

The Gift of Giving

WHAT IS A BIBLICAL LIFESTYLE?

If I'm honest I'm confused about what is a biblical lifestyle when it comes to money and possessions. I find myself swinging wildly between two extremes, both of which seem completely unreachable and equally impossible. On the one hand, and at one extreme, I often feel like the best thing I could do would be to sell everything, give the money to the Easter Team, and move to a desert somewhere to help feed refugees, or the starving. That is a genuine challenge for me. I genuinely feel sometimes that I'm done with church – I could quite happily leave it behind and go and serve the world's poorest. When I see – as you do – the immense gulf in our world between those who have and those who haven't – I can't help wanting to do something to help. When I watch Christians like me spending money on things we don't really need, while millions literally starve – I genuinely struggle with what I have. On the other hand I find myself thinking – but it's not my fault, I didn't choose to be born in England – in prosperity. I'm doing what I genuinely think God is calling me to do. So what is so wrong with being able to enjoy the fruit of my labour without feeling guilty?

The truth for me is that mostly I wish I didn't have to be bothered about money or possessions. It seems to me, the challenge of all this is that God doesn't simply give us the answer. The Bible give us principles – but we still have to figure out exactly how to live and what to do with our money and possessions. It leaves us with a lot of questions. For example – In the light of the current economic crisis what should I possess? How many cars should I own? What kind of car/cars? Do I need to own a house – how big should that house be? How many pairs of shoes is it ok to own? How much is it ok to spend on my hair? As a Christian am I freely able to pursue money and possessions to my heart's content? Are money and possessions the root of all evil?

Martin Luther once said that the human race is like a drunken man who falls off his horse to the right, only to get back on and fall off to the left. What we are

going to do this morning is look at two extremes – one of which may be falling off the horse one way, and the other falling off the horse to the other side!

At the end of this though, you are still going to have to figure out what you do with your money and possessions. Ok – so here's one way we might fall off the horse.

The Parable of the rich fool:

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God." Luke 12 v 13-21

The rich man here believes that money and possessions are automatically good. We call this materialism. Materialism puts the highest value on material well being – having what we want! The parable Jesus tells, is in response to the younger son's request for Jesus to intervene in a family dispute. Inheritance law was that the older son got two thirds and the younger son got one third of the father's estate. The younger son knew that - he simply wanted more and he wanted it now! He was preoccupied with the material. No Christian would say that that is a Christian way to see the world...would they? To be preoccupied with the material means we deny the spiritual. Jesus said: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well." (Mat 6 v 33)

Right back in the beginning, in the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve chose and valued what they considered appealing over what God had said was right.

Materialism usually surfaces in someone's lifestyle. We've said this before: what we say we believe, and what we think we believe, may not be what we actually believe. It is ultimately a matter of the heart. You can come to church, do all the right things, say all the right things – and still be a materialist. I find it immensely challenging when I think about my own life.

Materialism usually surfaces in one of two ways: possessions and covetousness. To be possessive is to be selfish and un-sharing! The rich fool says: "Look at what I have done – I need bigger barns to keep it all for myself!" He has no regard for others – some of whom will have, undoubtedly, helped to create his wealth. "The tragedy for people like the rich fool is that the sudden death of their body confirms that their soul had already died. In the amassing of things I believe you can die as you live. The rich man's money and possessions had robbed him of ideals and friendships which are real treasures".¹

To covet is to long for and be preoccupied with having what God has not given us. "It is the passion to possess what is not ours to have". The challenge is, you don't have to be rich to be a materialist; you don't have to own very much to be a materialist; you can be generous or a miser and still be a materialist. This is first and foremost a matter of the heart.

The rich fool thought he was in control of his life and his fate. He made plans without reference to God. He failed to understand the mortality of this present life; the eternal nature of life after death and the truth that the future life is being forged by the present life. How about you? If we fall off the horse this side, we live a money-centred life, not a God-centred life.

We can fall off the horse on the other side. We can practice a strict self-denial and deprive ourselves of all but the essential needs of the material world. Here the spiritual world is good, but the physical world is evil. The view here is that the way to avoid sin is to avoid physical pleasures and conveniences. The less you own – the more spiritual you are. We call this – asceticism. Is this a biblical view

of the way to be? No – I don't think it is. God created a wonderful world in which we are to live and to enjoy life. Certainly the Old Testament doesn't separate out the physical world and the spiritual world, and it is not how the people of Israel understood the world. Actually they often saw material blessing as being God's blessing on them – the generous hand of a loving God. He was the Lord of the Harvest, the Lord of Life and they celebrated God's generosity and faithfulness with national feasts. We saw a couple of weeks ago that one of their tithes was in fact for that very purpose!

Paul writes to Timothy – against ascetics (whom he calls hypocrites and liars): “Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected” (I Timothy 4 v 4-5). So... What do we do? How do we live? Mathew 6 v 33: “But seek first his kingdom and righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Some of you will probably remember that during the war when fuel was precious, the nation was encouraged to ask: “Is this trip necessary?” Every resource was limited and valuable, and the whole nation was focussed around the country's central concern – to fight the enemy and win the war. Friends, we as Christians, are engaged in a battle – the battle raging between darkness and light. Perhaps the challenge to our lifestyle comes in where we use our resources. Do we choose to use our valuable resources to build the Kingdom – that which has eternal value...or do we use them for ourselves...and one day we die and cannot take any of them with us?

“A biblical lifestyle will necessarily recognise itself as being in opposition to the prevailing values and lifestyle of its culture. It is informed by a different view of reality.”² In his ‘Celebration of Discipline’ Richard Foster suggests some principles to help us think about our lifestyle through this different view of reality.

On a scale of 1 – 10 (1 =rarely do this 10 = always do this), rate yourself on how actively you are currently living out these principles:

- Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you.
- Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status.

- Refuse to become a slave of gadgetry. Resist the notion that because the newest model has a new feature, you must have it.
- Develop a habit of giving things away. De-accumulate.
- Reject all “buy now, pay later” plans.
- Learn to enjoy things without owning them. Share things. Enjoy public parks and libraries.
- Develop a deeper appreciation for creation. Stimulate your senses with nature rather than just modern technology.
- Shun whatever would distract you from your main goal of seeking first God’s kingdom.

Friends, strategic, biblical living is always Kingdom centred. Jesus said that he came that we might have life to the full. Part of that must be enjoying life and some of its pleasures. I have come to think – after much inner wrestling – that golf is one of God’s blessings to me right now and here’s why I think that!

- Got given a good set of clubs that I could never have bought for myself.
- Been given free golf lessons for over a year now!
- Been given a new club – that I could not have bought for myself.

I’m thinking now that God may be saying: “Ian – you need a break from church – for goodness sake go and enjoy the golf – I’m making it as obvious as I can!”

What we have to do is to work out, in the unfolding story of our lives how best to use what God has given us. And whether we are blessed with much or little, the greatest joy for those who live for the kingdom, is knowing that this world is ultimately not my home, and that while I’m here I’m preparing for my true eternal home, and that at the same time God is graciously preparing me to be with him.

Preached at Crawley Baptist church on Sunday 5th April 2009 by Rev. Ian Phillips

1. Tondeur, Keith: *“What Jesus said about money and possessions,”* Monarch 1998, page 48
2. Willow Creek Resources: *“Giving: unlocking the heart of good stewardship,”* Zondervan 2000, page 79