

Positive Parenting  
September 2012  
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## WHAT IF MONEY REALLY COULD BUY HAPPINESS?

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:21

Growing up, the wisdom about money that most of us heard from our parents was, “Money cannot buy happiness.” (This was usually delivered in response to a toy or a trip we wanted that was beyond our parents’ means to provide.) Most of us grew to adulthood, adopting this pious wisdom and sharing it with the children in our lives.

Three times in ten days this past summer, God tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Pay attention!” The topic all three times was money and our children and our faith - an opportunity to really consider the connection.

First, the issue of children and money surfaced in my parenting group at church. Should kids get an allowance? If so, should it be based on chores done? Or should children be expected to pitch in because they are part of the family and receive some discretionary money on the same basis? And what should kids at various ages be expected to do with this money? Is it all available for the child to spend as he or she chooses? Should church offering come out of that? How about teaching children to save? Should children be allowed to spend it foolishly and regret it, or should parents guide the use of money? A few parents bemoaned that their own parents taught them little or nothing about money. Some felt their parents’ tight control over money taught them nothing but an impulse to escape from that control. All of us fear that our children will become greedy, materialistic, and ungrateful. So many questions, so little consensus, so much stress, so little happiness.

Second, the same day, seminary professor, phenomenal thinker, and writer David Lose offered his daily meditation on this topic, embedding an 11 minute video featuring Harvard Business School professor and psychologist, Michael Norton. Norton described research about the relationship between money and happiness. We all acknowledge that not having enough money to pay for basic needs in life causes stress and

unhappiness, but Norton explored the correlation between having money beyond basic needs and happiness. Does it increase happiness? Does it decrease happiness? Or does it have no impact at all on happiness?

Norton did his research across cultures, socio-economic groups, and age demographics. He asked subjects to rate their happiness. Then, he gave each participant \$5 - \$20, with the only stipulation that it must be spent before 5:00pm that evening. Half the research group was to spend it on themselves. The other half was to spend it on someone else, without specifying the recipient or what the money should provide. At 5:00pm, he only asked if they had spent the money as specified and had them assess their level of happiness.

Regardless of age, nationality, education, or socio-economic status, the results were identical. All research subjects spent the money as they were told. Those who spent it on themselves, regardless of the amount, reported no change in their happiness. Those who spent it on others, whether it was to pay a bill, buy coffee, purchase a gift, or donate it to charity, reported an increase in their happiness.

Third, a week later, I had the opportunity to do a family camp at Heartwood Center on the theme of “Building the Heart of Your Family: Living Generous Lives.” My dear friend and Thrivent agent, Bruce Ensrud, did a touching, transforming piece for families, engaging each family to talk together about money. He lead them through conversation about the values they express with their money and planning how they will share (yes, spend their money on others), save (identifying their goals), and spend their money (on themselves). Participants referred back to this experience over and over again during family camp.

So, what lesson are we to take from this and apply to our parenting? Can we help our children develop generosity and happiness simultaneously? Can we as parents model generosity and connect it to increased happiness? Is there a connection between how we spend our money and happiness? It appears that the answer is “yes”! Here are some ideas to get you started:

## FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. Introduce the idea of Share - Save - Spend to your family. As a family, discuss what your family would do if you received \$1000. How much and

with whom would you share? How much and for what purpose would you save some? How much and for what purpose would you spend some?

2. If you give your child an allowance, give them three envelopes (or a Thrivent piggy bank with the three sections). Help them decide how much goes in each category. What an important life lesson!

3. Have kids do a “fund raiser” for a cause important to them. It might be a mini-garage sale (of their stuffed animals, dolls, trucks, Legos, books, or games) or a lemonade stand or a neighborhood circus. Advertise the cause for which your child is raising money. Go with them to deliver the funds and learn more about the cause that has captured their imagination.

4. “Catch” your kids sharing or being generous. Describe the behavior you like and affirm both what they have done and the values they are demonstrating.

5. Let your children overhear you when you plan your charitable giving. Let them hear why you give to the causes you support and how it reflects your values. Consider setting aside money or possessions you can share with those in need this Christmas. Discuss as a family what you will give and to whom. Check in as a family and discover what difference it made in your happiness. Point to Jesus, who tells us that where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also.