

Simplicity¹

In this short passage, Jesus gives you and me two penetrating insights about material things and wealth.

First. It doesn't last. We can imagine in ancient times the futility people had trying to hang onto what they had made—be it tools, implements, food stores, coinage. Fine cloth deteriorates. Metal corrodes. The more coinage you could amass, the more it tended to disappear as the years passed and people died.

Our minds go to our modern banking system and computerized investing. Moth and rust can't get to a stock portfolio. That's true. But as we are all vividly aware, our assets, even our homes, can lose value with the ups and downs of the market.

What about the long-run? Doesn't wealth increase over years and decades of compound interest and a growing economy. Well, it may increase for awhile, but not forever. George Gilder has made the observation that to every hardworking, innovative, savvy gatherer of wealth is born children and grandchildren who are brilliant disbursers of wealth.

What Jesus is talking about here goes beyond just wealth. It's true of institutions and traditions too. They tend to decay and fade with time. My dad worked at four General Motors automobile plants during his career. He worked hard. Struggled

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to make them all profitable and keep manufacturing quality high. He's retired now. And all of those plants are closed.

Think of all the things that are declining—great American newspapers, outdoor sports like hunting and fishing; famous businesses like Howard Johnsons and Montgomery Wards; youth organizations like scouting.

Now, I don't mean for this to sound depressing. Neither do I mean to suggest that decline is unique to our generation. Every human being knows what it means to face decay, age, loss, and decline. It's part of life. Paleontologists tell us that when the great glaciers of the Ice Age receded and were replaced by green grasslands and forests, primitive humans longed for the good old days when they hunted Mammoth on ice sheets. Loss is just part of life. And Jesus tells us not to get our whole heart invested in things that will one day not be. That can be money. That can be anything.

Jesus' second insight is that where our wealth is, there also is where our heart is. Have you ever noticed that we become interested in what we're working on at the moment? I may drag myself outdoors to mow my lawn. But after I've worked on the grass for an hour or so, I'm not more tired of the work, but I find that I have a growing interest in lawn care.

Jesus is aware of this principle. If you or I tie up our money or attention or money in something, we're interested in that something. We can come to love that something. It can be our career, our house, our model railroad, our car, the little gift shop we start as a family business, the Ph.D. dissertation, our stock portfolio, our cabin in the woods, our pets. Whatever you and I invest our work and attention and money in we come to love more and more. Our heart is where our treasure is.

Now, here's a wrinkle for our affluent times. We can be invested in a dozen different things. Our hearts can be in a dozen different places. Our kids can show promise in gymnastics and we can get wrapped up in twice weekly practice and weekly competition. At the same time we can be involved with three community organizations. We can finally purchase the vintage '57 Chevy with plans to fix it up as a show car. We also have a spouse, two other kids, career, parents, and church. In our affluent, highly mobile time there can be a dozen treasures, each competing for a piece of our heart.

So, in just a few words, Jesus gives us penetrating insight into a fundamental challenge that confronts every human being. The condition of our heart is linked to where we've got our eyes and hands and attention, and, of course, money!

Because of this linkage of heart and treasure, our faith will always be calling us in some way to simplicity—the simplicity of investing exclusively in our relationship with Jesus, which is the same thing as our relationship with God. Think how many times in Jesus' public ministry he calls people to the life of discipleship which entails a whole new relationship with money. Zacchaeus and Levi before him, were tax collectors. They had to loosen their grip on the tax racket in order to step into a new life with Jesus. The rich ruler couldn't shake his addiction to his tony lifestyle and in turn was never able to follow Jesus. It's easier, Jesus warns us, for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

That saying sounds so harsh, but I submit that it is gloriously liberating. If wealth doesn't last, and our hearts are always set upon what we're investing in, then if we've invested in anything of this world we're going to be let down. Empty in the end. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer bluntly put it. "Our hearts have room for one all-embracing devotion; we can only cling to one lord."

By the way, did you ever stop to think that when Jesus came into the world, that was a simplifying process. Jesus came down from heaven to be one of us. He emptied himself, as the Bible

puts it. We admire the poor boy who becomes rich. Jesus was the rich boy who became poor. I believe that you and I can expect to be invited to empty ourselves as Jesus did so we may become rich as he was rich.

How can these insights become part of our lives? Let me share a little saying that brings the simplicity of one embracing devotion—the simple heart that Jesus had? “Given by God, owned by God, to be used for the purposes of God.” John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was told that his house burned down. Here’s his response: “God’s house burned down and that one less thing I have to worry about.” I wonder how many things you and I have that we could profitably stop worrying about so that we could be filled by the one thing that never fades or declines, the one thing that is worthy of our heart, soul, mind and strength? “Given by God, owned by God, to be used for the purposes of God.”