

ARTICLES

Pity the Poor Rich Man

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A well-known entertainer once remarked, "I have been poor and I have been rich. Believe me, rich is better." To this philosophy most men would heartily subscribe. And there are few who never to themselves have said, "I wish I had a lot of money."

While most Americans, in comparison with the citizens of other countries, are rich, most of them would probably be characterized simply as, "well off." The next plateau, in terms of material possessions, would be called wealthy or rich. Beyond that there is a class known as the very rich, and recently a label of "super-rich" has been invented to fit a handful of individuals.

Christians, of course, realize that there are two kinds of riches. Material wealth comes to relatively few; spiritual wealth is available to all. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet He became poor, that ye, through His poverty, might be rich." (II Corinthians, 8:9) Solomon wrote in Proverbs 10:22, "the blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich, and He addeth no sorrow with it." Obviously, if a man must make a choice, he should elect spiritual wealth rather than material, for "the things that are seen are temporal, but the things that are not seen are eternal."

Nevertheless, it must be recognized that through the centuries God has deliberately made some men rich beyond others in their generations. It is stated specifically that Abraham was very rich. So too was Isaac, his son. Solomon was noted not only for his wisdom but for his wealth. In the New Testament we read of Joseph of Arimathea who lent his tomb to Jesus and received it back after a very short occupancy. He too was a rich man. The Scriptures make it clear that increase of possessions is not in itself bad.

To the Christian, wealth may be regarded from three points of view: How he acquires it, how he uses it, and how he feels toward it.

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There is no doubt that the road to acquiring wealth is fraught with great dangers. Satan frequently uses the human desire to become rich as a means of thwarting spiritual growth. Jesus said, "the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the Word and cause it to wither." Many a man has started out with the noble objective of becoming wealthy so that he can help others or advance the work of the Lord, but somewhere along the path his good purpose has been warped into an obsession.

In our modern society there is nothing more dangerous to the spiritual life of a man than to be caught up in the competitive race to pile up more assets. It takes superhuman strength to resist the temptation to cut corners or to rationalize deceit, or to be cruel in one's methods. It is only when a man realizes these pitfalls that he arms himself with the whole armour of God, and dedicates a worthy portion of each day to the improvement of his mind and spirit through reading the Word and through prayer.

Paul admonishes us in I Corinthians 7, "But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passes away." In other words, wealth can either be used or abused. Its use should always be with the thought that time is short. It is interesting to observe how many large fortunes left behind by sound Christians have been the source of little good and sometimes even of harm to the cause of Christ because those who eventually administered the fortune were entirely unsympathetic with the aims of the donor.

Stewardship is surely the maximizing of all of one's resources for the glory of God. This should be the primary objective of every child of God.

If we really belong to Christ, our money does also. And the way we spend it reveals better than anything else what our real priorities are. I suspect some of us would not want the preacher to see our check stubs—for these, in a very real sense, reveal our spiritual temperature. After all, our money really represents us—the fruit of our labor, efforts, time and talents. Jesus said "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

The human tendency is to regard money available to us as our possession to do with as we see fit. As a result, many rich Christians live exactly like rich heathen. Like the rich man in the story of the widow's mite, they cast their gifts into the Lord's treasury looking for the praise of men and comparing their donations with those of men who possess far less than they, rather than measuring what they give against what they keep. Pity the poor rich man, for his sense of perspective is surely dulled by the very possession of his riches.

The third aspect of wealth that deserves consideration is the Christian's thoughts concerning what God allows him to accumulate. Jesus declared that "the cares and riches and pleasures of this life" choke the Word of God in the heart so that life becomes fruitless and futile. And our

Saviour reminded us that “man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of things which he possesseth.” (Luke 12:15) “Set not your affections on things below,” say the Scriptures, and “love not the world or the things that are in the world.”

As Christians, we are to love people and use things. Yet with too many of us this is inverted—we love things and use people.

It is hard for a man whose wealth is above average to regard himself as an average man. Thus, even in the early church, it was necessary for James to point out that rich people are not entitled to the best seats in church. Again, it takes supernatural spiritual strength to keep a man who is continuously flattered by people because of his possessions from regarding himself more highly than he ought.

Job, a very wealthy man, proved his spiritual strength when he was able to say “the Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” The worst of all attitudes, described in Revelation 3:17, “Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing. . . .” emphasizes that the accumulation of much wealth has a tendency to deprive one of the sense of utter dependence upon God. Pity the poor rich man who no longer finds it necessary to pray, “Give me this day, my daily bread.”

The Old Testament commentary on this subject is found in Proverbs 30:8, 9, “Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny Thee, and say, Who is the Lord? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.”

How should a Christian feel about wealth? Does a vow of poverty make him a more spiritual Christian? Not according to Paul, who summed up his philosophy on the subject this way: “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know how to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. (Phil. 4:11, 12)

In conclusion, I believe the affluence and materialism of our present society are probably the greatest deterrents to a real spiritual awakening. And this applies to us as individuals, as churches, and as a nation.

Materialism, rightly understood, is basically a matter of attitude. It does not depend so much on the possession of material wealth as it does on one’s motivation for acquiring and management of his possessions. Dr. V. Raymond Edman said, “envy, greed, jealousy, covetousness characterize even a poor man’s outlook. This too is materialism.”

And Scriptures are replete with warnings of the danger of a materialistic outlook.

So, again, “If riches increase, set not your heart on them. . . . trust in your money and down you go! Trust in God and flourish.”