WEALTH

Having reached the end of my ‘working life’ and become technically ‘retired’ and drawing the pension it seems like a good time to look back over the past 50 years and reflect on what I may have learned about wealth. I dare to claim that I may have something useful to say on this topic because I find myself in a situation of abundance despite having never made the accumulation of wealth a priority. At this point I would like to honour the parents of both myself and my wife. They modelled, to varying degrees, careful and wise use of finances and, due to their diligence, provided a legacy for each of us which we have sought to use in the wisest way possible. I have spent 11 of my earlier years studying in tertiary institutions accumulating three degrees and a teaching diploma. I spent a further six years in volunteer overseas mission work. I have spent a total of three years in depression. For only the first four years I spent overseas did I have donated money. The rest of our lives we have lived off what we worked for. It would be fair to say that my approach to money has taken a quite different course than most people due to the convictions I have developed.

As a boy growing up, I watched my parents stressing out over dwindling returns from the farm. Each year the farm advisor would come out and recommend more debt. I wondered if there was a better way to spend adult life than relentless toil. It was a common narrative during those years to hear people talked about in terms of ‘how much they were worth’ referring to how much wealth they owned. I had a niggling doubt that a person’s true worth is not measured in dollars.

I went from school to university in search of answers and used to ask the engineering students why they chose that path. They all answered that there was good money in engineering. I wondered, ‘Isn’t there more to life than making money?’ I switched from science to the social sciences in search of answers. Many of the lecturers were peddling Marxism as the solution to fairer distribution systems of wealth. In those days I lived with Christians who studied the Bible and was confronted with the reality of the corrupted nature of the heart of all humans. If this was true then Marxism or its various forms (socialism and communism) couldn’t work because those at the top of their hierarchies would exploit and control those below. Sure enough, the 20th century produced Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot and others who sacrificed tens of millions of fellow citizens’ lives on the altars of their ideology. This would have to be sheer evil. I rejected Marxist ideology.

On graduating I took a job in a small government corporate regulating a Primary Industry. My bosses there, from my observation, were using the system for their own ends. They offered me a promotion up the next rung of their corporate ladder. There had to be more to aim for than being a self-serving bureaucrat. I decided I was on the wrong side of the fence so I left to pursue farming. I went to Lincoln College to study agricultural commerce. This was the best of my courses with first class teachers who were well grounded in practical application.

In the middle of my time at Lincoln I had a major crisis culminating in having a personal encounter with God. I found Christ as my personal saviour and became born again. This was a cross-roads event that sent me on a very different pathway which included my relationship with money.

The key ingredient of my Ag Commerce course had been the application of good management of agriculture and capital with the goal of financial profit and the accumulation of wealth. After graduating I took work on various farms for experience, and subsequently went into contract fencing and later purchased some Friesian dairy cows to start my own herd. Dairy farming provided steps into farming through the progression of contract milking and share milking. Once I got out onto farms and living in farm workers’ quarters, I began the practice of studying the Bible for an hour a day to build up my new found faith. I found the Bible had quite a lot to say about wealth. From the Old Testament I read:

* God is the source of wealth. He made the world and everything in it and He gives it to whoever He pleases.[[1]](#footnote-1) God distributes wealth.
* Wisdom for good farming practice comes from God.[[2]](#footnote-2)
* Good yields come from the blessing of God;[[3]](#footnote-3)
* Listening to God pays better than wages.[[4]](#footnote-4)

If these were true, I would have to re-evaluate what I learned at Lincoln College. They taught sound farming practice but made no acknowledgement that this wisdom came from God. Not only the wisdom but also every cycle – water cycle, nitrogen cycle, carbon cycle, energy flow, the minerals in the soil, every facet of agriculture, all the weather systems, geology, chemistry, physics and biology came from God and was designed by Him and given to sustain human life.[[5]](#footnote-5)

It seemed peculiar that the academic world insists on citing the sources of research, and the commercial world honours intellectual property, patents, and copyrights, yet no acknowledgement is made of the creator and sustainer of all the natural systems. Furthermore, no acknowledgement was given to the One who gives farmers the wisdom to farm.

I also learned that:

* God sent our first parents out of the garden of Eden to work the ground to get the food they needed.[[6]](#footnote-6)
* Diligence and hard work are expected.[[7]](#footnote-7)
* Slackness leads to poverty.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Although, by this stage I had two degrees, I did a two-day fencing course back at Lincoln College and set myself up as a fencing contractor on the mid-Canterbury stony soils. I remember the end of one day looking down a fence line I had just made and thinking this is way more satisfying than the corporate world I had turned my back on.

Continuing in the practice of daily Bible study I found Jesus also had a lot to say about wealth:

* Don’t store it up for yourself but store up treasure for yourself in heaven.[[9]](#footnote-9)
* Don’t be a slave to money. You cannot serve both God and money.[[10]](#footnote-10)
* Don’t stress about money but seek first God’s Kingdom.[[11]](#footnote-11)
* Guard yourself against greed because a person’s true life is not made up of the things he owns no matter how rich he may be.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The rest of the New Testament had warnings about wealth:

* If you desire to get rich you will get caught in a snare: ‘The love of money is the root of all kind of evil’.[[13]](#footnote-13)
* Those who belong to Jesus Christ have put to death their human nature with all its passions and desires.[[14]](#footnote-14)
* Keep your lives free from the love of money and be satisfied with what you have, for God has said, ‘I will never leave you, I will never forsake you.’[[15]](#footnote-15)

With these guidelines in mind I decided to:

1. Limit my contracting work to 8 hours per day so that I had time and energy to study scripture.
2. Limit my capital to the bare minimum. I had a motorbike for road and farm. It towed a trailer with an old oven for my tools and four ‘spinning jennies’. I had a heavy-duty post driver but no tractor because farmers have them along with their farm workers.
3. Put all my profits into a farm ownership account to save paying tax.
4. Put 15 percent of earnings into an account for giving away.
5. Make no claim to the assets of my father’s farm.
6. Help my brother with harvest in summers.

After several years of this God seemed to be indicating that He did not want me to pursue farming any more but that I should prepare myself to go to foreign missions. It was the late 1980’s and New Zealand was in financial turmoil. Interest rates and inflation were very high, and subsidies and incentive schemes were being scrapped. Aspiring young farmers who had followed the ‘wisdom’ of Lincoln College were suddenly faced with market interest rates and the equity they thought they had accumulated suddenly evaporated.

But all these events worked in my favour. The Government scrapped the Farm Ownership Account scheme so I could withdraw all my savings and do what I wished with the funds; tax free. My cows fetched a good price because sheep farms were beginning to be converted to dairy farms in Canterbury. I used the money to go to Teachers College and Bible College and then joined a mission to India.

Through these ten years my attitude to wealth had taken a radical change. Two lessons stand out:

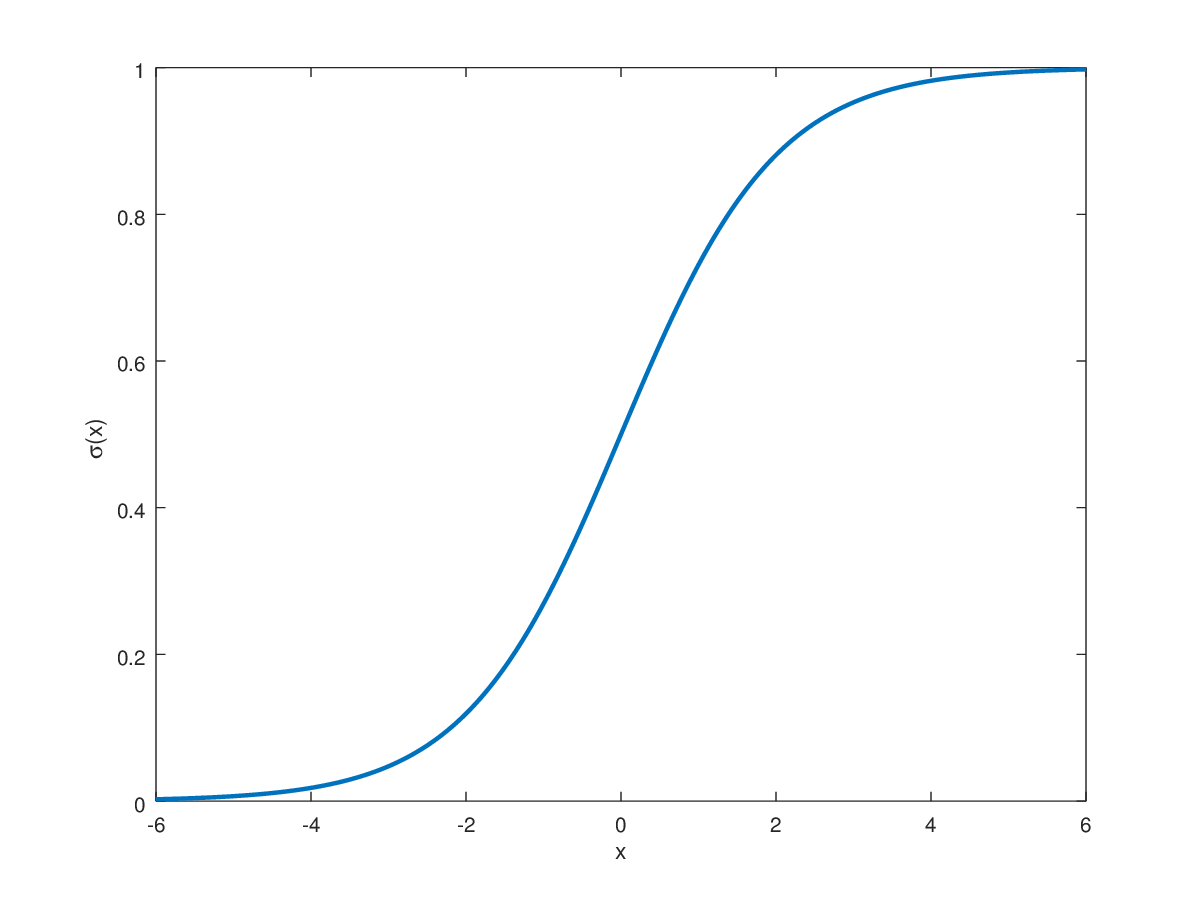
1. God my heavenly Father is completely trustworthy and reliable to provide the needs of his children. Though He expects us to work hard[[16]](#footnote-16) yet obedience to Him is most important whether it seems profitable or not.
2. The love of money must go. This is only achieved at the cross of Christ.[[17]](#footnote-17) When this deep- rooted desire is put to death we can live in true freedom with respect to money and we can be entrusted with more or less of it as He sees fit.[[18]](#footnote-18)

At age 36 when proverbial wisdom would have me building my career, my family and my capital, I went instead to India on the promise of a handful of donors and little or no assets to my name. There I found that, as donors dropped off, the exchange rate went up and I had all I needed. A year and a half of battling heat, foreign language and foreign culture as a single man showed up my glaring need of a life partner. My only criteria really was that she should be someone as crazy as I was. Wendy was also there as a team member. She was God’s provision and so we got married. What I didn’t realise and didn’t factor in was that she came with gifts and abilities in business acumen which complemented me. She was an excellent manager of money.

We left Kolkata on my 40th birthday fully expecting to return within a year but it was not to be. We moved to Ashburton and went to work, me on farms and Wendy in an office. Wendy owned a house in Auckland and had saved most of the rent which we used for a deposit on a house in Ashburton.

At the time we returned to New Zealand there was a sudden spike in the price of radiata pine. Dad had planted 50 acres of pine trees for his four kids 25 years before and the first of them were ready for milling. The reason for the price spike was a reaction by Asian markets to the election of Bill Clinton who had a green policy, creating fears of reduced supply of timber. I could see the sovereign hand of God orchestrating world events – not just for me of course; but His sovereign plans all work together in ways beyond our understanding.

While in Ashburton I attended a seminar by a financial planner. The talk began by a tongue-in-cheek piece of advice on how to make money on the stock market. He drew a sigmoid curve and explained that you buy shares when they are cheap at the bottom of the curve and sell them when they become expensive. This was obviously a light-hearted introduction which would require a ‘crystal ball’ to see into the future.

$time

Buy sell

As I look back over our financial life this graph explains many of our financial decisions. God’s invisible hand has guided our various decisions. God does know the future and He is pleased to give His wisdom to those whose trust is in Him.

Two years later we moved to Auckland so I could attend Bible College to learn about Biblical Narrative and get some tools for writing stories. Soon after this Wendy’s family were ready to sell the land where they had grown up. This provided capital for another house in Auckland. It was very rough but we could see its potential so we spent a year renovating it as we lived in it. We later rented it to an Iraqi immigrant family and eventually sold it to them.

Later we moved to New Lynn because I took a job in Mt Albert teaching science. At that time New Lynn was a quiet ‘backwater’ suburb with low house prices. We had looked at a few places and I liked one which had an old cottage on a quarter acre section. We were busy painting at another property when I remembered the auction for that house was soon to start. Wendy went, arriving late and the auction was in progress. They were struggling to get bids which were going up at slow increments. Wendy suddenly put in a bid of the price we had agreed on, blew the other bidders away, and bought the house.

We lived there for 10 years. During that time Auckland re-structured itself into a ‘super-city’ with various ‘regional centres’. One of these became New Lynn. It had a Mall, beside which they developed a ‘transport hub’ with underground rail. Real estate prices went up and we were able to sell our three-bedroom house and buy six bedrooms in nearby Glen Eden along with some change.

This was another example of God seeing into the future on our behalf without our having to give a great deal of concern, and certainly no stress, to our financial world. This pattern was the same for several other houses. We bought them relatively cheaply but in need of much work. We renovated them and rented them out committing ourselves to give good service to our tenants both in terms of rent and responding to their needs in the houses. When market movements increased their value and tenants gave notice, we then sold them, at much higher prices than we had bought them.

A principle we applied to this business was well stated in marketing class at Lincoln. In my own words: ‘define your business in terms of meeting the wants and needs of your customers better than your competitors. Profits follow naturally.’ This approach is really an application of the golden rule as stated by Jesus: ‘Do for others what you would want them to do for you.’[[19]](#footnote-19)

In practice this meant for us the following:

1. Attend to any maintenance request within 24 hours.
2. Begin a tenancy at current market rent and leave it there for the duration of the tenancy. The only exception would be to adjust for rates and insurance increases.
3. Borrow from the bank only what we can pay off in the short term.
4. In two cases we sold the house to our tenants adjusting the price down to meet their capabilities.
5. Renovate up to a modern standard between tenancies or when we lived in the house ourselves.
6. Build a personal relationship with tenants.
7. Employ a manager to deal with issues, which were rare, to manage change of tenants and when we went overseas (a legal requirement).
8. Only claim expenses against income that the IRD permitted.

This business was a gift to us from our Heavenly Father.

* He managed the timing of seed capital.
* He led our decisions to buy and sell according to market movements or circumstances.
* He gave us complementary gifts. Wendy had business acumen. She read real estate magazines for fun! She had a keen eye for a good buy. I had maintenance skills which I developed as we went along.
* We did not have indefinite expansion as a goal so were free to sell up and not get caught with properties and debt when it became no longer a profitable business.

Finally, Moses, possibly the greatest Old Testament character, had this to say about wealth in his last sermon before his death. “If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all His commands …. the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you.[[20]](#footnote-20) The Lord will open the heavens, the storehouse of His bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Wealth acquired as you set out to obey the Lord your God is a blessing.

* It has come from creative, industrious work.
* It has been earned without stress and worry.
* It is received with gratitude and thankfulness to God.
* It is held without covetousness nor a love of it.
* It is held on an open hand with freedom and willingness to bless others
* It has been earned honestly and with integrity.
* You see yourself as a channel not a reservoir.

When you relate to wealth this way then God is free to bless you with abundance because He can trust you with it.

On the contrary Moses warns:  
“However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all His commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:[[22]](#footnote-22)

“The sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron. The Lord will turn the rain of your country into dust and powder.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Poverty is a curse but wealth is a blessing only if it comes from the Lord.   
David, the greatest King of Israel put it this way:  
“Unless the Lord builds the house its builders labour in vain….In vain you rise early and stay up late toiling for food to eat – for He grants sleep to those He loves”.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Paul, in the New Testament said this:  
 “Whatever you do work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for men.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

If you see yourself and your work as the source of your financial needs then you reduce yourself to sharing in the curse put on Adam who chose independence from God.   
“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

But we don’t have to continue to live this way.  
“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree’”. He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Choose Christ, choose blessing, choose obedience.[[28]](#footnote-28)

One final word of warning. Be wary of preachers who pressure you to give them money under the pretext of tithing. This was an Old Testament law to give a tenth of all produce to the Levites who were priests.[[29]](#footnote-29) Tithing is not mentioned in the New Testament. Furthermore, the office of Old Testament priest has been replaced by its perfect fulfilment – Christ the perfect lamb sacrificed for our sins – the mediator of the New Covenant.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Let no one put you under law again – this is curse. “All who rely on observing the Law are under a curse.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Let no one extract money from you under the false pretext of Old Testament law. As the apostle Paul said, “As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves.”[[32]](#footnote-32)  
Jesus upgraded the law and fulfilled it.[[33]](#footnote-33) Adultery, or sex outside of marriage, was upgraded to lust in the heart.[[34]](#footnote-34) Murder was upgraded to calling someone a fool.[[35]](#footnote-35) If we follow this progression, tithing required 10 percent to be given to the Levites and the other 90 percent was your own. Now, we understand that everything we have is a gift from God.[[36]](#footnote-36) We should give generously and cheerfully, knowing that, like the farmer sowing seed, we will reap bountifully. There is no legalistic requirement to tithe. Everything we have belongs to God and we give it freely and cheerfully as we decide out of the abundance of our hearts.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Let us finish with the words of Jesus:

“No one can be a slave to two masters. He will either hate the one and love the other or be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”[[38]](#footnote-38)  
“So, do not start worrying, ‘Where will my food come from? Or my drink? Or my clothes?’ (these are the things the pagans are always concerned about). Your Father in heaven knows that you need all these things. But seek first His Kingdom and His Righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

1. Jeremiah 27:t [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Isaiah 28:26 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ezekiel 36:30 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Isaiah 55:2,3 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Genesis 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Genesis 3:19 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Proverbs 12:11,13:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Proverbs 24:33,34 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Matthew 6:19 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Matthew 6:24 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Matthew 6:31-34 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Luke 12:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 1 Timothy 6:9,10 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Galatians 5:24 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hebrews 13:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Colossians 3:23 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Galatians 2:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Philippians 4:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Matthew 7:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Deuteronomy 28:1,2 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Deut 28:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Deut 28:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Deut 28:23,24 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Psalm 127:1,2 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Col 3:23 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Genesis 3:18,19 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Galatians 3:13,14 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. 28 Joshua 24:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Numbers 18:21,24 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Hebrews 9:11-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Galatians 3:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Gal 5:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Matt 5:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Matt 5:27,28 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Matt 5:21,22 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. 1 Cor 4:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. 2 Cor 9:6-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Matt 6:24 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Matt 6:31-33 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)