



*Christ As Master 13th century mosaic Hossios Loukas Monastery, Greece*

# Reflections on The Pearl of Great Price

## READINGS

“The Lord’s house burned. One less responsibility for me!” So exclaimed John Wesley on learning his home had been destroyed by fire. What a radical kind of reaction, what a beautifully free kind of response, what a profoundly different way of thinking about possessions and money. While this is my own personal reaction to Wesley, I recognize it as precisely the sort of grappling we all need to do to continue to grow and change and be increasingly free with the material and lifestyle dimensions of our lives.

Which leads me to say that I want to share with you in this letter my own growing edge in dealing with money. In a word it has to do with what I will call *Kingdom Economics* vs. *cultural* or *worldly* economics. From there I want to share a fresh word about Grace and Joy in giving, followed by how being related to the poor assists us in this movement of growth and freedom through money.

My thinking has been affected this fall and winter beyond the Justice of Giving by being involved in two open-to-the-public money workshops in Southern California and Eastern Pennsylvania, a very specialized money workshop for physicians

and psychiatrists of the Christian Medical Society in North Carolina; finally to an invitation-only workshop for wealthy Christians in the Pacific northwest. The bottom line summary of these experiences for me was twofold. First, most of us have enormous resistance to change—especially where it affects our basic security, power, prestige, like money does; and secondly, what equally enormous joy and freedom is ours when we do take the wraps off the taboo about money and stretch out our hand in risk, obedience and trust.

Ever since hearing Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Cheap Grace, Costly Grace description years ago I have been helped to often assess where I am in the faith. Now as I deal with Stewardship of money in my faith and in the contemporary church I realize that the greatest area of cheap grace for many, if not most of us, is in the area of money. I realize how insightful the words of Martin Luther are, "There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, mind and the purse." The Bible says this in another way in Luke 16:10-11. "For unless you are honest in small matters, you won't be in large ones. If you cheat even a little, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities. And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven?"

—Don McClanen<sup>1</sup>

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The only ultimate question is where we finally place our security. At the place of our deepest inner being, where do we let down our full weight?

Biblical faith guides me to the answer. It says that the gospel is the power of God. God's supreme act of love was the sending of his son, Jesus Christ, who was among us in weakness.

Many do not see the ultimate revelation of God in him. I do. Being surrendered to him has fundamentally changed me. My old self, which was in opposition to God, is dead, and I am in union with his son. In this reality I'm safe. Jesus said, "Fear

<sup>1</sup>Used by permission of Wellspring.

not those who kill the body and after that have nothing that they can do." Nothing can fundamentally harm me.

I'm now in a new realm of grace. I trust myself forever to that stupendous love which has acted for me in the weakness and folly of Golgotha's cross. My ultimate security is in that folly.

All of this, in a very insecure world, is for me the bottom line, as it is for all Christians. Any other course is to be at war with God and his way of righting wrong. No other way has any reality. Any other way produces insecurity.

Any form of compartmentalization, any area in which we do not trust God, is doubting him and questioning his integrity. This trust in the Father's care must exist both in the personal and the public domain, for my personal life is never separate from my life in society; my faith affects how I want society to be organized.

The assumption is often made: God can't look after me unless society is organized in its present form, with its special advantages for my nation, my business group, my income group. So we Christians hold on with a death grip to the present way of ordering society.

Of course, every church structure and every political structure is provisional. We should always be moving toward a more equitable and just structure which will spread the benefits to everybody. To be unwilling to entertain radical changes in political structures is to say that we really trust the structures that insure us privilege rather than believing that God will provide our needs.

—Gordon Cosby in "Resting on Golgotha's Cross,"  
*Sojourners*, September 1978, p. 23<sup>1</sup>

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Money is a necessary commodity for survival in the modern world. Its uses are many and its role in business and society is

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well established. But it seems to bring out the irrational in people. It taps the deepest layers of the personality and triggers emotions such as greed and envy, love and security. The desire to obtain enough money to achieve one's desired standard of living is in the realm of realistic behavior. The desire to accumulate extreme wealth is irrational. Beyond a certain point, added wealth cannot increase the opulence of one's style of living or increase one's happiness. Yet the dream of having millions is common to most Americans.

Howard Hughes made more than a billion dollars in his lifetime and J. Paul Getty made several billion. This was much more than either could possibly spend. If one spent a thousand dollars an hour, twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, it would take over a hundred years to get rid of a billion dollars. What is the drive that made them continue to pursue money when they already had more than they could ever count, let alone spend? Surely not happiness, since both of them apparently became more and more unhappy as their wealth increased.

In his earlier years, Howard Hughes was considered a typical rich playboy, with a passion for parties and beautiful women. As he grew older and shrewder and turned his inheritance into a vast fortune, he underwent a transformation. He became more aloof and suspicious, and it would seem that his wealth created an ever-increasing barrier between himself and other people. In his last years he lived in seclusion and for years very few people knew whether he was dead or alive. In spite of his wealth and influence, he turned more and more inward, becoming a recluse whose life was devoted to avoiding germs and people.

To most people, perhaps, the lure of money seems to be a natural phenomenon. "Everyone wants money" is a common belief. The rumor of a new gold rush will cause people to scurry to the far corners of the earth and endure untold hardships. Most would agree the sacrifice is worth it. They have become so indoctrinated with the idea that having money is important, that they no longer question why. They are una-

ware that perhaps what they are truly seeking is a increase in self-respect, or security, or freedom, or love, or power. While they may not be aware of what it is they truly want from life, they feel sure that money will provide it for them.

—Herb Goldberg and Robert T. Lewis, in  
*Money Madness*, pp. 2-3<sup>1</sup>

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Is my relationship with God  
total in its importance to me

when God says  
give me your time  
do I make excuses and say  
I need time for myself

when God says  
give me your talents  
do I quibble and say  
but I don't have any

when God says  
give me your wealth  
do I squirm and say  
surely not every penny

when God says  
give me your heart  
do I hedge and say  
I need time to decide

Is my relationship with God  
total in its importance to me

Lois Shank Hertzler<sup>2</sup>

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## QUESTIONS

1. What is the most important thing in your life at the present time? What evidence can you give to support your answer?

2. Did Jesus intend for us to take the parables of the treasure and pearl literally and give up everything for our relationship with God? Explain your answer.

3. Why is it so difficult to put God first in our lives? What are some things which can help us do this?

4. Why did Jesus spend so much time talking about the dangers of wealth? In what ways is the teaching especially relevant in our time?

5. Why is it difficult for us to "give to the poor"? Has the rise of the welfare state decreased the need for such giving? Explain your answer.

## MEDITATION

*"Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."* (Luke 12:32)

Thank you, loving Father, for the privilege of coming to you in prayer. How good it is to still my racing thoughts and go to a quiet place of peace, where your love breaks through the clouds of concern with special radiance.

Knowing you and loving you are the most essential parts of living. Realizing that I am created as your cherished child, the sister or brother of all others in the human family, revitalizes my whole being, and floods it with humility and joy.

Dear Lord, when I turn to you each day in prayer, fill my spirit with the wisdom needed to serve others gladly and productively. Help me to focus on those around me in loving and helpful ways, and let go of too much concern for myself. I know you will be here as I work to develop the gifts you have given, and use them for the benefit of others. With deep

gratitude for Jesus Christ's wonderful words that it is indeed your good pleasure to give us the kingdom, my spirit speaks the prayer he taught . . .

*The Lord's Prayer*