

Chapter 6

Going for gold or contented with glitter?

A friend of mine worked as a receptionist for a group of doctors. She told me how worried she was that they were becoming less concerned about spending time with their patients than about running a successful business. It turned into such an unhappy practice that after doing her best, she finally expressed her concern and left. Cost cutting had destroyed the unseen asset of goodwill. As an author of ancient times put it, there is nothing new under the sun.¹ In contrast, she also told me how one of the richest men in Britain took time to visit a new widow, threatened with loss of the farm on his estate that was tied to her husband's job. Out of a kind and generous heart he offered to help her find a new home, allowing her to stay put until it was ready.

Going for gold instead of waiting on God

At the end of the last chapter, we left the people of Israel running out of patience because Moses had disappeared and was completely out of touch for nearly six weeks. God had called Moses to give him two large pieces of stone on which he had written out the ten instructions he had spoken to the assembled company and to tell him more about his rules for their lives. When Moses finally returned to the Hebrew camp, he found to his dismay that the people and even his brother Aaron, his deputy, had given up waiting for him. Worse still, they had turned from worshipping the true (though invisible) God and made themselves a false god, made out of their own glittering gold. It was cast in the form of a calf, perhaps like some of the nature gods they had known in Egypt.

In his shocked anger, Moses threw down the two stones inscribed with God's commands, smashing them. Their leader's reappearance and his reaction produced guilty embarrassment among the people who gave poor excuses for their behaviour. The truth was that by giving up hope of Moses' return, they were mistrusting and rejecting the love of God

whose guidance, through him, had brought them safely so far. By going their own way, they headed straight for an experience of severe discipline. The calf was destroyed and many of them lost their lives as well.²

How true to modern experience is this episode. Unwilling to either want or wait for a message from God, humanity still turns to the worship of gold in all its forms. In some cultures, including those who think themselves superior, offerings are still made to some kind of nature-god. Some hold particular animals sacred, while some worship 'the Earth Mother'. Any form of idolatry goes against God's wise instruction and risks spiritual death. For many, the greatest idol of all is the pursuit of gold itself. Centuries later, greed is on a list of idols possibly being worshipped then, as it can be now.³ Jesus once said 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also...You cannot serve both God and Money'.⁴ If the heart's desire is for material treasure only, that will not last. If instead our hope is in God he richly provides everything we need for our enjoyment, including enough to share with others as well.^{5,6}

Money-making, money-spending

As with the worship of the golden calf long ago, many people today have moneymaking as their priority in life, even if it means acting dishonestly. Gradually they learn to silence their inner God-given conscience. Money is, of course, necessary but it should be a servant, not a master. That place rightly belongs to the God who made us. In societies obsessed with the ups and downs of the money market, and dedicated either to collecting wealth or struggling to make ends meet, it is not surprising that thoughts of the true God may never enter the mind. As a friend sometimes says, 'No sooner do we make ends meet than somebody moves the ends!' Yet Jesus taught that by putting God first and trusting him, we will be able to put aside our worries for he knows exactly what we need.⁷ He can provide enough for us to share cheerfully (not grudgingly) with others whose needs are greater.⁸

The early days of most periods of training concentrate on getting through the workload and learning on the job. Later, many workers,

such as doctors, are driven to spend more time earning extra money, for example in private practice. In many cases, this is said to be for the survival or education of the family. For others it produces more wealth than is really needed. The goal can be to buy yet another status symbol such as a bigger house, a faster car or even the latest piece of equipment for personal or professional use. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking, 'Everybody who is somebody has one of these', when in reality *wants* are overriding *needs*.

In a recent broadcast, someone who had pioneered the introduction of communication technology now faced the fact that it had gone far beyond his intentions. He realised that what had started off as helpful tools now risk getting in the way of face to face communication. Concert goers are usually reminded to switch off their mobile phones before the performance but other gatherings can be disrupted by someone's repeated texting or phoning, regardless of company. Unless on call, or genuinely needing to exchange important news, could this say something about a change of priorities? The supposedly urgent can squeeze out the important. Some sensible families ban computers from the shared living space. This proves particularly important when parents and young people need an undistracted opportunity to listen to each other.

Members of staff in intensive care units have had to learn to respect relationships as well as the monitors. Intricate pieces of machinery threaten to separate patients from the voices or touch of their dear ones. Yet we now know that part of good 'intensive' care is to allow patients (and relatives) much closer contact. For anyone unconscious, hearing is the last sense to switch off, so familiar voices may still be comforting.

Making wise use of money

Those who live in a 'spend, spend, spend' culture often find themselves in debt. Shopaholics perhaps need as much help as alcoholics. Trained counsellors, or wise grandparents, may be ready to advise young people how to manage a limited income if they are willing to listen. After such advice one young couple reported happily, 'We've learned

that we don't have to buy everything we like the look of'. Perhaps we all need to stay alert to the difference between need and greed.

In contrast, many do give sacrificially. In the nineteenth century, a certain Dr Thomas Barnado gave up his intended medical career to found his famous children's homes. In our own times, doctors and others have dedicated much of their time, talents and bank balances to help those too poor or sick to help themselves. To be able to give more will mean taking an honest look at our personal expense accounts and spending less on ourselves. It is embarrassing that it is often poorer people who act with remarkable generosity.

Self-promotion or self-giving?

I recently read the confession of a hard working Christian doctor who had applied for a new and wonderful position with a salary to dream of. The interview had gone well and he was offered the job. The post would give him a more comfortable life as well as providing more wealth to share with the needy. Surely, this must be a good thing – and for some it might have been so. Each has to decide personally about such offers. Yet as this particular man was about to sign the agreement he developed a most uncomfortable feeling and prayerfully searched his heart. Was he simply chasing money? Would he still find time or inclination to keep a close relationship with God and to help others to know him? Was this a post that would satisfy his professional ambition but could damage his spiritual life? At the last minute he sent a different message to those waiting for his answer. He was withdrawing his application. He realised that he had been setting his heart on the wrong kind of wealth. Only by trusting and obeying God would he find lasting spiritual riches, much more precious than anything else. To share that with others would be to multiply, not reduce it. This whole episode had helped him to sort out his priorities though, of course, many others might have thought that he was a fool to turn down such an opportunity.

Despite the great benefits to be found in walking God's way, there is a possible cost to be counted. As with many other projects we may plan for, it is wise to take time to consider costs-versus-benefits before

making a clear commitment to following his ways.⁹ If riches increase, we are not to set our hearts on them. If instead poverty threatens, God is a loving heavenly Father who knows all about it and has promised to supply everything we need. Yet to do so he may rely on those who have more than they need to come to the aid of those with much less.¹⁰

Costly distractions

When Moses came down from the mountain he found not only idolatry. The people were eating and drinking before getting up 'to indulge in revelry' and have one big party. In the western world today, where obesity is already a big risk to health even among children, we are offered a stream of television programmes dealing with the variety, preparation and enjoyment of food. For entertainment many young (and older) people drink more alcohol than is wise, or go too far in other ways when enjoying themselves. To such distractions the prophet Amos added the early equivalent of a pop concert!¹¹ We are likely to recognise in our own lives what diverts attention from feeding our souls. It may be overdoing such good activities as studying or working hard, as well as others less worthy. Yet studies, work or serious sport will be more fruitful and fulfilling when we seek God's help in planning the use of our time.

Because of so many possible time-consuming activities, including the more serious ones, there is a risk of deeper thought becoming increasingly rare. Just as paying attention to committed personal relationships can be sadly neglected, so any idea of looking for a relationship with God can be pushed out altogether. Richer nations are not the only ones to be caught up in chasing wealth or entertainment and before spiritual appetite is quite lost we all need to take time out for some quiet thought about our priorities.

Wisdom needed

Among all the possibilities we have been thinking about, we need to remember that we are not intended to go around with long faces or become known as killjoys. For our enjoyment, God gives us what we need (not necessarily all that we would like). It is love of money, not

money itself, that lies at the root of so many of the world's evils and it is a matter for each of us to decide whether we are going for lasting gold or have a secret preference for short term glitter. God's gold really shines and sparkles, and so do those who treasure it.

This was the reputation of a man named Eric Liddell, a competitor in the Olympic Games of 1924, held in Paris. He is the hero of the film *Chariots of Fire* and was an unusual and humble athlete as he believed that running well was God's gift to him. He was given a gold medal for his world record in the 400-metre race and commented, 'When I run, I feel God's pleasure'. He rarely spoke of being a gold medallist but instead spent his life running a different kind of race as a missionary in China, his eyes fixed on Jesus.¹² He died in a concentration camp, known there as someone who was ever ready to help others in the dreadful conditions they experienced. His priority was to provide as much physical and spiritual support as he could to others and so became worth his weight in gold. Some of this century's athletes also praise God for his gifts to them, as do many other people who find strength in the joy of the Lord.¹³

Little did Moses think as he descended the mountain into the middle of all that unfaithfulness that just the same errors would cause trouble for centuries still to come, and would call for the same solution. He knew that the wrongdoing had to be recognised, repented of and dealt with. He also asked God to teach him more about his ways – a good prayer for each of us to echo.¹⁴

For further thought

- It is tempting to idolise money. If you had more how would you use it?
- When you give to a good cause is it gladly or reluctantly?
- What distractions interfere with your search for God?

Further resources

- Wilson J. *Complete surrender: A biography of Eric Liddell*. Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2012

References

1. Ecclesiastes 1:9
2. Exodus 32:1-35
3. Ephesians 5:3
4. Matthew 6:19- 21, 24
5. 1 Timothy 6:7-10
6. Philippians 4:15-19
7. Matthew 6:31-34
8. 2 Corinthians 9:7-11
9. Luke 14:27-33
10. 1 Timothy 6:17-18
11. Amos 6:3-6
12. Hebrews 12:1-2
13. Nehemiah 8:10
14. Exodus 33:13

