

In God We Trust

Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷ As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" ²⁰ He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." ²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ 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." ²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

²⁸ Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." ²⁹ Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Let's talk about money! Did you notice that all our United States money has the motto: "In God We Trust?" Why? According to the Internet:

The U. S. Department of Treasury states "the motto, IN GOD WE TRUST, was placed on United States coins largely because of the increased religious sentiment existing during the Civil War. Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase received many appeals from devout persons throughout the country, urging that the United States recognize the Deity on United States coins.

From Treasury Department records, it appears that the first such appeal came in a letter dated November 13, 1861. It was written to Secretary Chase by Rev. M. R. Watkinson, Minister of the Gospel from Ridleyville,

Pennsylvania. As a result, Secretary Chase instructed James Pollock, Director of the Mint at Philadelphia, to prepare a motto, in a letter dated November 20, 1861:

Dear Sir: No nation can be strong except in the strength of God, or safe except in His defense. The trust of our people in God should be declared on our national coins. You will cause a device to be prepared without unnecessary delay with a motto expressing in the fewest and tersest words possible this national recognition. It was found that the Act of Congress dated January 18, 1837, prescribed the mottoes and devices that should be placed upon the coins of the United States."

Pollock suggested "*Our Trust Is In God,*" "*Our God And Our Country,*" "*God And Our Country,*" and "*God Our Trust.*" Chase picked "*In God We Trust*" to be used on some of the government's coins. The first time "In God We Trust" appeared on our coins was in 1864 on the new two cent coin, and by 1909 it was included on most the other coins. During the height of the cold war, on July 11, 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed Public Law 140 making it mandatory that all coinage and paper currency display the motto.

Now let me tell you about me and my family's relationship to money. As a child my parents provided everything I needed, but not everything I wanted. The usual explanation was there was not enough money – and this was believable as they raised and educated eleven children on the resources and revenues of a small farm in southeastern Missouri. We worked the fields and usually worked for other farmer for money to

purchase school clothes. But, my parents always taught us to give generously to the church and God would provide for our needs.

When I was in high school I got a summer youth job and my mother and I opened my first bank account. I saved for college – but my parents continued to teach me to give to God and all my needs would be supplied. So this practice continued into young adulthood when I received college scholarships and work-study. I even received extra money when my father retired from farming and I received a small Social Security payment! Then I got a job that covered my room and board – demonstrating to me, God’s provision for my needs – and some of my wants!

I moved to Detroit and got my first “real” job and things went well until cars and insurance in the city of Detroit appeared an unavoidable burden. But still Leroy and I gave to the church and God provided for the needs of our growing family. Even when I went to seminary for 5 years, God continued to provide!

Now I am approaching the end of my full-time work career. I met with a financial planner who said I will be okay as long as I don’t live past 90, in which case I will outlive my money. So am I to understand that I didn’t save enough! But then I remember what my parents and the Bible taught: we do not trust in our own skills and abilities, but in God to supply our needs!

The story of the rich man—described as young in Matthew ([Matt. 19:20](#)) and a ruler in Luke ([Luke 18:18](#))—is one of the most familiar passages in the Synoptic Gospels. Like the equally familiar parable of the Good Samaritan, the story begins with a question about salvation from an earnest adherent to the law. The rich man asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus turned the focus away from the petitioner's concern with his own salvation toward gracious behavior to others. The Samaritan, a religious heretic, was lifted up as the standard of the good neighbor. Likewise, the rich man was exhorted to go, sell all that he had, and give it to the poor,

and then come and follow Jesus. On the one hand, this story clearly raises questions about our attitude and approach toward wealth, if we want to follow Jesus and inherit eternal life. On the other hand, it raises questions about our attitude and approach toward salvation itself.

Jesus' answer to the rich man shocked and dismayed the disciples, and it continues to perplex many of us today. In the ancient world (Greek, Roman, and Hebrew), material prosperity was widely seen as a reward or byproduct of spiritual virtue. Things go well for the good, for men and women of good character, and poorly for the bad, for those who lack good character and self-discipline. There are exceptions, of course, as seen in the story of Job and similar tales of good men and women who are defeated either by circumstances or by others less virtuous than they are. The question of why the good suffer and the wicked prosper is not new. But this question concerns the exceptions that prove the rule. The ideal remains the coincidence of virtue and prosperity. The hope and expectation are that virtue and vice will meet their appropriate fate, in this world or the next.

What then are the relationships between faith and reward, or virtue and wealth? Why must this man give up his riches in order to follow Jesus? What will he get in return? A standard answer is that there is nothing wrong with wealth itself. The problem is not wealth per se but our attitude toward it. As we accumulate riches, we are tempted to trust in our possessions and our powers of acquiring them, rather than in God, for our ultimate security and comfort. Even honestly acquired and generously shared wealth can thus lead to pride. This is why it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. It is hard to let go of the immediate basis of our security and comfort—and the more we have, the harder it gets.

Jesus' promise to the disciples is thus perplexing. He promised that everyone who had sacrificed for his sake will receive, now in this age, a hundred times more than he or she has given up, and will inherit eternal life, in the age to come. This promise is perplexing,

first, because it seems counter to our experience of the world. The community of disciples may provide a substitute and intensified family in place of those left behind, but the reward of discipleship in this age seems to be the way of the cross, not material prosperity.

Second, if the reason for discipleship is the promise of its reward, then discipleship seems to be no more virtuous than the naked pursuit of material gain. If faith promises a hundredfold return on investment, then it is nothing more than prudence or enlightened self-interest. Even the most narrow-minded, self-interested, and calculating spirit would be a fool not to abandon everything and follow Jesus.

To take Jesus' promise literally thus seems to push the notion of the reward for faith beyond his true intent. Faith is not simply an expedient route to friends and fortune. On the contrary, the reward for faith is of a different and higher order than what we sacrifice for it. It is not simply more of the same, a hundred fields and houses rather than one. Jesus is teaching us we cannot attain even this higher reward—our eternal salvation—by striving for it. If our primary concern is our own salvation, through faith or works, then we have missed the point of both faith and works.

Jesus' answer was thus doubly shocking. First, he questions not merely greed but also wealth itself and the virtues that help us to acquire it. Certainly, those of us who pride ourselves on our possessions or expect material prosperity to provide us with ultimate security are sadly mistaken. Even honestly acquired and generously shared wealth is dangerous to our salvation, because it prompts us to rely on ourselves rather than God.

Second, and even more shocking, Jesus questions those who pride themselves on their virtue and faith. Even honestly sought virtue and faith are dangerous, because they also prompt us to rely on ourselves rather than God. We are saved only when we stop worrying about our salvation and turn our attention to God and neighbor.

What then are we to do about our money? Jesus does not leave us with any easy response. We are left at the mercy of God, but Jesus' summons requires total

transformation and commitment. For the rich man, Jesus' call meant giving up all that he had for a life of discipleship. Can it mean less for us? Our response will show whether we truly believe that we will be rewarded in this life and the next. **James J. Thompson**

Giving up our obsession for wealth and possessions frees us up to trust and rely on God to meet our needs. Then we will be freed from monetary worries and freed up to do our ministries in faith and joy!

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