should always be balanced by sharing.

In administering your money and goods you shall "love your neighbour as yourself". That makes it relevant to be conscious about the question: "Who is my neighbour?" Not just as a philosophical question, but as an existential and practical one.

A statement like "Your neighbour is some one, who is close to you or dependant of you", nowadays opens up for a very broad scenario. The world has become one great village. What is done in one part of this village often influences far away parts of the same village.

How do we get and how do we spend our money ?

First and foremost I am responsible for administering what I personally have at my disposal. How do I get it ? The commandment, "You shall not steal", does not only refer to direct common theft. It also has much to say about how we get our money, ordering us to do it in a totally honest way. (Cf. Jer. 17. 11. about "the man, who gains riches by unjust means".) It has consequences for business life. It certainly also has implications for the relationship between employees and employer. It seems necessary to remind ourselves, too, about honesty in tax affairs, - an area, where many good (?) citizens in now-a-days societies are tempted to be "creative", because the neighbour, from whom the money is stolen, is to a very great extent so anonymous.

The other side of our administering money and goods is: How do we spend, what we have in our hands ? A Christian way of administering is to have an open eye for

those, who are in need. This is a topic, which is often referred to by the Old Testament prophets, but also over and over again repeated in the teaching, Jesus was giving to those, who listened to him and wanted to follow him. Not to forget, what was said and written by the apostles. Expressed e.g. in, what Paul quotes from Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive". (Acts 20. 35.)

Willingness to practise charity is part of what this means. Also as far as this is concerned, we should notice the rule that "from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded" (Luk. 12. 48.)

However, charity is not the only attitude to observe, when we talk about having an open eye for those, who are in need. A very important aspect is, what could be described as a just and fair sharing of available resources. In a local society. In a nation. But also worldwide. We have to remind ourselves that our neighbour, who should be an object of our practical love, nowadays include people, who are living in other continents far away. The circumstances under which they are living are to a great extent determined by political decisions and business arrangements made not only in their local society, but much more in other parts of the world by those, who have a great power of the purse.

Each one of us are part of a political system, where we have influence. We are co-responsible not only for development help, but also for other political decisions, which might either improve a more fair sharing of the goods or worsening an unjust sharing, which is keeping millions and millions of human beings in poverty, famine and terrible diseases. There should be no doubt that being Christians in a privileged part of the world in the beginning of the 21st century our administering money and goods puts us under an obligation to advocate a changed world order, leading to a more just sharing of the available resources and thereby better living conditions for the underprivileged billions of men, women and children. What is necessary are political initiatives; but politicians are very much influenced by the public opinion. And the opinion of a Christian should be determined by Christian ethical standards !

Serving the Kingdom of God through money and goods.

We cannot talk about Christian administering of money and goods without referring also to the responsibility of serving the Kingdom of God also through stewardship. Money can be used to many secular purposes, but it can also serve the Kingdom of God and be a rather important factor for further spreading of the Gospel. Jesus challenged those, who had questions about tax-paying, by saying that they ought to "give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matth. 22. 21.)

Through the prophet Haggai God is talking to the people, who had returned to Jerusalem, about how they were prioritizing totally wrong: "My house remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house." (Haggai 1. 9.) This was about the temple-building after the exile. Also to the temple, which King Solomon was building, the people was challenged to participate through offering their possessions. It is remarkable, what David is stating in this connection about God being the owner of everything and the people just being stewards: "Everything comes from you, and we have given you only, what comes from your hand." (1. Chron. 29. 14 + 16.)

In order to cover the expenses in connection with the temple-service the Israelites were bringing tithe to the temple. The people of God in the New Testament congregations are not bound precisely to give one tenth. When the congregation in Corinth was urged to participate in collection of money for the fellow-Christians in Jerusalem, the apostle Paul is challenging them by saying: "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (2. Cor. 9. 7.)

Through money and goods each one of us can be co-responsible for the life and activities of the church in its many aspects, including spreading of the gospel also to individuals and groups, who have not heard it before.

Much money has been given to different aspects of a service in the Kingdom of God by individual Christians as a consequence of their "giving themselves first to the Lord" (2. Cor. 8. 5.). What can be observed, however, is that the affluence in our society does not lead to any improved offering to mission and church work. The tendency is rather opposite. There seems to be a truth in the saying that the last thing to have conversed is the purse and the bank account ! (Zacchaeus seems to be a positive exception from this general experience ! Luk. 19. 8.) I think, we all are struggling with preaching stewardship in such a way that the outcome is "cheerful givers", who are inspired to "sow generously, not reluctantly or under compulsion", knowing and experiencing that "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." (2. Cor. 9. 6 - 8.)

However, it is still valid, what was said in the Lausanne Covenant in 1974: "The goal should be, by all available means and at the earliest possible time, that every person will have the opportunity to hear, understand, and receive the good news. We cannot hope to attain this goal without sacrifice. All of us are shocked by the poverty of millions and disturbed by the injustices which cause it. Those of us who live in affluent circumstances accept our duty to develop a simple lifestyle in order to contribute more generously to both relief and evangelism."

Not bad to have this as a programme and as a standard for administering money and goods, given in our hands by the Owner of all goods !

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For consideration and discussion at the seminar:

- ◆ How can we from a Christian point of view define a just world economic order ?
- ◆ How is the relationship between personal charity, congregation-/church-arranged charity and charity through secular society ?
- ◆ How can an improved personal stewardship for the Kingdom of God be developed in a sound way among Christians in an affluent society ?

