



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Mastering Mammon  
(*Consumerism*, pp. 19-26)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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### Christian Reflection

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# Mastering Mammon

What did Jesus mean when he declared, “You cannot faithfully serve both God and Money”? His teachings throughout the Gospels enable us to evaluate the consumer lifestyle.

### Prayer

**Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:19-34**

### Responsive Reading

In mercy, O God, you confront us and expose our sin. May we respond in spirit and in truth, confessing our failure, reclaiming our hope.

**In our lust for lifeless objects and our relentless pursuit for more, we cross the line between innocent desire and masked idolatry. We seek salvation in spiritless things, worship you for our own gratification, and see ourselves and each other as mere consumers and commodities.**

**Forgive us, O God, for we have sinned.**

In your mercy, raise us from the dead.

**Breathe new life into your people. Empower us to be a prophetic community, living the gospel of Jesus.**

**All: Create in us a consuming passion to love and serve you.**

### Reflection

Two treasures, two sorts of eye (stingy or generous), and two masters; in each case we must choose (Matthew 6:19-34). We were afraid discipleship would come to this: God or adequate resources. We cannot have it all!

Yet, tucked into Jesus’ great sermon is this promise: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be *given* to you as well” (6:33). “Clearly the way believers receive back ... is through their new, large Christian family. The way we have our material needs met must therefore be the same—as fellow Christians share with those who are in need,” says Blomberg. Jesus’ call is plural—“y’all seek...and these things will be given to y’all. Precisely when the church as a whole strives to implement the justice on earth that matches God’s will, then they will help the most materially needy in their midst.”

We can learn more about Jesus’ view of money through his:

- ▶ *parables*. Three parables in Luke—the rich fool (12:16-20), the unjust steward (16:1-9), and the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31)—condemn greed, but not great wealth. In the parable of judgment (Matthew 25:31-46), “those who will be allowed to enter his presence for eternity are those who have helped the materially needy, especially fellow Christian brothers and sisters, with their acute physical needs.” Our faithfulness is demonstrated in how we use money to care for others.
- ▶ *concern for the poor*. Jesus’ ministry was good news to the poor (Luke 4:16-21) and he blessed the poor (Luke 6:20). He commanded disciples to “give to everyone who begs from you” (Matthew 5:42), though, as Augustine acutely observed, this doesn’t mean “give everything to the one who asks.”



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► *encounters with the rich*. “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor,” Jesus told a ruler (Luke 18:22b). But this is followed, in the gospel of Luke, by the story of Zacchaeus (19:1-10) and the parable of the pounds (19:11-27). “Zacchaeus repented by voluntarily giving up a little over half of his wealth, while the good servants in the parable are praised because they invested their master’s money and made more! It is as if Luke wanted deliberately to juxtapose diverse models for being a good steward.”

We should not ignore Jesus’ call to evaluate every use of money. Indeed, “that Jesus did not command all his followers to sell all their possessions,” Robert Gundry says, “gives comfort only to the kind of people to whom he *would* issue that command.”

### Study Questions

1. How does your church address the needs of the poor in your community, and throughout the world?
2. What aspect of Jesus’ teaching on money disturbs you most?
3. Does a graduated tithe—the more we earn, the higher percentage we give to the Lord’s work—fit with Jesus’ teaching?

### Departing Hymn: “Bigger Barns”

“Bigger barns are what I need!”  
So a rich man said one day.  
“From my worries I’ll be free  
when my wealth is stored away.”  
“Fool!” God said, “Today you’ll die!  
Will your wealth mean anything?  
All life’s blessings really lie  
in my life that wealth can’t bring.”

“Bigger barns are what we need  
for our money, gadgets, more!”  
Lord, we’re tempted to believe  
having wealth, we’ll be secure!  
Somewhere children cry for food  
or to have a doctor’s care.  
Can our bigger barns be good  
when poor neighbors know despair?

God of love, we long to know  
what will make us truly blest.  
Jesus taught us long ago  
wealth won’t give us peace or rest.  
You are our security!  
Safe in you, we serve, O Lord.  
May we find we’re rich indeed  
when we’re sharing with the poor.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (© 2001 All rights reserved.)  
*Suggested Tune: ABERYSTWYTH (Parry)*

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# Mastering Mammon

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Luke 18:18-30
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (review all)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Question 1	Questions 2 and 3
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching goals

1. To introduce what Jesus taught about our proper relation to material possessions.
2. To appreciate Jesus' concern for the poor.
3. To explore the principle of a "graduated tithe" and the wise direction of our tithed funds.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Consumerism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the hymn "Bigger Barns," locate the tune ABERYSTWYTH (Parry) in your church's hymnal.

## Begin with a Comment

Arthur Simon writes: "In blessing the meek, Jesus is lifting up not the acquisitive and well-connected, but the poor, the powerless, and those more often oppressed than successful, who typically wind up on the underside of social respectability. Most of us, myself included, have a hard time accepting this eagerly, and a hard time receiving the gift of the kingdom as really good news, because we are among the privileged. It is hard to seize a disturbing truth when a comfortable life depends on toning it down. Perhaps that is why, as John Haughey has observed, 'We read the Gospel as if we had no money, and we spend our money as if we know nothing of the Gospel'" (*Consumerism*, p. 67).

In this study Craig Blomberg guides us to reflect on not only "What would Jesus do?" but also "What did Jesus teach?" regarding money.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God will guide members to grateful and generous use of their material resources.

## Scripture Reading

Ask three group members to read Matthew 6:19-21, 22-23, and 24-34 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

Because this study surveys a number of Jesus' parables and teachings, as well as several important events in his ministry, you may want to study the material over two sessions. The group might focus on several of Jesus' parables in the first session, and then discuss his encounters with the rich (in chapters 18 and 19 of Luke) in the second session.

One of the three contrasts in the scripture reading—the choice between the healthy eye and light-filled body, or a diseased eye and darkened body (Matthew 6:22-23)—seems like an odd insertion into Jesus' teaching about money. Some commentators think the passage hearkens to the Jewish idea that

one's eye reveals whether one is generous (healthy/bright) or greedy (diseased/darkened). This instruction in the Apocrypha draws a similar connection: "To all those who practice righteousness give alms from your possessions, and do not let your eye begrudge the gift when you make it. Do not turn your face away from anyone who is poor, and the face of God will not be turned away from you" (Tobit 4:6b-7).

### *Study Questions*

1. Encourage members to explore your church's opportunities for local ministry and witness as well as the percentage of church budget gifts that are forwarded to other Christian care agencies. Does your church apply biblical models of stewardship thoughtfully? Has the congregation started new ministries for the poor in recent years? How is the church budget planned and adopted?

Blomberg concludes: "But even the most generous American churches still spend a considerable majority of the money they take in on themselves—their staff, facilities, and programs. So-called 'missions budgets,' in especially generous congregations, may range between ten and twenty percent, but seldom more than half of that ever leaves the United States and an even smaller percentage goes to the 'holistic' gospel of Jesus—meeting people's most desperate physical as well as spiritual needs—in the most impoverished and/or unevangelized parts of the world. Obedient Christians will therefore give generously to their local congregation *and* donate perhaps an even larger sum to Christians and Christian organizations more directly involved in addressing the most acute needs of our global village" (*Consumerism*, pp. 25-26). Do members agree? Do they have Christian organizations to recommend that help the poor?

2. Sometimes Jesus' instructions are all too clear, but we wonder if they are meant to be taken literally today. We must rely upon careful scholarship to explain the context of the instruction. (Do members agree with Blomberg's commentary on the biblical passages in this study? Do they have other interpretations for the group to weigh?)

In other instances, Jesus' instructions are vague and we wonder how to apply them. The church as a body bears the responsibility to interpret his commands for each new situation. (Does your congregation discuss individual and group stewardship openly and frequently?)

Jesus' parables can be confusing, especially if we attempt to read them as allegories with a specific contemporary meaning corresponding to each detail in the story. (Do members agree with Blomberg's commentary on the parables in this study?)

3. Blomberg says the graduated tithe is suggested by Jesus' comments concerning the widow whose gift of "two small copper coins" represented "all she had to live on" (Mark 12:41-44). "Perhaps the 'New Testament model' for Christian giving today is not the 'flat tax' of a tithe, or ten-percent, for everyone," he writes, but a graduated tithe—"the principle not of equal amounts or equal percentages of giving but of equal sacrifice.... As Linda Belleville explains in the context of commenting on 2 Corinthians 8:11-15, another key text on our topic, 'Whereas a fixed 10 percent would most likely be negligible for someone with an income of \$100,000, it could well cripple a person with an income of \$10,000.' This also accords with Jesus' teaching in Luke 12:48 that 'we are responsible in direct proportion to how God has blessed us.'"

Encourage members to brainstorm on how a family might determine a percentage they should give to the Lord's work, both through their congregation and other Christian aid organizations.

### *Departing Hymn*

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.