



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## God's Reign First: Focus

Matthew 6:19-24

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### *A Brief, But Important Lesson from History*

Former Auburn University History Professor David Edwin Harrell, Jr. documented the effect of a 19<sup>th</sup> century agrarian worldview on the Restoration Movement: the United States was “the garden of the world” and so “rural life was superior to urban life.”<sup>1</sup>

- For example, Alexander Campbell wrote (1843): “American cities, ... [were] neither so intelligent in the scriptures, nor so pious as the people of the country.”<sup>2</sup>
- Just after the Civil War (1866), Ohio preacher B. A. Hinsdale wrote: “The cities are moral and spiritual deserts. They contain the dangerous classes.”<sup>3</sup>

Those statements are context for an 1873 editorial in the *Apostolic Times*, a restoration paper in Lexington, KY, which declared that “the poor in the great cities . . . are about the only class of poor people among whom the gospel does but little good when it does reach them. The great mass of them are besotted by vices of all the baser kinds, that they turn a deaf ear to all the messages of the truth and virtue.”<sup>4</sup>

David Lipscomb reprinted and criticized the article. He said that “to teach that certain classes are so degraded that the Gospel of God’s love cannot reach the poor, is certainly to despise them, and is nigh akin to oppressing them.”<sup>5</sup> As *Gospel Advocate* editor, Lipscomb often spoke against denigrating the city poor and identified why they were hard to reach: “the poor ... should feel at home in the church,”<sup>6</sup> but often didn’t because of the church’s “demands for the

<sup>1</sup> David Edwin Harrell, Jr., “The Agrarian Myth and the Disciples of Christ in the Nineteenth Century,” *Agricultural History* 41, no. 2 (April 1967): 181-92; as cited in John Mark Hicks, “David Lipscomb on the Urban Poor,” *Missio Dei* 3.2 (August 2012), 37-47. All restoration era citations herein are as quoted by Hicks.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Campbell, “Notes of an Excursion to the Eastern Cities, No. II,” *Millennial Harbinger*, n.s., 7 (February 1843): 64.

<sup>3</sup> B. A. Hinsdale, “The Poor and the Gospel,” *Christian Standard* 1 (10 November 1866): 254.

<sup>4</sup> David Lipscomb, “Preaching to the Poor,” *Gospel Advocate* 15 (24 April 1873): 390.

<sup>5</sup> David Lipscomb, “Preaching to the Poor,” *Gospel Advocate* 15 (19 May 1873): 512.

<sup>6</sup> David Lipscomb, “[Notice],” *Gospel Advocate* 8 (27 February 1866): 141.

expenditure of money.” What was conveyed in the nicer buildings built after the war made the poor feel like outsiders.<sup>7</sup> The church “adapt[ed] religion to the rich and [drove] off the poor.”<sup>8</sup>

Why notice this? It makes the challenge of our text real. We claim primary commitment to God’s reign. How do we manage wealth blessings in “the world’s richest nation”?

### *Christ in the Context of Judaism*

Abraham Lincoln is quoted to have said, “God must love poor people; he made so many of them.” The Old Testament proves the first part of that statement.

1. Leviticus 25.39-43 taught that if an Israelite became poor, another Israelite could buy his land, and even employ the poor Israelite.
  - a. According to the law, the amount he would pay would vary depending on how close to the next “year of Jubilee” (every 50<sup>th</sup> year) the exchange was (see 25.10ff.).
  - b. When the 50<sup>th</sup> year came, the property was to revert back to the original family.
2. Other laws forbade Israel from mistreating the poor or designated care for them.
  - a. Every third year, the required tithe was for the poor (Dt. 14.28; 26.12).
  - b. Farmers were to leave part of the harvest so the poor could help themselves in times of immediate hunger (Lev. 19.9; Dt. 23.24; 24.19-27).
3. God cared and expected his people to care for the poor. But, he did not forbid them to gain wealth. The distinction between the “brother [who] becomes poor” (Lev. 25.39) and the one he then serves implies approval of one having more (when the land reverted to him in the 50<sup>th</sup> year, the poor man was not to receive the profits gained by his richer brother).
4. Proverbs 30.8-9 expresses the correct balance.

### *Three Big Ideas from Our Text*

1. Durability (6.19-21).
  - a. Jesus calls for habit change: “stop storing up ... but keep storing up...” (present tense imperative, *θησαυρίζετε*, *thēsaurizete* in vv. 19, 20).
  - b. It’s practical: moths, rust, and thieves cannot get to heavenly treasures.
  - c. Jesus was a realist: where we keep our treasures (*θησαυρός*, *thēsauros*, what we store in a safe place<sup>9</sup> [because we value it]) is where the center of our affections and commitments,<sup>10</sup> will be.

<sup>7</sup> David Lipscomb, “The Church as God Ordained It – The Church for the Working People,” *Gospel Advocate* 38 (9 July 1896): 436.

<sup>8</sup> Lipscomb, “Preaching to the Poor” (19 May 1873): 509.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick William Danker, with Kathryn Krug, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 170.

<sup>10</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 123.

- i. "If a man wants *above all else* to make a lot of money, buy an extravagant house, ski in the Alps or sail in the Mediterranean, head up his company or buy out his competitor, build his reputation or achieve the next great promotion, advance a political opinion or seek public office, he will be devoured by these goals, and the values of the kingdom will get squeezed out. Notice that none of the goals I mentioned is intrinsically bad, but none is of ultimate value, either."<sup>11</sup>
2. Focus (6.22-23).
  - a. Jesus' figure reminds us that we follow whatever we focus on: the body's lamp is the eye; keep a healthy eye and we get the right light.
    - i. "Healthy" (ἁπλοῦς, *haplous*) was used in the LXX to mean "singleness of purpose, undivided loyalty" (Carson, 84).
    - ii. But, ἁπλοῦς also was used of generosity, a meaning that is hinted at by the term "evil eye" (v. 23; rabbis used "evil eye" to refer to selfishness).
  - b. The point is to focus on the priority: do we seek the world's reign or God's?
3. Choice (6.24).
  - a. In Jesus' world a slave or servant was expected to give total allegiance to his master (different from our attitude toward an employer to whom we give partial allegiance); the word for "master" is κύριος, *kyrios*, ("Lord").
  - b. "Hate or love" was a Semitic way of expressing choice (more than the absolute ideas we associate with the terms).
  - c. Will the choice be "God" or "wealth" (μαμωνᾶς, *mamōnas*)?<sup>12</sup>

### *Bringing It Home to Us*

1. The problem is less wealth than priority. Two texts from Luke provide commentary.
  - a. Luke 12.13-21, which ends with Luke's record of the teaching about laying up treasure in heaven: the issue leading to the rich fool parable is covetousness.
  - b. Luke 16.1-15, which is where Luke put the "two masters" saying (v. 13): again, the issue is the use of wealth and covetousness (of which the Pharisees were guilty).
2. We live in a different world; saving for retirement was never a part of their equation – nor is it a live option in much of the world today.
3. The issue is not having wealth, but loving it (cf. 1 Tim. 6.10).

<sup>11</sup> D. A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5-10*, Two Books in One (Grand Rapids, MI: Global Christian Publishers, 1978, 1987 [Global, 1999], 83).

<sup>12</sup> "Wealth" or "money" are good translations of the Aramaic word ("one's material resources," Blomberg, 124), but the original idea is more "something in which one puts confidence" (Carson, 86).

- a. The test is how we use it (whether “a dollar and a quarter” or millions).<sup>13</sup>
- b. Do we have the money to evangelize the world (as some have told us)?
- c. Could more follow the example of wealthy saints who lived on plenty (see Mt. 6.34) and gave away much more?<sup>14</sup>

### *Let's Think Hard About This*

“Many perceptive observers have sensed that the greatest danger to Western Christianity is not, ... prevailing ideologies such as Marxism, Islam, the New Age movement or humanism but rather the all-pervasive materialism of our affluent culture. We try so hard to create heaven on earth and to throw in Christianity when convenient as another small addition to the so-called good life. Jesus proclaims that unless we are willing to serve him wholeheartedly in every area of life, but particularly with our material resources, we cannot claim to be serving him at all” (Blomberg, 124).

God or wealth? What is Lord of your life?

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<sup>13</sup> Jerrie Barber cites a poetic verse to the effect that “it’s not what we would do if millions should be our lot, but what are we doing with the dollar-and-a-quarter we’ve got?”

<sup>14</sup> For example, an OT professor I had for a class in my graduate studies told of a patron who supported him as a doctoral student at the school where he earned his degree. As Director of another school’s program later, he told me he was hoping to establish a similar support network. Of course, many other opportunities are available, including using estate gifts for different causes.