

"He who dies with the most toys wins." That phrase was coined by a guy you've never heard of named Malcolm Forbes. His father founded Forbes magazine, which publishes a yearly list of the world's richest people. And in 1989, when Malcolm turned 70 years old, he threw a \$2.5 million birthday party. He flew in celebrities and politicians from all over the world and was as lavish as you could possibly imagine.

He died six months later, and he may in fact have had the most toys - he had an enormous collection of yatches, cars, motorcycles and - weirdly - Fabergé eggs. But Forbes died alone, and a generation later, nearly no one has ever heard of him. Even the magazine that bears his name is really his father's.

When we hear a story like Malcolm Forbes', we know instinctively that he didn't win anything, that a life dedicated to materialism is doomed to isolation and loneliness. But we can't help getting caught up in the same rat race. We'll never throw \$2.5 mil birthday parties, but we live with a general sense of dissatisfaction about what we have. If our house were just a little bigger, our car a little nicer (or newer, or more classic), our wardrobes a little bigger or more fashionable, our paychecks a little fatter, then we'd be there. Most of us don't feel like we have enough - and it's not just a feeling.

In a survey report from the Federal Reserve Board, nearly 1 in 2 Americans said they don't have \$400 to cover an emergency. They would have to borrow, sell, or not have it. \$400. 1 in 2 Americans. Worse, the average American household carries more than \$15,000 in credit card debt and nearly \$50,000 in student loans.

No wonder we look around and wish we had more. Many of us feel sharp anxiety about even what we do have - that it's not enough.

I'm a pastor, so I don't have any get rich quick schemes for you this morning. But I want to show you this morning how we can learn to see our material possessions differently. Learning to see our stuff from God's perspective transforms how we live in the world. The anxiety we feel toward money and possessions doesn't have to define us. We don't have to go to bed worried about money and wake up wondering how we're going to make ends meet.

Instead, we'll see today that God invests in us so we can invest in the world around us.

We're in a series called [w]hole. We're asking what a whole, healthy human life looks like. To find the answer, we're beginning with Jesus' response to a question he was asked:

One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

This was a common question rabbis of Jesus' day debated. The root of the question is getting at what it means to be fully human - which of God's laws is the summation? Which most perfectly encapsulates what it means to be a people of God?

Jesus replied, "The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these." -- Mark 12:28-31

Jesus' answer frames our series: in one sense, it's a twin command - Love God and love others. But Jesus' command is also four-fold. We are to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength. During this series, we're using these four aspects of our humanity as a lens to examine our own lives.

Sin doesn't emerge fully grown. You don't burnout in one day. You don't show up at work and need to embezzle money. You don't decide to cheat out of nowhere, or become a chronic liar or a road rager in an instant.

Sin begins as small seeds within us. And God offers us these lenses - heart, soul, mind and strength - as opportunities to examine ourselves carefully, to seek out the seeds of sin and pluck them out of our lives before they can take root and grow into something ugly and painful.

First, we learned that loving God with all our hearts means with every desire we have - both the spiritual and the fleshy. We saw that to love God with all our soul or self means we have to maintain healthy, strong boundaries that distinguish mySelf from yours. Last week, we saw that to love God with all our minds means to have God's perspective on the world. Today, we talk about loving God with all our "strength".

We think of strength as the physical aspect of ourselves, but we limit it to our bodies. But that's not what Jesus meant. When he said, "Love the Lord your God with all your strength," he was quoting the Shema from Deuteronomy 6. It's a prayer Jewish people offer every day. The Hebrew word Deuteronomy uses is better translated as means or ability. The rabbis understood this part of the Shema to be a command to love God with everything we own or possess. All our material stuff.

[Slide 3 **How do we illustrate "influence"?**] It can be difficult to imagine what it means to love God with our possessions. Possessions easily devolves into a money sermon. Churches want to get out spreadsheets and track income and all that. And while money is a part of our means, it's not the whole. Much as we have done throughout this series, I'd like to challenge us to think bigger. Not about money, not just about possessions, but about influence.

Influence is a little harder to measure these days than in Jesus' day. In Jesus' day, the person in the village with the most livestock had the most influence. The person who was the oldest had the most sway. But we *do* have influence today. You might have wealth or property that lends

you influence. You might also have position - maybe you run a business, manage people, or have children. We have influence in our group of friends, among people who look up to us.

[Scripture Slide 1] What does it mean to love God with our whole influence? If you have a Bible, turn with me to Matthew 25. This is a parable Jesus told about the End of Days. It's one in a series of three. This parable is often used specifically to talk about money (and you'll see why in a moment). The parable before it is about a wedding, and the parable following is about sheep and goats. Like all parables, none of them are about what they're about. So we don't read this parable to think about money specifically. Rather, we want to know how we are to live while we're waiting for God to come back. And this parable helps us think about our means, our power and influence, and yes, our money.

The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. He called together his servants and entrusted his money to them while he was gone. He gave five bags of silver\* to one, two bags of silver to another, and one bag of silver to the last—dividing it in proportion to their abilities. He then left on his trip.

“The servant who received the five bags of silver began to invest the money and earned five more. The servant with two bags of silver also went to work and earned two more. But the servant who received the one bag of silver dug a hole in the ground and hid the master's money.

First, it's worth noting that each of the slaves is given a different amount of silver. That reflects what we know about ourselves and our means. We all have a different amount of power and influence. Some of us have a lot. We lead companies or organizations. Or we have a lot of money. And some of us have very little. Maybe we are scraping by financially or we have only a small circle of people we influence. We might be tempted like that last slave to throw our hands up and

“After a long time their master returned from his trip and called them to give an account of how they had used his money. The servant to whom he had entrusted the five bags of silver came forward with five more and said, ‘Master, you gave me five bags of silver to invest, and I have earned five more.’

“The master was full of praise. ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!\*

“The servant who had received the two bags of silver came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two bags of silver to invest, and I have earned two more.’

“The master said, ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!’

“Then the servant with the one bag of silver came and said, ‘Master, I knew you were a harsh man, harvesting crops you didn’t plant and gathering crops you didn’t cultivate. I was afraid I would lose your money, so I hid it in the earth. Look, here is your money back.’

“But the master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy servant! If you knew I harvested crops I didn’t plant and gathered crops I didn’t cultivate, why didn’t you deposit my money in the bank? At least I could have gotten some interest on it.’

“Then he ordered, ‘Take the money from this servant, and give it to the one with the ten bags of silver. To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who do nothing, even what little they have will be taken away. Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ -- Matthew 25:14-30

The slaves are rewarded not on how much they make, but for the fact that they choose to invest what they have been given. The slave who is punished is the one who hoarded his gifts. The master expected the slaves to use what he gave them while he was away, not hoard it for themselves.

If we're not careful, this can sound like Health and Wealth preaching - God wants to make you rich, so give and God will give you more! Remember: this parable is not about money. It's about how we live as God's people while we wait for God's return. The issue here is not how much we have, but what we do with whatever we have. Are we hiding what God has given us, or are we investing it in the world around us?

To say God is love is to say that God is most essentially a giver. And that we, who are made in God's image, are essentially givers. We are most fully ourselves when we receive from God and turn to share with the world around us. To store up treasure in Heaven, to seek God's kingdom, to follow the way of Jesus is to live in God's will. To see with God's perspective. And that means with our stuff, that we understand our money, means and influence for what they are: gifts from God that enable us to live like God.

Missing this understanding of God and our means is what keeps us from giving - that's what sabotaged that last slave. He was convinced his master was cruel and unreasonable, so he acted out of fear.

We know because of Jesus that God is not cruel and unreasonable, but an unrelenting giver. We don't have to be afraid. We don't have to live in fear. We can give because God has given to us. We can invest in the world because God has invested in us.

Milan → No one is too poor to give.

Often, we'll see that we don't consider what we have as gifts God gives us so that we can be generous. Instead, we see our money and possessions as things we've earned, that we're entitled to.

GIVING as spiritual practice.

But when we see that God gives to all of us so that we can share with each other, there is no limit to what we might accomplish. No one is too poor to give. Everyone has a role to play in our world. So how will you give? What has God given you that you can share with others?

In a world where we never feel as though we have enough, this is a powerful truth: God has given you means. Influence. Power. A lot or a little. The question is not, "How much do I have?" but "How will I use what I have been given?"

How will you love God with all your strength this week? How will you speak for justice? How will you work for peace? Will you be kind and generous? Will you be loving and patient? Will you be faithful and self-controlled?

### **Communion + Examen**

[Communion Slide] We approach the table...

1. When in the last week did I invest what God has invested in me?
2. When in the last week did I hoard what I have been given?
3. How might I be tempted to hoard what I have been given this week?
4. How can I invest what God has given me this week?