

The Seduction of Money

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity On the 16th of November 2003 The preacher is Paul Barker His sermon is entitled The Seduction of Money And is based on Luke chapter 18 Verses 18 to 30 You'll find in the Bibles Page 853 The passage from Luke's Gospel That was read for us by Nancy a few minutes ago Luke chapter 18 Beginning at verse 18 And let me pray for us O God our Father We give you thanks That you're a God who reveals himself to us In the words of scripture We pray that as we come to these words That we'll read, mark and inwardly digest them So that our lives may bear much fruit For your glory Amen

Well towards the end of the service today As is our custom The collection plate will come around And when it does so Today I want it to be a little bit different When the collection plate comes around And past you I want you to put into the collection plate All your money All your shares Your house title Your house title Car keys Jewellery Bank accounts Credit cards Everything Now don't get up and leave just yet Before you walk out in protest Or think that I'm a greedy charlatan Let me tell you there was a religious leader Called a ruler Probably one of the leaders of the Sanhedrin The Jewish governing body Of 70 men Or perhaps a synagogue leader In Jesus' day And he came up to Jesus This was a man who was devout A pious Religious Upstanding Noble Citizen Of the country

He was also wealthy Very wealthy He was the sort of person That others would aspire to be like That people would look up to And he came to Jesus And asked him Good teacher What must I do To inherit eternal life Now it may be That it's a genuine question But given that he was a religious leader A pious man Maybe there was more behind his question Maybe he was sceptical about Jesus And wanting to quiz him To find some error In his answer By which perhaps Later a charge would be laid against Jesus Maybe though He's spiritually insecure Maybe for all the teaching and learning That he's had From what we call The Old Testament scriptures He doesn't quite feel That he's obtained eternal life Maybe he's trying to flatter Jesus Certainly he calls him Good teacher A very unusual way Of addressing somebody

In those days And if it is flattery Jesus in the next verse Rejects it He says to him Why do you call me good No one is good but God But then Jesus answers His question What must I do To receive eternal life And Jesus directs This Jewish leader Who was steeped In the Old Testament To the foundational commandments Of the Old Testament To the Ten Commandments Given hundreds of years before To the people of Israel In the time of Moses On top of Mount Sinai The nation of Israel Heard God's very voice Speak The Ten Commandments And Jesus quotes just five of them Back at him The fifth To the ninth Although not in order Jesus replies to him In verse 20 You know the commandments You shall not commit adultery You shall not murder You shall not steal You shall not bear false witness Honour your father and mother And the man replies In the next verse I've kept all of these Since my youth Now it may be that it's a boast

It may be that the man is arrogant I've done all that Aren't I good Aren't I religious Noble May indeed be That he's a person Of impeccable character Maybe he's speaking Sincerely the truth That these are commandments That he's kept All through his life From his youth Certainly those five commandments That Jesus quotes back at him Are the five of the ten commandments That particularly have to do With interpersonal relationships We might say Relationships from one person To another Not murdering Not stealing Not bearing false witness Honouring parents Not committing adultery So for this man Certainly it seems That a key ethos Of his life Has been To love his neighbour To serve his neighbour And to keep those commandments That relate to that He's an upright citizen Of noble And religious character Now Jesus Now Jesus in response To his statement

[5 : 05] I've kept all these Since my youth He neither praises the man For his obedience Nor does he condemn him For a boast But he moves on And rather he directs him To a further demand That Jesus makes In verse 22 Jesus says to him There is still one thing lacking Sell all that you own Distribute the money to the poor And you'll have treasure in heaven Then come Follow me Two things in essence Get rid of everything That you own And follow me Now there's nothing In the Old Testament law About selling all your goods And giving all the money Away to the poor Jesus is not here Quoting some other Old Testament command Certainly in the Old Testament Generosity is frequently commended

Indeed commanded So people are to be open handed With one another Especially those worse off Than themselves In particular Generosity is commanded Towards those who are landless So generosity to the widows The orphans The Levitical priests Who didn't own land And as well as that The refugees and resident aliens Who'd come into the land To live But couldn't own land Generosity to them In particular Is commanded at several points In the Old Testament Moreover in the Old Testament Every 50th year What's called the year of Jubilee Land was to be redistributed Amongst the families Clans and tribes Of the people of Israel When they arrived in the land It was divided up Relatively equitably And now after 50 years Some people would have Fared badly with their crops And maybe had to sell their land And become servants of other people The land is all redistributed Start again Fresh slate Imagine playing a game In Monopoly for 50 years And then all of a sudden You go back to the start And start again That's the idea in effect

That's more than a game And also in the Old Testament Wealth is seen to be A sign of God's blessing So that as the people Were to be obedient in the land God would abundantly bless them With crops and animals And children And safety, protection, security And so on So why does Jesus give this man This demand This added demand Not from the Old Testament To sell all he has And distribute the money From what he gets To the poor And then to come and follow Jesus Is it just because the man's wealthy?

Or is it in fact more than that? Well it's intriguing to notice Which commandments Jesus has not quoted to the man He quotes to him commandments Five through to nine But he leaves out the ten And also the first four And maybe there's something in that The tenth commandment is You shall not covet You shall not be greedy For something That is not your own As we saw in a sense In the children's talk earlier And in the first two commandments They are Don't put anything above God No idols Don't make any graven images Of God or other gods And bow down and worship them No doubt this man Being a religious Jewish leader Would not have had statues of idols On his mantelpiece That he would bow down to That would be unthinkable But maybe Jesus By quoting firstly The five commandments that he does To do with the relationship With people primarily And now going on to say

Sell all your goods And give the money to the poor Follow me Is hinting at where The man's failure lies Not in some command That's new But rather directing This rich man To the commandments Of covetousness And idolatry This man This wealthy man Seems to have made Wealth An idol I wonder I wonder whether wealth Is one of your idols I doubt that you Stack up your banknotes On the mantelpiece And bow down at night And pray that somehow That will give you Financial security That's not what we mean By idolatry And it may be that you say Well I'm not really very rich So wealth is not my idol Well you're probably rich In worldly and historical standards We're probably amongst the richest People who have ever lived So we've got to stop kidding ourselves That we're not rich But even if we're not rich

[9 : 46] Wealth can still be an idol Whether you're wealthy or poor The idolatry of wealth Is a snare for each one of us You see idolatry is Is a subtle and insidious sin That clings to us And grasps hold of us And in the end Stifles our faith in God You see idolatry is putting Something first Over and above God And it can even be putting Something that is good First Over and above God Indeed it can be putting Something that is a gift of God First Over and above God So wealth Which could be a gift Of God's generosity And blessing If we put it first Above God It becomes an idol And a sin It could be our families A gift of God And yet if we put them First over and above God Then that becomes a sin It could be my ministry That I put first Rather than God himself And so on Good things Can in fact become idols When placed above God In the scale of priorities And devotion So idolatry

Is holding on to something More than God Idolatry is holding on To something that we refuse To let go of Even more than God There is a novel By the Jewish writer Chaim Potok Who died recently And called I Am The Clay Set in the Korean War And he describes A Korean family Fleeing the onset Of the Korean War And they go with Their barrow or cart If I remember rightly And put all their possessions In including Their large and heavy idols Which they would bow down to And worship As part of the pagan culture Of Korea in the 1950s And they're trying to flee But in pushing along the barrow With these heavy idols They are slowing themselves down And wearying themselves out And therefore becoming More and more imperiled As the armies of the opposition Come closer Their idols were Stone or wooden statues That they'd bow down to

But they were idols They had to carry Idols that slowed them down Idols that offered them No protection The same charges Leveled against the people Of Israel In the Old Testament In Isaiah 46 for example There And leveled At other nations as well There The idols are other gods And Isaiah mocks them And says You have to carry those gods Stoop under their weight But the real God Carries you Even to the end of your life In the end Idolatry is something That we hang on to And cling to No matter what weight it is That slows us down A couple of weeks ago I preached From Hebrews chapter 12 As part of our series On the letter to the Hebrews And there you may remember The exhortation At the beginning of Hebrews 12 Since we're surrounded By so great a cloud Of witnesses Let us also lay aside Every weight And the sin That clings so closely And let us run With perseverance The race that is set Before us

Well the idolatry of wealth Is a weight And a sin It clings closely And slows us down And makes us All the more vulnerable Not to persevere In the Christian race So how do we test If something is an idol How do we test If wealth Is an idol Well the demand of Jesus To this man Gets to the problem Give it away That's the test If something's an idol In your life Give it away He tells this man Give away all That you have And distribute the money To the poor Because Jesus knows That in the heart Of this man Is the idolatry Of wealth That's what he Clings to above all And he gets right To the heart Because this man Is so sad The other account In another gospel Tells us that he Goes away sad He doesn't do What Jesus demands Wealth is something He's not prepared

To let go of It takes number one Place in his life Over and above God And as Jesus has said Only two chapters before In Luke's gospel You cannot serve God And money So there's the test Is wealth an idol In your life Give it away That's how you'll find out Oh but I can't do that You might reply I need my money For future security I need my money For provisions For my family I need my money To continue my lifestyle I've worked very hard For all this money All my life Now I'm retired I deserve this money To live on it And enjoy it Maybe all those things Are true But it can still Be an idol As it was For this rich man Can you give it away It's a question I've been grappling With this week As I've prepared This sermon Could I give away

[14 : 50] All my wealth If commanded to By God And I've prayed That I would Jesus issues A solemn warning Not just to this man But to all those Who are around About him and heard He says in verse 24 How hard it is For those who have wealth To enter the kingdom Of God Wealth fixes our attention On the things of this life On today and tomorrow's Financial security and comfort Wealth makes us Short sighted It shuts out Eternity and heaven From our perspective It focuses us Narrowly And in the immediate On this world How hard it is For the wealthy To enter the kingdom Of God Because wealth Blinds us And makes us Short sighted And all we see Is this world And the accumulation Of security And comfort

And ease And enjoyment How hard it is For the wealthy To enter the kingdom Of God Unlike the little children Of the very immediate Paragraph before Who are welcomed Into the kingdom In verse 17 And then Jesus Adds a famous Illustration An almost surreal Absurd analogy He says in verse 25 Indeed it is easier For a camel To pass through The eye of a needle Than for someone Who is rich To enter the kingdom Of God There are some Who have tried To water down Or dismiss Jesus' words And say in Jesus' Day in Jerusalem There must have been A gateway Called the needle gate And a camel Might stoop To go in it Or something That's ridiculous The people listening To this knew That Jesus was Talking about An impossibility Can you get a camel Through an eye Of a needle The biggest beast That people would Have been familiar With Through the tiniest Hole that they Could imagine I can hardly Get a thread of Cotton through An eye of a needle I sit there Sometimes

And peer at it Like this Trying to get The background Right And no I've missed Again And I've missed Again I've got buttons Around my house I just can't Be bothered Trying to sew on I couldn't get a camel Through an eye of a needle Nor could you No matter how hard You tried That is Jesus Jesus is using An absurd illustration To point to an impossibility He's just said He's just said How hard it is For the wealthy To enter the kingdom Of God And now he's saying In effect Humanly speaking It is impossible For someone who's wealthy To enter the kingdom Of God But Jesus then Directs his reply To God The people object And say Well who can be saved In verse 26 They realise That it's You know Is Jesus saying No one can be saved And so Jesus replies In verse 27 What is impossible For humans Is possible For God It is impossible To get a camel Through an eye of a needle But it is possible For God And Jesus is saying Then Humanly speaking It is impossible For a wealthy person To enter the kingdom

Of God It is possible Only by God That is It is a Salvation For a wealthy person Is a miracle Of God's grace It is never Ever Something that That wealthy person Has earned Or bought Or deserves Or has achieved Is only ever A miracle Of the grace of God And so what Jesus Is implying In this answer Is that in human Strength alone We are too weak To break away From the temptation Of wealth Humanly speaking Without God We cannot overcome Temptation of wealth Ourselves He is saying It is a miracle Of God's grace To be wealthy But not to trust In our wealth Or rely upon it For our security And our future Who then can be saved Well in the next chapter There is a wealthy man A fraudulent wealthy man Who has made some of his money By fraud and cheating He is a tax collector Despised man of Jesus' day

Very wealthy Because he has used corruption To gain more wealth for himself His name is Zacchaeus And Jesus confronts him On his road Into Jerusalem At Jericho Goes and eats with him Tells him that salvation Has come to his house And this rich man Zacchaeus Gives away half of all He owns to the poor And he repays fourfold What he's defrauded From other people The Old Testament law Said you had to repay double But he's repaid fourfold There is the sign Of salvation And that is a miracle Of the grace of God And nothing to do With the man's wealth The kingdom of God Has been open to that rich man Because of the grace Of God's power In his life Well in contrast To the rich ruler Peter and the disciples Are poor They respond Or Peter responds On their behalf In verse 28 And says to Jesus Look we have left our homes And followed you That is we have done What you demanded Of this rich man We have left everything And we have followed you Now maybe Peter is thinking

[19 : 53] Well are we saved Maybe doubts have been Thrown into his mind By the conversation That he's listened to They've done the two things Demanded of the rich man And Peter wants to be assured That they've done enough And Jesus replies to him In verses 29 and 30 Truly I tell you He says There's no one Who's left House or wife Or brothers Or parents Or children For the sake Of the kingdom of God Who will not get back Very much more In this age And in the age To come eternal life Well it doesn't mean In this age You're going to get back More wives Or more children Or more houses But generally speaking You will reap back Abundantly more In this age And in the age To come eternal life My father was telling me During the week Of two friends of his Who lost everything In an accident They were They had a bus Which was their home As well as their workshop And their storeroom

They made things To sell at craft fairs On the back of the bus Was a trailer With a little car And a little boat It was all their Earthly possessions Their income Everything And they were driving Down the highway South of Sydney I think he said One day And behind them Was a truck The driver of the truck Fell asleep The truck ploughed Into the back of them As they drove down The highway A couple of years ago I think he said Near Picton Drove over the trailer Which had the car And the boat Ploughed into the back Of the bus Where the gas bottles And so on were kept There was a huge explosion The men escaped With their life The driver was alive But everything Was obliterated There are indeed Marks in the road Where the fire Had melted the tarmac Of the road They said to my father Sometime later Or more recently I think That in the end The insurance company Has paid out For all of their loss Over a million dollars They lost everything But they in a sense

Regained it Jesus' words here In verses 29 and 30 Are a little bit Different from that But he's saying That if we are prepared To lose everything For the kingdom of God Our eternal insurance Payout Will give us much more In this life As well as eternal life In heaven With God forever That's a remarkable promise I wonder whether it's a promise That you trust Do you trust the promise Of Jesus here That if you give up Everything for him You will reap even more In this life As well as The joy of eternal life In heaven Do you trust That heaven's riches Are worth much much more Than the wealth You have on earth Do you trust That in giving up For Jesus now He will supply All your needs And more beyond In this life

As well as for eternity Does trusting this promise Lead you to be Extravagantly generous As it ought to be Or are we indeed People of little faith Who don't trust Jesus' promise Who think that somehow If we're going to have Plenty in this age We've got to accumulate It for ourselves Are we relying And trusting on our wealth For our security Our future Or are we relying On the promises Of God to us It's a great struggle I think It's a personal struggle I have People keep telling me To buy a house To invest in my retirement And make sure That I'm secure When I retire On the other hand I keep thinking Should I be more generous In giving They're difficult issues Is our attention Devoted to our Accumulation of Earthly treasure Or is our attention Focused on Heavenly treasure See if we take

Jesus at his word Here That there is no one Who's left house Or wife Or brothers Or parents Or children For the sake Of the kingdom Of God Who will not Get back Very much more In this age And in the age To come Eternal life If we take Jesus at his word Here and trust That promise It will revolutionise Our lives All of us Whether we're rich Or not It will take In the crucifixion it will mean the less compromised service of God and the much greater likelihood of persevering in the Christian race rather than carrying around the weight of sin, of idolatry, of wealth on our back.

[25 : 00] I've just read this week an incredibly fantastic book called The Heavenly Man. I think it's the British Christian Book of the Year for this year. It's the story of a Christian pastor called Brother Yun.

Brother Yun suffered through the 80s and 90s until just a few years ago in China. Three long imprisonments. Each time he refused to stop preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And at every point it is the Bible's words that encourage him, strengthen him and keep him going in Christian faith. But in one moving passage he talks about the poverty that being a Christian pastor had led him to in China in the 1990s.

He's in prison. And during one visit he says, my son and daughter ran to me before the guard could stop them. I held them in my arms, caressed them and they said, Papa, I love you.

And I told them, I also love you very much. The guard tore them out of my arms and said, Yun, if you really loved your children, you wouldn't be here in prison.

[26 : 12] That is, if you really loved your children, you'd stop preaching the gospel so that you could be out of prison and care for them and provide for them. And he goes on to say, I noticed that my son wore the same clothes every time he visited me.

The same clothes he'd owned at the time when I was arrested. And even though he was growing much bigger, he had to keep wearing the same shirt and the same trousers. His shoes had large holes in them and his wife and children were extremely thin.

I realised they had no money at all and were struggling to survive. He asked his son, Do you miss your daddy? And the son said, Mama says that we don't have money to visit you and we don't have money to buy new clothes or shoes, but we always pray for you at home.

And then he writes by way of reflection, I've suffered many tortures and torments in my life. I've had electric batters placed in my mouth. I've been kicked and beaten till I longed to die.

I've fasted 74 days without food or water. But I tell you from my heart that the most difficult thing I've ever experienced was seeing the condition of my family when they came to visit me in these days.

[27 : 24] They were all skin and bones from lack of food, were dressed in rags and I could see that they were struggling terribly. My wife put on a brave face, but I could see she was in deep despair.

The paternal instincts inside me cried out to be a good daddy to my precious children and a good husband to my dear wife, but I could do nothing but pray for them. Although to this day, I don't have any home or possessions to give my children.

They love the Lord Jesus and they have a heart of compassion for others. He's reflecting that though he has no earthly possessions and humanly speaking, his children and wife have suffered terribly.

What they have in effect in knowing the Lord Jesus is a greater treasure and a heavenly treasure. After his imprisonments in the end, he escapes extraordinarily, miraculously from China.

The prison doors just open and under a word from the Lord, he walks out of the prison through several gates that would normally be locked and guarded. He walks out, a taxi pulls up, he gets in and he says, go to this house and he goes to some Christian friends.

[28 : 37] An extraordinary tale of a miraculous release. And then he eventually flies out on a false passport to Germany. And later on, only in the last couple of years, has he and all his family been reunited in Germany.

But towards the end of the book, he reflects, before I travelled to the West, I had absolutely no idea that so many churches were spiritually asleep. I presumed the Western church was strong and vibrant because it had brought the gospel to my country with such incredible faith and tenacity.

Many missionaries had shown a powerful example to us by laying down their lives for the sake of Jesus. But in the West, he says, many Christians have an abundance of material possessions, yet they live in a backslidden state.

They have silver and gold, but they don't rise up and walk in Jesus' name. In China, we have no possessions to hold us down, so there's nothing preventing us from moving out for the Lord.

Wealth is a huge idolatry for us. A weight, a sin, a snare.

[29 : 53] The test is, can we give it away? Here is a man who's given away all his meagre wealth for the sake of the kingdom of God.

And though suffered and his family had suffered, he knew that he'd receive much more in this life and eternal life in the world to come. Immediately after this passage in Luke 18, Jesus tells his disciples that he's going to Jerusalem to die.

And there is the model, perhaps, above all, of someone who gives up everything, even his life, who hangs impoverished, naked, without a possession on a cross, willingly yielding his life at an unjust trial for our sakes.

The way of Jesus is a way of self-denial, though so often in Western Christianity it's a way of self-fulfillment. The Bible's version is that it's the way of self-denial, of being prepared to give up everything, wealth, family, the lot, for the sake of Jesus Christ and for the sake of the kingdom of God.

As one of our Christmas hymns says, Thou who was rich beyond all splendour, all for love's sake becameest poor, leaving your throne in glad surrender, sapphire-paved courts for a stable floor.

[31 : 21] Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for the abundance that you have entrusted to us out of your mercy, generous grace and love.

We pray that you will work in our hearts so that our wealth may not be a snare or sin or weight or idol, but rather the cause and means of enormous generosity for the service of the kingdom of God.

And we pray that putting it aside as an idol from our backs, we may run with perseverance the race set before us, following the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, the Lord Jesus Christ himself, being prepared to give away all that we may obtain that life eternal and the treasure of heaven.

Amen.