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RICH AND POOR

Introduction

In this message, we will be considering the issue of riches. This subject is related to the preceding messages on success and prosperity, strength and power, and on the fallen world and God's kingdom.

Riches, prosperity and success, strength and power – these are concepts usually associated with worldliness and the ambitious. These are the things that the people of the world are preoccupied with. Christians can also be entangled in these areas and their lives rendered ineffective.

However, there is a place for true success and prosperity, strength and power and riches from the perspective of God's kingdom. The Bible teaches us that these are vital aspects of healthy, effective Christian living.

It is important that we recognise the distinction between the worldly perspective of success, prosperity, strength, power and riches, and the perspective of God's kingdom. These messages can help us understand the biblical perspective and the life and teachings of the Lord Jesus in relation to these issues.

The issue of riches

Preoccupation with material wealth is a prominent feature all over the world. At the national level, there is a strong emphasis on countries becoming wealthier, and the growth in the gross national product is often regarded as the measure of the progress and success of a country. At the personal level, the material wealth of a person is often regarded as a measure of how well he is faring.

Many who desire to get rich fall into temptations, resulting in their ruin and destruction. The corridors of history are littered with many who have taken this path and ended up in destruction.

Paul warns us about this in 1 Timothy 6:9.

1 Timothy 6:9

But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.

The pursuit of wealth afflicts both the rich and the poor. Those who are poor want to get rich; and those who are rich want to get richer. In the pursuit of wealth, many are prepared to be dishonest, to cheat, to lie, to scheme and even to kill.

Many crimes are related to the desire for material gain. We see all kinds of dishonesty and scheming. There are the "schoolboy cheats" and "small-timers" who cheat on weights or pass off inferior imitation goods as the real thing. There are also those involved in intrigues and schemes in high society, where the stakes are high. White-collar crimes and criminal breach of trust can involve millions of dollars.

The desire for money

Why do people want to make plenty of money? I remember pondering about this issue when I was young. It cannot be that they want money for its own sake. We cannot consume money. Money is desired because of what people think money can do for them. It can buy material things, and it can also give status, influence and even power. The common phrase, "money talks" refers not just to being able to buy things but also to exert influence and get one's way.

Some people may want money for self-indulgence. At a deeper level, many pursue material wealth because it gives them a sense of security and they think it can bring them fulfilment and satisfaction. They associate material wealth with well-being and success in life. They do not realise that earthly riches cannot truly satisfy the human soul, and that man seeks in vain for true fulfilment and well-being in earthly riches.

Trying to find true fulfilment and to fill the emptiness in our lives through the pursuit of riches can be compared to a man digging a hole. The more he digs, the bigger the hole, and the greater the emptiness in his life. It is sad that though this is the case, many continue to do so. It is even sadder that many believers, who should know better, are often drawn towards it.

Let us ponder over the life of the Lord Jesus and His teachings on true riches.

The life of the Lord Jesus

In His earthly life, the Lord Jesus was poor from the time of His birth. His parents were poor materially. His father was a carpenter. When they presented the Lord Jesus at the temple, they offered according to the provision for the poor – a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.

Luke 2:22-24

22 And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord

23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord"),

24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Luke 9:58 describes what His life was like – He had nowhere to lay His head:

Luke 9:58

And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

But how can the Lord Jesus be poor when He is the Son of God and the creator of all things? Does not Paul tell us "the unfathomable riches of Christ" is an integral part of the gospel message (Eph. 3:8)?

In the visible, temporal realm, and from the worldly perspective, the Lord Jesus was indeed poor. He was poor in material wealth and possessions during His time on earth. But in reality, from the spiritual and eternal perspective of God's kingdom, He was truly and infinitely rich at all times. For in Christ are riches immeasurable.

The unfathomable riches of Christ are not just for Himself, but also for us. This is the direction we should work towards – to be truly rich in the Lord, such that the spiritual richness of our lives overflows in positive impact and enrich the lives of others.

The teachings of the Lord Jesus

The proper perspective, attitude and approach we should have towards riches is an important theme in the teachings of the Lord Jesus. Matthew 6:19-24 is a key passage on this subject.

Store up treasures in heaven

Matthew 6:19-21

19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.

20 "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal;

21 for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The Lord Jesus tells us not to store up for ourselves treasures on earth. He is not saying that having material things is wrong. He is referring to self-centred, self-seeking desires in storing up treasures on earth for ourselves. He explains that such treasures on earth cannot last, for here "moth and rust destroy, and thieves break in and steal". These are not true riches; we should not set our heart upon these things.

In contrast, He says in verse 20: "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal". We should store up for ourselves true riches which are eternal. If we store up true

treasures, no one can take them away from us. Time does not destroy them. Even the powers of darkness cannot take them away.

In the next two verses, the Lord Jesus tells us that if our eye is clear, our whole body will be full of light.

A clear eye

Matthew 6:22-23

22 "The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light.

23 "But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

"Clear" can also be translated as "healthy" or "sound". In these two verses, the Lord Jesus is stressing the importance of having spiritual insight, the right perspective and quality of heart. Stating this principle immediately after talking about the kind of treasure we should set our hearts upon, indicates how important it is for us to have the right understanding and attitude towards being rich. When we have accurate spiritual perception, and when our hearts are aligned with the truth, we will not be snared by the deceitfulness of material wealth. Instead, our hearts will be set on becoming truly rich.

In the next verse, the Lord Jesus teaches us another important principle on the subject of what our attitude towards material wealth ought to be.

An undivided heart unto God

Matthew 6:24

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

The Lord's teaching is very clear and categorical. We cannot serve God and wealth. Many believers are divided in their hearts in this matter, and therefore are unable to make good progress in their lives. They love the Lord but they also love material wealth. We have to be decisive and make a clear stand in this area. If we cling to riches, we cannot properly love, worship or serve God.

The deceitfulness of riches

The Lord Jesus refers to the deceitfulness of riches in the parable of the seed sown among thorns in Matthew 13:22.

Matthew 13:22

"And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

He explains that the deceitfulness of wealth chokes the word of God so it becomes unfruitful. With regard to non-believers, it is difficult to find a place in their hearts for the truth of the gospel when they are preoccupied with the pursuit of material wealth. For believers, the truth cannot bear good fruit in our heart if material wealth grips our lives. We are not able to benefit as much as we could because our lives are being choked by the thorns of riches.

The rich fool

Let us pay heed to what the Lord Jesus has to say on this subject as illustrated by the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:13-23.

Luke 12:13-23

13 Someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

14 But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?"

15 Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."

16 And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive.

17 "And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?'

18 "Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.

19 'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry." '

20 "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?'

21 "So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

22 And He said to His disciples, "For this reason I say to you, do not worry about your life, as to what you will eat; nor for your body, as to what you will put on.

23 "For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

The Lord Jesus told the parable when a man asked Him to tell his brother to divide the family inheritance with him. The Lord Jesus replied: "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?" By this, the Lord was saying that the primary concern

in His heart when He came into this world was not over these things. He told the parable to help us see what is truly important.

The parable tells of a man who was materially rich. In reality he was very poor. He was poor in the things that really matter, for he was not rich toward God. The Lord pronounces him a fool for living the way he did. God said to him: "You fool! This very night your soul is required of you". We must pay close heed to why the Lord uses such strong words of disapproval on this man's life. Let us pay heed to the warning of the Lord Jesus: Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed.

Let us take note of a few important points from this passage:

1. Life does not consist of possessions

"Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

This verse is not telling us that we should not have material possessions. It is telling us that life does not consist solely of the visible and the material, and we should not live as if they are the most important things in life. We must not be gripped by them.

What was wrong was not that the man was rich, but his whole perspective, approach and attitude towards riches. In verses 17-19, the man reasoned to himself about what to do with his abundance of crops. He said: "This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry' ".

He was concentrating on growing his material wealth and indulging in the pleasures of the material things of life, as if they were most important for his soul.

2. Beware of being presumptuous

'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry" ' (Luke 12:19).

The man took for granted he would have many years of ease and plenty ahead of him as he had all his plans in place and he would be able to make much, as his land was very productive. He was presumptuous. He did not think that anything could happen to him. In reality, he could die at any time and he would have to give an account of his life to the Lord. He could lose all his possessions, or he could have many years of sorrow, pain and anguish awaiting him. He did not realise that that very night, God would pronounce: "You fool! This very night your soul is required of you".

3. Beware of the wrong basis for our security

The man owned a productive land, so he was confident of it yielding years of plenty. That was his source of security. It was in the material realm, and so he planned based on what he could see.

It is helpful to ask ourselves: What is the basis of our security? Is it our material possessions or is it God? It does not mean we cannot make provisions for the future, but do we need tangible things to feel secure? Can we trust the Lord whatever the future may hold?

Many of us have not properly resolved this issue. While we have plenty – a good stable job, a fairly substantial bank account – we can quite readily say that our security is in the Lord. But if these things are threatened or taken away, would we still have a deep sense of security in the Lord? Are we prepared to embark on a course of action which we recognise God desires of us but would mean foregoing a regular source of income and the need to truly trust God to provide for our material needs?

We cannot increase our sense of security in the Lord by simply trying hard not to place our security on other things. True security in God comes about only when we have a true basis for confidence in God. This requires that we live a life pleasing to God. We must be right with God before we can have true security. If we do not have true faith, we may be frustrated and disillusioned trying to have a sense of security in God.

Many look to Psalms 23 for comfort and an assurance of God's provision and undertaking: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want". We may also try to comfort and assure others in this way. But it can easily be a false sense of comfort. Psalms 23 does not promise or assure us any of those things.

Psalms 23 is a testimony of David. He testified: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want". This was real in David's life. He loved the Lord and sought to walk with Him. Although he had weaknesses, he trusted God and walked humbly with Him. He was a man whom God appreciated – a man after God's own heart.

There are no promises in Psalms 23 for us to claim. But this psalm can be a strong encouragement to us. If we love the Lord and learn to walk with God the way David did, we too can have a deep and proper assurance of God's provision and undertaking.

True security is in the Lord, and in His provision and undertaking for us. But it is true only for one who loves the Lord, who walks with Him.

4. Beware of self-centredness and selfishness

A major problem with the rich man was his self-centeredness and selfishness. Why did he want to amass his possessions? It was because he wanted to store up treasures *for himself*. He was planning for many years of self-indulgence when he could "eat, drink and be merry".

Although material riches can be a snare, it is not an evil in itself. If the Lord sees it fit, in our faithful walk with Him, to entrust us with material possession and wealth, we can put them to good use. But we must not rationalise or think that it is all right to set our heart on pursuing wealth because we can put it to good use.

5. Beware that you are not pronounced a fool

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' " (Luke 12:20).

God pronounces this man "a fool" because of his self-centred attitudes and ways. It would be tragic if this is God's pronouncement on our lives. Let us heed the Lord's warning not to set our hearts on accumulating worldly possessions and not to place our security in them.

6. Be rich toward God

"So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21).

The Lord Jesus was not just talking about the rich man. He was also referring to anyone who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

The significant issue is to be rich toward God. True riches do not lie in the realm of the visible and the temporal. The issue has to do with the degree to which the inner qualities important to the Lord have been developed in our lives. We are truly rich if we have grown in the qualities that contribute to the true worth of the individual and the richness of our relationship with God.

7. Do not be anxious about the basic needs of life

"And He said to His disciples, "For this reason I say to you, do not worry about your life, as to what you will eat; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing" " (Luke 12:22-23).

If we learn how to live well with the Lord, there is no need to be anxious about the necessities of life.

In Luke 12:24, the Lord Jesus referred to the birds. Unlike the rich man, who was preoccupied with accumulating more for his future comfort, the birds do not sow nor reap, nor do they have storerooms and barns to store their food. Yet, the Lord tells us, they are well provided for. God feeds them. And we are more valuable than birds to God.

It is proper to trust God to provide for us, just as He provides for the birds and clothe the lilies of the field. The Lord says, in verse 29: "And do not seek what you will eat and what you will drink, and do not keep worrying". Many are bothered about these things, but the Lord tells us not to worry about them.

The Lord does not promise that He will provide whatever we desire. But we can trust Him for the basic needs of life. But this trust and assurance is in the context of verse 31: "But seek for His kingdom, and these things will be added to you". This means that the kingdom of God must have first priority in our lives.

In one sense, we can say that this is a basic issue of discipleship – trusting God for the basic needs in life. But many believers have not settled their hearts on this matter. We must learn to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; only then can we properly trust Him for all things. It is helpful to consider and pray over this issue: Have we set our hearts on the things pertaining to God's kingdom? If this is true, we can meaningfully trust God for the basic things in life, instead of being anxious about them.

It can be a significant hindrance in our walk with the Lord and in our development if we have not properly resolved this issue. It can cause us to stumble and to compromise in our approach to life.

Not easy to be wealthy yet faithful

Preoccupied with material wealth

The preoccupation with acquiring material things and making more money is not confined to those who are materially deprived. Many wealthy people are also afflicted with this "disease", if not more so. The appetite for more can be insatiable. It has to do with the wrong attitude and appetites within.

Many of us think that it is advantageous to have plenty in the material realm, and that we will be satisfied when we have more material things in life. But those who are materially rich may find it more difficult than the poor to be contented. It is not uncommon for the rich to be preoccupied with wanting more and acquiring more and fearful that their wealth may dissipate or be destroyed.

A false sense of security

Those who have plenty may find it more difficult not to place their trust in riches than those who own little. When we have little, we may learn to trust the Lord more. But as we become rich materially, we may begin to depend on our riches. Even if we have much wealth that comes about in the context of faithful walk with God, we have to be careful not to let it become a snare in our lives.

Let us look at Proverbs 18:11.

Proverbs 18:11

A rich man's wealth is his strong city,
And like a high wall in his own imagination.

The rich man pictures his wealth as his strong city and high wall. He has a sense of security in his wealth and regards it as impregnable. This is a tendency the rich man has to guard against. But notice the word "imagination". His sense of security exists in his imagination. In truth, it is neither a strong city nor a high wall that he imagines it to be. The preceding verse gives us the contrast.

Proverbs 18:10

The name of the Lord is a strong tower;
The righteous runs into it and is safe.

The Lord is truly a strong tower. The righteous is safe in it. In the Lord, there is true security. But notice that it is the righteous who finds it safe. We need to set our lives aright before we can have true confidence in the Lord and find in Him a strong tower.

Paul gives this instruction concerning rich believers:

1 Timothy 6:17

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy.

Paul exhorts the rich not to be conceited or to depend on their wealth because there is a tendency for this to take place. Instead, they ought to fix their hope on God and learn to be contented with food and covering (1 Tim. 6:8).

Maintaining a spirit of true discipleship

Many may think it is good to increase in wealth but in reality it is more difficult to maintain a true spirit of discipleship and to exercise good stewardship of what we have in such a context. Freely the Lord has given to us, freely we must also channel it as the Lord sees fit – but it is not easy to live with a deep sense of freedom in this area when we have much material wealth.

Temptation and spiritual attack

Material wealth is a major area of temptation in the fallen world and also a major area of spiritual attack.

Let us learn from the scriptural record of how Satan tempted the Lord Jesus in this area and how He overcame the temptation.

Matthew 4:8-10

8 Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory;

9 and he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me."

10 Then Jesus said to him, "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.' "

The devil tempted the Lord Jesus by offering Him "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory..." if He would "fall down and worship" him. This temptation would include power, status and the riches of this world. The evil one often uses material riches to tempt those who seek to walk faithfully with God. If we give in to him, we would be drawn into a relationship with him.

Many may not be conscious that when they allow themselves to be drawn to material wealth, they are yielding to the temptation of the evil one, who seeks to destroy them with these attractions. It is not just a matter between us and the riches. There is a spiritual dimension to it. The powers of darkness are at work. Those who are drawn in that direction are more and more drawn into deeper bondage, and they will be hindered by the evil one in their walk with the Lord.

Reflect on the reply of the Lord Jesus: "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only' ". The reply of the Lord Jesus was definite and decisive. It is important that we learn from the example of the Lord Jesus to deal with this area of temptation decisively. Yielding to the temptation of the evil one in what he offers us will hinder us from the true worship of God. We must consecrate ourselves to the Lord and concentrate on worshipping the Lord our God and serve Him only. As the Lord Jesus tells us, we cannot serve God and wealth. Undivided devotion to the Lord, worship of the Lord and service to Him are of paramount importance.

The love of money

1 Timothy 6:9-11

9 But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.

10 For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

11 But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.

Paul warns believers that the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil (v. 10). The evil one is very much at work using money to draw us in the direction of evil. Those who desire material wealth are easily ensnared and their lives ruined (v. 9). By longing for money, we can easily wander away from the faith, and pierce ourselves with many griefs (v. 10).

These are clear warnings of the Scriptures, but many continue to be led astray because of the love of money. Let us prayerfully look to the Lord to help us resolve this area thoroughly and decisively.

Storing up the treasure of a good foundation for the future

True riches

Instead of wanting to get rich and longing for material wealth, let us heed Paul's exhortation to flee from these things and concentrate on pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness, which are true riches. We are to fight the good fight of faith in order to take hold of eternal life:

1 Timothy 6:11-12

11 But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.

12 Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

True riches has to do with doing good, being rich in good works, and being generous in sharing with others. True riches have a spiritual and eternal dimension. When we have true riches, we are storing up for ourselves a good foundation for the future and we take hold of that which is life indeed. We will have abundant life, the kind of life that God desires for us, on earth and in eternity.

1 Timothy 6:18-19

18 Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share,

19 storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.

Poor but rich widow

Not all of us are rich in material wealth and not all of us are in a position to contribute financially in a substantial way. However, all believers can be truly rich and contribute significantly from the perspective of God's kingdom.

Let us learn from the life of the poor but rich widow. The story of the poor widow is not a parable, but a real-life example the Lord Jesus commended. Her life is in stark contrast to what we have seen earlier of the life of the rich but poor man who was pronounced a fool by the Lord in the parable recorded in Luke 12:13-23.

Mark 12:41-44

41 And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums.

42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent.

43 Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury;

44 for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."

The widow was poor. She only had two small copper coins – but she put in all she owned.

What the poor widow did seems insignificant, and the meaning of what she did could easily be missed. No one would even have taken notice of her, but the Lord Jesus singled her out as someone who contributed much.

There were many rich people putting in large sums of money. Yet the Lord considered the widow as having "put in more than all the contributors to the treasury". How could this be when she only had two small copper coins? She was very poor materially, but from the perspective of God's kingdom, she was very rich. What she contributed was very significant in the eyes of the Lord. And surely, that is what counts. She was able to contribute more significantly because of the attitude and quality of her heart.

It is not the outward expression of our contribution that determines its significance. What is truly precious to God in our contribution are the realities and qualities within us, which give meaning and significance to all our outward expressions. To become truly rich, we must concentrate on nurturing these realities and qualities within.

Conclusion

Let us ask the Lord to open the eyes of our heart, so that we may perceive accurately how to approach the issue of riches. Having such insight, we should then set our hearts on being truly rich, laying up treasures in heaven.

Let us ask the Lord to help us see in what ways and to what degree we have a problem in this area and how we can properly resolve it. Let us be vigilant and not fall prey to the wiles of the evil one, resulting in our lives ruined by the deceitfulness of riches. Let us concentrate on what is truly precious to God and lay up a good foundation for the future.

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