

Chapter 7

Money

Introduction: The first major I declared in college was social studies. That choice came primarily from the fact that on the ACT (American College Testing) test scores, my highest score was in that area. After the first semester of my freshman year, though, I changed my major to natural science. The motive was simply that everywhere I looked there were social studies majors; most of them males who intended to get a job coaching somewhere but would also be available for teaching history, geography, and so forth.

The joining of social studies and coaching was and is a thing. The point, though, was they were going to get hired before I did. So, with the second highest score on my ACT scores being natural science, I switched majors.

In some ways, though, that was a choice based on how I was going to pay for college. I managed to get approved for a continuing loan from the National Science Foundation, a federal agency. The U. S. government had recognized there was a growing shortage of science and math teachers across the country. This stimulus program was instituted to buffer against a complete decline in those fields and their specialties.

As long as I kept a relatively moderate grade point average, I got the loan. There was the codicil in the loan language that if I took a job in a school system whose relative economic level fell toward the low end of average that I could be discounted on repaying the loan for each year teaching. I managed to work off forty-five percent of that loan before I moved on from the high school job that included teaching chemistry and biology.

And, of all things, that job was in the high school from which I'd graduated myself. I was one of those who then by invitation (!) lived at my home of rearing with my parents. That place was three to four miles outside the town, a distinctly rural location.

So far, you've likely figured out that money mattered in my college major decisions, both in the college experience and after graduation. But, then, I would have to say that I was and am no different than anyone else. Money, having enough to go to college, having sufficient funds to make a living—which can be defined according to relationships and contexts.

Quite possibly where I grew up played into that choice of natural science as a major. For, I could step out the backdoor of that house and immediately be in the “field and forest.” I had imbibed ecology before I knew there was such a thing. I'd fished, wandered, all over that area learning plants, animals, their locations, their seasonal habits.

That upbringing also carried a certain organic theme into my biblical literacy and interpretation. The time frame was also way before I knew anything about that which was called hermeneutics. My early biblical-theological education came by way of a local church, but also from my maternal grandfather. He had only a fourth-grade education, but he was one of the first that caused me to do investigative reading of scripture by way of leading questions he would put in front of me.

He, on some of our walks in the woods, drew attention to the matter of Creation, all around us. He was a farmer-rancher. That meant his sense of the seasons, the climatological area we lived

in, the hills, the valleys, the waterways all came into his field of vision. He taught me how to look at those as a whole and the parts within the whole.

It took a lot of years for me to realize that he was right on track about Creation with where more of us should be. His practice of rotating crops, leaving some acreage fallow, terracing, were small in themselves but gave me points to extrapolate to be sensitive toward practicing stewardship that could affect the whole planet.

Most of the congregational education drew attention to the endpoint of Creation, human beings, and quickly jumped to Genesis 3, the Fall, and moved on to primarily a revivalistic approach as the primary purpose of the Church. As far as those “days” before the creation of human beings, they were ignored, considered unimportant, giving little to no attention to that point from God of humans given dominion over the earth. Still, that matter, if not unread is at least misread and certainly misapplied, was allowed to shift to domination, not a stewardship, a management, an accountability over those things created before humans.

The perspective went that humans must be the most important since they were created last. But, with my homespun education, I learned that so much more is obvious to us in nature of the fingerprints, the handprints, the mind of God—if we pause long enough to take it in. What if we looked at life through the lens of the beginning of Creation forward, and not just from the perspective of humans forward? And, that those increments before the humans contain so many foundational points for what our theology and ethics should be.

There has come in a not so subtle dynamic that humans can control nature, the earth, the Creation. This control urge has deeply shaped our approaches to the Bible, the Church, one another, so that our theology has become more anthropologically oriented. We attempt to become God, when, ironically, we will go back to the earth at the end of our mortal days—dust to dust.

All of these considerations carry value assertions, motivations, and questions. Thus, Money, first of another set of topics, themes, the issue areas of life is the first of another triad—money, sex, and power). These like the ethical theories triad (deontological, teleological, and relational) and the values triad (accountability, forgiveness, and courage) will interface, are nearly indistinguishable from one another at points.

It's Always About the Money

The phrase is mostly right on target. Where there is some digression is when the conversation about “money” is limited only to matters of currency exchange. With this chapter, an issue-oriented chapter, “money” is expanded to mean anything material, the stuff, the matter, of Creation. While we may be used to literal pieces of paper, or metal coins, or credit cards or any number of representations of these kinds of identifications of money, most exchanges for goods and services from the ancient days were exchanges of items.

Value, and worth—which may have a different qualification and quantification—was attributed to things that were in short supply, like metal pieces. But, as well, goods and services among people groups could be exchanged with some relatively equivalent value held.

The goods and services might have, and still do, involve people as part of the exchange. Certainly property, literal land area but also anything that could be produced, was included in the

exchanges. The productions at some stage are the results of things of the earth being worked, like wood or metal, reshaped as with how some plastics are the reshaping of the hydrocarbon molecules in petroleum.

“It is always about the money” is one of those platitudes we offer when we run up against the dynamic that we don’t know where the money is coming from or where it is going. We’re concerned that we get fair value for a fair cost, or that we are paid a fair wage for a fair amount of work, that there is work at all. We get little education on the many layers to the statement, though, of “It is always about the money.”

Most congregations I know about have levels of transparency about their financials. There are few guidelines for what is to be considered as how one as a follower of God is to make, spend, save their money, much more that “money” has so many layers of meaning. The context is often another one of the conspiracies of silence—we just don’t talk about money. We must consider this omission a major one.

We are shocked when it dawns upon us that a congregation has been the victim of embezzlement by one of its ministerial leadership, or has provided a soft spot for a member to operate a scam on fellow congregants.

These matters should alert us to the dynamics of “dark money.” Slush funds, money off the books. Perhaps the omission is due to the inability to understand, or want to understand, “money” being a major part of any social/cultural paradigm. The scale is so huge that bafflement sets in early and then is ignored.

We can’t forget that the information age, the digital age, is upon us. Intellectual property can have much to do with regard to how culture moves; how hardware and software can move enormous amounts of information at continuingly faster speeds that affect all the aspects of “money.”

But, surely, the matters of a household spending pattern, the anxieties of earning enough to make ends meet, should draw the attention of congregational entities. These kinds of things can lead us to the heart of Creation, in fact, and help develop a theological framework sufficient to address our individual matters about money all the way to being literate about global money matters.

We should be aware, for instance, that early mission journeys out of Western Europe followed colonial trade routes—where commerce went, the missionaries followed. For those who were asked to take the Gospel as their own often, and still do, had difficulty separating out what was the content of the Gospel after all.

Dominion or Domination?

Even with a recognition that “money” has contemporary global ramifications, our perspectives may lack a deep enough dive to have some guiding principles to do self-identification all the way to global identification of how we should be thinking about all the many meanings of “money.”

The matter of theological and ethical prescriptions about “money,” wealth, property, predates all the ancient methods of understanding wealth. Or, at least according to the Hebrews a sense of how Creation came about. A significant hinge point on how humans were supposed to relate to the Creation shows up right after humanity is begun with the terms subdue and rule over introduced.

Read Genesis 1. Notice the days of Creation. Notice God's statement that there needed to be someone to take care of the Creation, the beings within it. Creatures are specifically named, but Creation included what we call the universe. One thing we miss is that humans were introduced into the creation process specifically to watch over the Creation. That principle alone can go a long way as one asks, "Why am I here? What is my significance in all this we can call Creation?"

This management, stewardship, accountability, dynamic, the subdue and rule over phrases, as most English translations go, do not carry the strong, even violent, connotations humans since humanity's beginnings have instituted. For instance, even the King James Version translated the "subdue" idea as having dominion, but the functional definition, the applied theology and ethics definition, became "dominate with force." So, one of the failings of humanity early on was to allow the dominion as management idea to shift to dominate with some extreme consequences that ironically work against Creation.

By the time the Hebrews put their version of the Creation together for succeeding generations, the prescriptive texts, the Adamic Covenant if you will, had already run aground. The rehearsal of the guidelines of being stewards, managers, not runners into the ground of Creation, was an attempt to remind the Hebrews they were to take care of one another and not get into conflicts over the material parts of Creation, like property, or each other.

This dynamic of conflicts, whether between neighbors or nations, has at the heart of it the pressure to hold more wealth than anyone else possession of the property, of the people already there. Notice the history of wars how the "spoils of war" go to the victor.

If not wars which decimate one set of population more than likely, other crises do the same. One example that set the trajectory for Western culture was the Black Death plague in the Middle Ages. The millions of deaths created a shortage of labor and provided some of the nails in the coffin of feudalism. Those formerly serfs/slaves left asked for better wages and treatment.

By the time of the Renaissance and Reformation, the ideas of working hard, investing, and a reconcentration of wealth in fewer people took over. The mechanisms tweaked, stretched, coddled and with the powers implicit and explicit in the "dominate" approach to Creation showed up as laissez faire capitalism. In its extreme forms it can be devastating to a culture, to a society, to a planet.

Production becomes over production requiring more consumption. If more consumption does not follow closely, then "marketing" creates artificial needs to ramp up consumerism. Creation--the creatures, the human beings, the content of the planet, the environment--suffers.

Notice that each of the Genesis 1 days was concluded by God's seeing the respective created element – for instance, light, water, land, creatures--"was good." Perhaps we should ponder on that longer than we usually have done so. Is a possible self-question that of "Dare I mishandle anything that bears the conclusion from God that it is good? Is there not something of the vision, purpose, mark of God upon anything that was declared good? Surely that realization should cause one to be more careful in the treatment of the created creatures, the land, the water, the sky, and so forth.

The lack of pause and reading the days of Creation as gifts over which to be responsible and instead constantly finding ways to enhance the human image began early on and continues on.

The domination of the Creation, or perhaps I should say the attempted domination of Creation, has resulted in conflicts between people groups, all sorts of fault lines in the global society, as well as in family relationships. The attempted domination reveals some interesting reverberations when the global environment is examined.

“Possession is nine points of the law” comes from early English property laws and meant/means holding something in hand. Contending that an amount of land, something of material constitution—articles of clothing, a house, a vehicle or other modes of transportation, things collected, and the list goes on—means ownership, goes back millennia, though. And, often, possession has also included not just land, waterways, even air space, mineral rights, but also people.

The latter application should strike us as appalling at the least. People as property still moves in the global culture of what can be identified as slave labor, sex trafficking, or any pattern of considering a labor force as no more than objectified matter. The list can grow, though, once you catch the idea that there are people who thrive upon seeing other people as property, commodities. It is dehumanizing, depersonalizing, and profanes the idea of the image of God in each human—each given the responsibility of being a co-creator with God—one of the definitions of having dominion over the earth.

Perhaps you are thinking ahead with me and recognize how these goods and services evolved and devolved, especially as we might consider the treatment of these matters through the lens of holding dominion.

An idea often missed when the essence of the Gospel is sought is that of the idea of having dominion over Creation being a matter of salvation. One definition of original sin could be outlined as the attempt to be God, rather than treating Creation as God has already treated it. Instead of attempting to make a list of dos and don'ts to describe original sin, we should look at the impact of humans upon the Creation.

Creation Theology and Ethics—A Biblical Perspective

Being co-creators, those who manage as God would have us manage is at the heart of what it means to be a God follower, one who knows God, one whose “salvation” is being worked out.

The Old Testament prophets called for a balance, a fairness, justice on “money” matters for the people. Their essential messages were based on the Covenant statements that preceded them, for instance, notice the Ten Commandments with regard to covetousness—wanting others’ property, spouses, and so forth—which amounted to theft. Continually from the prophets was the call to take care of the oppressed—anyone who had less. See the Levitical Code especially in Leviticus 19 where so many of the guidelines followed would indicate a God-follower were guidelines dealing with the economic system of the time.

With the New Testament, read the narratives of Jesus’ conversations with people. Illustrations from Creation abound. Parables which have organic, earthy, bases are frequent. Most of what Jesus talked about was life in the here and now, not an ethereal afterlife, but on “money matters.”

Often missed is the reading of Luke with “wealth,” “money,” in mind. On average one out of every six verses is about the matter of money. The vocational representations of the time move

throughout the material. With the weight of scripture principle in mind, how is it we miss there are these more than beginning points for considering “money.”

Human relationships are highlighted by Jesus as he gave an ear, healing touch, or directions for improvement to individuals and to groups. He summarized his relationship to the disciples as “friends” not servants. The relational category changed the dynamics of mutual treatment. With these and other teachings, Jesus reached back into and built upon Creation theology so as to offer liberation from a life of, a culture of, domination.

Paul’s observation that “the love of money is the root of all evil” is a formidable piece of wisdom. Not money is the root, but the love of money. And, yes, read that and understand all which has preceded these lines to define “money” can be included in Paul’s proverb.

Here is an example of where the virtue of love can be subverted and through a progression that may cover years becomes a vice, greed. For the greedy, when asked the question “How much is enough,” they reply there is never enough. Possession, consumption, consumerism, or just having things that others do not have. Hoarding, as a vice, recognizes no economic levels—multi-billionaires, as well as those who have hardly anywhere to call home—can be identified here.

Conclusion: More consideration of “money” from a Creation perspective is needed. Clear directives from the Old Testament and New Testament have been ignored, distorted, made to fit contemporary cultural modes of all the aspects of Creation—material goods, the environment, for example. Re-reading and understanding the ancient texts indicate that perennial value from those directives can be had. “Money” issues, yes, but they quickly have faces and at the least call for a reformation of our thinking and acting in the directions laid out by God to humans being caretakers of Creation and all within it.

For Further Discussion:

1. Will your perspective on Creation change any by reading Genesis 1-3 more slowly and reflectively?
2. Do you know anyone who has been reared in a “Third World” culture? Ask them to describe the different perspectives they may have about wealth as compared to the United States’ perspectives about wealth.
3. Agree or disagree with this observation: at the current rate of consumption, we are killing the planet.
4. One of Jesus’ parables indicated the value of investments. What are your perspectives in that regard?
5. Read Galatians 3:28. Do you see the three large issue areas of life in the verse? Where does “neither slave nor free” fit with “money”?