

David R. Thomas

# Four Great Texts

For Preaching About Money

*Psalm 116:1-14 Malachi 1 Matthew 25:14-30 Hebrews 11:4*

Dwight L. Moody once said that standing just beside the ministry martyrs in heaven will be the ministry fundraisers. And we who carry financial responsibility in our churches can believe it. As I write this in the closing week of a capital campaign in our church, I can testify to the challenge American pastors face in preaching on money to history's wealthiest Christians. Someone has said that the most sensitive nerve in the body is the one going from the heart to the wallet.

But it's that connection—where our treasure is, there our hearts will be—that makes this topic of preaching so full of promise. Every time someone takes a step in stewardship, they mark a significant spiritual victory, refusing to buy into the world's deceptions that our self-worth is determined by our net worth. And Scripture helps us in the task. The Bible offers 500 verses on prayer, less than 500 on faith, but more than 2000 verses on money and possessions. In the Gospels, one out of ten verses deals directly with the subject of finances. Here are four texts you could consider the next time you approach the pulpit with a message on money.

## *For All God Has Given*

*Psalm 116:1-14*

A biblical perspective about money begins in the fact that we are not actually givers at all. God is the real Giver, from whom all blessings flow, we sing in the Doxology. Paul asked the Corinthians, "What do you have that God hasn't give you?" (I Corinthians 4:7) God has given us "every good and perfect gift" (James 1:17 [NIV]), and that kind of divine generosity stirs a response.

Psalm 116 tries to drape words around this response kicking off with the phrase, "I love the Lord because..." and then listening, though only partially, some of what God has given us. God gives me His listening ear (vv.1-2). God gets me through the toughest times (vv. 3-4) and protects me (vv. 5-6). God gives us peace so we can rest (v. 7) and keeps us on track so we can go the distance (vv. 8-11). And then at verse 12, the psalmist asks the key question for preaching about money: "What can I offer the Lord for all he has done for me?"

A very wealthy man was known to be critical of the church, always grouching about its problems and failures and inade-

quacies. In time, this man become very ill, and on his deathbed he asked to see the pastor. Pale and worried, he said, "Do you think, Rev., that if I gave all my money to the church, do you think God would take me in? If I donated all that I have, would that be enough to make it?" The pastor leaned forward: "I'm not sure, but it's worth a try."

The truth is, this is where we can be tempted to make our appeal: self-interest and guilt, getting church members to drop something in the plate to soothe their conscience and purchase just a little bit of God.

But Scripture invites a response to God of gratitude and joyful obedience, giving that is eager with love because we know Who gave first (I John 4:9-10).

## *Our Best and All*

*Malachi 1*

The book of Malachi opens with what's at stake in loving God with gifts that reflect His priority in our lives. Old Testament law required people to offer God choice sacrifices from their flocks, but the temptation was to bring blind and crippled and diseased animals. And God

says, “Go ahead, beg God to be merciful to you! But when you bring that kind of offering, why should he show you any favor at all?” (Malachi 1:9)

We can do better, pastor Jim Nicodem has written, than spending an hour reading the newspaper cover-to-cover and five minutes reading God’s Word before falling asleep. A tainted sacrifice is when we bring to our careers our best energy and talent and motivation, but when it comes to serving in the Body of Christ we either sit on the sidelines, trying to stay under the radar, or look for something requiring little. A crippled sacrifice is when we watch our favorite ballplayer sink a perfect three-pointer and leap out of our Lazy-Boys in jubilation, but in worship we sit passively in neutral. A diseased sacrifice is when we spend a lot of money on ourselves for a house renovation or a summer vacation, but when it comes to giving God an offering we look at our budget and say, “What’s left over here?” A tainted sacrifice is when we love our kids so much there is nothing we wouldn’t give them, but if we’re honest our heart does not beat that fast for God Almighty.

God’s honor is at stake every time we pass the plate on Sundays: “No matter what we say or do, this is what we really think of You.”

## *How to Invest Your Life*

*Matthew 25:14-30*

Nearly half of the parables of Jesus are concerning money and possessions. And perhaps one of the best known of these is the Parable of the Talents, illustrating a lesson in stewardship with the potential for revolutionizing the way we live. “The earth belongs to God! Everything in all the world is his!” (Psalm 24:1 [LB]) And we were created to be His managers. That’s what stewardship means: God owns everything, and we are appointed to take care of what belongs to Him.

This owner had eight talents and obviously trusted his servants, knowing what each of them could handle. One was frozen by fear, which causes us to place our security in ourselves. Frederick Buechner has written, “The life you hoard, guard, and play safe with is in the end a life worth little to anybody, including yourself; only a life given away for love’s sake is a life worth living.” The other two servants, however, invested well, benefiting from the effects of trust compounded daily. Just as muscles grow

stronger through use, faithful stewardship has a certain spiritual momentum about it.

I read not too long ago that a recent biographer of the Duke of Wellington claims to have had an advantage over all previous historians. He had discovered an old account ledger revealing how the Duke invested his money—more revealing, this biographer said, than merely studying his letters and speeches. Can you imagine that: someone writing your biography on the basis of your checkbook and tax returns?

The Parable of the Talents teaches that stewardship includes an audit, and that account will tell our story. “Yes, each of us will have to give a personal account to God.” (Romans 14:12) I know my perspective has changed on entrusting what I value to someone ever since babysitters became a part of our lives. With our two toddlers, I expect good results on what Karen and I put in someone’s care. God expects the same with all that He has put under our management as well.

## *Faith’s First Steps*

*Hebrews 11:4*

Most everyone knows the story of Cain and Abel, sons of Adam and Eve—Cain a farmer and Abel a shepherd. Genesis 4 explains that they brought offerings to God: Cain some of his crops, but Abel one of his choice, firstborn lambs. And Hebrews 11:4 [NIV] says, “By faith Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain did,” because its what we believe, not just what we bring, that makes the difference. During an especially trying time in the work of the China Inland Mission, Hudson Taylor wrote to his wife, “We have twenty-five cents—and all the promises of God!” The Bible says, “God gave his approval to people in days of old because of their faith.” (Hebrew 11:2) And first stop in that Hall of Faith is giving that trusts God enough to risk sacrifice.

Abel’s example proves that giving is much more about character than cash, about being “commended as a righteous man” [NIV], because it’s what God approves, not what we accumulate, that determines our worth. No one is remembered for what he or she received in life; people are honored only for that they gave. Like Abel, long gone, yet still speaking to us because of his faith, it’s who we bring to mind, not what we bequeath, that is our true legacy.

As our capital campaign consultant has said many times these last few weeks, giv-

ing is more about faith-raising than fundraising. If we say we trust God for our eternal salvation, can we not also trust him enough to tithe? If we have trusted God to get us to heaven, can we not also trust him enough to have integrity with our finances? It’s a question of whether we believe God is able. And how we handle money marks faith’s first steps.

## *“The Only Thing I Have Is What I Gave Away.”*

You may know the story of a man who gave a huge sum of money to start a Christian school in Africa in the late 1920s. Twenty-five years later, in the early 1950s, the school was marking its twenty-fifth anniversary and wanted to invite their benefactor to the celebration. When they finally tracked him down, this man was living in a small rented home in a very modest suburban section of Chicago. He had lost everything in the 1929 stock market crash and had just managed to pull himself back to a subsistence level of living. First refusing but eventually consenting to come to Africa, the man sat on the platform watching as the graduates paraded by, receiving their diplomas. And at one point, he turned to the headmaster, with a tear in his eye, and said, “You know, it really is true: the only thing I have is what I gave away.”

Just think about what it could mean to untold generations in your church, what it could mean to a world hungry for hope all around you, just think what it could mean to God if your congregation could enter into this kind of spiritual victory. To give our lives away is what it means to really live. So we do not apologize for proclaiming boldly what the Bible says about money. □

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**David R. Thomas is pastor of Centenary, A United Methodist Congregation in Lexington, Kentucky**