

Message: AR148
Series: Appearance and Reality
Section: The Lord Jesus Christ
Subsection: Truly Rich
Date preached: 2 Oct 94
Date edited: 20 Aug 10

TRUE RICHES AND WELL-BEING

Introduction

In the previous message, we noted that the Lord Jesus shows us that true riches do not lie in material wealth. He teaches us not to store up treasures on earth, but to store up true riches in heaven.

Many people are preoccupied with the desire to become rich, to acquire material wealth, and together with it, a sense of status and pride. They have a notion that such a life is truly satisfying. But the satisfaction they hope to find in material things will be elusive. The pursuit of riches is like a man digging a hole; the more he digs, the bigger the hole, and the greater the emptiness in his life.

As Christians, we know that the material things of this world will one day perish. Yet many believers are unable to be free from the distractions and attractions of material wealth, and as a result their growth and development are impeded. Some are ensnared by the foolish and harmful desire for material wealth which plunge them into ruin and destruction (1 Tim. 6:9).

Let us ponder over and pay heed to the teachings of the Lord Jesus on this subject, so that we may be delivered from the desire to be rich, and from indulgence in materialism.

The rich man and Lazarus

Let us consider the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31.

Luke 16:19-31

19 "Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day.

20 "And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores,

21 and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.

22 "Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried.

23 "In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom.

24 "And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.'

25 "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.'

26 'And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.'

27 "And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house—

28 for I have five brothers—in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

29 "But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'

30 "But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!'

31 "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.' "

The rich man appeared to be getting on very well in life. He lived a life of luxury that many would long to have. He was always well-dressed in very expensive clothes and he enjoyed living in splendour everyday.

In sharp contrast, there was Lazarus, a destitute. He did not even have the basic necessities of life. He had no roof over his head and no proper food to eat. He was laid at the rich man's gate and longed to be fed with the crumbs falling from the rich man's table. It is a picture of terrible deprivation and suffering.

Note, however, the marked contrast in their situation after they both died. In death, Lazarus, the poor man, was faring very well, being in Abraham's bosom. He was in a very favourable context in the world to come. In contrast, the rich man was in Hades, a place of torment. He was suffering intensely, and had to plead with Abraham for mercy and to send Lazarus to cool off his tongue (vs. 22-24).

Through this parable, the Lord Jesus is impressing upon us that we must not live like the rich man, thus ending up like him in eternity.

Some may view this parable from the angle that because Lazarus was in a miserable state while on earth, he enjoyed well-being in eternity. The rich man, on the other hand, was well-off and had a fine time on earth and so he suffered in eternity. This is not the meaning of this parable.

True riches and well-being

An important lesson the Lord Jesus wants to teach us through this parable is the meaning of true riches and well-being from the perspective of God's kingdom. To see this clearly, we must learn to see beyond the material wealth or poverty of a person and his physical circumstances.

A person like Lazarus can be rich in the eyes of the Lord even while on earth, in spite of his material poverty, temporal deprivation and hardship. On the other hand, the rich man was not rich toward God in spite of his material wealth. He was in spiritual poverty and in a miserable state even though he was dressed in fine linen and living in physical splendour.

Let us take note of three points.

1. Those who are rich materially are not necessarily rich spiritually.

The rich man was rich materially, but he was poor spiritually. He was in spiritual poverty, not because he was rich materially, but primarily because of his attitude, character and ways.

Although he was rich and lived in splendour, he did not lift a finger to help the poor, hungry and suffering Lazarus, who laid at his gate, longing to be fed. He comes across as a man of extreme self-indulgence, preoccupied with materialism, and utterly lacking in compassion for those in dire need.

2. Those who are poor materially are not necessarily rich spiritually.

It does not mean that all who are poor materially and suffering in this world are faring well spiritually in this life and will fare well in eternity.

Some people have the false notion that because they are suffering or are deprived in this world, they will have a good time in eternity.

Lazarus fared well, not because he was poor materially, but because of the reality and meaning within him. Although the passage does not mention this point, the Scriptures clearly teaches that how we fare in the eyes of the Lord and in eternity has to do with the condition of our heart. Let's look at the teaching of the Lord Jesus in the Beatitudes.

Matthew 5:3-12

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

5 "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

- 7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
10 "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
11 "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.
12 "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The passage lists those who are blessed and it has to do with the good attitude and qualities within them, for example, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are merciful and those who are pure in heart. And those who are persecuted because of their faith in Christ have their reward in heaven

3. The principles apply to us even though we are not exactly like the rich man or Lazarus.

We may think that we do not have the same lifestyle as the rich man and are therefore not like him. This does not mean the truths in this parable do not apply to us.

This parable is told in sharp contrast—the very wealthy man daily living in great splendour and the very poor Lazarus starving and afflicted with severe sores. This is to help us see more clearly the issues involved. It does not mean that we must be exactly like the rich man or Lazarus for the issues to apply to us.

This parable warns us against any form of self-indulgence. We may not be indulging ourselves the way the rich man did, but is our attitude towards material things shaped by the world? Are we using these things in the spirit of discipleship, in a manner that befits children of God? Is our fellowship with God superficial and our spiritual appetite dull because we are preoccupied with these things and because of our indulgence in the things of this world?

This parable also raises the issue of compassion. We may not treat others the way the rich man treated poor Lazarus. But do we have a true heart of compassion and consideration for others? Do we have a genuine concern for those in need or do we only pay lip service?

True security and well-being

The rich man felt self-sufficient and secure in his riches and splendour. We may not have amassed wealth like the rich man did, but do we also place our security in material possessions? If we do, we will be having a false sense of security, for what counts is not our material possessions or other things we have in the visible and temporal realm. What counts is whether we are well inwardly, in our being, in our character and in our walk with God.

Our sense of security and well-being may be derived from worldly values. We are easily influenced by the people around us who hold such values, so it is important that we be clear of the spiritual and eternal perspective.

True security and well-being come about when we walk well with the Lord. Our earthly circumstances will not always be favourable even when we are walking well with Him and He is pleased with us. But we can rejoice in the Lord even in the most adverse of circumstances. We will seek to learn what the Lord desires to teach us and we will not be discouraged. Instead, there will be a sense of true well-being and an increased sense of confidence in Him.

Spiritual and eternal perspective

The Lord told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus to drive home the point that our perspective and approach in life have implications not just for our life on earth, but also for eternity. The rich man regretted the way he lived on earth, but he was unable to undo it in eternity.

Are we deeply conscious of the spiritual and eternal realm in the way we view people and situations, and in the way we go through each day? How do we spend our time and channel our energy? How do we make decisions and respond to people and issues?

We have only this one opportunity in our life on earth. Every moment that we live is important; we cannot re-live it. We must make the most of our life. We must live it well. Any regrets in eternity would be futile.

Not to be envious of the arrogant rich

Let us also learn from this parable not to be envious or troubled when we see those who pursue earthly treasures appear to be well-off in this life. Many rich people do not live their lives properly, and the wicked do not care for the ways of God. Yet they seem to have so much: earthly wealth, status, an enjoyable and easy life. We can become troubled and envious when we seek to be faithful to God yet experience a difficult life.

Those who love the Lord can experience such thoughts and feelings, and the evil one will seek to incite such thoughts and feelings. It is important that we do not dwell on them, but instead maintain a proper posture before God and reject all the evil one's negative influences. Let us learn from what the psalmist testified in Psalm 73.

The psalmist affirmed the goodness of God to His people, to those who are "pure in heart". For him, he had almost stumbled because he was envious of the prosperity of the wicked.

Psalm 73:1-28

1 Surely God is good to Israel,
To those who are pure in heart!
2 But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling,
My steps had almost slipped.
3 For I was envious of the arrogant
As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
4 For there are no pains in their death,
And their body is fat.
5 They are not in trouble as other men,
Nor are they plagued like mankind.

The wicked are prosperous and having a fine time. They seem to be getting away with their evil deeds. They are not plagued by anything. Even in death, they do not seem to be in any pain.

6 Therefore pride is their necklace;
The garment of violence covers them.
7 Their eye bulges from fatness;
The imaginations of their heart run riot.
8 They mock and wickedly speak of oppression;
They speak from on high.
9 They have set their mouth against the heavens,
And their tongue parades through the earth.

They are proud, violent, oppressive and self-indulgent. They speak against the Lord and have no regard for the things of God. Yet they continue to experience abundance. It seems like God does not even know about their wickedness.

10 Therefore his people return to this place,
And waters of abundance are drunk by them.
11 They say, "How does God know?
And is there knowledge with the Most High?"
12 Behold, these are the wicked;
And always at ease, they have increased in wealth.

The psalmist sought to keep his heart pure, and he wondered if it was all in vain. While the wicked increased in wealth and ease, he continued to suffer.

13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure
And washed my hands in innocence;
14 For I have been stricken all day long
And chastened every morning.

But he recognised that it was wrong to think in this way. It would not only be detrimental to himself, it would also be a betrayal of God's children.

15 If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.

However, he had difficulty understanding and resolving the issue until he came before the Lord and realised the end of the wicked.

16 When I pondered to understand this,
It was troublesome in my sight
17 Until I came into the sanctuary of God;
Then I perceived their end.

We may be troubled by many things, but as we come into God's presence, He can help us to perceive them more accurately. It does not mean we will understand everything. But it does mean our understanding of things and situations around us and our response to them will be more wholesome.

18 Surely You set them in slippery places;
You cast them down to destruction.
19 How they are destroyed in a moment!
They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!
20 Like a dream when one awakes,
O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form.

When we look at what takes place in the world, verses 18 to 20 do not seem to be an adequate answer. On earth, the wicked are not always punished, and those who love the Lord are not always spared troubles. But these verses indicate how God views the wicked: "O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form". God is against the wicked, and, at any time, He can destroy them.

The psalmist knew it was not right for him to be embittered over what he saw as injustice in this world. And he could see how meaningful it was to be continually with the Lord, and to have the Lord holding him with His right hand.

21 When my heart was embittered
And I was pierced within,

22 Then I was senseless and ignorant;
I was like a beast before You.
23 Nevertheless I am continually with You;
You have taken hold of my right hand.

He appreciated the need to seek God's counsel and guidance and thereafter to be received to glory.

24 With Your counsel You will guide me,
And afterward receive me to glory.

The psalmist was able to express in all sincerity:

25 Whom have I in heaven but You?
And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.
26 My flesh and my heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

In his fellowship with God, the psalmist became more settled in his heart and posture. He came to this recognition that what truly matters is having a deep and meaningful relationship with God.

"Besides You, I desire nothing on earth" does not mean other things on earth were unimportant to the psalmist. It was an expression of how important God was to him in comparison. His relationship with God abides forever.

When God is primary in our life, we can view and respond appropriately to situations, people and things.

The concluding two verses show us that what ultimately counts is not how much wealth we have, but the depth of our relationship with God. Those who are far from Him, those who are unfaithful, will perish.

27 For, behold, those who are far from You will perish;
You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You.
28 But as for me, the nearness of God is my good;
I have made the Lord God my refuge,
That I may tell of all Your works.

Although the psalmist lived in the Old Testament times, he was able to come to this very meaningful posture of faith. For us, with the coming of the Lord Jesus, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the revelation in the New Testament, we have much more light and knowledge. It should therefore be possible for us to adopt this posture at an even deeper level.

This psalm helps us to see more clearly the main thrust of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Appearance can be very different from reality. Those who appear to be faring well may not be so in reality. True riches are not found in the material and the temporal realm. They are found in our faithfulness to God and in our fellowship with Him.

We cannot serve God and material wealth

In Luke 16, the Lord Jesus was addressing the issue of material wealth and it was in that context that He told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

Luke 16:13-14

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

14 Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him.

We may say that we are not like the Pharisees, who were "lovers of money". But we still need to pay heed to the Lord's teaching. Do material things and money still tug at our hearts? Do we scoff at the biblical perspective as being idealistic? Do we say that we have to be "realistic" about such matters?

Material wealth is not evil in itself. The love of money is the root of all sorts of evil. We cannot serve God and love material wealth. There are some who may think that they are being shrewd in trying to have the best of both worlds. Let us realise that this is not possible.

It also does not mean that the faithful cannot have material wealth. In our faithful walk with God, He does sometimes entrust us with material wealth. However, we must make sure we do not become rich because of our love for riches.

All of us do have some material wealth and the Lord expects us to exercise good stewardship over whatever we have. This is the subject of another parable in Luke 16.

Wise stewardship of material wealth

Many refer to the parable in Luke 16:1-13 as the parable of the unrighteous steward (or "manager" as in the updated NASB version). But I think a more suitable title is the shrewd manager. As we will see later, the emphasis of this parable is not on the manager's unrighteousness, but on his shrewdness.

This parable is not easy to understand. But there are some helpful things that we can learn from it on the issue of material wealth and stewardship.

The Lord was addressing the disciples, so this is an issue relevant to believers.

Luke 16:1-13

1 Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions.

2 "And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.'

3 "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg.

4 'I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes.'

5 "And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

6 "And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.'

7 "Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'

8 "And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.

9 "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings.

10 "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much.

11 "Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you?

12 "And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?

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

What the manager did was clearly improper. Verse 8 tells us that he was the unrighteous manager. He was dishonest. Fearful for his own future, and in order to gain an advantage, he collaborated with his master's debtors. He was teaching them how to cheat his master, so that when sacked by his master, he might find a future with the other debtors.

Why was the unrighteous manager praised?

Many find it difficult to understand verse 8 which says: "his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly". Different explanations have been offered. I will share how I understand it.

Clearly the Lord does not condone what the manger did, for He describes him as "unrighteous". Why then did the master praise him? It was because the manager was shrewd. He was clever. He thought about his future and proceeded to protect it, although he did so in an improper manner.

The sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light

In the second part of verse 8, the Lord Jesus compares believers to the people of this world. He says: "the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light". By saying this, the Lord Jesus is not asking us to emulate this manager. He is highlighting this point: the people of the world scheme and plan based on their perspective and values. They want to make the best out of this world and are shrewd in doing so. But what about us, the sons of light? Are we "shrewd" in relation to the kingdom of God? As sons of light, we should be wiser than the people of this world, because the Spirit of God is dwelling in us. But are we? Are we living according to the perspective and values of God's kingdom?

We believe we are citizens of God's kingdom. We recognise that the things of this world will perish, and only the things of God's kingdom have real value and will endure. But are we living consistent with this recognition? Are our energies concentrated on this? Do we plan in that direction? Are we wise in our own context and in God's eyes?

Sadly, we are often far from wise in working out according to the perspective we believe in. We are not planning well with a view to eternity in the whole way we live on earth.

Wise use of material wealth and eternal well-being

The main issue in this parable has to do with material wealth. In verse 9, the Lord Jesus says: "I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings".

Why "the wealth of unrighteousness"? It is because money, although not evil in itself, is often associated with unrighteousness.

In this verse, the Lord is telling us to make good use of material wealth. The way the Lord Jesus says it indicates He wants us to pay attention to this issue. This is

because our attitude, approach and stewardship of material wealth will have a bearing on how we will fare in eternity. How we use material things will reveal how wise or unwise we are as sons of light. Are we wise managers of the wealth of unrighteousness?

Faithfulness in material wealth and true riches

Luke 16:10

“He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much.

In this verse, the Lord Jesus is telling us that material things are not important in God’s kingdom. It is a “very little thing”. Yet, we are to be faithful in this “very little thing”. If we are not faithful in this “very little thing”, it will reflect poorly on our attitude and character.

Luke 16:11

“Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you?”

“True riches” refers to the things pertaining to God’s kingdom. The Lord is saying: If we cannot be faithful even in material wealth, how can God entrust to us important things He is concerned about in His kingdom? Will He share with us what is in His heart? Will He bring us into His confidence, and entrust important work and responsibilities to us?

There is another element that is important in the area of true riches, which will become clearer as we look at verse 12.

Luke 16:12

“And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?”

What does the verse mean? “Use of that which is another’s” may seem to be referring to the use of material wealth belonging to others. However, in my understanding, the Lord Jesus is referring to material wealth that we have. Such wealth, while it belongs to us is not really ours because it is entrusted to us by God. Legally, it belongs to us, but from the spiritual perspective, it has been entrusted to us by God. We are God’s managers. We cannot bring material wealth with us to eternity. It is not a part of us.

“Who will give you that which is your own” refers to that which is more important. In my understanding, it refers to those things that pertain to eternity, things linked to us that carry on to eternity. Such things have to do with our own development, our responsibilities, and what the Lord seeks to teach us. The significance of how we fare in these things will continue into eternity. These are the things that really count.

Concluding remarks

The Lord Jesus wants us to be wise managers, to be prayerful in making good use of material wealth. We are not to neglect this area of responsibility. We must learn to be wise in the way we manage this area of our life. While material things can damage our life, it can also be useful. Make good use of it, "so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9).

Luke 16:9 is a follow-up statement on the parable of the shrewd manager. The Lord Jesus is trying to tell us to make good use of material wealth, so that there can be positive implications for us when we enter into eternity. How we make use of material things—our attitude, our approach, the wise stewardship of it—will have a bearing on how we will fare in eternity.

Material wealth can be a snare to us but it need not be. Wise stewardship of the material things that God has entrusted us can actually be helpful in the advancement of God's kingdom. It can contribute to the lives of others, as well as to our own spiritual life.

"It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). As we give, we are blessed. As we are good managers of the material things God entrusts to us, we actually make progress in our spiritual life.

So while material things are unimportant in themselves, our attitude towards them and the way we use them do have important implications.

The Lord Jesus has declared that we cannot serve material wealth if we want to serve God (Luke 16:13). So we have to make up our minds. We cannot serve two masters. Let us look to the Lord that He will help us be devoted to Him and serve Him only.

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