

A Theology of Money: The Apostle Paul's Advice on Long-Term Dividends

by Thomas Tewell

At 8:45 A.M. on Tuesday, September 11, John and Michael were having their daily phone conversation about derivatives and investments. Michael was speaking from the World Trade Center where he worked as a bond trader, and John was speaking from North Carolina, where he worked for First Union Bank. Suddenly, Michael exclaimed in a voice filled with panic, “John . . . there’s been an explosion . . . I’m surrounded by smoke and flames. Help me!” What can I do?” Michael’s reply was poignant and precise: “John . . . here’s my home phone number. Please call my wife Erin and tell her I love her.” Then the phone went dead. All John could hear was static. Michael died on Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001.

Stories like this one have filled all of our minds since that tragic day—but they are particularly commonplace in the financial area of New York City, which is home for many of the members and visitors to whom I preach on Sunday mornings at The Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. Unlike any other event in my lifetime, this tragedy has shaken the financial world to its core. People are instantly reprioritizing their lives and futures. There is an unparalleled opportunity for spiritual leaders to say something to our society about the “eternal dividends” that can come from a relationship with God as opposed to the “short-term dividends” that our earthly investments have to offer. People are looking to us for leadership and are hungry for words of hope. They are more interested in faith issues than at any other time in my life. We must be ready to speak!

A Trader’s Day

If the Apostle Paul worked for Goldman Sachs, I believe that he would shift the investment strategy from making money to making a difference in the wake the tragedy of September 11. He would shift the entire focus of the firm from “mammon” to God (see Matt. 6:24).

I learned the need for this shift in focus by conducting a full day of experiential research at Goldman Sachs a year or two ago when I saw first-hand the life of a Wall Street trader. Beginning at 7:00 A.M., when my Goldman Sachs friend and I boarded the subway, through every minute of a very busy day, we focused on one thing—money. I’ve never seen such intensity of focus in my entire life.

The friend who opened this door for me (and to whom I’ll refer as Will) was a long-time employee of Goldman Sachs—and a faithful member of our Fifth Avenue Presbyterian

congregation. He allowed me to “shadow” him throughout the day to observe the daily life of a trader.

At 8:00 A.M., Will and I had a meeting to learn what was happening in other cities and to consider how the stock market might respond. We gathered around a speaker in the middle of a table to listen as people spoke to us from Chicago and Dallas (where it was 7:00 A.M.), Phoenix (where it was 6:00 A.M.) and Los Angeles and San Francisco (where it was only 5:00 A.M.).

From just before 9:00 A.M. until just before 9:30 A.M. Will was on the telephone calling key clients to see what transactions they wanted that day. But from the moment the market opened at 9:30 A.M. until the closing bell at 4:00 P.M., he literally did not stop working. He ate lunch at his desk, and never put down the phone; he simply dropped it, not taking time to hang up before reaching for it again.

He talked with people on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, clients, and other traders, and the focus of every single telephone transaction was money. I was amazed to see, first-hand, that the timing of a transaction can make or lose hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars. People stand in line at the stock exchange “just in case” a stock reaches a certain price, and then buy or sell in an instant.

Transactions are made so quickly and with such intensity that I wondered how everyone could keep track of what had happened. Everyone ate, breathed, drank, spent, and made money. The mood was intense.

Investing in God

If the Apostle Paul were employed as a consultant by Goldman Sachs or another Wall Street firm, I have no doubt that he would warn them: “You’re making the wrong kind of investment! You’re so desperate to buy shares of stock in a company that has an uncertain future. Why not make an investment that has lasting significance? Why not make an investment in eternity? Why not make an investment in God?”

I have biblical evidence that this is what the Apostle Paul would say to Wall Street firms:

The point in this: he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work. As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures for ever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God (2 Cor. 9:6-11).

Paul was deeply concerned with the values of the people who lived in Corinth—a center of trade and commerce in his day. He was saddened that people exploited one another for

economic gain and that they were preoccupied with materialism. He observed rampant prostitution and gross immorality in a place where men and women were exploited and not treated with dignity.

I am certain that the Apostle Paul would have been incensed at the twenty-first century advertisers who try to seduce us into thinking that happiness and fulfillment can be bought. Paul reminded the people in Corinth and in other cities where he planted churches that material possessions cannot ultimately fulfill them. Only God can fill the emptiness inside.

Theology of Money

As I reflect on what the Apostle Paul might say to Goldman Sachs and other Wall Street firms, I think of several key spiritual points that form what I believe to be the Apostle Paul's "theology of money." This is what Paul would say to investment firms in light of the horrific tragedy at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and in Pennsylvania.

God owns everything. The Apostle Paul taught the people of Corinth, "You are not your own . . . you were bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The psalmist echoed these words: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps. 24:1). We belong to God. Although we are seduced by our culture to believe that things belong to us, we are only stewards or trustees of jobs, homes, automobiles, children, families, bodies, and material possessions for a brief time. The truth is that everything we think we own is really owned by God.

Remember that Jesus Christ restructured our long-term debt portfolio. In investment companies, key executives are paid enormous bonuses to figure out how to restructure debt. Investment firms make money by restructuring the debt of other companies that they buy and sell. In a spiritual sense, Jesus Christ restructured our long-term debt portfolio by paying the debt for our sin with his own blood on the cross. He offers us forgiveness and eternal life as free, unmerited gifts of grace.

The only motivation for giving is gratitude. We do not give in order to earn God's love or in order to deserve God's love. We do not give because God needs the money or because the church or other worthy organizations need it. We give simply in response to God's gift to us in Jesus Christ. There is no other motivation for giving.

The purpose of giving is spiritual growth. Although the motivation to give is gratitude, the purpose of giving is our own spiritual growth. God wants to teach us the spiritual lesson of trust, which is a difficult lesson to learn. In the Old Testament, God taught people to trust by urging them to give "the first fruits" as an offering of praise and thanksgiving. He taught them to "tithes off the top," not wait until the entire harvest was gathered.

As I slowly learn these spiritual principles, the words that I heard years ago from Sir Winston Churchill have started to make sense, "You make a living by what you get . . . but you make a life by what you give."

My day on Wall Street finished at nine o'clock in the evening, as Will and I got off the subway after dinner with a client. But on Wall Street, the focus on money resumed at 7:00 A.M. the next day.

As I left Will that evening, I realized how desperately Goldman Sachs and I need to hear the life-transforming words of Jesus Christ—as spoken through one of God's finest investment consultants, the Apostle Paul. “Those who sow sparingly will reap sparingly, but those who sow bountifully will reap bountifully!”

In light of the tragedies of September 11, my friend John in North Carolina and financial executives in New York are now ready to hear and to heed God's words. And God must wonder why it took such a tragedy for us to pay attention.

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