

CONSUMER TO STEWARD

INTRODUCTION

Thousands of years ago, the invention of the mirror changed the way we view ourselves. Mirrors have certainly made us more self-conscious, but they have also made us more self-aware. By looking in the mirror, we can assess ourselves and know what we need to change.

What if there was a mirror for the soul? What if there was a way to see our insides with as much as clarity as we see our external image in a mirror? There is, but most of us ignore it. We walk past it every day and never pause to look into it. It is the way we handle our possessions.

Howard Dayton said, “Sixteen of [Jesus’] 38 parables were concerned with how to handle money and possessions. Indeed, Jesus Christ said more about money than about any other subject. The Bible offers 500 verses on prayer, fewer than 500 verses on faith, but more than 2,350 verses on money and possessions. The Lord said a lot about it because He wants us to know His perspective on this critical area of life” (*Your Money Counts*, p. 2).

TEXTUAL WORK: IT’S NOT ABOUT THE MONEY

From the gospel of Mark, we join the disciples again as they followed Jesus along the way. This time they watched as Jesus was confronted by a rich young man who asked, “Good teacher . . . what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (10:17). Jesus replied that he must keep the commandments but only cited five of the original Ten Commandments (vv. 18–19). The five that he cited are all from the second half, which deals with loving others. Jesus was already hinting that eternal life is not only in loving God (the first four commandments) but in loving others (the last six commandments). Nevertheless, the man insisted that he had kept those since childhood.

Yet Jesus noticed that he lacked one thing and told him, “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and then you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (v. 21).

Too often we try to push the words of Jesus to this man on everyone, insisting that anyone who does not sell everything they have cannot be a true disciple. But just as often, we avoid these words altogether, insisting that they were meant only for the rich man and not for us. The truth is probably somewhere between these two extremes. In fact, the key words are not “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor,” but rather, “then you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.”

Remember the question the rich man asked: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” That is the question Jesus answered. The central focus of the text is not one’s possessions, but one’s quest to find eternal life. The subject of possessions came up only because they were preventing the rich man from focusing on more essential things. In the end, the problem with the rich man was not his money, but his whole economy. And from the way the disciples responded to this incident (see vv. 23–31), they were of the same mind as the rich man. They couldn’t understand how possessions can keep us from entering the kingdom of God (vv. 24–27). Even though they “left everything” to follow Jesus (v. 28), they were still counting and calculating all they had given up.

In the end, the reason it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God (Jesus says it three times: vv. 23–25) is because wealth tends to trap us in a different economy. It is the effect of wealth upon one’s mind that is the problem.

IMPLICATIONS: THE TWO ECONOMIES

Let’s spend some time looking at these two economies—the old economy of the world and the new economy that Jesus introduced.

In the old economy, possessions are tangential to our spiritual lives. But in the new economy, possessions are at the center of our spiritual lives. Our possessions reveal what is important to us. So people in the new economy use their possessions to lead their souls to God (see Matt. 6:21). In the final day, God will judge the condition of our soul and the things that we value.

In the old economy, wealth is evidence of God's blessing (it makes you secure). But in the new economy, wealth is an obstacle to God's grace (it makes you self-reliant). Jesus was saying that wealth creates a false security, shifting our reliance from God to ourselves.

In the old economy, possessions are owned. But in the new economy, possessions are borrowed. They belong to someone else; we only manage them. By our nature we tend to overestimate the value of what we possess, so it is critical that we never possess our possessions, or we will overestimate their value and cling to them.

In the old economy, giving up our possessions is a risk, investment, sacrifice, or going without. But in the new economy, giving up our possessions is an upgrade. The payback is something money can't buy. The rich man's question was, "How do I inherit eternal life?" Jesus' final answer was, "You trade in your possessions for things that money can't buy."

If you think giving up everything is too hard, you should try following Jesus while holding onto everything. That is even harder. He will not let you do it. He will make your Christian life miserable until you surrender your possessions and begin to live in the new economy. But how?

APPLICATION: MOVING FROM CONSUMER TO STEWARD

Begin with the principle of "enough." Set a cap on your spending. Sit down with your family and determine what you really need to live on and then take everything above it and give

it away. If you don't make a lot, learn to be content with what you have. *Review the suggestions under the mini-shift from spenders to savers (see SoulShift, p. 80).*

Practice disciplined giving. The Bible speaks of a tithe as 10 percent of our income, so start there. If you can't, start lower and work your way up. Set aside a certain amount, agreed upon by you and your family, and give it to your church every week or month. Give it first at the beginning of the week or month so you don't cheat and spend it on something else.

Begin a habit that moves you toward generosity. When you run into money you didn't expect (income tax returns, insurance settlements, inheritance, profit-sharing, dividends from investments, gifts at Christmas or birthdays, etc.), sit down together and ask yourselves, "Where should we give this money?"

CONCLUSION

Whoever you are and however much you make, God has given you everything you need to be a steward. Come over to the new economy!