

CHAPTER 9, SESSION 20: LEARNING TO LIVE WITHOUT AVARICE

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

Perhaps the greatest challenge of chapter 9 of *The Good and Beautiful Life* is simply that it raises so many questions. It raises questions about kingdom economics. It raises questions about “adequate material provision.” It raises questions about consumerism and marketing. It raises questions about simplicity and poverty. These are huge questions with precious few answers. The impact and difficulty of this chapter will depend greatly upon the affluence and resources of your group. For example, groups comprised of upper-middle class individuals may feel overwhelmed by these ideas and the call to work through them.

There are two helpful thoughts to keep in mind as you lead the group through this chapter. First, questions and discomfort are good! For many years a majority of “Christians” in the western world have glided over Jesus’ words about materialism, greed and avarice. It is very good for us to now engage in the difficult work of looking at these areas and taking them seriously as they apply to our lives (just as we have been doing throughout this study). Second, it is important to keep in mind that at the heart of all of this is our trust in God. The point here is not to inflict guilt but instead to recognize areas where we can continue to grow closer to God. For example, I may not trust God enough to live without a retirement fund, but we know from all of our reading that this doesn’t mean God is disappointed with me or that God is going to “smite” me; it simply means there is an area of my life where I don’t have a radical trust of God. Encourage your group to be honest in naming the things they can’t imagine giving up. Put those items on the table and allow God to teach and guide your group by looking at those things. Hopefully, your group has developed enough trust with each other to dialogue about these fears. Then spend time inviting God to lead you into the deeper waters of the simple life. Usually when we think we’ve arrived is when we are most blind.

Also be aware that the next session is not based on a chapter in *The Good and Beautiful Life*, but instead is based on watching the documentary *Affluenza*. What is especially helpful about this additional session is that it gives your group more time to consider areas of avarice in their own lives.

LOOKING BACK

As you consider this chapter, it might be helpful to reference chapter 2 from *The Good and Beautiful God* titled “God is Good.” When we sacrifice our resources, we sometimes see the benefit. An example would be when Jim Smith loaned \$300 to a man who didn’t pay it back, yet Smith received \$500.00 from a different source when he needed it. However, there are other times when we may not see the benefit of our sacrifices. In these instances we may receive the “good that only the good know.” These paragraphs from “God is Good” illustrate the point:

Thus, the right things to focus our attention upon are “the good things peculiar to the good.” What does that mean? It refers to the blessings that are given only to those who strive to do good. That is the only justice, in a sense, we can count on.

For example, at the time I am writing this I am in Brazil working with two pastors. They have both been offering love and serving people and preaching to the people in Rio and Campinas for years. Though I do not yet speak fluent Portuguese, and I cannot understand what people are saying to them, I have watched them throughout the day as dozens of men and women who have been blessed by their ministries came forward to hug them and thank them. Pastors Eduardo’s and Ricardo’s face radiated with joy.

This is something unknown to those who do wrong. Those who are selfish and spiteful and mean will never know the feeling those two pastors know. It is something “peculiar” to those who do good. Conversely, Augustine says that we should also “give the widest birth to the evils peculiar to evil men.” To use the analogy above, those who are selfish and spiteful and mean are intimately acquainted with guilt, loneliness, remorse and self-hatred. They know what it is like to feel darkness surround them and overtake them. This does not

solve the problem entirely, but it gives us a glimpse into the goodness of God. God promises that those who love, those who serve, those who are honest, and those who are faithful will know—will know a kind of joy and peace that those who are evil will never know (pp. 46-47).

In understanding kingdom economics it is also helpful to return to chapter 7 of *The Good and Beautiful God* entitled “God Is Self-Sacrificing.” That chapter gave us important insight into the nature of God and the nature of the universe God created—it is filled with self-sacrifice rather than self-preservation. When we consider “avarice,” we should keep in mind this bigger vision of existence and how it calls us to live our lives.

SUPPLIES

- ✎ Paper and pens for the treasures list made during “Experiencing Transformation”
- ✎ Optional: dry erase board or tablet of paper

WELCOME

RECITE COLOSSIANS 3:1-17 TOGETHER

Then begin the silence.

5 MINUTES OF SILENCE

PRAYER TO END THE SILENCE

Generous God, everything belongs to you and is given by you to establish your kingdom on earth. Enliven our conversation throughout this class with your very Spirit, so that we might be set free to live in harmony with your will for all creation. Amen.

SOUL-TRAINING [15 minutes]

If you are in a group of six or more people, divide into groups of three or four. Use the questions below to discuss your experience of de-accumulation.

1. What challenges did you encounter as you gave away some of your possessions?
2. How did it feel after you gave the items away?
3. What did you learn about God or yourself from the exercise?

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [25-45 minutes]

THE MAIN IDEA OF THIS CHAPTER is that we are all stewards of money we earn or are given, and we can invest them either in earthly or heavenly treasures.

Read through the following questions before you begin discussion. Note any questions you especially want to discuss. Depending on your group size and the conversation, you may not have time to discuss all of these questions.

1. At the beginning of the chapter the author shares his story of buying a pair of Adidas Americanas. With your group recount a possession you desperately wanted and eventually bought. How did you feel once you owned it? What finally happened to the item?
2. We hear Suze Orman’s story of watching her father save the cash register from a burning building and how it formed an important narrative for her (p. 156). With one or two people from your group, tell a story from your childhood that explains your view of money.
3. Have someone in the group read the following summary of Matthew 6:19-24 on page 161:

There are two types of treasures that we can invest in (heavenly or earthly), two kinds of eyes (generous or stingy) and two deities we can serve (God or mammon). Earthly treasures are temporal; heavenly treasures are eternal. The wise choice is obvious. Stingy people are inwardly focused and do not experience joy; generous people are outwardly focused, give freely, and experience joy. Finally, mammon says it can produce peace and happiness, but it fails. God promises peace and happiness, and always delivers. Who will we give our allegiance to? Our loving, giving, endlessly able Father. Jesus is not trying to shame us, but is offering good investment advice. And that is because he understands the nature of the kingdom of God.

What insights and questions do you have about this quote and Matthew 6:19-24?

4. The author recounts a story about a time when he loaned money to an acquaintance, and from that loan he learned an important lesson about kingdom economics (p. 162). If kingdom economics are real, how will you live differently after reading this chapter? As a group brainstorm ways you can put into practice kingdom economics. Let it be a joyful experiment and see what God does!

BREAK [5 minutes]

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION [10 minutes]

This simple activity is meant to increase the group's understanding of what we treasure and how those treasures can be both good and bad.

Say:

It is possible that our deepest, most reinforced narratives revolve around our money, possessions and the happiness that comes from consumerism. To experience transformation we must begin by taking an honest evaluation of what we "treasure." For a definition of what we "treasure," we will look at a quote on page 159, which you will want to find and follow along with as we work through a few questions.

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What exactly is a "treasure"? Dallas Willard explains, "We reveal what our treasures are by what we try to protect, secure, keep." Humans are designed to treasure things. Jesus isn't telling us to not treasure things, he is telling us which kinds of things to treasure. We shouldn't treasure a car because it will not be around forever and cannot love back. Treasuring our spouse is a very good investment. He or she is an eternal spiritual being who can in return love us back and can bless the world.

On a blank sheet of paper, write a list of things you treasure based on Willard's definition, and then explore the following questions. (You may want to write these two questions on a dry erase board, or on a tablet of paper for all to see.)

☞ As you look at these "investments," which ones are earthly and which ones are eternal?

☞ In what ways would you like to change your list of "treasures"?

When the group has had enough time to study their list, move on to the "Engaging the Word" activity.

ENGAGING THE WORD [20 minutes]

To cultivate the inner reality of simplicity the author tells us that 1 Timothy 6:6-10 is a great passage to reflect upon. He writes, "Paul advocates contentment with adequate provision. Beyond that we are tempted to serve mammon and not God" (p. 167).

Have a volunteer read 1 Timothy 6:6-10 out loud.

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For 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 (NIV).

Discuss the following questions:

1. What strikes you about this Scripture passage?
2. What soul-training exercises have helped you develop the inner reality of contentment and simplicity?
3. Make a list of 30 items you possess, then work through these questions from the chapter (p. 166).
 - a. Do I really need this?
 - b. Does this item give me kingdom joy or merely temporary happiness?
 - c. How much of the money I would spend on this item can I invest in heavenly treasures?
4. Regroup and discuss what you discovered. Identify any measurable steps that you could take to develop inner contentment and outer simplicity.

GO IN PEACE [15-20 minutes]

Close your time together by having a volunteer in the group read these valuable words:

Treasures in heaven relate to the things God is doing. And we know that God is helping people. Thus, the best way to lay up treasures in heaven is to live out Matthew 6:33: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you” (KJV, p. 159).

FOR THE COMING WEEK

- ☞ Do not read chapter 10—yet. The next session will be spent watching the video *Affluenza* and discussing it. So for this coming week, return to any previous chapter that has especially challenged you and reread it. Spend time reviewing all the different soul-training exercises you have engaged in and see if there is a practice you should revisit for this week.