

# Enough Is Enough!

sermon digest

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Matthew 6:19-34

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A couple of weeks ago, founder of Facebook Mark Zuckerberg publicly announced on the Oprah Winfrey Show a 100 million dollar contribution to improve the Newark, New Jersey, school system. Where did this twenty-six-year-old get his wealth? After two years at Harvard, Zuckerberg dropped out in 2004 to develop the online networking system Facebook, but he hardly fits the stereotype of a dropout. At age twenty-six, Zuckerberg's six years of accumulated wealth is estimated by *Forbes* magazine at two billion dollars.

The billionaire philanthropy movement seems to have started much earlier with Bill Gates shortly after his marriage to Melinda French in 1994. Bill removed himself from running the daily operations of Microsoft to devote his time to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Warren Buffett, the wealthiest man in the world at the time, became the third principal officer. At the end of 2009, the Foundation had an endowment of \$33.5 billion, the world's largest transparent charitable foundation. The Foundation is committed to global issues of health, poverty, and education.

In June, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett started a campaign to convince fellow billionaires to announce publicly their intention to contribute at least half of their wealth to charitable causes. *Forbes* has identified 403 billionaires in the U.S. By early August, they had contacted eighty people of whom forty were willing to be identified with the billionaire philanthropy club. At fifty-three billion dollars, Gates is the second wealthiest man in the world. Buffett is now number three with only forty-seven billion. All of this makes Zuckerberg's \$100 million donation appear on the down side of generosity.

Although I have some difficulty in comprehending the magnitude of the wealth involved, I commend the surge of philanthropy among the world's billionaires and wish them every success in convincing the other 383 billionaires to join the club. From reports at the time of their marriage, it appears that Melinda was the primary influence on Bill's sense of values, raising questions about the possible meaning and use of such wealth.

In the background something is wrong in the distribution of wealth in this country. The gap between the super-wealthy and the desperate poor in the U.S. is greater than any other nation in the world, and it is growing. Today 20% of the wealthiest Americans control 85% of the wealth; the bottom 80% control 15%. Excluding the value of a home, the gap grows. The top 1% holds 42.7% while the bottom 20% holds 7% of the nation's wealth.

***The crisis in values corrupts our view of the world and vision of the good life.*** Shortly after the Gates' marriage, a PBS documentary was produced by Seattle and Oregon Public Broadcasting. "Affluenza" is a coined word: "An epidemic of stress, overwork, shopping and indebtedness caused by dogged pursuit of the American Dream. . .An unsustainable addiction to economic growth." Since 1950, Americans have used more resources than everyone who has ever lived before them. About five per cent of the world's population, the U.S. consumes one-third of the world's resources and produces half of its hazardous waste. In 1979 President Carter preached to the nation about a disease of the spirit: "In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities and our faith in God, too many of us now worship self-indulgence and consumption." Historian David Shi believes that this speech cost Carter the 1980 election. Shi also observed that Carter blamed the people and ignored the root cause—institutions, corporations, and media that promoted the hedonistic ethic of the consumer culture. The following decade, the 1980's became known as the "Decade of Greed" as the gap between rich and poor grew wider.

The market value system turns families into consumer groups and people into products. On average, Americans spend one full year of their lives watching TV commercials encouraging them to spend. Money arguments are the known cause of 90 % of divorces; and in the final analysis, meaningful fulfillment is missing from the lives of folks who are driven by the insatiable quest for things. British psychologist Oliver James sees a correlation between unhappiness in life and our lust for wealth. World Health Organization data indicates that English speaking nations have twice the level of mental illness of Europeans, which James attributes directly to our hedonistic lifestyle. Something is wrong with the sense of value of a people who spend six hours a week shopping to forty

minutes playing with their children. Family values lauded today as the moral standard should reach higher than the affluent measure of the TV ads. Children deserve something better than more toys and gadgets. We have no higher gift to give to family than self. The same holds for the family of God. If we have our values straight, the money will gravitate to the level where it belongs.

The Sermon on the Mount did not address a billionaire's club. Rome had taxed the middle class into a survival mode. The primary concern of the population was the next meal, not the protection of a nest egg. Jesus taught us to pray for daily bread. He recognized the necessity of "all these things" that sustain bodily existence, but he raised the right question: "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" Jesus did not disparage the value of material things. He just viewed Mammon to be on a lower level of worth than persons and intangible spiritual matters. Mammon is not really a pejorative concept in the Gospel. Contrary to popular assumption, there was no known pagan god called "Mammon." The word simply refers to currency, property, things. Jesus inspired later Christians who declared that the *love* of money is the problem (1 Timothy 6:10; Hebrews 13:5). The value we place on things, not the things themselves create our chaos. God created the material world and declared that the creation was good. Waldo Beach noted that the Christian ethic does not distinguish the material from the spiritual as the difference between lower and higher or evil and good. "The moral good of the matter lies in the right ordering of all values, the moral evil in the wrong ordering of values" (*The Christian Life*, p. 204).

Offerings of money follow closely the offerings of self. Thus, Christian stewardship concerns not only the way we give but the way we live. Stewardship is a management issue, not a fund-raising technique to enhance the wealth of churches. Stewardship is the management of our physical and spiritual lives in a material world that requires stuff like food, clothing, and shelter to survive so that we learn to put first things first.

***Christian stewardship boils down to the focus of worship.*** The gospel of Christ is concerned with values. Someone has summarized the ethic of Jesus: worship God; love people; use things. Proverbs 30:8 is a prayer, "give me neither poverty nor riches." Wealth leads to the denial of our need of God; poverty presses us to another kind of materialism that destroys community.

Jesus addressed two essentials in daily life, our system of values and the direction of worship. Jesus posited the problem with wealth in the heart, where your treasure/values reside. He directed us to a life of reduced stress and lowered anxiety which comes of a higher trust in God and an adjusted appetite for things. *Affluenza* is about the drive toward luxurious living. Jesus addressed our values in balance with the true necessities of life. The God who provides for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field is concerned about our welfare, but not with our wealth.

Jesus called Mammon in question to the degree that it becomes a god for us. He seemed to be especially hard on the rich in spite of the Old Testament standard that wealth is sign of divine favor. By the time of Christ, the Jewish people had been impoverished by political control and military occupation. Most of the rich had sold out to Rome and were generally viewed as corrupt.

We are confronted by a new challenge to our values. Every one of us has had our heads turned by the luxurious life promoted by the culture of which we are a part. The most disgusting symbol of our age is the call of Robin Leach, host for "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," calling us to "dreams money can buy." If our heads are so turned by the lure of this world and the promise of immediate gratification, we have no place for tomorrow and no place for the God who sent his Son into our world, not as a tycoon, not as one who owned the kingdoms of this world, but as one who became poor for our sake, as one who taught his disciples to trust in the providence of God for the needs of tomorrow.