

WATCH OUT FOR RELIGIOUS HUCKSTERS!

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We have been looking at the topic of money for a few weeks now.

We saw that God in general prefers to bless His people.

We saw that Jesus was not an example of living in poverty. He had a home of His own — a big house — and possibly two. He had a treasurer.

We saw that money does have a dark side to it. Though neutral itself ... **the love of money is a problem! You don't have to have money to love it!**

And religion — and churches — aren't exempt from the love of money!

Luke 16:13-15

13 “**No servant can serve two masters**; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. **You cannot serve God and mammon.**” (“Mammon” = *wealth/money*)

14 **Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him.** (“Derided” = *mocked/scoffed*)

15 And He said to them, “**You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.**”

The Pharisees were the established religious leaders — the TV evangelists — of the day — the Bible experts! **They loved money — not God.** No doubt they “looked the part”?

2 Peter 2:1-3

1 **But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, (brethren) who will**

secretly bring in destructive heresies, even **denying the Lord who bought them**, and bring on themselves swift destruction.

2 **And many will follow their destructive ways**, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. (*“Many” — the majority — God’s people??*)

3 **By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words**; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.

Religious leaders who were covetous — greedy! Taking advantage of you — exploiting you.

2 Peter 2:3 (KJV)

3 ... **make merchandise of you** ...

2 Peter 2:3 (WEYMOUTH)

3 **Thirsting for riches, they will trade on you** ...

Their greed might not be obvious? They will present a deceptive image.

Matthew 7:15

15 “**Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.** (*Ravenous = extortioners*)

They look like sheep ... but they are out to exploit and devour.

Typically ... **MONEY BEING ONE OF THE KEY AREAS!**

Matthew 7:16

16 **You will know them by their fruits.** (*Check them out!!*)

Acts 20:17-27

17 From Miletus he (*Paul*) sent to Ephesus and called for **the elders of the church.**

18 And when they had come to him, he said to them: “You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you,

19 **serv^{ing} the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews;**

20 how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house,

21 testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

22 And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there,

23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me.

24 **But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.**

25 “And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more.

26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men.

27 **For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.**

Acts 20:28-38

28 **Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, (addressed to the ministers) among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.**

29 For I know this, **that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.** (*Other ministers. Money will be the key ingredient that they are after*)

30 Also from among yourselves **men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.** (*Money is involved*)

31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

32 “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

33 **I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.** (SO. **DON'T YOU!!**)

34 **Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me.**

35 I have shown you in every way, **by labouring like this,** (*Paul was a worker — who served at his own cost*) that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, '**It is more blessed to give than to receive.**' ”
(**ADDRESSED TO THE ELDERS!!**)

36 And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.

37 Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him,
38 sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship.

Paul's warning: watch out for savage wolves/elders

Paul didn't covet gold or silver.

Paul warned against covetousness — greed. He'd set a great example ... PAID HIS OWN WAY!

It's more blessed for the elders to give ... than to receive.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-5

1 For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain.

2 But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict.

3 For our exhortation did not come from error or uncleanness, nor was it in deceit.

4 But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts.

5 **For neither at any time did we use flattering words,** as you know, **nor a cloak for covetousness — God is witness.**

1 Thessalonians 2:5 (THE VOICE)

5—**we told it straight**—and before the eye of God, **we never conspired to make a single cent off of you.**

1 Thessalonians 2:5 (NIV)

5 **God knows we never tried to get money from you by preaching.**

1 Thessalonians 2:6-10

6 **Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. (But: PAUL PAID HIS OWN WAY!)**

7 But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children.

8 So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us.

9 **For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for labouring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God.**

10 You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe;

Paul was up before dawn to pay his own way.

Paul had a right to be supported in his ministry ... but often preferred to pay his own way.

He was a good example of diligence ... avoided criticism ... and was a warning to brethren about others who would come as preachers looking for money and gain.

So we can see a number of warnings in scripture about the danger of religious men and churches coming for your money.

Today ... religion is “BIG BUSINESS” — at least in the US. A Georgetown university study some years ago gives a conservative figure of \$378 billion annually in the US — but ... a more likely figure of \$1.2 trillion.

There's a lot of money out there for covetous religion!

We all need to watch out and be cautious and apply wisdom.

We're free to give our money to anybody we want ... but need to watch out for religious manipulation.

We can't just assume that a respectable church leader ... TV evangelist — purported “Man of God” — is honest. **Some will be after our money!**

There are **TWO PRIMARY METHODS:**

- 1. Guilt — used to put pressure on us**
- 2. Promise of super-abundance**

Let's look at GUILT first.

This is the pressure that comes from implying you must be selfish ... carnal ... wanting to use your money for your own purposes — when a “real Christian” would sacrifice for the good of the church and the “Work of God”.

“How can you think about getting a new car ... going on a luxury family holiday ... moving to a new house — when you could give that money to the church to save souls”?

“How utterly selfish you must be”!

And if you're not prepared to “give till it hurts” — you're undoubtedly Laodicean.

It is difficult to know how many people have been conned and got into financial trouble giving money they didn't have due to high-pressure demands ... **almost threats!**

It is common among many churches — and Churches of God have not been immune. They believe they're doing God's Work and feel they're entitled to “encourage” you to give very generously!

You can find co-worker letters ... sermon transcripts — which are quite brutal — as they manipulate deceived people.

Scripturally — giving under pressure is not pleasing to God.

2 Corinthians 9:5-8

5 Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren to go to you ahead of time, **and prepare your generous gift beforehand, which you had previously promised, that it may be ready as a matter of generosity and not as a grudging obligation.**

6 But this I say: **He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.**

7 So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, **not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.**

8 And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, **that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.**

God loves a cheerful giver. He can bless.

Note the context:

- **It is not about giving to the Ministry or the “Work of God”!!**
- **It is not an “offering” as we tend to use the term.**
- **This was a collection for the needy saints in Jerusalem ... who were in much hardship at the time.**

There should be no compulsion. Certainly no threats.

Rather than threats ... we have the much-better example of **George Mueller**. He cared for 10,000 or more orphans in the 1800's. He received the equivalent of \$150 million — **ONLY BY FAITH AND PRAYER. NOT ONCE DID HE EVER ASK ANYONE FOR EVEN A PENNY!!**

I don't personally have a problem with someone making a need known and asking for their audience to consider helping. Be open and transparent.

It's the covert attempt to manipulate — by pressure such as guilt — that is the problem.

Religion is huge business. Lots of people want your money. Exercise caution — especially if you detect emotional pressure.

I want to cover again an interesting example of religious pressure. One I've heard during offertory messages ... yet in reality an example of religious abuse.

Mark 12:41-44

41 Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. **And many who were rich put in much.**

42 **Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans.**

43 So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, **"Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury;**

44 **for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood."**

I've heard:

- Even if you're poor — give anyway (you'll get some blessing somewhere ...)
- Those who're planning to give \$10 ... \$50 — should feel ashamed. **THE WIDOW GAVE ALL! Are you giving till it hurts?!**

Some have given what they can ill afford!

But does God really require and delight in a widow giving up her entire livelihood? Is that an example for us?

No! The widow had been conned by religious predators.

God has made plain He wants to get support to widows — not from them! Jesus knew the plan!

Exodus 22:21-24

21 “You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

22 “**You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child.**

23 **If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry;**

24 **and My wrath will become hot, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless.**

This was at Sinai!

The widows were vulnerable! There was no “social security”.

Deuteronomy 24:19-21

19 “**When you reap your harvest in your field, and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow,** that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

20 **When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.**

21 **When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not glean it afterward; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.**

Leave some for the widows. (Like Ruth and Naomi).

God may have a soft spot for widows?

Isaiah 1:16-17

16 “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes.

Cease to do evil,

17 Learn to do good;

Seek justice,

Rebuke the oppressor;

**Defend the fatherless,
Plead for the widow.**

Isaiah 1:17 (NCV)

17 **Stand up for the rights of widows**

Isaiah 1:23

23 Your princes are rebellious,
And companions of thieves;
Everyone loves bribes,
And follows after rewards.
**They do not defend the fatherless,
Nor does the cause of the widow come before them.**

Isaiah 10:1-2

1 **“Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees,
Who write misfortune,
Which they have prescribed**
2 **To rob the needy of justice,
And to take what is right from the poor of My people,
That widows may be their prey,
And that they may rob the fatherless.**

Isaiah 10:2 (THE VOICE)

2 ... **Such leaders intend to make helpless widows and orphans their prey.**

Isaiah 10:2 (NET)

2 **(they) deprive the oppressed among my people of justice,
so they can steal what widows own,
and loot what belongs to orphans.**

God has repeatedly made provision for the care of widows.

Unfortunately ... even in a church setting — widows can be vulnerable
... can be exploited.

If a widow today owns property ... she can be pressured to sell it and
give the proceeds “to God’s Work” — or at least bequeath it to the
Church when she dies.

God's word is clear: PROVIDE FOR THE WIDOW.

Mark 12:41

41 **Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much.**

This is not the beginning!

Mark 12:38-40

38 Then He said to them in His teaching, **"Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces,**

39 **the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts,**

40 **who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers.** These will receive greater condemnation."

These religious men devour widows' houses.

Mark 12:40 (NLT)

40 **Yet they shamelessly cheat widows out of their property and then pretend to be pious by making long prayers in public.**

These religious men looked good. They quoted scripture.

They were hypocrites. They loved money. Even to the point of ripping off vulnerable widows.

Jesus as Lord of the Old Testament had set up a system to provide for widows. As usual ... the Pharisees were making the Word of God of no effect by their tradition.

Just as Jesus is explaining their evil — a case pops up right in front of Him!

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more than all those who have given to the treasury;
44 for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her
poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood.”

Bless the lady’s heart. She was only doing what they had taught her.

So Jesus isn’t primarily commending the widow — as much as warning about covetousness and greed among men (and perhaps a warning to the disciples?).

Matthew 23:13-14

13 “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

14 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers.

Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.

Jesus is deliberately highlighting the real problems.

These religious men were covetous and loved money.

One of Jesus’ own disciples was covetous and a thief.

Peter and Paul both warned about religious men — ministers — churches — who would be after our money ... either to support their comfortable lifestyle ... or their “vision” or pet project.

Be on guard. Choose where you put your money wisely. Don’t fall for manipulation ... threats or guilt trips.

2 Corinthians 2:17

17 For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in

Christ. (*Even in the time of Paul — “so many” — out there “peddling the word of God”*)

2 Corinthians 2:17 (NET)

17 For we are not like so many others, **hucksters who peddle the word of God for profit,**

Don't be naïve. There are plenty out there who would like your money.

If you're confident ... checked them out ... not under any undue pressure — fine.

Next week we'll look at the other technique — promising you glorious wealth and prosperity ... if you'll support their ministry. Lots of scriptures tend to be used — but what do they really mean?