



DEVOTIONAL GUIDE – LESSON 1

STEWARDS OF GOD'S WEALTH
PROVERBS 30:8-9, MATTHEW 6:19-24

MAIN POINT

God owns all things. We are simply stewards (caregivers of His wealth).

INTRODUCTION

Do you collect anything? If so, what? What is the most extreme length to which you have gone to get one of your collectibles?

What does your collection say about your interests and passions?

Year after year, Americans amass massive amounts of credit card debt, while the number of Americans on food stamps continues to climb. What do statistics like this reveal about our culture's perspective on money and stuff?

We live in a culture divided by extreme wealth and extreme poverty, but most of us live somewhere in the middle. Whether you tend to find yourself with more money than you need or barely getting by, it's important to understand that money and possessions should never be the focus of a person's life. That focus should always be on honoring God, something we cannot do if we are a slave to our stuff.

UNDERSTANDING

READ PROVERBS 30:8-9.

Proverbs 30:8-9 is part of a longer prayer from a teacher named Agur, about whom little else is known. What is the main point of Agur's prayer in these two verses?

What did Agur see as the consequences of having too much money? What about having too little?

Proverbs is one of the wisdom books in Scripture. What is the wisdom you glean from Proverbs 30:8-9?

In his prayer, Agur asked God to give him neither too much or too little money, because he understood that both would have negative impacts on his relationship with God. If he had too much, then he would be tempted to mock God and forget his dependency on Him. On the other hand, if he was destitute he would be tempted to steal and curse God for the lack of provisions in his life. Both issues lead to the same end goal—failure to honor God with your life. The prayer of Agur in Proverbs 30:8-9 articulates an important lesson every child of God must learn: Money has the power to control our lives, and that is true whether you have too much or too little of it.

One of the best ways to keep your stuff in perspective is to remember that everything you have is a gift from God, and He expects you to steward those gifts well. With this in mind, how would you rate your current level of stewardship?

Read Jesus' model prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. What similarities do you see between Agur's prayer in Proverbs and Jesus' model prayer?

What do both prayers teach us should be the focus not only of our prayers, but of our lives?

The prayer in Proverbs 30:8-9 is comparable to Jesus' model prayer (Matt. 6:9-13). Both ask God's protection from temptation; both ask for basic needs; both are concerned with upholding God's honor. The primary focus of these two prayers is on God, and not self. When our focus is on ourselves, we are tempted to be slaves to our possessions and comforts. However, when we turn our focus to God, our material possessions lose their weightiness in our lives and we are able to acknowledge trust in Him to meet our daily needs. Understanding you cannot honor God and be a slave to your stuff is so important for the Christ follower that Jesus included a similar teaching on this topic in His Sermon on the Mount.

READ MATTHEW 6:19-24.

What is the difference between having nice things and having treasure?

How can you tell if money and possessions are becoming your treasure?

Jesus pointed out the foolishness of making earthly treasures the goal of life, instructing His followers instead to focus their attention on heaven. Unlike earthly treasures, spiritual treasures aren't material possessions that bring us temporary satisfaction. Rather, they're the benefits we'll get one day for our faithful service to God while on earth—such as eternity in His presence, an inherited place in the kingdom of God (1 Peter 1:3-5), and our perfect, glorified bodies (1 Corinthians 15). We don't remain faithful to God in order to accumulate spiritual treasures for ourselves, but so that we can offer them back to God.

What do you have to believe to be true about God in order for you to spend your money like Jesus says in this passage, or to pray like Agur modeled in the previous passage we discussed?

When we believe in God's love and goodness, that we can trust He has our best in mind, we can release our hold on our money. We can use our resources freely for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Why are materialistic and godly values at odds? Is there a way to reconcile those values? Why or why not?

What are some ways we attempt to serve Jesus and money?

Jesus cautioned His followers on the impossibility of serving two masters. A slave is owned by another person. Both the world and the Lord demand ownership of our lives. Jesus sharply declared that such dual loyalty is impossible. Eternal values and temporal values are mutually exclusive; one cancels out the power of the other. If we want to honor God, we cannot be slaves to stuff.

APPLICATION

Identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to your life.

What "stuff" in your life tends to pull your attention away from God most easily? How can you counteract that tendency?

What is one thing you can do this week to help you chase money a little less and God a little more?

With the prayers of Agur and Jesus in mind, what needs to change in the content and purpose of your prayers?

PRAY

Close your time with prayer, asking God to help you to focus on Him and not on stuff. Pray that God would be seen as valuable and precious, far more than the treasures of the world.

COMMENTARY

PROVERBS 30:7-9

As the first numerical saying ("Two things"), this verse begins the main body of Agur. The humility of the author of this prayer is evident from its self-awareness. The author recognizes his weaknesses, both in his tendency to forget God when life is too easy and to turn in desperation away from God when life is too hard. "Before I die" apparently means "As long as I live." The "two requests" are not (1) keep lies away from me and (2) do not let me be rich or poor. Instead, "keep falsehood and lies far from me" is introductory; the two requests are (1) do not give me poverty and (2) do not give me wealth. The explanatory clauses (v. 9) are exclusively concerned with wealth and poverty and disclose the real concerns of this passage. The "falsehood and lies" of v. 8 are the deceptiveness of both wealth and poverty. The former convinces one that God is not necessary; and the latter, that either he is of no help

or that his laws are impossible to keep. Verse 9 also reveals a marked fixation on the glory of God (rather than personal needs) as the prime motivation for the requests.

MATTHEW 6:19-24

The last half of Matthew 6 deals with wrong perspectives regarding the material realm—in a word, money. In 6:19-24 Jesus dealt with our greed, while in 6:25-34 He dealt with our anxiety over basic necessities. These two problems are actually cousins to each other, because both display a lack of trust in the Father and a lack of eternal perspective.

It is not as obvious in this portion of the sermon that Jesus was confronting the hypocritical religious leaders and contrasting them with the truly righteous kingdom servant. But in the context of the entire Sermon on the Mount (especially the theme of 5:20—exceeding the “righteousness” of the Pharisees), we may assume that such a contrast was intended. This is clear in light of the greed of the religious leaders (see 21:12-17).

There is a connection between this portion of the Sermon on the Mount and its immediate context (6:1-18). In the preceding section, Jesus contrasted the earthly reward of men’s attention with the heavenly reward from the Father. In 6:19, He contrasts the transience of earthly wealth with the permanence of heavenly wealth. Even the teachings on anxiety (6:25-34) peak with the exhortation to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness (6:33) in the assurance that the fulfillment of our earthly needs will naturally follow. All of Matthew 6 seems to be saying, “Look up!” when our natural tendency is to look at the world around us (see Col. 3:1-2).

6:19-21. Verses 19 and 20 are almost exact parallels, designed for easy understanding and easy memorization. This is a critical passage. Here the King drew an ultimate contrast between on earth and in heaven. He urged His followers to forget earth and think of heaven. We must not waste our time trying to get ahead in this world. It is the same idea He taught in 16:24-27. What does it profit a person “if he gains the whole world”? Jesus was demanding that His disciples look up and ahead—“for the Son of Man is going to come in His Father’s glory ...and then He will reward each person according to what he has done” (Matt. 16:27).

Jesus was summarizing why the kingdom servant is motivated to practice righteous acts. It is not for temporary honor among men on earth, but for eternal reward before the Father in heaven. The point of this life is preparation for the world to come. The present tense verb here can best be translated, “Stop storing up treasures on earth!” But Jesus does specifically command us to store up for yourself in heaven. Moths were universally known as a destructive force (Job 4:19; Isa. 50:9; 51:8). Burglary was especially common in the day of mud -brick homes. Break is the Greek term meaning “break through.” It literally means “dig through.” There is no permanence in this world. You cannot take your treasure with you into the next world, but you can send it on ahead through kingdom-oriented stewardship.

Jesus not only saw nothing wrong with His followers working for reward; He went so far as to command it. The New Testament clearly encourages it (e.g., 1 Cor. 3:10- 15; 9:24-27). Jesus’ words in the last few verses of the Bible emphasize it: “Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done” (Rev. 22:12).

This concept of storing up heavenly treasure by doing good works was common in rabbinic tradition, and so it would have been easily understood by Jesus' audience and Matthew's readers. The conditional "if" statements of 6:22b–23a are parallel, again using the form of poetic wisdom literature.

6:22-23. These two verses can be confusing until we look at them in the light of the preceding and following context. We have not departed from the theme of the person's attitude toward material wealth. Jesus spoke of a small part of the body as being very important to the body as a whole, much as James claimed that anyone who could tame his tongue could tame his whole body (Jas. 3:1-12). No muscle of the body can relax if the eye is uncomfortable. Both Jesus and James were speaking of the inner human control over one's attitude toward wealth and one's choice of words. These two limited aspects of human choice can have profound consequences for the entire person (the whole body, figuratively speaking).

In keeping with the figurative language, the light would be an accurate perspective on the value of material wealth, while darkness would be some warped distortion of this truth. The person with a generous eye can see clearly, and life can be guided in wisdom and safety by such light. The person with a covetous, selfish eye is walking in darkness and is bound for harm he cannot see. Poor perspective causes stumbling.

6:24. The center of this verse is, again, a symmetrical parallel pair of statements, poetically memorable. The term Money is from the Aramaic mamon, meaning "wealth" or "property." It is anything in which a person places confidence. Jesus carefully chose here the picture of a slave. There could be no doubt about the issue of control. No person can serve two masters.

Any compromise of allegiance in this issue reminds us of the Lord's attitude toward those who are "lukewarm" in Revelation 3:15-16. It seems to suggest He thinks even less of those who claim to serve Him, but have other loyalties, than He does of those who claim no loyalty to Him at all. The terms hate and despise should be taken to mean "be less devoted to," "disregard," or "love less." On the other hand, love and be devoted to would imply a higher priority commitment, not necessarily an exclusive commitment.