

Everything

“God, not things.”

I Kings 17:8-16

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Financially Free

Whenever any of us, in our young lives, wanted to make a significant purchase, we had to bring Mike. Mike was the oldest child of a local sports shop owner. He was gifted in a number of ways. He could be a good friend – he listened well and spoke with understanding and compassion. He was a great children and youth counselor, musically talented, and had a way with people.

Gifted.

But his unique gift was in the way he managed money. I don't recall him having an overabundance of things. Yet, it seemed that what he had was what he wanted; it was what was right for him. Once he bought a guitar that had a box with a unique shape; its tone was distinctively rich; and playing chords up and down the neck over the frets was like sliding your hand over a stick of butter. We all wanted one just like it.

He just knew the value of things. Like I said, if any of us had a significant purchase to make, it was Mike we wanted to invite along. Another friend might have been more of an expert in camera equipment; I might have been the one asked for advice in camping or hiking equipment: but Mike knew how to bargain. When I bought my guitar, it was Mike who talked the salesman down to a lower price and got him to throw in a free case, to boot.

Mike had the knack. He was the first in my circle of friends to buy a Mustang – an early 70's 2+2 fastback.

This is why I think of him. He also told me that he bought that car cash-down. We didn't know it, but he'd been saving up for it for quite a while. We were interested in how he made this big purchase without taking out a loan he said, “That's how I do all my big purchases. Cash-only. Why should I pay extra by giving interest money to a bank? I just know what I want, save up for it, and *wait* until I have enough.”

I don't think he had to borrow to buy anything until he took out a mortgage for a house. He hadn't even borrowed from his parents. I couldn't say that.

He was the one person I knew that was truly in control of his possessions.

Control

Most of the rest of us were already in debt – to our parents if not the bank. Lucky for us it was before the popular proliferation of credit cards. Most of us would have been in as much trouble as so many people are in today.

It's clear that Jesus understood the struggle most of us have in relationship to money and what we have and what we want. Over half of his 39 parables we have in the gospels have something to do with money. The parable about the prodigal son was about a young man who wanted his inheritance early, then wasted it as he lost himself.¹ The parable of the talents had to do with investing that which God has lent as a matter of faithfulness.² That's just two of the parables.

Then there were other lessons. A rich man came to him and asked about really being connected to God. He obeyed the Law, what more did he have to do? Jesus told him to let go of his possessions, give it all to the poor and just follow him.

He told everyone not to be anxious even about food or clothing but trust God who cares for the lily of the field and the birds of the air; to seek first being connected to God and everything else that's needed will be given.³ He asked, "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit the soul?" "Don't store up treasures on earth, but store up treasures in Heaven."⁴ He said you that can't serve both God and money.⁵ And when Zacchaeus the tax collector told him he'd pay back everyone he cheated and would give to the poor, Jesus said salvation had come home.⁶

Some say that when you start talking money in sermons you go from preachin' to meddlin'. But that's just a little slice of all Jesus had to say about it. He saw how economics can dominate our attention until it becomes an obsession that looks a lot like worship. He knew that whether it was about debt or taxes or accumulating wealth, few people were happy with their financial lot: and it was easy to pay more attention to that discontent than the love of God or the needs of others. Most people weren't like my friend Mike who patiently made his plans and carried them out in due time, master of his possessions. Money and possessions had become powers that oppressed the people and kept them unsettled.

No wonder we make resolutions about finances this time of year.

And maybe that's why this story about Elijah and the widow can be so fascinating. She's hardly someone you would expect to be the hero of a story – biblical or otherwise. She lived outside of Israelite territory, a Sidonian whose home was part of the Phoenician domain. This means she wasn't a Jew and didn't worship God. Instead she was a part of the cult that worshiped Baal, the false god.⁷

There were significant ways that she was not like Mike. She was a woman living in an ancient land where a woman had no rights at all. On top of that, she was a widow, which means that she would have been among the most destitute of all people. She had no husband to provide for her, so she had no legitimate means of income. And she had a son who depended on her.

An irony of the story is that her town of Zarephath was a commercial capital known for its production and export of various grains, and wine, and oil. But this center in Baal territory was so drought-stricken it had no food for its own inhabitants. The vulnerable, like this widow, would be the first to run out of food and perish.⁸

Now when she was down to her last handful of flour and her last drops of oil, this Israelite prophet, Elijah, came her way telling her to give him a drink of water and make him a biscuit. "You're kidding me," she said. "I'm just gathering a few sticks so I can build a cooking fire and prepare the last meal I'll ever get to cook for my son and me; and then there's nothing left for us to do but die."

Nothing more. No food stamps or bridge cards to take to a grocery. No bread line or sack lunch program: there was no where to go. And a handful of flour and a little bit of oil was all she has left.

Then the prophet commanded in the name of the Lord God of Israel; and with the command came...a promise. Trust and give and you will never run out until the rain comes and your normal resources come through.

This is where the widow was like Mike. She would not let her possessions own her. They would not define who she was and she would not let them determine what she would do and what she would not do. She had command of her possessions. She was free of the power they could have had.

Same attitude as Mike.

At the word of the Prophet, she let God be God and did not let her possessions be the boss of her. Her treasure was in her connection to God.

If it was possible for the Sidonian widow to give her last crumbs of food , why should it be so hard for us to manage our finances?

Could it be a matter of attitude?

I considered this. Possessions are nothing other than blessings given by God. Money is the medium of exchange that measures the value of these blessings. The state of your finances reflects how you have this in perspective and, in light of that, how you're managing.

Make your wealth into something more than it's supposed to be and it will take charge of you. It will limit what you want to do with it. Make your self-worth dependent on what you possess and you will be pressed to have the new camera, the Mustang 2+2 fastback, and the bigger house **now**. And you will go into debt. Maybe more debt than you want. Maybe more than you can handle.

Trapped.

Owned by Master Card.

Serving money instead of God and instead of money serving you.

If that's what is going on, may you adjust your attitude and be free. Trust God. Make God your God and be faithful. And accept these gifts:

No and **NOT YET**.

Start with your relationship to God. Let Jesus claim your heart so you can know that it's not what you have but it's who you are that counts. And you are a child of God.

Then make a plan – even get some help from a financial advisor or a bank manager to do it. Be specific about your goals; be realistic with a time line. Plan for success: methodically and steadily.

Sometimes you've got to take charge instead of putting it on your charge.

Who Decides

I talked with Mike a few years ago and he was still at it. He had made the most of his vocation and was following through on his plans. So disciplined: it was sickening!

It wasn't like he only denied himself. His family was educated and cared for. He had his Mustang and a couple of motorcycles along the way. He had what he needed and some of what he wanted – just not *everything*.

He had made belonging to Christ his everything.

I thought about him and tried to think of a word to describe how he was and it came to me:

Comfortable.

Maybe that's what the widow was.

Comfortable.

She could be generous with next to nothing.

Maybe that's all it takes when you have a plan and trust God.

¹ Luke 15:11-32

² Luke 19:11-26

³ Matthew 6:25-34

⁴ Matthew 6:19-21

⁵ Matthew 6:24

⁶ Luke 19:1-10

⁷ Choon-Leong Seow, "The First and Second Books of Kings," *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Vol. III*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1999. p 128.

⁸ Ibid.