

ALL ABOUT EARNING

COLOSSIANS 3:23-24

We go to school to get equipped to earn **it**. Then we spend a significant part of the rest of our lives – 40-60 hours a week earning **it**. We invest many additional hours in thought and discussion on how we're going to handle **it**. We walk around shopping malls thinking of ways to spend **it**. We often worry that we just won't have enough of **it**. The number one reason marriages fail is because of arguments over **it**. Business partners end their relationship because of **it**. Democrats and Republicans fight all the time over **it**. Despair over losing **it** provokes people to commit suicide. Many of society's crimes can be traced to an obsession with getting **it**. Some consider **it** - or the love of **it** – to be the root of everything evil. Still others live as if **it** is the greatest good life can offer. In the end, none of us can afford to be ignorant of the power of **it**. Anyone want to hazard a guess as to the identity of **it**? Money!

It amazes me how much is in the Bible about money. It speaks to the subject head on. I suggest to you that the Bible is the single best guidebook on money management ever written. Did you know that the Bible refers to money or its use some 2,000 times? Did you know that approximately two-thirds of Jesus' parables make some kind of reference to money? Now, I want to say right up front that this series of messages is not original with me, but I believe what I'm going to speak to you about with all of my heart over the next four weeks. Usually, once a year I devote a series of messages to some aspect of money and financial issues. Why? In my years as a pastor, I've learned that many people – devoted Jesus followers, non-believers, saints and atheists alike – struggle mightily in this area. In fact, there's such a thing as financial bondage or slavery. That might describe you this morning. You just feel like you've got these chains around you because of excessive debt. Or, you're frustrated over never being able to make ends meet. Or, you've become convinced that you'll just never get ahead financially. Perhaps our nation's – indeed our world's – current economic problems have made you increasingly pessimistic.

You may be longing for financial freedom today. Your goal isn't to be super rich. You'd simply like to not have money be this constant source of anxiety and frustration for you. Here's something I know beyond a shadow of a doubt! God wants every single one of us here to be liberated in the money areas of our lives so we can be about those things that are far more important than money – like knowing God better, like other people, like your spouse and kids, like reaching lost people, like helping our church be more effective for Jesus. By addressing money issues in His Word, God says, "I'll help you become financially free if you learn My principles and then obey them."

There's another reason I speak about money issues. A lot of shame is associated with it. Again, as a pastor, I'm aware that two kinds of failure bring out a lot of shame in people: the failure of some kind of sexual sin and the failure of mismanaging one's money. Why are people ashamed when it comes to

money? Because they know that money mismanagement is their own fault. They made poor choices. They acted irresponsibly. Their foolishness caught up with them. So let me say at the very beginning of this message series, "If you've ever made a mistake with money, welcome to the club!" I doubt there's an adult in this room that hasn't made at least one poor financial decision in his or her life. I've made my share! So have you! We're all trying to find our way here. Sure, some are experiencing greater financial freedom than others this morning, but let's just admit that none of us are perfect. Let's realize together that God wants us to experience freedom in this area of our lives. Let's humbly thank Him for lessons learned. Let's sincerely ask Him for greater wisdom in the future.

One way to begin thinking about financial freedom is to think about earning money. If there's any real hope of being financially free, it starts with your need to work and earn some money. But it also hinges on avoiding two very powerful extremes when it comes to earning. Let's call the first one:

AVOIDING THE PILLOW PERVERSION

Here's a Bible verse that explains this phenomenon. "As a door swings back and forth on its hinges, so the lazy person turns over in bed." (Proverbs 26:14 NLT) The Bible's describing the proverbial "couch potato" in that verse. This is the "pillow" person – slothful and lazy. This is the person who says by his or her actions, "I refuse to take work seriously. I'm not going to take responsibility for earning money. Instead, I'm going to have an entitlement mentality. The world owes me. My parents owe me. The government owes me. I'm going to enjoy this easy chair and all these pillows and expect money to flow my way." That's the pillow perversion.

God doesn't see it that way. You need to get off the couch and off the pillows. You've got to get into action, find a job and work! You need to earn some money. Again, the Bible says, "But those who won't care for their relatives, especially those in their own household, have denied the true faith. Such people are worse than unbelievers." (1 Timothy 5:8 NLT) Even so-called Christians can have an entitlement mentality. They think the government ought to provide for their needs, or other family members, or even the local church. Now, I'm not talking about people who run into an emergency situation and need a helping hand. That's why we have a benevolence fund in our church – to help folk out with financial emergencies. Life happens to all of us! Certainly, we're called to minister to others in financial ways. No, the kind of person I'm referring to is the man or woman who will not work or someone who mismanages money so habitually that he or she always needs to be rescued by others.

Here's a simple truth: the pillow perversion leads to human destruction. The Bible says, "The fool sits back and takes it easy, his sloth is slow suicide." (Ecclesiastes 4:5 MSG) When you study the Bible on this issue, you see a direct connection between laziness and self-disintegration. When you refuse to earn

money, you begin to lose self-respect. God created work for a good end originally. Work itself is not a result of human sin. Being frustrated in your work may indeed be a result of our being sinful creatures, but not work itself. No, God created purposeful activity – work – in order to stimulate and challenge the remarkable talents and abilities He’s put into your life: stuff like intelligence, decision-making abilities, creativity and problem-solving skills.

When you do things that call out those characteristics in you, you get bigger as a person. Your competency grows. Your character deepens. But a pillow person allows his or her talents, creativity and competence to decay. That inevitably leads to a loss in dignity. That then leads to an unnecessary dependence on others. The Bible teaches that work is one way to bring glory to God. Work helps you stay alive by earning money. Work develops your abilities. Work provides the joy of accomplishment. Work enables you to provide for yourself, your loved ones and help the Lord do His work in this world.

Let me clarify something right here. It’s a mistake to always equate work with earning money. Some of you moms have made a conscious choice to leave the workplace because you want to be the primary caregiver for your children or you simply want to provide a stable, enriched home experience for your family. More power to you! That’s not a lazy decision. That’s usually a God-honoring decision that often entails the sacrifice of things money could buy for intangibles like stability, emotional and spiritual investment in your kids and just a more relaxed home environment. Stay at home moms are some of the hardest working folk I know! You’re probably also doing some very important volunteer work in the community or in our church. By the same token, we have a number of retirees in our church family, and I don’t want you to start feeling guilty about enjoying your retirement years. You should be able to enjoy the fruit of your long years of labor! And your volunteer efforts in the community or here at our church help keep us going as well. Obviously, we all know the difference between stay at home moms, retirees and people suffering from a pillow perversion!

How can you avoid the pillow perversion? The Bible describes the essential attitude and approach you need to have in this area of your life. I love how the Message translation renders this passage: “... And don't just do the minimum that will get you by. Do your best. Work from the heart for your real Master, for God, confident that you'll get paid in full when you come into your inheritance. Keep in mind always that the ultimate Master you're serving is Christ.” (Colossians 3:22-24 MSG)

Every time I read those verses, it causes me to ask myself three very important questions. First, am I working? Are you taking seriously God’s command to get into action, identify your skills and interests, find a place where you can be useful, and, then, get after it! Some things God wants to develop in you can only be developed by work. So get to work. Or make great work of getting to work so you can enjoy the benefits of work as soon as possible. There’s a story about a

farmer who made his sons work long hours out in the corn fields while their buddies spent almost every afternoon swimming, having fun and doing whatever they wanted to do. Someone chided this father saying, "Why do you make your boys work so hard? You don't need all that corn!" That wise father answered, "Sir, I'm not raising corn. I'm raising boys."

Ah, but here's a second question: am I working heartily? That goes to the matter of attitude, doesn't it? Do you do your work with passion? Are you giving it your best? Do you go in each morning with a great attitude? If your employer was asked to rate his or her hardest working employees, would you make the list? It may not be the best job. You may not want to stay in that job forever. But while you're there, are you doing your work with heart? When you don't, it actually reflects poorly on God Himself. People look at you and conclude, "He's (or she's) just plain lazy. What difference does it make to be a follower of Jesus?" When you do work heartily, it reflects positively on the Lord. People look at you and conclude, "I like what I see. He's (or she's) got passion. There's something enormously attractive about a person who works heartily.

Don't miss the third question suggested by our verse: am I working heartily as if Jesus is my Boss? What does that mean? It means you work with intensity, integrity and joy. It means you're a joy to work with because of your co-operative, positive, "can do" attitude. Ultimately, it means Jesus is your real Boss at your place of work. If Jesus was your actual supervisor, would you come to work late or leave early? Would you give a half-hearted effort? If Jesus was your Boss, would you try to undermine Him? You'll benefit as well when you work heartily as if Jesus is your Boss. How so? You'll gain satisfaction and an appropriate sense of self-worth. Your gifts and talents will develop. You'll inspire others. You'll model something of vital importance to your kids. It might even have a strong evangelistic impact on lost people who see how you work.

Linda Clare works long hours as a childcare provider. She's often tempted to complain about her job. Sometimes she feels like "just a babysitter." Then one day, a father who came to pick up his toddler said to her, "You taught Kasey to pray. She says grace at home now, and my wife and I are thinking of attending church." Now, when people ask Linda what she does for a living, she smiles and says, "I just babysit for the Lord." What a great perspective! When you work like that, my friend, you add value to any place where you work. And earning tends to flow towards those who work heartily as if Jesus is their Boss. Let's avoid the pillow perversion. But, as human beings, we tend to go from one extreme to the other. So, let's be just as careful to:

AVOID THE EARNING ADDICTION

Do you see the hypodermic needle up there? That represents the person who gets addicted to work and earning money. You can get so caught up in work or earning money that it becomes an emotional drug. You begin to need it like a

person needs drugs or alcohol. Without it, you just don't function well at all. How does someone get addicted to earning money? Very subtly. Here's a man who started out working diligently – which is a good thing. Here's a woman who wanted to stretch her abilities and received rewards for doing so – which is completely appropriate. He began to feel the joy of accomplishment. She began to feel gratified by the ability to support herself. But somewhere along the way something which began in a healthy way became something very unhealthy. In fact, it became spiritually and emotionally deadly.

You can become an earning addict when you crave power and influence. Dignity is one thing. But the earning addict wants to move beyond dignity and feel like a deity. After all, in our culture, when a person earns a lot of money and achieves a high position, he or she can be treated like a little god. You can buy what you want, go where you want and avoid what you want. You don't have to be dependent on anyone for anything. You love that sense of control. You no longer have to delay gratification. That kind of power can be intoxicating.

You can become an earning addict when you crave acclaim. Again, those who earn lots of money in our culture are often held in high esteem. Even if they lack integrity or intelligence, they get applauded simply for being rich. They're celebrities. All too many people grew up in homes where they weren't loved much or loved well. When you put these kind of folk into a job, sometimes the natural rewards that follow honest effort feels so good to them, they get hooked on the next award, the next honor and the next pay scale raise. Soon that person isn't just a hearty worker, but a hooked worker. He or she is addicted to work.

Addiction is not too strong a word. If you tell an earning addict that his work addiction is destroying his relationship to his wife, he'll just give you a sad look and a shrug. But when Monday morning comes, he gets out the syringe and gets another earning fix. If you tell an earning addict that her work addiction is alienating her kids from her, she'll look away, shrug and just hope that the school, or the church or some counselor can hold those kids together. Monday morning comes and another powerful jolt of earning keeps her going. If you tell an earning addict that the pace of his life is going to destroy his health, he'll have a heart attack before he makes any changes. In goes the needle! If you tell Christian earning addicts that they're shortchanging God and themselves by cutting out time spent in worship, never entering into community with other believers and never discovering and using their spiritual gifts, they smile sweetly, shrug and say, "Someday, I'll get around to that." In goes the needle. The deception and power of this earning addiction is so great that Jesus Himself once said, "What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?" (Matthew 16:26 MSG). Earning addicts say, by their slavery to work and earning money, in effect: "Yes. In the end, pursuing money or pursuing the emotional fix I get through work is more important than where I spend eternity."

I'm not suggesting you quit your job or go on unemployment. That's the pillow perversion. I'm not suggesting you head for Alaska, build a cabin and subsist on roots and berries. I'm suggesting something a little harder. Change. Idle back. Get your life in balance. Develop a walk with God and enjoy it. Invest time and energy in your marriage. Invest time and energy into those precious children. Find a ministry and give yourself to it. Yes, you might earn less because you work less hours. You might not make it to the top. There may well be a price to pay for not being an earning addict. But, then, what do you want in the end? You'll never achieve true financial freedom if you're enslaved to working patterns that are destructive to your life and relationships. You can be rich and still be a slave. You can have a very average income and be free. A pillow perversion. An earning addiction. Those are extremes and as human beings we tend naturally towards extremes. The place of balance is working heartily as if Jesus is your Boss. Where are you on that continuum? In 2009, what direction do you need to move?

There are inspiring examples out there of people who seem to achieve that delicate balance and get it right. I think of Truett Cathy today. He's a very successful, wealthy businessman in his late 80s now. Back in 1967, Cathy took a tiny Atlanta diner and transformed it into the first Chick-fil-A restaurant. Since then Chick-fil-A has become the second largest quick-service chicken restaurant chain with more than \$2.5 billion in sales in 2007 at nearly 1400 locations around the country. Cathy is a committed follower of Jesus who has built his business on biblical principles. For instance, all of his Chick-fil-A restaurants observe a closed on Sunday policy without exception in order to honor the Lord's Day. When he's not managing his company, Cathy donates his time to community efforts and still teaches a Sunday School class for 13 year old boys – something he's done for over 50 years. Cathy has also developed a successful foster home system called WinShape Homes. There are now eleven homes in the United States and one in Brazil that provide long term care for foster children in a positive environment. His WinShape Foundation provides 20-30 annual scholarships for kids to go to college. His WinShape Camps give some 1900 young people annually the opportunity to be impacted by a two week experience designed to help them grow in Christian character. One of his quotes is a fitting way to end our message today. "I'd like to be remembered as one who kept my priorities in the right order. We live in a changing world, but we need to be reminded that the important things have not changed, and the important things will not change if we keep our priorities in proper order."

If you and I are to achieve financial freedom this or any year it will mean avoiding both the pillow perversion and the earning addiction. It will mean discovering what it means to work heartily as if Jesus is our Boss.