

The Christian and His Money

By Jamie Buckingham

Every serious Christian I know struggles with the place of money. In fact, when I meet a Christian who does not struggle with it, I wonder just how serious he really is.

Jesus had more to say about money—and man's relationship to it—than any other subject. It's not wrong to make money. In fact, Paul says if a man doesn't work he shouldn't eat. But the more we earn, the harder it is to maintain a proper relationship with God. And if we ever become rich, Jesus said, there's a real danger we might not even make it to heaven.

The danger is real, you know. I know at least 10 influential churches whose pastors began making big bucks. Then they got involved in scandals—either sexual or financial—and the churches have lost their influence. Some of the pastors were able to stay at their churches, but ministry has become their number two priority. Holding on to what they have is number one.

Too many of my friends have grown rich and slipped their spiritual moorings to float away in their Mercedes—tragically powerless while justifying their wealth.

Remember Luther's supposed reply to the church official who bragged: "No longer does the church have to say, 'Silver and gold have I none....'"

"Yes," the reformer answered, "but neither can she say, 'In the name of Jesus rise and walk.'"

Not wanting this to happen, official church boards have been notorious in protecting their pastors and staff members from ever having to face the temptations of riches. "Lord, keep me poor and humble," the old pastor once prayed in the deacons' meeting.

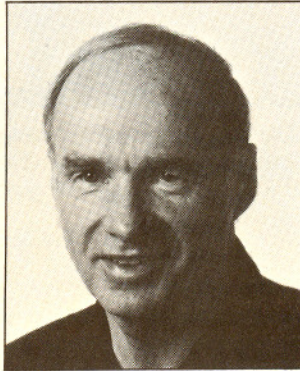
One of the deacons responded, "You keep him humble, Lord. We'll keep him poor."

But this stingy attitude totally overlooks what Paul says about God's men receiving "double honor." That means, I take it, the pastor should be paid twice as much as the chairman of the finance committee.

I grew up believing I should tithe. My wife and I tithed our first paycheck after we were married. I was earning \$1.19 per hour as a city bus driver for the Ft. Worth Transit Company. Writing out a check for \$4.76 each week to the University Baptist Church was a wonderful discipline. We gave, and trusted God to supply all our needs. He's never failed us.

But there was little joy. God required me to "pay" my tithe every paycheck. I tithed because I had been taught that everything I had belonged to God.

What a miserable interpretation of New Testament stewardship. If my car belonged to God, why did it keep breaking down? If my house belonged to God, why did the toilet stop up? No, my house is mine. Not God's. My money is mine, too. The question I'm faced with is even tougher though: What am I doing with my money—spending it on self or for His



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glory? Can a Christian, for instance, ever justify a huge diamond as long as others are starving?

When I first began writing, I wrote for the joy of it—and because I believed my books and articles would minister to those who read them. Fortunately, my books have sold, and I've made enough money to buy my house and put my children through college. Most important, we've been able to give away huge amounts. I praise God for that. In other words, it's OK to get in order to give.

Now I am struggling with how much money is enough? In the early days of my ministry, I looked with disdain on those who "ministered for money"—who set a price tag on each sermon.

Some celebrity Christians would not come to town for less than \$7,000—plus expenses. It's because of "overhead," their agents justified. I determined not to judge—and to never do it that way myself.

But recently, I've wondered. I have a big ministry project I want to see accomplished. I need money to do it. The only way to get it done—apart from begging—is to sell my services. Therein lies the struggle.

How should I respond when a sponsoring group asks: "How much do you charge to speak?" I have no problem negotiating a book contract. But preaching?

If Paul Harvey can command \$25,000 for a single speaking engagement, why shouldn't a preacher set a fee? Does that make him a hireling?

One of the men in my home group reminds me there's nothing wrong with making money. He says he gets up every morning and goes to work to do just that. Yet when it comes to preaching, it's just possible that a different set of principles may apply.

In a recent editorial in *The Wittenburg Door*, Mike Yaconelli says, among other things, that Christians have justified making money by saying it is not money which is the root of all evil, but the *love* of money.

"Radical faith doesn't mean that we all give up our money and become indigent, but it does mean that we give up the antiquated illusion that money isn't evil," Yaconelli says. "We must face up to the frightening fact that anything money touches, it corrupts—including us."

Is money really evil? I think not. Like power and sexual freedom, however, evil always lurks in its shadow. Few are able to resist it. Therefore a periodic money checkup is mandatory—not to see how much we have, but to see what it is doing to us.

The bottom line? I must make my decisions based on what God says. If money is a by-product, I shall rejoice. If it costs me something rather than pays me something, I shall rejoice also. Anything else means I am a materialist—and a man cannot serve God and mammon. ■