

The Two Faces of Money

What Wealth Can Buy, and What It Can Never Touch

A reflection by **SubbuS**, Retired Banker

“Money is a good servant but a bad master.”

— Francis Bacon

For forty years I sat across the counter and the table from people and their money. I watched fortunes built rupee by rupee, and I watched them slip away in a single season. If those years taught me anything, it is this simple truth: money is one of the most useful things in the world, and one of the most overrated. Both halves of that sentence are true at the same time, and learning to hold them together is, I think, the beginning of a peaceful relationship with wealth.

Let me set down, plainly and without sermonising, what I have come to believe.

What Money Can Do

It would be dishonest to pretend money does not matter. Anyone who tells you it does not has usually never gone without it. Money is the quiet machinery that keeps a decent life running.

Money buys **security** — a roof that does not leak, a door that locks, a small cushion for the day the rains do not come. It buys **comfort**: a warm meal, a clean bed, a fan in summer and a blanket in winter. These are not luxuries; they are the floor beneath a dignified life.

Money buys **options**. This, to my mind, is its finest gift. With a little put away, you can say no to work that demeans you, leave a city that no longer suits you, or sit by a sick relative without counting the lost wages. Money widens the corridor of choices a person may walk through.

Money buys **access** — to good doctors, to schooling for one’s children, to clean water and to medicine when the body fails. It buys **time of a certain kind**, too: the housemaid who frees an evening, the taxi that spares an hour, the appliance that does in minutes what once took a morning.

And money, used well, buys the **ability to be generous**. There is a particular joy, known to anyone who has felt it, in being able to help a struggling cousin, fund a child’s education, or give quietly to those who have less. Money makes kindness possible on a scale the empty-handed can only wish for.

“Money is only a tool. It will take you wherever you wish, but it will not replace you as the driver.”

— Ayn Rand

So let no one dismiss money as unimportant. It is important. It is simply not everything.

What Money Cannot Do

Here the ledger turns, and the columns do not add up the way the young expect.

Money **cannot buy time** — not the kind that matters. It can hire help and save errands, yes, but it cannot add a single year to your life, cannot rewind a morning spent badly, cannot give back the childhood of a son you were too busy to watch grow. The richest man and the poorest are given exactly twenty-four hours a day, and neither can purchase a twenty-fifth.

Money **cannot buy peace of mind**. I have seen wealthy men who could not sleep and modest pensioners who slept like children. A bank balance silences certain worries and breeds entirely new ones — fear of loss, suspicion of others' motives, the endless comparison with those who have more. Contentment, it turns out, is not for sale at any branch.

Money **cannot buy health** — only its delay. It can fund the best treatment, but it cannot make the body young again, nor restore what years of neglect have taken. Many a fortune has been spent in the last months of a life to buy back the health that was casually spent in the first fifty years.

Money **cannot buy love, respect, or true friendship**. It can buy attention, flattery, and company — but these are imitations, and the heart knows the difference. The affection that money attracts leaves the moment the money does.

Money **cannot buy character, wisdom, or a clear conscience**. No sum will make a small man large, or quiet the voice that reminds him of what he did to earn his pile. And money cannot buy meaning — that sense that one's days have counted for something. That must be earned in a different currency altogether.

“Wealth consists not in having great possessions, but in having few wants.”

— Epictetus

A Word on the Psychology of Money

In my later years I grew fascinated by *why* sensible people behave so strangely about money — and I will share, briefly, a few things I came to understand.

First, money is rarely about money. It is about feelings — safety, status, freedom, the fear of being looked down upon. A man does not buy a bigger car because he needs one; he buys it for what he hopes it says about him. Recognise the feeling beneath the spending, and half your financial battles are already won.

Second, **enough is a moving target**. The mind quickly adjusts to whatever it has and then reaches for more. The salary that once felt like a dream becomes, within a year, merely ordinary. Those who never pause to say *“this is enough”* remain poor no matter how much they hold.

Third, **wealth is what you do not see**. The truly secure are often not the ones flashing their spending, but the quiet ones who saved what others showed off. Real wealth is the money *not* spent — the freedom held in reserve.

Fourth, we consistently underestimate the value of **time, sleep, and good relationships**, because none of them appear on a bank statement. Yet on any honest accounting of a life, these are the assets that pay the richest dividends.

“Too many people spend money they haven't earned, to buy things they don't want, to impress people they don't like.”

— Will Rogers

Summing Up

So where does this leave us? Not with a rejection of money — that is the romance of those who have never struggled — but with a sense of proportion.

Earn honestly. Save patiently. Spend thoughtfully. Keep enough to be secure and free, and give away enough to stay human. Treat money as a good and faithful servant, useful for buying the *means* of a good life — the security, the comfort, the options. But never mistake it for the *ends* themselves: the love, the peace, the health, the time, the meaning. Those are bought, if at all, in other coin entirely.

The happiest people I met in four decades of banking were not the richest. They were those who had made money serve their lives, rather than spending their lives serving money. If this little article nudges one reader toward that balance, the writing of it will have been worthwhile.

“It is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more, that is poor.”

— Seneca

Keep your accounts in order, and your heart in order too. The second ledger, in the end, is the one that matters most.

— SubbuS

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