

“Cantaloupe—This and That”

Scientists at NASA built a cannon specifically designed to launch dead chickens at the windshields of airliners, military jets, and the space shuttle. The idea was to simulate the impact of the large birds on the windshields so that they could make stronger windshields. Unfortunately airplanes run into a lot of birds.

British engineers heard about the cannon and wanted to use it to test the windshields of their new high-speed trains. They bought one of the cannons, set it up in a lab and fired a chicken at the windshield. They couldn't believe the damage it did! The chicken shot out of the cannon, went right through the shatterproof windshield smashing it to bits. It blasted through the control console and through the engineer's backrest and embedded itself in the back wall of the cabin.

The British engineers were in shock! They immediately contacted the NASA lab where they had bought the cannon and showed them video of what had happened. They gave the horrible results of their test and asked the U.S. scientists for suggestions. NASA responded with a one-line memo: “Read the directions; thaw the chicken.”

Making sure to follow the directions is key to avoiding disaster. Whether that's thawing the chicken or handling money, we have to know what we're doing and do it very carefully!

Last week we started a series of messages called “Cantaloupe.” We're talking about what we're to do with what God has given us. We're talking about money. But don't get all defensive. Don't cop out by saying, “All the church wants is my money.” Nope. Like I said last week, I'm not talking about this to make you feel guilty, I'm not talking about this because the church needs your cash, I'm not talking about this to fund a budget, I'm not talking about this to get you to fill out a commitment card (if you're a member of the church, you've already said you're going to prayerfully do that every year, just do it).

No, we're doing this because we need to be reminded of God's view on money and possessions. Because it takes constant vigilance, ongoing reminders, to stay strong on God's view on money and possessions. I need regular instruction, and you need regular instruction, on how to possess money without being possessed by money. I need help and you need help in learning how to own things without becoming slaves to those things. I need help and you need help in learning to live simply so that financial issues don't tear us up. And they are tearing us up. The mortgage meltdown fiasco is evidence that we need help. There are some messed up things behind all that and if Christ followers followed his teaching, there would be a lot less problem there.

The fact of the matter is that Jesus talked more about money than anything else except the kingdom of God. He did that for a reason, because he loves us and wants the best for us, and getting this right, how we handle money and possessions is a big part of living lives of freedom and balance; lives that have margin in them, so we're not living on the financial edge all the time.

This series is called “Cantaloupe” and these cantaloupes up here represent our money and possessions. God gives us everything we have, but he claims a divine portion. He puts that in our hands and puts us to the test of trust. Can he trust us to bring him back his portion. Last week I cut one open, it was full of seeds, when we put God's portion in his hands, God plants a huge amount of seeds that build God's kingdom on earth, that positively impact the lives of others, and some of those seeds grow and come back to us. That's why I can live better on 90% of my income than on 100%. The seeds get planted and it helps me to prioritize.

Today we're going to look at how we are given “this” in order to accomplish “that”. This and that. How we get a right perspective on “this” so we are free to do “that”. How we are blessed with “this” to be a blessing to “that”. How sometimes God asks us to leave one thing, (this) in order to receive another (that).

In order to understand this and that we need to understand that there is a dark side of money and a light side of money. I want to start off by quickly talking about **the dark side of money**. This is a place we don't really want to go. We don't want to talk about this because it's kind of spooky, kind of out there. But it's

crystal clear in scripture that **money has a spiritual force behind it that wants our allegiance**. It wants us to put our trust in it, and idolize it, and when we do we end up turning our backs on God.

To think that money is just a neutral tool is to court disaster and idolatry. Jesus said, "**No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money**" (Matthew 6:24, NIV). Notice that the word "Money" there is capitalized. It's that way for a reason. It's the word Mammon. Jesus referred to money as "mammon." The word "mammon" doesn't just mean cash money, it means something with a personality and a spiritual identity. What Jesus was saying is that money is a rival god! Mammon, money, has power behind it. Money wants our allegiance; it wants to influence us and wants to dominate us.

The Bible tells us that, "**the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs**" (I Timothy 6:10-11, NIV). Whether we have it or don't have it, money can be a god that we serve in very subtle ways, but ways that are very destructive to our lives and to our faith.

Like I said, we don't like to go here. I'm not trying to scare you, but the scriptures are clear about this. To ignore this is to be dangerously naïve. We don't have to be afraid of this spirit behind money, but we do have to have the tools to deal with it and keep it in its place. Because we either serve money or the one true God but never both.

But let's shift gears. Because money also has a light side. To make this transition from dark to light take a look at this video. "**There's something about Benjamin**"

Yes, money has a light side—a side that can actually enhance our relationship with God, and the Bible has a whole stream of teaching on this side. When we keep money in its proper place it can be used as an incredible blessing. In the New Testament money and material possessions are seen as the lavish gifts of a bountiful God. People are blessed with "this" in order to be a blessing in "that".

When we use money from the side of light, rather than darkness, we can build a stronger faith in two very important ways: with God and with others. And when we have stronger relationships with God and others we find peace, freedom, and joy.

The key is to possess money without being possessed by it. This is exactly why we are talking about this now. So, how do we get a right perspective on "this," so that we can do "that"? Let's look at some important Biblical concepts in how we handle this, in order to accomplish that.

We start by **being deeply thankful**. Being thankful is like giving, it doesn't come naturally. All too often we miss the incredible bounty that God provides—fresh air, sunshine, rain, nature's beauty, friendships and so much more. How often do you wake up and thank God for the gift of sleep? Or sit beside your sleeping kids and give thanks. We can also look at our possessions and money and give thanks for them but not treasure them.

The second way we can use the light side of money is to **invest in people**. We can put our treasure, our money in all kinds of things and places, but one of the best investments is in people. Matthew 6:19-21 says this, "**Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also**" (Matthew 6:19-21, NIV). A lot of times when we spend money we say, "you can't take it with you!" No, you can't take it with you. But Jesus is saying that you can send it on ahead!

One way that we invest our treasure in heaven is to invest in the lives of people. Money invested in people is the best possible investment. This means that the best use of our money from the light side is not to live high on the hog down here! It's to invest as much as possible of it into the lives of people—that becomes an eternal investment.

Investing in people can look like helping needy neighbors, giving to relieve a famine in the Sudan, sharing what you have so that people who haven't heard the good news can hear it, investing in the future of a bright young student. Invest in people.

The third way to live with the light side of money is to **manage your money carefully**. This is the technical stuff. This begins with tithing, bringing God the first fruits, the first tenth of our income. Tithing is bringing God's portion to the local church. Then it moves into things like family budgeting, estate planning, investments, wills and trusts. So many people are afraid of these things because they might bring restrictions, but the truth is that they can bring freedom because so many worries are eliminated. Create a budget and work to stick to it. Use a Christian financial planner. Take the Crown Financial Course. Find ways to manage God's resources wisely. It may sound restrictive but it actually brings freedom. Imagine that because you've managed your money carefully, setting aside some for emergencies, you don't worry about your car breaking down, or unexpected medical bills, or other needs that pop up. That's huge freedom that comes from managing your money.

A lot of people are afraid of making out wills. It too morbid! But what better way for your wealth to continue operating in the light side than by making sure that it goes where it should!

The fifth thing we can do to live in the light side of money is make it a part of our prayer lives. **Pray about money usage**. Money is a spiritual issue. Pray for God to incinerate the greed in your life. You see, greed and the forces behind money are like crabgrass. As soon as you think you've killed them they take root in another place and start growing! Ask God to grow a generous spirit in you, and along with it a sense of freedom and joy. Visualize your money being used to help needy families. Pray for how our governments use money. Pray for how our church uses money. Pray for how families use their money. Pray for God to clearly show you the difference between wants and needs and ask for the strength to not become a slave to the wants.

The sixth thing we can do to live on the light side of money is to always, **always, always side with people over money and things**. In other words, love people and use things. Don't use people and love things. Be willing to loan without interest. Be willing to lose money rather than friendship. As a church it means that we are willing to let the facilities be used for all kinds of community activities, because that's more important than preserving the carpet and paint.

One other challenge of this and that, one other way to live on the light side of money and build a stronger relationship with God, is by training ourselves to let go of the words "my" and "mine" and remember that everything in the world is God's. The bottom line is that nothing we have is ours! We're born with nothing and we take nothing with us when we die. You don't see hearses with luggage racks!

When you get things and want to write your name on them, try this instead. Write, "Given by God, owned by God, and to be used for God's purposes." The Bible teaches us that "**The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it**" (Psalm 24:1, NIV). Nothing you have is really yours! If you are able to do this, really do it, really understand that the clothes on your back, and the place where you live, and the paycheck you get are blessings from God that belong to God, then you begin to see God in everything!

When I was in seminary a church family let me and a couple of other friends use their house on the coast of North Carolina during Spring break. It was gorgeous! They weren't there when we stayed in the house but almost every minute I spent in that house I thought about them. And I was thankful for them and my love of them increased! The same thing is true in our relationship with God. When you realize that the house you live in is God's house, and the car you drive is God's car, and the money you have is God's money, and that we're just temporary caretakers we begin to see God around us in everything! We begin to love God more.

When this begins to happen there is an incredible sense of freedom and peace. Instead of having the constant need to guard your money and stuff you begin to ask how it should really be used. Instead of asking how much of my money should I give to God, we start to ask how much of God's money should I keep for myself! In Acts 4:32-37 the early Christians saw what they had and believed that it was God's. They gave land and houses to provide funds for those in need. When you see your stuff as God's you begin to ask

yourself if it might be time to sell that extra car or piece of property, or stamp collection or whatever to do something beyond yourself.

Earlier this year I made about 500 extra dollars through a couple of speaking opportunities and weddings. I brought 10% of that back to God, his portion. The rest I set aside, I saved it. I was like, "OK baby, I'm getting me some gadgets. It's my gadget money! I'm a guy, I like gadgets. I'm getting' me an iPhone!" I went to the AT&T store, I held one in my hands, I caressed it, I looked at all the features, I played with it to see what all it could do. Two different days I went into the store and did that, and I was ready to buy it. But I hit pause button, and I invited God into that decision. The phone was \$400. To me, that's a lot of money. I talked with God about it. I had an ongoing conversation. Part of me is going, "I already tithe. I've already given God his portion, so I can do whatever I want with the rest, right?" Well, yes and no.

In this case, I just felt I needed to wait. And sure enough, waiting was the right thing because...iPhones went on sale! No. No. Because I found out about somebody who needed a car and couldn't afford one. I was concerned about his safety driving an hour to and from work every day carrying his kids around in something that was completely unsafe and unreliable. I had the chance to buy a reliable car for \$500 so I did, and I gave somebody a car as a gift—just handed over the title. I'm not trying to honk my own horn...I've got a long way to go, but I think I got that one right. I'm trying, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, to see everything as God's. And I'm trying, sometimes successfully, and sometimes not, to eliminate the words "my" and "mine" from my vocab. And man it feels good when I get it right.

If the dark side of money is that it can control us then the light side is that we can use it to have a major positive impact on our world. Christian business people need to know that it's not wrong to make money with integrity and honesty. It's not wrong to become wealthy! But to operate on the light side of money is to use that wealth for the good of many, many people.

Saint Paul's is on a mission to offer hope, and help, and light, and life, and direction and purpose. We're able to do what we do because generations of people gave "this" in order to accomplish "that". Generations of people of people saw themselves as blessed with "this" to be a blessing in "that". We give "this" to bless those who are not even here yet. In order to do that we live on the light side of money which leads to peace, generosity and freedom. And for today that is the Good News of Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am deeply indebted to Richard Foster for his book The Challenge of the Disciplined Life. This book has guided me for many years on understanding God's heart on money and possessions.