

TRULY  
**RICH**<sub>AND</sub>  
**GREAT**

Many people in the world are preoccupied with the pursuit of material riches and worldly fame, status and greatness. They regard these as important goals in life and see how one fares in these areas as indicators of success. Such worldly pursuits are futile, bring no true fulfilment and ruin many lives. God's children must guard against such preoccupations and pursuits. At the same time, they have to recognise that being truly rich and great is extremely precious and of enduring value.

It is crucial for believers to see clearly the biblical teaching on these important issues. How we understand these areas and what we are committed to will have a direct bearing on our personal relationship with God, our growth in moral and spiritual stature, and how effectively we participate in the fulfilment of God's purposes.

May this book contribute towards a wholesome understanding of these issues. May it help God's children to be truly rich and great in His kingdom.

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LIM KOU



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# Preface

This title, *Truly Rich and Great*, is the fifth that I have published since 2003. The four earlier titles<sup>1</sup> have reached the hands of Christian brethren in various countries. The warm reception the first four titles received has been an encouragement to me and, as the Lord enables, I hope to continue making available more titles.

This latest book is based on eight consecutive messages<sup>2</sup> preached in a local congregation in 1994–1995. Through it, I hope to contribute towards a wholesome understanding of what it means to be truly rich and great — seen from the biblical perspective and the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus.

As in my earlier books, I have tried to show that the truths presented in these pages have been carefully derived from the Scriptures. I hope that by presenting the messages in this way, you will be helped to develop your personal convictions on the issues addressed based on the Scriptures.

As at this time of writing, I have had forty years of fellowship and ministry in a local congregation and for that, I am truly grateful to the Lord. My books grew out of these forty years of life together with the brethren. Many of the brethren have contributed in various ways to my ministry and in making these books available. Their contributions include recording and transcribing the messages, and editing them into a form suitable for publication.

I wish to also express my thanks to God for the participation of brethren in other countries. Some of them helped to print and distribute the books in regions beyond — from the Philippines and India to Africa and the Americas. Some also helped to translate the books into other languages. To date, the first four

titles have been translated into Spanish while the first title, *Understanding Job*, is available in Akha, the language of a Thai minority tribe, and the fourth title, *Truly Strong*, is currently available in Korean in ebook format.

The involvement of the brethren in the local congregation and those in other countries is, to me, a meaningful expression of fellowship among God's people in the universal church.

More materials from my ministry are available on the website [www.godandtruth.com](http://www.godandtruth.com). Besides the five books in various digital formats, you will also find many text messages and more than 500 audio messages on major issues of the Christian faith. I invite you to visit the website and freely download the materials for personal use or to forward them to others. God willing, I hope to provide more wholesome scriptural materials to help Christians grow and serve the Lord.

This is an on-going project and I am deeply conscious that it cannot be carried out and sustained without the Lord's enabling and provision. I would therefore appreciate your prayers for the Lord's guidance and undertaking for this whole project so that it may truly contribute to the spiritual growth of His children. It is my earnest prayer that God's children may be truly rich and great in His kingdom.

Lim Kou

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<sup>1</sup> *Understanding Job* (2003), *The Two Kingdoms* (2005), *Man of Faith* (2010), *Truly Strong* (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Messages AR147–154 from the message series *Appearance & Reality*.

# Introduction

**R**iches, greatness, success, strength and power — these are concepts usually associated with the worldly and the ambitious. These are the things that the people of the world regard as of utmost importance and are preoccupied with. Christians can also be entangled in these areas and their lives rendered ineffective.

There is, however, an important place for true riches, greatness, success, strength and power from the perspective of God's kingdom. The Bible teaches us that these are vital aspects of healthy, effective Christian living. But we need to recognise the distinction between the world's perspective and God's perspective of riches, greatness, success, strength and power.

I considered the subject of true success in my book *The Two Kingdoms*, and true strength and power in my book *Truly Strong*. I approached these subjects of true success and true strength by looking at the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In this book, I will take a similar approach, where the issues of true riches and true greatness will be viewed primarily through the lens of the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus.

Because many people are so used to viewing the issues of life from the perspective of this fallen world, they will find the life and conduct of the Lord Jesus, and many of His teachings, to be puzzling. But when we understand the primary concern in the heart of the Lord Jesus, which is the kingdom of God, and when we learn to view things from the perspective of God's kingdom, we will be able to have clearer insights into many issues, including the many issues relating to riches and greatness, such as:



- Why do many people in the world desire after riches and greatness?
- What does it mean to be truly rich and great?
- How does the life of the Lord Jesus exemplify the life of one who is truly rich and great?
- Why is it important that we aspire to be truly rich and great and what are some pitfalls we have to beware of?
- How can we become truly rich and great?
- In what ways does our attitude towards material wealth have a bearing on our being truly rich and on our spiritual and eternal well-being?
- Can one be materially rich, yet spiritually poor in God's kingdom? And can one be materially poor, yet truly rich in God's kingdom?
- Is it good and advantageous to have much material wealth?
- What would be a wise approach to the stewardship of material wealth and what are some practical ways wise stewardship may be expressed?
- What are wrong concepts of greatness and how will these hinder the work of God?
- Why is true greatness vitally linked to having the heart of a servant?

May the Lord be pleased to make use of the content of this book to contribute towards a wholesome understanding of what it means to be truly rich and great. And may He help us all to be truly rich and great in His kingdom.

## God Desires We Be Rich Towards Him

All over the world, people are preoccupied with material wealth. At the national level, there is a strong emphasis on countries becoming wealthier, and 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 temptation, resulting in their ruin and destruction. The corridors of history are littered with many who have pursued this path and ended up in destruction.

The apostle 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 this quest for wealth, many are prepared to be dishonest, to cheat, to lie, to scheme and even to kill.

Many crimes are committed by people who desire material gain. We see all kinds of dishonesty and scheming—from the “schoolboy cheats” and “small-timers” who cheat on weights or pass off inferior imitation goods as the real thing, to intrigues and schemes in high society, where the stakes are high, and white-collar crimes and criminal breach of trust that can involve millions of dollars.

Why do people want to make plenty of money? I pondered over this issue when I was young. It cannot be that people want money for its own sake because money has no intrinsic value. People desire money because of what they think money can do for them. It can buy them material things. It can also give them status, influence and even power. Hence, the common phrase “money talks” — which refers not just to money being able to buy things, but also to how money may be used to exert influence and get one’s way.

At a deeper level, many pursue material wealth because it gives them a sense of security and they think it can bring them fulfilment, satisfaction and happiness. They associate material wealth with well-being and success in life, but they do not realise that what can be obtained through earthly riches cannot truly satisfy the human soul.

Trying to find true fulfilment and fill the emptiness in our lives by pursuing 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 reality, many continue to pursue riches. It is even sadder that many believers, who should know better, are also joining in this pursuit.

Let us ponder over the life of the Lord Jesus and His teaching on riches and what it means to be truly rich.

### **The Lord Jesus was poor yet truly rich**

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.

#### **Leviticus 12:8**

‘But if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, the one for a burnt

offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for her, and she will be clean.’

**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.”

The Lord Jesus did not have a comfortable, easy or lavish lifestyle — 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, 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 enriches the lives of others.

**The teaching of the Lord Jesus on riches**

The proper perspective, attitude and approach we should have towards riches is an important theme in the teaching of the Lord

Jesus. Matthew 6:19–24 is a key passage on this subject.

### *Storing 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 teaches us not to store up for ourselves treasures on earth. He is not saying that having material things is wrong. He is saying that we are not to store up treasures on earth out of self-centred, self-seeking desires. 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 and we should not set our heart upon them.

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 and even the powers of darkness cannot take them away.

In verses 22 and 23, the Lord Jesus teaches 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 proper attitude towards material wealth.

#### *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 on our attitude towards material wealth 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 take a clear stand in this area. If we cling to riches, we cannot properly love, worship and serve God.

#### *The deceitfulness of riches*

In the parable of the sower, the Lord Jesus warns against, among other things, the deceitfulness of riches.

##### **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.”

The Lord Jesus explains that the deceitfulness of wealth chokes the word of God so it becomes unfruitful. When non-believers are preoccupied with pursuing material wealth, it will be difficult for the truth of the gospel to find a place in their hearts. Likewise, when believers are gripped by material wealth, the truth will also not bear good fruit in their hearts. If our lives are being choked by the thorns of riches, we will not be able to benefit as much as we could.

### *The rich fool*

Let us pay heed to what the Lord Jesus has to say on this subject in the parable of the rich fool.

#### **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 this 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 went on to tell 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 towards God. The Lord pronounced 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 God’s strong words of disapproval on this man’s life, and to the warning of the Lord Jesus: Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed (v. 15).

Let us take note of some important points from this parable.

### *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



to 19, the man reasoned to himself about what he could 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 expanding and accumulating his material wealth and indulging in the pleasures of the material things of life, as if they were most important for his soul. He did not realise his concentration on indulgence in the material things in life was harmful to his soul and would lead to its destruction.

### *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 abundance ahead of him. He had all his plans in place and he thought that his accumulated wealth would last him for a long time to come. He was being presumptuous. He did not think that anything could happen to him. He did not consider that he could die at any time and he would have to give an account of his life to God, or that he could lose all his possessions, or 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 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? Have we properly resolved this issue in our lives?

While we have plenty — a good and stable job, a substantial bank account — we can 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 take a course of action that we recognise God desires of us, but one that would mean forgoing a regular source of income? Are we prepared to do that and 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. Those whose lives are not pleasing to God do not have proper basis for such confidence in Him. If they affirm strong faith in God's provisions and undertaking for their lives, they may end up frustrated and disillusioned.

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 by quoting this psalm. But the sense of comfort may be false. 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 had sought to, 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 the one who loves the Lord, who walks with Him.

#### *4. Beware of self-centredness and selfishness*

A major problem with the rich man in the parable 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 evil in itself. In our faithful walk with the Lord, He may see it fit to entrust us with material possessions and wealth. When He does so, we are to 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 pronounced this man “a fool” because of his self-centred attitudes and ways. It would be tragic if this is also God’s pronouncement on us because of the way we live. Let us pay heed to the Lord’s warning and not set our hearts on accumulating worldly possessions or place our security in them.

#### *6. Be rich towards God*

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

In this verse, the Lord applies the truth He is teaching in the parable to anyone who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God.

The significant issue He is emphasising is that we are to be

rich towards God. True riches do not lie in the realm of the visible and temporal. True riches have to do with the extent we have developed the inner qualities that are important to the Lord. If we have grown in these inner qualities and in the richness of our relationship with God, and are living lives that bear good fruit, we will be truly rich.

*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 barns to store their food. Yet, the Lord tells us, they are well provided for. God feeds them. And we are more valuable to God than birds.

It is proper to trust God to provide for us, just as He provides for the birds and clothes 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. 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.

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 this issue in their hearts. If we have not properly resolved this issue, we can be significantly hindered in our walk with the

Lord and in our spiritual development. We may also stumble and compromise in our approach to life.

We must therefore 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 we have, we need not be anxious about the basic things in life, and we can meaningfully trust God to provide for us.

### **Not easy to be wealthy yet faithful**

#### *Preoccupied with material wealth*

It is not just those who are materially deprived who are preoccupied with acquiring material things and making more money. 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 having the wrong attitude and appetites within.

Many people think that it is advantageous to be materially rich, and that they will be satisfied if and when they are materially rich. But the rich often find it difficult to be contented. Those who are materially well-off may be preoccupied with wanting to acquire more and more. They may also be fearful that their wealth may be dissipated or 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. Take note of the word "imagination". The rich man's sense of security is just his own imagination. It is illusory. In truth, his wealth is neither a strong city nor a high wall. 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.

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

Paul gives this instruction concerning believers who are rich:

**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, the rich 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. In reality, when we are wealthy, it is more difficult for us to maintain a spirit of true discipleship and to exercise good stewardship of what we have.

Freely the Lord has given to us, freely we are to channel it as the Lord sees fit. However, when we have much material wealth, it is not easy to live with a deep sense of freedom in this area.

### **Temptation and spiritual attack**

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

Let us learn from the account of how the Lord Jesus was tempted by Satan 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 is seeking to destroy them. 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 towards material wealth are drawn deeper and deeper into 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 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 often uses money to draw us towards 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*

Let us heed Paul's exhortation in 1 Timothy 6:11–12.

#### **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.

Instead of desiring to get rich and longing for material wealth (v. 10), we are 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.

In 1 Timothy 6:18–19, Paul teaches that true riches have to do with doing good, being rich in good works, and being generous in sharing with others.

#### **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.

True riches have a positive 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.

*The 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, from the biblical perspective, all believers can be truly rich and can contribute significantly to God's kingdom.

Let us learn from the life of the poor but rich widow, whom the Lord Jesus commended. The life of this poor widow is in stark contrast to what we have seen earlier of the life of the rich man who was pronounced a fool by God (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 had only two small copper coins, but she put in all she owned.

What the poor widow contributed seems insignificant and the meaning of what she did could easily be missed. No one would 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 contributed only 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 her attitude and the 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 the outward expressions. To become truly rich, we must concentrate on nurturing the realities and qualities within.

### **Concluding remarks**

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 and lay 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 in God's sight and lay up a good foundation for the future.

## Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Why are so many people in the world preoccupied with material wealth and the pursuit of riches? What are some of the problems associated with the desire to be rich?
2. Was the Lord Jesus rich or poor during His earthly life? What are the implications of this for our lives?
3. What can we learn from the Lord's teaching in Matthew 6:19–24 and Matthew 13:3–9; 18–23 on:
  - Storing up treasures
  - Having a clear eye and an undivided heart
  - The deceitfulness of wealth?
4. What is the Lord Jesus seeking to teach us in the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:12–23)?
5. Do you think it is easier or more difficult to be faithful to the Lord when we have much material wealth? Why?
6. Scripture exhorts us to store up for ourselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future (1 Tim. 6:19). What do you understand by this and how can this be worked out?

What further insight can you gain on this subject from the action of the poor widow in Mark 12:41–44?

## Message 2

# True Riches and Well-Being

In the previous message, we noted the Lord Jesus' teaching that true riches do not lie in material wealth and that we are not to store up treasures on earth, but to store up true riches in heaven. We also noted that many people are preoccupied with becoming rich, acquiring material wealth and, together with it, a sense of status and pride. Although they seek satisfaction in such a life, they will find true satisfaction eluding them.

In this message, we will consider other scriptural passages on this subject, beginning with the teaching of the Lord Jesus in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

### The parable of the rich man and Lazarus

#### 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 for. He was always dressed in 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 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. His was a life of deprivation and suffering.

Note, however, the contrast in their situations after they both died. In his life after death, Lazarus, the poor man, was faring very well, being in Abraham's bosom. He was in a very favourable context. 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 impresses upon us that we must not live like the rich man or else we will end up like him in eternity.

Some think that because Lazarus was in a miserable state while on earth, he could enjoy well-being in eternity. The rich man, on the other hand, was immersed in luxury while on earth and so he suffered in eternity. But this parable is not teaching us that there will be a reversal of circumstances in eternity.

### *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. To see this clearly, we must learn to see beyond the material and financial circumstances of a person.

A person may suffer material poverty, deprivation and hardship, but, like Lazarus, he can be rich in the eyes of God — even while on earth. On the other hand, a person may live in material wealth and luxury, but, like the rich man in the parable, he may not be rich towards God. In fact, he may be living in spiritual poverty and in a miserable state, even though dressed in fine linen and living in physical splendour.

Let us consider three points arising from the parable.

#### *1. Those rich materially may not be 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 improper 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 was laid at his gate, longing to be fed. This rich man comes across as a man of extreme self-indulgence, preoccupied with materialism, and utterly lacking in compassion for those in dire need.

## 2. *Those poor materially may not be rich spiritually*

Some people have the notion that because they are suffering or are deprived in this world, they will have a good time in eternity. But that is not true. Not all who are poor materially and suffering in this world will fare well in eternity.

Lazarus fared well, not because he was poor materially, but because of the positive reality and meaning within him. Although the passage does not make this point explicit, the Scriptures clearly teaches that how we fare in the eyes of the Lord and in eternity has to do with the quality of our heart. We see this in 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 Beatitudes lists those who are blessed, and it has to do with the good attitudes and qualities within them. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are merciful and pure in heart, and those who are persecuted because of their faith in Christ, shall have their reward in heaven.



*3. The truths in the parable apply to us even though our circumstances differ from those of the rich man and Lazarus*

We may think that we do not have the same lifestyle as the rich man and are therefore not like him. But 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 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. We need not be exactly like the rich man or Lazarus for the truths and spiritual principles 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 indulging in the things of this world such that our fellowship with God is superficial and our spiritual appetite dull? Or are we using the things of the world in the spirit of true discipleship, in a manner that befits God's children?

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 genuine concern for those in need or do we only pay lip service?

Let us reflect further what we can learn from this parable.

*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, but do we also place our security in material possessions or in other things in the visible and temporal realm? Are we influenced by the people around us who hold such values, and do we end up doing the same? If so, we will be having a false sense of security.

We need to have a clear spiritual and eternal perspective on this issue. 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 in our being, in our character and in our walk with God.

True security and well-being come about when we walk well with the Lord. Our earthly circumstances may not always be favourable, even when we are walking well with Him. But we need not be discouraged. We can still rejoice in the Lord, and seek to learn what He desires to teach us. When we do that, we will experience true well-being and have proper basis for true confidence in Him.

### *Living with an eternal perspective*

The Lord Jesus 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 time 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 when 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 of our life is important. We cannot re-live it. We must live our life well and make the most of it. Any regret in eternity would be futile.

### *Envy not the rich*

Many rich people do not live their lives properly, and the wicked do not care about the ways of God. Yet they seem to have so much: earthly wealth, status, an enjoyable and easy life. On the other hand, many of us who seek to be faithful to God do experience a difficult life. As a result, we may become troubled and envious of the rich. And the evil one will seek to stir up such thoughts and feelings in us. It is important that we do not dwell on these negative thoughts and feelings but seek to maintain a proper

posture before God and reject all such negative influences. Let us learn from this parable not to be troubled or envious.

### **Seeing things from God's perspective**

Let us also learn from the testimony of the psalmist in Psalm 73. He began by affirming the goodness of God to His people, to those who are pure in heart. But for him, he had almost stumbled because he was envious of the prosperity of the wicked.

#### **Psalm 73**

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.  
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.

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.

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.

15 If I had said, “I will speak thus,”

Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.

The psalmist had sought to keep his heart pure. Surely, he felt, it was all in vain, for the wicked increased in wealth and ease while he continued to suffer. But he recognised that he was wrong to be envious of the wicked and that it would be a betrayal of God’s children to say that living a pure and innocent life was in vain.

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.

He had difficulty understanding and resolving the issue until he came before the Lord and realised the eventual outcome of the wicked.

Likewise, we may be troubled by many things. But as we draw near to God, He can help us to perceive things more accurately, and our response to things, people and situations can become 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.

These verses indicate how God views the wicked. God is against the wicked, and, at any time, He can destroy them. But when we look at what takes place in the world, verses 18 to 20 do not seem to give an adequate answer. On earth, the wicked are not always punished, and those who love the Lord are not always spared troubles. This seems to be an injustice.

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.

The psalmist knew it was not right for him to be embittered over what he saw as injustice in this world. He could see how meaningful it was to continually be with the Lord, and be led and guided by Him.

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

He appreciated God's counsel and guidance and thereafter, be received to glory. And he 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 saying: “besides You, I desire nothing on earth”, the psalmist did not mean other things on earth were unimportant to him. He was expressing how important God was to him compared to other things on earth.

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

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

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.

These concluding verses show us that, ultimately, what counts is not how much wealth we have, but how deep our relationship with God is. Those who are unfaithful and far from Him will perish.

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 a posture of faith that is 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 temporal realm. They are found in our faithfulness to God and in our fellowship with Him.

## **We cannot serve God and material wealth**

The Lord Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in the context of addressing the issue of material wealth in Luke 16.

### **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.

In verse 14, we are told that the Pharisees were lovers of money. They were listening to the Lord, but they were also scoffing at Him. We may not be lovers of money like the Pharisees, but how well do we pay heed to the Lord’s teaching? Do material things and money still tug at our hearts? Do we scoff at the Lord’s teaching as being idealistic and not practical in the world we live in?

The Scriptures teaches us that material wealth is not evil in itself. It is the love of money that is the root of all sorts of evil (1 Tim. 6:10). We cannot serve God and also love material wealth. Some want the best of both worlds, and they think they are being shrewd. The Lord teaches us that this is not possible. That is not to say that faithful believers cannot have much material wealth. As we walk faithfully with God, He does sometimes entrust us with material wealth. We must, however, make sure that we do not become rich because of our love for money.

Many 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.

## **The parable of the shrewd manager**

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, the emphasis of this parable is not on the manager's unrighteousness, but on his shrewdness.

When the Lord told this parable, He was addressing the disciples. Although the parable is not easy to understand, there are helpful lessons on the issue of material wealth and stewardship that we can learn from it.

**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 an unrighteous manager. He was dishonest. Fearful for his own future, and seeking personal advantage, he collaborated with his master’s debtors. He taught them how to cheat his master, so that when sacked by his master, he might find a future with these debtors.

*Why was the unrighteous manager praised?*

Verse 8 is difficult to understand. It reads: “And 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 manager did, for He describes him as “unrighteous”. Why then did the master praise the manager? It was because the manager had acted shrewdly. When he was told he could no longer be manager, he assessed his situation and took steps to ensure his future circumstances would be favourable to him. But the way he went about it was improper.

*The sons of this age shrewder 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: “For the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light”. In saying this, the Lord Jesus is not asking us to emulate this manager. He is highlighting the point that the people of the world cleverly scheme and plan based on their perspective and

values. They want to make the most 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 wise in living according to the perspective and values of God’s kingdom?

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 true value and will endure. But are we living consistent with this recognition? Are we concentrating our energies on the things of God’s kingdom? Do we plan in this direction? Do we live on earth with a view to eternity? Are we living wisely in God’s eyes?

#### *Wise use of material wealth and eternal well-being*

The Lord Jesus is addressing the issue of material wealth in this parable. In verse 9, He says: “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”.

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 and approach towards material wealth and our stewardship of it 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 the use of 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 this verse mean? “Use of that which is another’s” seems 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.

“Who will give you that which is your own” — this refers to what the Lord will give to us in His eternal kingdom. Our

rewards in heaven, what we will experience, and the roles and responsibilities we will receive from the Lord in His eternal kingdom, will bear a relationship with what we have learned from the Lord, how much we have grown in moral and spiritual stature, and how we have lived our lives on earth. These are the things that are important, that really count.

### **Concluding remarks**

While material wealth can be a snare to us and can damage our lives, it need not. In fact, it can be useful. In Luke 16:9, the Lord Jesus tells us to make good use of it, “so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings”.

This verse is a follow-up statement on the parable of the shrewd manager. Here, the Lord Jesus is teaching us that wise stewardship of material wealth has positive implications for us in eternity. How we make use of material wealth — our attitude and approach towards it and our stewardship of it — will have a bearing on how we will fare in eternity.

In Acts 20:35, Paul recounted the teaching of the Lord Jesus, that “it is more blessed to give than to receive”. As we give, we contribute to the lives of others. At the same time, we are blessed, and our own spiritual life is enriched. Indeed, wise stewardship of the material things that God has entrusted us will help to advance God’s kingdom.

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 two masters. If we want to serve God, we cannot serve material wealth (Luke 16:13). We have to make up our minds which we will serve. May the Lord help us to be devoted to Him and serve Him only.

## Questions for reflection and discussion

1. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), who is the one who is truly rich and why? What else can we learn from this parable?
2. How does the testimony of the psalmist in Psalm 73 help us in our perspective and attitude towards material wealth and life in general?
3. What can we learn from the parable of the shrewd manager in Luke 16:1–14 on the wise use of material wealth, its relationship with being truly rich and our well-being in God's eternal kingdom?

Consider Luke 16:8. What would it mean for us as sons of light to be more shrewd in relation to the kingdom of God than the sons of this age in relation to their own kind?

## Relationship Between Material Riches and True Riches

We have seen that a person who is rich and doing well in the world may in reality be poor because he is not rich towards God, and thus, not rich in the eyes of God and from the perspective of eternity. This truth comes through clearly in the parable of the rich fool and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

One who is poor and not doing well from the world's perspective may be truly rich and faring well. The perfect example of this is the Lord Jesus. Other examples are Lazarus in the parable, and the poor widow who contributed two small copper coins.

In this message, I want to concentrate on the relationship between material riches and true riches, spiritual health and eternal well-being. We will be revisiting some Bible passages we have covered in the earlier messages.

When we consider issues such as growth in moral and spiritual stature, spiritual health and eternal well-being, we tend to think only of areas like prayer, reading of the Scriptures, fellowship with God and fellowship among the brethren. We may not think of the area of material riches. In this message we shall see that this area has a significant relationship with spiritual growth and our eternal well-being.

### **The Lord's teaching on true discipleship and material wealth**

The Lord Jesus often taught on the relationship between true discipleship and material wealth, and the attitude one should have

towards material wealth. This is because our attitude and approach towards material wealth have a bearing on our relationship with God, our spiritual health and eternal well-being.

This comes through clearly in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The lifestyle of the rich man reflected his attitudes, which affected how God looked at him, and it had implications for his eternal well-being. Likewise, in the parable of the rich fool, the rich man was not rich towards God because of his poor attitude in the area of material wealth, and God pronounced him a fool.

Let us consider further the teaching of the Lord Jesus on this issue in the parable of the shrewd manager.

**Luke 16:8–13**

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.”

The master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly. Commenting on this parable, the Lord Jesus said: “For the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light”. A key issue the Lord Jesus wants to

communicate in this parable is the shrewdness of the people of the world compared to the foolishness of believers.

The Lord Jesus continues: “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” (v. 9). The Lord Jesus is teaching us the attitude we should have towards material things: to use material wealth wisely, in a way that contributes to our eternal well-being. Many believers are not wise in the way they use material wealth. They live in a manner inconsistent with their being God’s children.

### *Stewardship of material wealth and eternal well-being*

There is a close relationship between the way we manage our material wealth and our eternal well-being.

The Lord Jesus says in verse 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”. He made this statement immediately after commenting on how we ought to make use of material wealth. This tells us that how we make use of material wealth reveals the quality of our faithfulness to God.

We may think that we are faithful in areas such as prayer, reading of the Scriptures, fellowship with the brethren, attending church meetings and so on. But are we also faithful in the wise use of material wealth? If we are not, it could be an indication that something is not right within us. We may not be as faithful as we think we are.

The Lord Jesus asks in verse 11: “Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you?” The Lord is comparing between our stewardship of material wealth and true wealth, which pertains to the kingdom of God and which will abide. Our attitude and response towards material wealth reveal the true quality of our lives and affect the way the Lord views us. It can also affect the freedom God has to use our lives now and what He will entrust



to us in eternity.

Material wealth can be useful and well-utilised, but it must not become our master and have a hold on us. The Lord Jesus makes this clear in verse 13: “No servant can serve two masters ... You cannot serve God and wealth”. If we let material wealth become our master, it will impair our relationship with God and our service for Him.

Let us look at Matthew 6:19–24, which reinforces this point.

### *Storing up treasures in heaven*

#### **Matthew 6:19–24**

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.

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!

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.”

In verses 19 and 20, the Lord Jesus contrasts storing up treasures on earth with storing up treasures in heaven. If we concentrate on storing up for ourselves material treasures on earth, we will not fare well in storing up spiritual treasures in heaven.

The Lord Jesus continues in verse 21: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”. It is clear that the Lord Jesus is concerned about our heart. Our heart will concentrate on where our treasure is, and that will have a bearing on our eternal well-being, and the outcome of our lives for eternity.

In verses 22 and 23, the Lord Jesus refers to the lamp of the body. Here, He is talking about spiritual insight and perception. He says: “The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. 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!”

Clarity of spiritual insight is very important. It is relevant for every aspect of our lives. Here, the Lord Jesus is emphasising the significance of having clear spiritual insight in relation to treasures on earth and treasures in heaven. He wants us to know the importance of seeing clearly the issues concerning our attitude towards material wealth and its implications on our treasures in heaven. He states categorically that no one can serve two masters. We certainly cannot serve both God and material wealth.

Material wealth in itself does not have enduring value in God's kingdom. However, our approach and attitude towards it reveal the quality of our spirit of discipleship and the meaning of our profession of faith in God, our submission to God, and the reality of our love and concern for others. We may say we love the Lord, we love our neighbours, and that we have an eternal perspective to life. But if we also love material wealth, it calls into question the meaning and reality of our profession, our values and the condition of our heart.

Material wealth has a significant bearing on our walk with God and our eternal well-being. If our approach towards material wealth is healthy, it will reinforce the positive qualities within us and help us develop them further. But if our approach is self-centred, it will harm our development and lead to degeneration of our lives.

So let us realise that if we are unhealthy in this area of material wealth, it may indicate that the professions of our lips are just that. There may not be the reality in our hearts. We may think we really love the Lord with all our hearts, but it may just be feelings.

It is important for each one of us to prayerfully reflect over

our attitude towards money and material possessions. What sort of attitude do we have and what does it reveal about the quality of our discipleship?

### **What does the Lord Jesus require of us?**

Let us now consider an important issue raised by our Lord concerning material wealth. It is not easy to immediately understand its meaning, and it is even more difficult to live it out.

#### **Luke 18:18–22**

18 A ruler questioned Him, saying, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

19 And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone.

20 “You know the commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’”

21 And he said, “All these things I have kept from my youth.”

22 When Jesus heard this, He said to him, “One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”

In this account, a rich ruler asked the Lord Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life. The Lord told him to sell all that he possessed and distribute it to the poor. When he heard the Lord’s reply, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich (v. 23). A passage in Mark 10:22, likely to be referring to the same incident, states it this way: “But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property”.

Here was an extremely rich man. But he was not truly rich, for he had no treasure in heaven. He wanted to have eternal life, but he was unwilling to do as the Lord had instructed. He went away, sad and grieved. It is sad that riches so gripped this man that he was hindered from becoming truly rich.

Why did the Lord Jesus lay down this condition — that he had to sell all he possessed and distribute it to the poor — before he could have treasure in heaven, and then to follow Him?

*Sell all we possess and distribute to the poor?*

Does the Lord require this of us all? Do we have to sell all we possess and distribute it to the poor before we can be His disciples, before we can enter the kingdom of God?

If this is so, how can we reconcile it with His instruction to “make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness”? This is in the parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16:9). It would be difficult to reconcile this understanding with the Lord’s teaching on the importance of our being good stewards of material riches.

The Lord Jesus did not require Zaccheus to give away all his possessions.

**Luke 19:8–9**

8 Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.”

9 And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham.”

The Lord Jesus said that Zaccheus had experienced salvation after Zaccheus announced that he would give half his possessions to the poor. Note that there was no requirement that he should give all.

It is likely that the Lord Jesus instructed the rich ruler to sell all that he had and give the money to the poor because the Lord knew he had a problem in this area. The Lord does not require this of all His followers.

Does it then mean that Luke 18:22 is not relevant to us? No, it is still relevant to us. It is important as a general principle not to quickly dismiss instructions of the Lord that make or appear to make a demand upon us.

*Spirit of true discipleship*

The reply of the Lord Jesus to the rich man underscores a very important principle which is clearly applicable to all believers. This principle is reflected in another verse in the teaching of the Lord Jesus.

**Luke 14:33**

“So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.”

Let us look at the context of this verse.

**Luke 14:25–32**

25 Now large crowds were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them,

26 “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.

27 “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

28 “For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it?

29 “Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him,

30 saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’

31 “Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand?

32 “Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace.”

The Lord Jesus is talking about the cost of discipleship. He says in verse 33: “So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions”. It is reasonably clear

that this verse applies to all who want to be His disciples.

The Lord wants us to give up all our own possessions and follow Him. The spirit of true discipleship involves giving up everything in order to follow the Lord. These words of the Lord Jesus can help us understand the meaning of what He told the rich ruler in Luke 18:22: “Sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me”.

What does the Lord require of us when He says His disciples must give up all their own possessions?

#### *Giving up all our own possessions*

We have seen that the Lord Jesus did not require Zaccheus to sell or give away all his possessions and that He had also taught the importance of good stewardship of what we have.

There are two key aspects to the Lord’s requirement: “to give up” and “all our own possessions”.

The original text translated “give up” has the sense of saying “goodbye”. It means we no longer regard any of the possessions as our own. We have said “goodbye” to them. We have given them all up.

“Give up all your own possessions” would then mean we do not regard anything we have as our own, to do as we please. Although the possessions belong to us legally, they are all consecrated to the Lord for Him to use as He pleases. We are merely His stewards. We are to manage, use and channel them to the degree we understand the Lord desires, in whatever form He sees fit. This is a reasonable and meaningful way to appreciate these words of the Lord Jesus and is consistent with the teaching of the Scriptures on this subject.

This principle is very important. We may be familiar with the concept of stewardship, but it is very important that we identify with the spirit of what the Lord Jesus is seeking to communicate here.

Many Christians freely say, “I do not regard these things

as my own; they are consecrated to the Lord; I am only God's steward." But there is often little reality of the spirit and posture intended by the Lord when He tells us to give up all our own possessions.

It is not easy to have the kind of spirit and attitude towards material riches that the Lord Jesus speaks of and some of us have more difficulty in this area.

*Part of the wider issue of consecration and true discipleship*

This kind of attitude and spirit required by the Lord Jesus that we are talking about is part of the wider issue of consecration and true discipleship. In the preceding verses, He also says: "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" and "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26–27).

The Lord Jesus makes it clear that if we want to be His disciples, we have to consecrate our lives to Him and submit to Him in every aspect of our lives. He must become primary in our lives. Our whole approach to life must change drastically. Our earthly relationships must take on a different light. Our love for our parents, spouse and children would have to seem like hate when compared to the love we should have for the Lord.

When we think about "self-life", we often think of expressions that are obviously negative or repulsive, but it can include areas which are not obviously unacceptable, such as our concerns for others and our desire to serve God.

Self-life basically proceeds from the self. The starting point of such an approach is our seeking to do things according to our own wisdom and thinking, and in our own strength.

The starting point, however, ought to be our relationship with God and our commitment to do all things in fellowship with Him. Our whole approach to life must not be based on our

own thinking and effort. How we view our lives, and our desire to grow, our attitude towards others and our love for them, must all be premised upon how God wants us to approach and work at these areas.

As in every other area of life, our approach to material wealth must not be according to our own thinking, inclinations or desires. We cannot regard material wealth as our possession, to use or dispose off as we see fit. It must be given up, consecrated to the Lord, to be used in wise stewardship.

If we say we are submitted to the Lord and yet we are not truly obedient to Him in the area of material wealth, then there is a deficiency in our submission to the lordship of Christ. If we have the spirit of true discipleship, we would be prepared to literally give up all and follow the Lord when He requires it of us.

Let us look at Matthew 4:18–22.

**Matthew 4:18–22**

18 Now as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen.

19 And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

20 Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.

21 Going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them.

22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.

When the Lord called Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow Him, they immediately left all and followed Him. Peter and Andrew left their boats and nets, which were their means of livelihood, and in the case of James and John, they left their father as well. They manifested the spirit of true discipleship in their response to the Lord’s call.



If we enter into the reality of true consecration of every aspect of our lives, we will have true freedom in the area of material wealth and in every other area.

What I am highlighting is the kind of spirit that the Lord requires of us. He may require us to literally leave everything to follow Him or He may not. But He would require all His disciples to have the *spirit* of giving up all their own possessions in order to follow Him.

The Lord Jesus highlighted and spoke much about the issue of material wealth because it is an issue that confronts all believers and there are many pitfalls. Believers can easily be ensnared, distracted and hindered in their walk with God because of the failure to “give up all our own possessions”. But to have a wholesome appreciation of the Lord’s teaching on this subject, we would need to consider also the positive dimension.

### **Wise use of material riches has a positive dimension**

#### **Luke 16:9**

“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.”

The Lord Jesus says we are to make friends for ourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that “when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings”. What I understand the Lord is saying here is that although material wealth is “unrighteous wealth”, how we use it has eternal significance. If we use it wisely, in a positive way, then there will be the positive meaning and significance in the eternal realm. In eternity, when our earthly material wealth would have perished, the eternal value that resulted from its wise use will remain. How we use material wealth on earth will have a bearing on how we will be regarded in God’s kingdom in eternity.

If we maintain the spirit of true discipleship in the way we exercise stewardship of “unrighteous wealth”, it can contribute to the development of our character and the nurturing of the qualities of our inner man. We learn to refrain from self-indulgence and be concerned for the needs of others and the Lord’s work. We learn and grow in the process. At the same time, the needs of others are met and there is contribution to the advancement of God’s kingdom.

We know that in many parts of the world there is still a significant need for the Scriptures, for good Christian literature, and for the support of faithful Christian workers. There is also the need for equipment in advancing the Lord’s work. Material wealth when properly used can contribute to the advancement of God’s kingdom. It can therefore have a positive dimension.

*Every believer can contribute significantly in giving*

Do not think that just because we are not well-off materially, this area has little or no relevance to us. If we think in this way, we may then miss out on the joy and blessedness of giving.

Remember the poor widow who contributed the two small copper coins. It is very likely she was the poorest among all those who were giving. But she did not neglect her part. And the Lord Jesus tells us that she contributed more than all the rest. What she contributed was more significant to God than the contributions of all the others.

The significance of our contribution is not measured by how much we give, but by the meaning within our hearts and whether we are acting in wise stewardship according to God’s guidance.

Each one of us must prayerfully consider how we can be good stewards of all that the Lord has entrusted to our care — that which is within our control and influence.

Let us not compare with one another, and let us not just leave it to others to give to God’s work. I want to stress this important truth: each one of us can contribute significantly in giving. None

of us should neglect this area. Each one of us can and should experience the joy and blessedness of giving.

In Acts 20:35, Paul, quoting the Lord Jesus, said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive”. If we give with the right attitude, we enter into the joy and blessedness of giving. Let us be good stewards and give generously and wisely so that we can be a blessing to others and be blessed ourselves.

Whether we have much or little materially is not the critical issue. What is critical is the quality of the spirit of discipleship in us. If we have little, is it because we have squandered away what the Lord has entrusted to us? If we have much, is it because we are accumulating and hoarding for ourselves?

At the heart of the issue is the wise management and use of material riches for the advancement of God’s kingdom. This is part of a wholesome approach to life.

### **Concluding remarks**

Let us realise that our attitude and approach towards material wealth and possessions bear a relationship with true riches, spiritual health and eternal well-being. This is an area that the Lord Jesus addresses often, and He links it directly to the issue of true discipleship and the implications for our eternal state.

We need to prayerfully ask the Lord to help us understand what He requires of us. What does He mean when He asks His disciples to give up all their own possessions and follow Him? What is the spirit He wants us to have? How can this become a reality in our hearts?

Let us ask the Lord to search our hearts and help us evaluate accurately our whole approach, attitude and practice in relation to material wealth.

Do we truly regard nothing as our own to do as we please, and everything as consecrated to the Lord to be used as He pleases? Are we truly His stewards? Or are these merely familiar phrases we pay lip service to, with little reality in practical outworking?

Let us ask the Lord to help us recognise our state with regard to this area and take corrective measures where necessary. Good stewardship of material wealth can have significant implications for our relationship with God and for His work.

### Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What bearing does our attitude towards material riches have on our being truly rich, our relationship with God, our spiritual health and our eternal well-being?
2. In Luke 18:22, the Lord Jesus instructed the rich ruler to sell all he possessed and distribute it to the poor. Does the Lord require this of all His disciples?

What does the Lord mean when He teaches in Luke 14:33 that “none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions”? What does He require of us and how is this instruction part of the wider issue of consecration and true discipleship?

3. In the context of telling the parable of the shrewd manager, the Lord Jesus said: “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” (Luke 16:9). What do you understand by this statement? How does it speak to us about the positive dimension in the wise use of material wealth?
4. Is significant contribution in giving feasible only for the wealthy or also for every believer? Explain.

## Practical Outworking — Wise Stewardship

**I**n the last message we reflected on the relationship between material riches and true riches. Wise stewardship of material riches God has entrusted to us is a manifestation of true discipleship and faithfulness to God and would have a direct bearing on our spiritual health, growth, being truly rich and laying a good foundation for our future in God's eternal kingdom. In this message, we will consider how the spirit of wise stewardship of material wealth can be meaningfully and appropriately expressed.

### **Practical outworking of our attitude towards material wealth**

#### *1. Careful spending on ourselves and loved ones*

Some expenditure is necessary, such as on food and clothing for ourselves and for our loved ones. What we should be careful about is unnecessary or excessive spending, especially on things which do not contribute to service or to our well-being.

We need to beware of pampering ourselves or our loved ones. It is a waste of money, and it is also detrimental to the spirit of discipleship and our well-being. If we are truly concerned for our loved ones, we will not want to pamper them because it can have negative effects on their lives.

With increasing affluence, the spirit of consumerism is all around us. We must not be carried along by this spirit. It does not mean, however, that if we spend little on ourselves or on our loved ones, we are faring well in this area. What is critical is the

reason for our spending little. The miser does not spend much either — for himself or his family. We may hoard what we have, accumulating them for a sense of security. Or we may just want to cling on to money and possessions.

Lavish, wasteful spending on ourselves and on our loved ones, and ignoring the urgent needs of others and in the Lord's work, are not trivial matters. Remember the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man lived lavishly, thinking all was well and fine. In reality, he was in a precarious situation.

## *2. Genuine willingness to give*

The Lord may not require us to give away everything we have. He may want us to give away substantial amounts of our money, or He may want us to accumulate a substantial amount to be channelled in various ways at the appropriate time. Whatever the case, we must not cling to our possessions. We must not let them have a hold on us. There must be a genuine willingness to give whatever is appropriate, at any time.

Let us not rationalise away wrong attitudes within our hearts. Let us first resolve the attitude and spirit within us in these areas and then learn to hold all things with open hands, not with clenched fists.

Do we really have the attitude that we do not own the material wealth that we have, and that we are merely stewards? Remember, we have to give an account to God of our stewardship in all areas, including in this area of material wealth.

Let us beware of holding on to what the Lord has entrusted to us, giving little and keeping much for ourselves. Instead, let us learn to nurture the spirit of generosity and, at the same time, be wise in how we express it.

With increasing affluence, our responsibility in the stewardship of material riches will increase in significance. What we give can mean a lot to people in need and to those doing the Lord's work in various contexts. Our contribution can make

a significant difference, especially in less developed countries where the cost of living is much lower. A small sum of money can go a long way to support a Christian worker in the poorer regions of the world.

### *3. Thoughtful giving*

In our practical outworking in this area, we should prayerfully consider before the Lord how and in what area we can give from time to time. We need wisdom to channel what we have. It should be thoughtful giving, not careless giving.

### *4. Consideration and planning for the future*

The Lord may lead some believers through times when they do not have sufficient for the near future and they do not know where or when they may obtain provision for their daily needs. A life of faith can include learning to trust the Lord day by day for His provision. The Lord may desire some to trust Him in this way for long periods of time.

But it does not mean that a life of faith must always be this way. It is not always best to live from day to day without any idea how our needs for the next day or next year will be met. This way of living is not necessarily a mark of spirituality. There is a place for us to consider and plan for the future for ourselves and for our loved ones. Failure to do so can at times be a reflection of lack of care or irresponsibility. We may be lazy and careless with our lives and may not be taking the necessary steps to ensure that we and our loved ones are adequately provided for. There can also be other areas of need the Lord may want us to bear in mind.

### *The excellent wife*

Let us reflect on the excellent wife described in Proverbs 31. What we can learn from this passage is very helpful, not only for wives, but for all women — and men as well.

**Proverbs 31:10–31**

10 An excellent wife, who can find?  
For her worth is far above jewels.  
11 The heart of her husband trusts in her,  
And he will have no lack of gain.  
12 She does him good and not evil  
All the days of her life.  
13 She looks for wool and flax  
And works with her hands in delight.  
14 She is like merchant ships;  
She brings her food from afar.  
15 She rises also while it is still night  
And gives food to her household  
And portions to her maidens.  
16 She considers a field and buys it;  
From her earnings she plants a vineyard.  
17 She girds herself with strength  
And makes her arms strong.  
18 She senses that her gain is good;  
Her lamp does not go out at night.  
19 She stretches out her hands to the distaff,  
And her hands grasp the spindle.  
20 She extends her hand to the poor,  
And she stretches out her hands to the needy.  
21 She is not afraid of the snow for her household,  
For all her household are clothed with scarlet.  
22 She makes coverings for herself;  
Her clothing is fine linen and purple.  
23 Her husband is known in the gates,  
When he sits among the elders of the land.  
24 She makes linen garments and sells them,  
And supplies belts to the tradesmen.  
25 Strength and dignity are her clothing,  
And she smiles at the future.  
26 She opens her mouth in wisdom,  
And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.



27 She looks well to the ways of her household,  
And does not eat the bread of idleness.  
28 Her children rise up and bless her;  
Her husband also, and he praises her, saying:  
29 “Many daughters have done nobly,  
But you excel them all.”  
30 Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain,  
But a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.  
31 Give her the product of her hands,  
And let her works praise her in the gates.

Verse 10 introduces this excellent wife. We see a commendable woman, one who fears the Lord. Her husband trusts her, for she does him good and not evil. She takes good care of her household and helps the poor and needy. She is not idle but works very hard.

The excellent woman considers a field and buys it. She plants a vineyard with her earnings. She sells garments and belts. Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she smiles at the future.

It is quite clear from the context that the way she approaches her responsibilities is meaningful and appropriate. She gives proper thought for the future and plans for it. She considers beyond whether there is sufficient for the day. However, when we plan for the future, we should remember not to do so by simply relying on our own abilities.

#### *Laying aside for various needs*

Besides providing for our personal needs and those of our family, it is also proper to make provision for the needs of other believers. In 1 Corinthians 16:1–2, we see Paul encouraging believers to do this.

#### **1 Corinthians 16:1–2**

1 Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also.

2 On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come.

Here, Paul urges the believers in Corinth to regularly put aside a sum of money as they are able so that this may be channelled to meet the needs of brethren in other places.

### *Importance of faith*

How provision is made for various needs may vary with different people in different situations. Some may, for example, find it appropriate to take up insurance policies, while others may not. Whatever it is, when we plan for the future, we must bear in mind the place of faith and trusting in the Lord for His provision. We must never base our security on material things or on what we have set aside.

Many believers have difficulty trusting God for His provision. Some do not have savings for contingencies and future needs and they feel insecure. Others who have plenty may think their security is in God. But when tested, for example, when they lose their jobs and are unable to find employment for a considerable length of time, they may become troubled and anxious and feel very insecure. Whether we have plenty or lack, we need to learn to trust God for His provision.

### *Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness*

The Lord Jesus teaches us very clearly to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and “all these things” will be added to us (Matt. 6:33). Let us briefly look at the context of this verse to appreciate its relevance to us.

The Lord Jesus tells us, in Matthew 6:25, not to be anxious for our lives — as to what we will eat, drink or wear. He says that life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. He directs our eyes to the birds of the air and tells us that our heavenly Father feeds them. How much more so for us who are worth much more than the birds (v. 26). He then tells us to observe how the lilies of the field grow.

**Matthew 6:30**

“But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!”

The Lord concludes by encouraging us to trust God:

**Matthew 6:33**

“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

If we have the spirit and attitude of “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness”, we can properly trust God to provide for our needs.

Many believers say they are trusting God, but their expressions of faith may not be true faith. If we are preoccupied with self-centred desires and the things of the world, our faith would be misplaced. But when our hearts are properly focused, and we sincerely seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, we can properly trust God to undertake for our lives and to provide for us according to His perfect wisdom. It does not mean that we will not go through difficulties or will have plenty materially. But as we concentrate on His kingdom and His righteousness, we can trust Him to provide for us as He sees fit.

For many of us, having a suitable job can be part of the Lord’s will for us. For some, the Lord may guide in such a way that we may not know what the future holds or how our material needs are going to be met. But whatever it is, the crux of the issue is learning to seek the Lord, to know His will for us, to concentrate on His kingdom and to trust Him to provide for us.

So let us make sure we concentrate on the Lord and His kingdom continually. Our personal material needs and those of our loved ones should not become a preoccupation, distraction or source of anxiety. Let us be responsible but do not become anxious.

Those of us who live in affluent countries may at times be

dissatisfied with what we have when we compare ourselves with those around us. We may feel that what we have is inadequate. But if we are living in less developed countries where many lack the basic necessities, we may not feel the same way. So let us not compare unhealthily with the lifestyles of others, but seek to live a lifestyle that is suitable for us and one that is pleasing to the Lord.

### *5. Wise investments*

Related to our responsibility to plan for the future is the issue of wise investment. We should not think that this area is inappropriate for those who really trust God and are committed to Him. Wise investments can be part of our expression of good stewardship of what the Lord entrusts to us — that is, wise stewardship can involve wise investments.

The excellent wife described in Proverbs 31 considers a field and buys it, and from her earnings she plants a vineyard (v. 16). What we see here is the principle of investment. The excellent wife invests in this field for future gains.

### *Dangers of investment and the need for vigilance*

With regards to this area of investment, we need to be vigilant because it can easily become a snare and a stumbling block to us. It can stir within us a greedy desire to have more and more.

Although wise stewardship of our financial resources may involve investment, we should not let it distract us and cause us to diminish our concentration on the kingdom of God. Investments can take up much of our time and energy, resulting in our being entangled in them. They can also hinder us from responding to genuine needs because we may feel our resources are “tied up”, and we may not be able to respond freely to the Lord when we recognise that He wants us to contribute to certain areas.

### *How we acquire wealth is important to the Lord*

We must not get involved in speculation and gambling, which can

take many different forms, often motivated by greed. An example would be speculating in the stock market — monitoring stock prices closely, buying and selling stocks with a view to making quick and easy profits.

Besides affecting our focus in life, speculation and gambling can result in severe losses and other serious problems for us and our family. Even if we often make a profit, speculating in the stock market is a form of gambling and not proper investment. This is not the right way to go about trying to increase our wealth.

Acquiring more wealth out of greed is obviously wrong. Even if the wealth acquired is intended for the Lord's work, it is still not good or right. The Lord is very concerned about our whole approach to life, to things, to issues. So how we acquire wealth matters to Him.

We may have good intentions, and we may plan to use the wealth acquired for the Lord's work, but if the way we acquire it is not meaningful, God will be displeased with us. And even if the means we use are legitimate, the Lord may still be displeased with us if, in the process, we become distracted and lose our concentration on the kingdom of God, neglecting our time with Him and with other people.

### **Outward expressions should flow forth from inward reality**

Although we are now considering the practical aspects, let us realise that we cannot just attend to the outward expressions. We must first attend to the realities within our hearts. If we just concentrate on the outward expressions, many different kinds of problems will arise. Apart from the fact that God will be displeased if our attitudes are not right, there can also be a sense of conflict, confusion and frustration within us.

For example, if we try to conform to the expectations of others, or express our faith in the way others do, without having the corresponding reality within, we can become frustrated. We

will not have a sense of freedom and joy in what we do because we are not doing them out of true love for God.

When we truly love the Lord and are seeking to express our love in practical ways, we will have a deep sense of freedom in the Lord. The outward expressions will correspond with the realities within. But if we neglect the realities within us, and instead concentrate on conforming to outward expressions, our conduct may just be an outward show, and the sense of spirituality we feel would be false spirituality.

*Our outward expressions can affect others*

Although our lives should not be merely an outward show, we need to pay attention to how our outward expressions may affect others. There are helpful principles concerning this in Romans 14.

**Romans 14:12–13**

12 So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.

13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this — not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.

Paul reminds us that each one of us has to give an account to God, and in view of that, our primary concentration should be on living our lives well before Him. We have to be good stewards of all that He has entrusted to us.

At the same time, as our lives can affect others, we ought to be careful not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in our brother's way. An extravagant lifestyle or clinging to our material wealth is not only poor stewardship of our material possessions, it can also have an adverse influence on other believers and their attitude towards their financial resources. There may be times when others are stumbled even though we have conducted ourselves in ways pleasing to the Lord. They are stumbled through no fault of ours. But still, we should exercise care in our conduct so as not to stumble others unnecessarily.

*Outward expressions according to what is appropriate in individual contexts*

It is important that each one of us works out according to what is meaningful and appropriate in our own context, according to what we understand the Lord desires of us, and according to our stage of development. Our contexts are not the same, neither is our level of development. There are various principles that do apply to all of us, for example, the principles of stewardship and trusting God. But even in the area of trusting God, we have to be mindful that we do not all have the same degree of faith. So differences in outward expressions would be in order.

Let us look at two verses in Romans 14 on this important principle:

**Romans 14:22**

The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

**Romans 14:5**

One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

Note these two phrases: “the faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God” (v. 22) and “each person must be fully convinced in his own mind” (v. 5). These tell us we should learn to live our lives according to what we have come to recognise and understand, according to our convictions, and our understanding of what is appropriate in our context. This is important so that we can work out with meaning and conviction and in fellowship with the Lord.

How truths and principles are worked out may vary according to individual contexts. Some may find it meaningful to trust the Lord for their material needs without laying aside finances for such needs. At different times in their lives, what they

own may vary substantially. At times, they may have relatively more, not because of their lack of faith, but because of other considerations. At other times, they may be comfortable owning hardly anything.

But we must not try to live out “a life of faith” at an unrealistic level, beyond what we can do so meaningfully. We must not try to imitate others. It may be appropriate for others, but unrealistic for us. If we try to imitate others, we may become troubled and anxious because we do not have the faith and conviction to live that way.

For example, in a moment of enthusiasm, we may give away all that we have, and for a period of time, our heart may be at peace. Subsequently, when we feel deprived, or when we have difficulty making ends meet, we may be shaken or even disillusioned and bitter. Our faith is not of the level that can see us through difficulties meaningfully. Our situation may be aggravated when we see others having plenty and we may start to blame others for our pitiful state. But if we are truly living according to our convictions, it should not be this way. Others may discuss with us, share with us and encourage us, but ultimately we should live according to what we have come to understand and are convicted of. Only then can we do so with joy, with meaning, with restful trust in the Lord. And since we have freely chosen to live in that way because we believe in it, whatever the outcome, there is no place for us to blame anyone.

### *God loves a cheerful giver*

#### **2 Corinthians 9:6–7**

6 Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

7 Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

God loves a cheerful giver who gives generously and not



grudgingly. The giving must be an expression of love that flows forth from the heart and never under compulsion or coercion. It should be done prayerfully, after due consideration, and not carelessly or impulsively.

#### *Aiming for higher level of faith*

The approach we adopt and the practical outworking in this area of material things should not reflect little faith in God or our being gripped by material things.

Paul writes in Romans 14:22: “Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves”. We must make sure that what we approve for our own life, how we seek to order it and live it out, is pleasing to the Lord. We must not end up condemning ourselves.

So, while we do not aim for something which we cannot meaningfully live out and then become bitter, we also do not aim to live in a way that expresses weak faith in God. Learn to trust God, seek to nurture the right spirit, and increasingly aim for a higher and higher level of faith in the Lord. It is not good for us to live our lives at a low level of faith.

#### *Not judgemental*

It is also very important that we are not judgemental or rash in the way we view those who do not conform to our practices or expectations.

Yes, there is a place for us to be concerned for others. We should not be oblivious to what is going on in the lives of our brethren, whom we love. In fellowship, we may share, discuss and interact with them. But do not be quick to judge them and their practices without a sufficient understanding of their contexts.

#### *Not rigid and legalistic*

We need to beware of being legalistic in our own lives as well as in our expectations of others. The Lord wants us to live with a meaningful sense of freedom and joy as we trust

Him and fellowship with Him. Instead of emphasising on strict conformance to certain outward expressions, rules and regulations, our emphasis should be on principles, convictions, and inward reality.

We should also be careful about inflexibility. Life situations vary, and the practical expressions in different situations may also vary. So believers should have the freedom to consider before the Lord what would be the appropriate practical expressions in each situation and context of life.

For example, it may not be helpful to insist that believers do not spend beyond a certain amount for clothes or shoes, or that those who love the Lord do not eat at posh restaurants. Good stewardship does not mean always buying cheap things, which may wear out or break down easily. Of course, expensive things are not always better either.

Instead of rigid rules, there can be some guidelines with reasons for them. With the general principle that we should not be extravagant and not overspend on food, clothing or other things, we can have some flexibility for varying situations in life. We can consider before the Lord, in any particular context, what is the reasonable thing to do.

How we live out this area can help us to understand what is within us. If we are careful in the practical expressions, the positive attitudes and qualities within us can be reinforced and even deepened. But if we are careless, it may indicate that the realities within us are not meaningful. If we keep on living carelessly, our inward realities may degenerate. So while our concentration should be on nurturing the spirit of true discipleship and the right attitudes within, we also need to be mindful of the practical outworking and the outward expressions.

### **Practical outworking affects overall growth**

Not every area of our lives is growing and developing at the same

rate. Not all aspects are equally healthy. Whatever our level of maturity, there will be some aspects in our lives that are growing well and some that are deficient.

For some of us, our development and practical expressions with regards to material wealth and stewardship may not be as good as our development and practical expressions in other areas and they may also not correspond to our overall growth. Deficiency in this area will hinder overall growth. So to fare better, we would need to pay sufficient attention to it. As we do so, it will contribute to our overall development.

The evil one can easily take advantage of our weakness in this area and cause us to stumble and be ensnared. Let us prayerfully evaluate before the Lord our attitudes and outworking in this area. Is there any aspect we are negligent in and what must we work at to fare better?

### **Helping and correcting one another in love**

While it is important not to pressure others to conform to our convictions or expectations, we must not have the attitude that what I do with my life is my own business and others should not interfere.

The Lord wants us, as fellow-believers in the body of Christ, to learn and grow together. We should therefore be concerned for one another's growth and development. There is a place to share, raise and discuss issues in a spirit of love. To be constructive, we need to be mindful of the feelings of our brethren. We need to understand the state they may be in. Be prayerful about what is appropriate, and when and how to express love and concern.

We may expect others to show their love and concern in a certain way. When they do not do so, we think they do not care, and we feel neglected and become upset. Yet when the brethren are truly concerned for us and try to help us fare better, we may see them as interfering with our lives, and we become resentful.

Such negative feelings are manifestations of self-centredness, an unhealthy spirit, and are deviations from healthy fellowship in the Lord and in the truth. When others raise issues out of concern for us, we should be appreciative and consider them prayerfully and then form our own convictions.

Let us reflect over these things so that we can adopt a healthy posture. Yes, we want to live according to our convictions, and we do not want others to impose on us. But remember there is a place for the brethren to encourage one another in the direction of truth. Proper expressions of love and concern should not be quickly brushed aside or rejected as interference, especially when expressed by those who love and care for us, and who are careful and prayerful in their approach.

### **Concluding remarks**

Material wealth can be likened to fire. Fire can and ought to be put to good use, but it can also become harmful and destructive. If it comes too near to us, we can be severely burnt. It can even be fatal. In the same way, material wealth can and ought to be put to constructive uses. But if we love it or cling to it, it will destroy our lives. Let us heed Paul's warning: "The love of money is a root of all sorts of evil".

It is easy to falter in the area of material wealth. The Lord Jesus has warned us about it again and again. He teaches us not to lay up for ourselves treasures upon earth, but to lay up treasures in heaven, and not to be anxious about the material things of life, but to concentrate on seeking first the kingdom of God. Let us take care lest we are materially rich but spiritually poor in the eyes of the Lord.

It is all too easy to rationalise wrongful desires and ways, clothing it with good-sounding reasons like, "Oh, in my context, it is appropriate to live this way; for others it is not, but for me it is. None of you can understand; only God understands my

situation, and it is proper for me to live in this way.” Be careful! When we rationalise, we do so to our own detriment, which can lead to spiritual poverty. Even if we can convince all others, of what use is it if the Lord is displeased?

It is said that Benjamin Franklin once remarked, “Who is rich?” And he answered, “He that is content.” And then he asked again, “Who is that?” And he answered, “Nobody.”

The one who is truly rich is the one who knows how to be content. But who is content? “Nobody”. In the world, very few people are content. For many, no matter how much they have, they still want more, and they relentlessly pursue material riches.

Some may think that to be content is to simply accept things as they are, and as a result, become lazy or irresponsible. But that is the wrong notion. Being content is actually a mark of a healthy walk with God and believers should learn to be truly contented in the Lord.

Let us not think that to have a lot materially is always advantageous. Of course, if the Lord entrusts much to us, we should not run away from the responsibility. Instead, we should seek to discharge it well. But those who are in such contexts must be careful not to be ensnared by the material wealth or to abuse it in any way.

From a Christian perspective, having material wealth involves responsibility. To be good stewards of what we have is not easy. That is why we have spent some time to consider this issue of stewardship.

In this regard, let us reflect on these words of Matthew Henry:

“There is a burden of care in getting riches:  
fear in keeping them;  
temptation in using them;  
guilt in abusing them;  
sorrow in losing them;  
and a burden of account at last  
to be given concerning them.”

When we have riches and we keep them, we may be fearful it is wrong to do so and fearful we may lose them. When we use the riches, we may be tempted to use them improperly for ourselves. When we abuse them, we may feel guilty. When we use them unwisely and they dissipate, there is sorrow. And then there is the burden of having to give an account to the Lord of how we have used them.

However, let us not view material things just from a negative angle. There is a positive dimension. Material things can be put to good use — for ourselves, for our loved ones, and for the Lord's work.

A central issue to keep in mind is the nurturing of the spirit of true discipleship. Also important is the issue of wisdom in stewardship — how we manage the material wealth entrusted to us. We need to seek God's guidance as to how we can channel what we have, so that we will work out with wisdom, understanding, conviction and maturity. We need to avoid going to extremes, and instead, maintain an approach that is wholesome and balanced.

As we work out faithfully in these areas, we will be laying up for ourselves treasures in heaven. Like the excellent wife in Proverbs 31, we can face the future with a deep sense of assurance and confidence in the Lord — not just for our time on earth, but also in eternity.

As we reflect over our lives, let us be open and honest before the Lord. What is the reality within us concerning material wealth and stewardship? What is our true attitude? Are there areas we need to correct? In what ways can we nurture a healthy attitude and improve on the practical expressions?

## Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Share your understanding of how wise stewardship of material wealth can be meaningfully expressed in the following areas:

- Spending on ourselves and our loved ones
- Giving
- Consideration and planning for the future
- Investments

2. In expressing stewardship in practical ways, why is it important that we attend to the inward reality before we attend to the outward expressions? What problems may arise if our main focus is on the outward expressions?

How can the way we exercise stewardship of material wealth affect other believers?

3. In the area of the use of material things, what are some manifestations of a judgemental and legalistic spirit? Why is it important that we do not have such a spirit?

4. Share your understanding of:

- How our development and practical expressions with regards to material wealth and stewardship may affect our overall growth
- The place for helping and correcting one another in the area of wise stewardship.

## Truly Rich or Appearing Spiritually Rich

**L**et me begin with a question: Do you attend church meetings regularly, pray and read the Scriptures often and contribute to the Lord's work readily?

If your answer is yes, you may think that you are spiritually healthy. Others may also think you are faring well. But is it really true?

From the Lord's teaching, we see two categories of people who appear rich but are in reality poor. One category is those who are materially rich. They are like the rich man in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus — regarded by people in the world as well-off because of their material wealth, but are poor spiritually.

The other category is those who appear to be spiritually rich or who regard themselves to be so. They project the impression that they are spiritually rich when they are not. Being in this state is worse than those who know they are spiritually poor. It is difficult to help such people fare well.

In this message, we shall concentrate on this second category.

### **Appearing spiritually rich — the church in Laodicea**

In Revelation 3:14–22, the Lord Jesus had strong words for the church in Laodicea.

#### **Revelation 3:14–22**

14 “To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:  
The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of  
the creation of God, says this:

15 ‘I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot;



I wish that you were cold or hot.

16 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.

17 'Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked,

18 I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

19 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.

20 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.

21 'He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

22 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' "

The believers in Laodicea thought they were spiritually rich (v. 17), and therefore had no need of anything. The Lord Jesus revealed to them that they were actually "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked". They were blind to their poor spiritual state. They needed to see their true state and repent, otherwise the Lord Jesus "will spit" them out of His mouth.

We have to beware of a false sense of spiritual well-being. Remember the Pharisees. They prayed long prayers, fasted regularly and tithed faithfully. They considered themselves to be spiritual leaders of the day and were also regarded as such by many. Yet, they were condemned by the Lord Jesus.

Even as they thought highly of themselves, they also looked upon others with pity, condescension, and even contempt. The

parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9–14 illustrates the attitude of the Pharisees.

**Luke 18:9–14**

9 And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:

10 “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

12 ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’

13 “But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’

14 “I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The Lord Jesus described the Pharisee as praying “to himself”, thanking God that he was not like the others, whom he regarded with contempt. He commended himself for his own faithfulness — he fasted twice a week and paid tithes of all he got. But the Lord Jesus proclaimed that it was not the Pharisee, but the tax-collector, who was justified.

**How do we know whether we are truly rich?**

What distinguishes the truly rich from those who only appear to be so? How do we make sure that we are truly rich? Are we truly faring well from the perspective of God’s kingdom? It is vital that we have a clear understanding of the answers to these questions. The primary issue that determines whether we are truly rich is the reality within our hearts. Do we have zeal and love for God? Do we have positive motivation within?

### *Zeal and love for God*

The believers in Laodicea were lukewarm. They lacked true zeal and love for the Lord, and were thus rejected by Him.

We may do many things outwardly and even do them with enthusiasm. We may then think our love for God is deep, and we express sincerely the desire to do great things for God. But in reality, our enthusiasm may be superficial and merely emotional, and such enthusiasm must not be confused with true zeal.

True zeal and love for God arise from a deep response to the Holy Spirit working in our hearts, and the deep response gives birth to true and strong convictions. It is not merely an enthusiastic response to some outward stimuli. It is a response based on strong convictions that are firmly grounded in the truth. Such convictions will guard us from being easily deceived or discouraged.

### *Positive motivation*

The motivation for what we do is very important because what motivates us gives our outward expressions their true meaning.

For example, consider what motivates us to read the Scriptures, pray and attend meetings. Are we doing these things out of habit, because others expect us to, or because we want to impress others? If we do them for these reasons, we are in a poor spiritual state.

What we say and do — whether reading the Scriptures, praying or having fellowship with the brethren — should be motivated by our love for God, for truth and for others. Our expressions of concern for others are meaningful only if they are truly motivated by love — a genuine concern for and commitment to their well-being.

## Further reflections on the words of the Lord Jesus to the church in Laodicea

### *Spiritual blindness, spiritual pride and the need to repent*

The believers in Laodicea were lukewarm in their faith and they were not even aware of it. They were blind to their true state and thought they were spiritually rich.

Beyond their inaccurate assessment of themselves and their false sense of well-being, they were also arrogant. They felt they had need of nothing. Spiritual pride is a serious defect in character and spirit, and a major hindrance to learning and receptivity. Those who are truly rich will not have this negative attitude.

Even if we are growing well, it would still be improper to say that we have need of nothing. In fact, we would have a stronger sense of our need of God and a growing hunger to know Him more. We would know we are far short of God's intentions for us in Christ. We would long for a greater experience of the infinite grace and riches of God. We would want to scale greater spiritual heights.

If we feel that we have need of nothing, it is an indication that we have become spiritually complacent. We think we already know, and we lose the eagerness to learn. In due time, this spiritual pride will close our hearts to the truth. If we have even a tinge of the attitude that we already know and there is little that others can teach us, we are in a pitiful state.

The Laodicean Christians were actually “wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked”. They were spiritually poor and they needed help to see their true state and repent. The Lord advised them to “buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see” (v. 18).

*Gold refined by fire — true riches*

The Lord Jesus told the Laodicean Christians they needed to “buy” from Him gold refined by fire so that they could become truly rich. The gold here refers to true spiritual riches that will endure. Such spiritual riches can come about only when we abide in Christ.

In John 15, the Lord Jesus teaches us how we can bear good fruit.

**John 15:4–5**

4 “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me.

5 “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

The only way we can bear true fruit that has enduring value is by our abiding in Christ and His abiding in us. This is the only way we can become truly rich.

*White garments — a righteous life*

The Laodiceans were “naked”. The Lord advised them to buy “white garments” to clothe themselves. “White garments” refers to a life of truth and righteousness. Revelation 19:8 tells us the bride of the Lamb was clothed in fine linen, bright and clean, and that the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

Such a life is feasible because of what was accomplished by the Lord Jesus on the Cross. As we respond positively to the risen Christ, our fellowship with Him and His working in us bring about a life of righteousness. Our outward expressions of faith must flow from this inward reality.

*Eye salve — spiritual insight*

The Laodiceans needed spiritual insight, so the Lord advised them to get eye salve to anoint their eyes so that they may see. The eyes of their heart must see clearly their true spiritual state

— that they were spiritually poor, wretched and miserable — so that they can repent, turn to the Lord and grow in spiritual health and richness. They must recognise their need and come to the Lord because only He can grant them spiritual insight.

*Humble and contrite spirit*

Believers who are generally healthy may still stumble and falter in their faith. If corrective measures are not taken, degeneration will set in. God loves His children and He reaches out to those whom He loves. He will reprove them and discipline them in order to help them repent and return to Him. In Revelation 3:19, we see the Lord calling upon the church in Laodicea to repent.

When God reproves us in whatever form, it is imperative that we respond positively to Him. We must be humble and contrite and open to His discipline.

There are many who have once been spiritually rich, but have degenerated to spiritual poverty. It is likely that the Christians in Laodicea were once spiritually rich. They had benefitted from the ministry of the apostle Paul and his co-worker, Epaphras. Let us look at some passages in Colossians.

**Colossians 2:1–3**

- 1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face,
- 2 that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself,
- 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

**Colossians 4:12–13**

- 12 Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring

earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.

13 For I testify for him that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

**Colossians 4:15–16**

15 Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house.

16 When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.

Paul and Epaphras struggled hard for the Christians, including those in Laodicea, that they might attain to a life abounding in spiritual wealth, grounded in a true knowledge of Christ and what God intends for us in Him (Col. 2:1–3). There was deep concern and earnest labour for their spiritual health and growth. When Paul wrote to the Christians at Colossae, he also expressed concern for those in Laodicea. In Colossians 4:16, we see Paul requesting that his letter be read to the Christians in Laodicea as well and indicated that he had also written another letter to them.

When we have a meaningful experience of God and have tasted of His goodness, we must be careful to guard against pride and having the attitude of “I already know it all”.

The Lord Jesus told the Laodicean Christians: “If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me”. The Lord wants us to have rich fellowship with Him. He takes the initiative by standing at the door and knocking. If anyone opens the door, He *will* dine with him. It is indeed foolishness to shut our ears to His voice.

The Lord exhorts us to overcome. “He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne” (Rev. 3:21). The overcoming life — one of true riches — is open to all.

Let us heed the final words of the Lord Jesus in verse 22: “He

who has an ear, let him hear ...” When the Lord Jesus speaks in this way, it is an indication that He has said something important. We cannot be careless and disregard the words of the Lord Jesus to the church in Laodicea and the implications for our own lives.

## **How to make sure we are truly rich**

### *1. Gain spiritual insight and walk in truth*

Believers need spiritual insight to have a proper appreciation of the truth and an accurate perception of things. For this reason, Paul prayed earnestly for believers so that they may have the eyes of their heart enlightened (Eph. 1:18).

Whether it be our personal reading of the Scriptures or when we listen to someone expounding it, true insight is vital. Spiritual insight can come about through the Lord helping us in our earnest searching and prayer. But even when there is hardness of heart, the Lord may at times still speak to us as we listen to messages and as we go through life’s situations. When our hearts have been enlightened to see the truth, we must align our hearts with the truth, absorb it into our lives and live according to it faithfully.

To benefit from the truth, all three aspects must be present: spiritual insight into the truth, absorption of the truth into our hearts and living our lives accordingly. This is the way to spiritual richness and fruitfulness.

This is also the way to grow in scope and depth of spiritual insight. There are varying depths of appreciation and spiritual insight into any area of truth, for example, the meaning of God’s sovereignty and His love for us. There is no limit to the insight one can have into the meaning and implications of the truth. It is therefore important for us to always seek to deepen our insight into the truth so that we can deepen our walk in the truth.

To be truly rich and never degenerate into the state of the Laodicean Christians, we must continually make sure that our primary motivation is love for the Lord and for the truth. This



must be the basis for our lives and for our response to people and situations. When we love the truth, we will long to know it so that we can absorb it into our hearts and walk in it.

### *2. Do not neglect what is more important — the inward reality*

In Matthew 23, the Lord Jesus warned the scribes and Pharisees not to concentrate on proper outward forms and “neglect the weightier provisions of the law”.

#### **Matthew 23:23**

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.”

Like the scribes and Pharisees, we could be emphasising on right conduct and expressions in Christian living — reading the Scriptures, attending church meetings, praying, giving, keeping our time with God, proper dressing and being thrifty. But we could be neglecting what is more important — our inner life and reality.

While observing proper conduct, it is important that we pay attention to our inward qualities — our character, our values and our relationship with God. This is what the Lord Jesus was trying to communicate to the scribes and Pharisees. It is only when there are true inward qualities that meaningful outward expressions can come forth.

### *3. Nurture deep spiritual and moral realities*

To make sure that we do not live in a state of deception like the church in Laodicea, we must pay attention to the spiritual and moral realities in our own life and in the life of the congregation, and these have to do with our relationship with the Lord, the quality of our character and our attitudes.

It is vital that we maintain and nurture a healthy spirit and

attitude at all times. Some may ask: How do we know whether our spirit and attitude are healthy? When something is amiss in our spirit or attitude, it is usually not difficult to recognise it. For example, if there is pride, jealousy, frustration, complacency, discouragement or self-confidence, we should be able to know. These wrong spirit and attitudes are opposed to the Spirit of God, and if we seek to be right with Him, He will make it known to us. But we must be prayerful and honest with ourselves, and sincerely seek to do what is right in God's sight. When we have such a posture, we can more readily see what is amiss in our lives and take corrective action.

#### *4. Avoid unwholesome emphasis on inner life*

While it is needful to emphasise the importance of the inner life, we must be careful not to do so in an unwholesome way.

There is a category of people known as mystics. They emphasise very strongly on the inner life. Some of them have strange practices. Some live in isolation, usually in remote places, in pursuit of their idea of spirituality. They may reject the world's values and seek inner peace through mystical practices.

Some of these mystics do have deep and genuine experiences of God and are sincerely devoted to Him. However, there are dangers in over-emphasising inner experiences of God. When people seek spiritual experiences without being well-grounded in the Scriptures, they may be deceived. Even those who initially have genuine experiences of God can be deceived by the evil one and may go far astray because of their concentration on pursuing spiritual experiences. The evil one may grant them spiritual experiences which they receive as from the Lord. These can include pleasant experiences of joy and peace and seeing visions. They may also receive and carry out instructions, thinking they are obeying the Lord.

Those who have inner experiences may become proud and think they are more spiritual than those who do not have such

experiences. Some may also think that they are having deep spiritual experiences of joy and peace when in fact what they are experiencing are merely superficial and primarily emotional.

If our attitudes are negative, the danger is great. But even if our attitudes are positive, we still have to be vigilant.

#### *5. Exercise appropriate outward expressions*

Appropriate outward expressions are important and can help us in two ways:

##### *a. Outward expressions help us recognise the reality of our inner state.*

The Lord Jesus says: “For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matt. 12:34). True spiritual health and attitudes will be expressed in our conduct and words and reflected in the fruit of our spiritual labour. When we truly abide in Christ and He in us, we will bear much fruit (John 15:5). And we should be “bearing fruit in every good work” (Col. 1:10). When there is inner reality, there will be meaningful practical expressions in our daily life.

If our practical outworking is poor, and yet we think we are spiritually rich, we may be deceiving ourselves and fail to recognise our true state. When we manifest negative traits and ways — for example, when we are impatient or inconsiderate towards others, when our priorities are wrong and we use much of our resources and time on worldly pursuits — it is unlikely that our inner state is right. We may have been spiritually rich in times past, but we are now spiritually poor and blind. Let us ask the Lord to help us see our true state, and then repent and put right our lives.

##### *b. Outward expressions help us nurture our inward reality, relationship with God and understanding of truth.*

Our walk with the Lord will deepen when we properly express love and kindness, and consistently observe the spiritual disciplines of reading and searching the Scriptures, prayer

and fasting, attending church meetings and spending time in fellowship with the brethren because we want to be faithful to Him. When we work out the truths we have come to understand, we will have a deeper appreciation and understanding of the truths. The realities within our hearts will deepen and we will be drawn closer to God.

*6. Maintain balanced approach and emphasis on inner reality and appropriate expressions*

Our approach to life should be wholesome and according to what God has revealed in the Scriptures — with the right emphasis on both inner reality and appropriate expressions.

The biblical approach emphasises the nurturing of the inward reality: true and deep love for God and His ways, zeal for a deep relationship with God, godly character and spiritual values and a sound understanding of the truth. From such a life of truth and righteousness, expressions of faith must then flow forth — in appropriate words and deeds, consistent with biblical revelation and principles.

The wholesome, biblical approach can be summarised in this way: Believers ought to nurture positive inward realities based on sound knowledge of truths revealed in the Scriptures and express these truths appropriately in their lives.

**Concluding remarks**

Let us reflect over the issues we have considered in this message.

Are you materially rich and doing well by the world's standards, but in reality spiritually poor? Do you think you are spiritually rich and also regarded by others to be so, but are in reality spiritually poor, miserable and wretched? Will you be content if you are spiritually rich though materially poor?

It is important that we come before the Lord and ask Him to search our hearts and help us see clearly whether we are truly spiritually rich or actually spiritually poor.

### **Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. How do we know whether we are truly rich?
2. The Lord Jesus had strong words for the church in Laodicea (Rev. 3:14–22). What can we learn from these words of the Lord about being truly poor and truly rich?
3. How can we make sure we are truly rich?

Some people believe that a person who is truly rich in God will have deep and mystical inner experiences of God. What are the dangers of over-emphasising inner experiences of God?

## Who Is Truly Great?

**T**he desire to be great is a major aspiration of man. This is true of people all over the world and throughout the history of mankind. It is also a major problem area that is aggravated by popular notions of greatness and wrongful desires in the hearts of men.

Some seek greatness in spectacular ways. We have heard of people like Alexander the Great who conquered nations and built a vast empire, and Muhammad Ali, the heavyweight boxing champion who famously declared: "I'm the greatest." For many of us, it might simply be a desire to be a great doctor, artist, musician, athlete or cook.

This desire to be great motivates people to work very hard and some to even resort to improper means to make sure they attain greatness in society. Such a desire is not confined to unbelievers. It exists in believers as well. For example, we are told in Luke 9:46 that the disciples of the Lord Jesus argued among themselves as to which of them might be the greatest.

Why do people want to be great? It is often because they desire to be famous, and to be recognised and honoured. The desire to be great is usually associated with a desire for power and authority, success and accomplishment. When people have attained any or all of these, they feel they "have arrived" and have achieved status in society, and others look up to them.

It is not only the individual who aspires to greatness. Often, those close to him, especially his parents and spouse, also want him to be great. Many of them are prepared to work very hard and use all means to help him attain greatness. But is it a commendable

thing to be great? And what does it mean to be truly great? These are the issues we will consider in this and subsequent messages.

### **The world's concept of greatness**

We shall first look at two persons in the Old Testament who illustrate the world's idea of greatness.

#### *King Solomon*

It is generally agreed that King Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiastes chapter 2, he wrote:

#### **Ecclesiastes 2:1–11**

1 I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility.

2 I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?"

3 I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.

4 I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself;

5 I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees;

6 I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees.

7 I bought male and female slaves and I had home born slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem.

8 Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men — many concubines.

9 Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me.

10 All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was

pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor.

11 Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.

Solomon had immeasurable wealth. He had houses, huge estates, vineyards and fruit trees, many slaves, large herds and flocks. He amassed immense amounts of silver, gold and “the treasure of kings and provinces”. He had many concubines and indulged in all kinds of pleasures. In that context he said: “I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem” (v. 9).

Yes, Solomon became great. He had wealth, he had fame, and he enjoyed prestige and power. But his greatness is not true greatness. It is greatness in the eyes of the world, but not greatness in the eyes of God.

The picture that Solomon painted of himself and his pursuits is a very vivid description of gross self-indulgence, pleasure-seeking and self-centredness. We see a constant repetition of “for myself” in this passage. In everything that he sought to possess, he did it for himself, for his own pleasure.

Yet, he acknowledged that in spite of his immense riches, all he had laboured to achieve was vanity and striving after wind. There was a sense of emptiness and futility. What he had attained and achieved had no lasting value and did not give him a sense of true fulfilment.

### *King Nebuchadnezzar*

Like King Solomon, King Nebuchadnezzar was considered great in the temporal and visible realm. He was king over the most powerful empire in that region at that time. In two passages, Daniel described the power that Nebuchadnezzar had:



**Daniel 4:22**

It is you, O king; for you have become great and grown strong, and your majesty has become great and reached to the sky and your dominion to the end of the earth.

**Daniel 5:18–19**

18 “O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father.

19 “Because of the grandeur which He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations and men of every language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated and whomever he wished he humbled.”

King Nebuchadnezzar had sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty. He had tremendous power — he could command the death or otherwise of whomever he pleased. All the nations and peoples feared him. However, what he had was only earthly sovereignty, grandeur, glory, majesty and power.

What was Nebuchadnezzar’s true state in the eyes of God? Daniel 5:20 tells us “his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly”. His arrogance incurred the wrath and judgement of God. So although Nebuchadnezzar had all the glory and splendour of the world, he was, in reality, in a pathetic state, and his attitude was found wanting. Under God’s judgement, his earthly kingdom and glory were taken away.

Daniel had earlier interpreted one of Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams which warned of God’s impending judgement. Daniel advised the king to break away from his iniquities. In spite of the warning, the king did not change. At the height of his majesty and power, while still basking in his glory, God’s judgement came upon him.

**Daniel 4:28–33**

28 “All this happened to Nebuchadnezzar the king.

29 “Twelve months later he was walking on the roof of the

royal palace of Babylon.

30 “The king reflected and said, ‘Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?’

31 “While the word was in the king’s mouth, a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you,

32 and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place will be with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes.’

33 “Immediately the word concerning Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled; and he was driven away from mankind and began eating grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair had grown like eagles’ feathers and his nails like birds’ claws.”

The king was driven away to live like an animal among the animals. He fed on grass, his body was drenched with dew, his hair grew like eagles’ feathers and his nails like birds’ claws. What a pathetic state for a powerful king to be reduced to!

Before judgement came, the king had the outward appearance of splendour and power. Even though his true state was pathetic, it was not obvious. But when judgement came upon him, his pathetic state became obvious to all, and it was a picture of his true state.

Like King Solomon and King Nebuchadnezzar, many who are regarded as great in society may in reality be in a poor state. Outwardly, there is the facade of splendour and glory, but in their hearts, there is pride and arrogance, corruption and turmoil. Though they dress in fine clothes and flaunt their wealth, and though they revel in their fame and status in society, their lives are devoid of true meaning and purpose, and a sense of emptiness and futility lurks within.

Let us now consider the One who is truly great.

### **True greatness — the Lord Jesus and His teaching**

The Lord Jesus is without doubt the greatest. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the Son of God, the Creator of the universe, and all things came into being through Him. His kingdom is the only one that will endure forever.

#### **Luke 1:32–33**

32 “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David;

33 and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.”

The Lord Jesus is the perfect example of greatness. Yet His life, His attitudes and His teaching are starkly different from the world’s notions and expectations of greatness. Although He is the Son of God and the great Saviour of mankind, His earthly circumstances were anything but what would usually be associated with greatness. He was born in a stable and laid in a humble manger. His parents were poor, and even while He was just a child, they had to flee from King Herod who was after His life. Even in adult life, He had nowhere to lay His head (Matt. 8:20). All these have implications for our understanding of the meaning of true greatness. Many regard the Lord Jesus as a great man, but they neither know what He stands for nor His teaching on true greatness.

#### *Heart of a servant*

Through His life and teaching, the Lord Jesus sought to correct wrong notions of greatness and unhealthy desires for greatness. But it is not always easy to understand His teaching or the way He lived His life. Even His disciples found it difficult at times. This can be seen on one occasion recorded in John 13.

**John 13:1, 3, 4**

1 Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God,

4 got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself.

**John 13:8**

Peter said to Him, “Never shall You wash my feet!” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.”

There were important things that the Lord Jesus wanted to communicate to His disciples before His departure from this earth. When the time for Him to be crucified was approaching, one of the things He did was to wash the feet of His disciples. Peter protested. Why? It was not because he was rebellious or disrespectful, or just wanted to be different, but because he recognised Jesus as the great Lord, and he could not imagine the Lord washing his feet. That would be a task done by servants!

Peter’s concept of greatness reflected the common understanding that greatness involves exercising power and authority over others. Thus the great should not serve, but be served.

*Teaching by example*

But the Lord Jesus was seeking to teach His disciples an important truth — that true greatness involves the *heart of a servant* and *true humility*. And so He vividly illustrated that truth by the act of feet-washing. This would serve as a practical example — and one that would be impressed deeply upon the hearts of His disciples for years to come.

**John 13:12–17**

12 So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at the table again, He said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you?”

13 “You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am.

14 “If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.

15 “For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.

16 “Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him.

17 “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

Jesus was their Lord and Teacher. Even though it did not seem proper to them, there was deep meaning in what He did. He wanted them to observe, learn from and follow His example.

A slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. The Lord, their master, washed their feet. How much more must the disciples be willing to do as He did! It was not the outward act that they were to follow, but the meaning behind that act. It was humility and the heart of a servant in true service that the Lord wanted them to appreciate and to develop.

The Lord Jesus intended that His disciples should have the same attitude as His and express it in their lives: “For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you” (v. 15). Knowing these things, they would be blessed if they did them.

*Different from worldly ideas and expressions of greatness*

The Lord Jesus sought to teach this area of truth to His disciples on several occasions. In Mark 10:42–45, the Lord explained to them that worldly expressions of greatness are often associated with exercising authority and lording over others.

**Mark 10:42–44**

42 Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them.

43 “But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant;”

44 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all.

The rulers of the Gentiles and their great men enjoy exercising authority and lording over others. But the Lord reminded the disciples that it was not to be so with them, for it is different in the kingdom of God. True greatness is when we have the heart of a servant. It is when we become a slave of all that we are first.

The Lord Jesus then pointed to Himself as an example.

**Mark 10:45**

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

The Son of God came with the spirit of serving others — to the ultimate degree. He referred to the Cross, where He would lay down His life as a ransom for many.

*Aspirations to greatness in God’s kingdom*

Let us look at the context of Mark 10.

**Mark 10:35–41**

35 James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Jesus, saying, “Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You.”

36 And He said to them, “What do you want Me to do for you?”

37 They said to Him, “Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory.”

38 But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”

39 They said to Him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.

40 “But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

41 Hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John.

James and John aspired to greatness and glory in the kingdom of God. They asked for positions of honour — to sit on the right and the left of the Lord Jesus in His glory. The other disciples were indignant with them. In that context, the Lord Jesus explained to them the right and wrong concepts of greatness.

James and John were not seeking worldly greatness. They wanted greatness in God’s kingdom. Was that wrong?

Notice that the Lord neither disparaged the notion of greatness nor discouraged their aspirations to be great. What He wanted to impress upon them was that they should be like their master, and that they should appreciate the true meaning of greatness in the kingdom of God and the way to attain true greatness.

### *Beware of the pitfalls of aspiring to greatness*

The very entertaining of the desire to be great, even in the kingdom of God, is fraught with dangers. The problem lies with the heart of man. The longings to be great are very often tainted with wrong attitudes, especially the spirit of pride and the desire to be in a position of status, power and authority. As we live in this world, the spirit of the world exerts a great influence over us.

Even when we strive to have the heart of a servant, we may be motivated by an unhealthy desire for recognition and an unhealthy competitive spirit to be the greatest of all. We may think and project the idea that we are more humble, or are better at expressing the life of a servant, than other believers.

The apostle Paul tells us in Romans 12:2 not to be conformed

to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. So, to be truly free from all improper longings, and from the wrong way we see things and approach issues of life, we need to be thoroughly renewed in our mind and spirit.

### **Concluding remarks**

Many of the problems of the world — strife, jealousy, envy, scheming and bloodshed — can be traced to man's aspiration to be great. These problems exist even among God's people and in relation to His work.

The world's idea of greatness involves high status, a sense of authority over others and being able to get what you want. Yet the lives of King Solomon and King Nebuchadnezzar were empty and futile. Instead, as we reflected on the person, life and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, the One who is truly great, we see that true greatness is not manifested in lording over others, but in having a heart of humility and service. Ultimately, God is not against the notion of greatness but wants us to recognise clearly that greatness in the kingdom of God is fundamentally different from that in the world.

Having a wrong concept of greatness is a serious matter and a significant hindrance to God's work. It facilitates the work and schemes of the evil one and his opposition to the advancement of God's kingdom. It is therefore important that we have a good grasp of the biblical concept of true greatness and seek to attain to true greatness in our lives. We will dwell more on this in the next message.



## Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Why do people long for and strive hard after greatness? What is the world's concept of greatness? What can we learn from the experiences of King Solomon (Eccles. 2:1–11) and King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4–5) in the area of greatness? Were these two kings truly great?
2. What can we learn from the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ on the meaning of true greatness? How did the Lord Jesus go about correcting wrong notions of greatness and unhealthy desires for greatness? (John 13:1–17; Mark 10:35–45)
3. What is the difference between the world's idea of greatness and true greatness?
4. Is it wrong to aspire for greatness in God's kingdom? What are the pitfalls?

## Attaining True Greatness and Its Relationship With Servanthood

**T** rue greatness is positive and God's children should desire it. However, when our primary focus is on attaining greatness, there is the danger of being tainted by negative elements such as a spirit of pride and superiority. So how can we attain greatness in a healthy way? How can we make sure that negative elements are not present?

### **How to attain true greatness in a healthy way**

In my understanding, a more helpful way of attaining true greatness is by concentrating on making good progress in various positive areas of our lives which will help us attain true greatness. As we do so and make progress in these areas, we will then be making progress in attaining true greatness.

*Concentrate on the Lord, on the truth and on developing positive qualities within*

The most helpful approach to attaining true greatness is to concentrate on the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the greatest and He is our perfect teacher. So we should reflect on His life and His teaching to consider how we can be more like Him. The scriptural goal for all believers is that we be conformed to the image of Christ and that Christ be formed in us (Rom. 8:29; Gal. 4:19). This must be our primary concern.

How can Christ be formed in us? There are certain attributes of the Lord that cannot become ours, such as omnipotence,

omnipresence, omniscience. But we can be like Him in moral attributes, such as humility and strength of character. True greatness in the kingdom of God has much to do with the moral and spiritual stature of the believer.

The Lord Jesus exemplified the hallmarks of the true heart of a servant. He came to serve, even to the point of laying down His life. It is not easy to have the heart of a servant — to maintain a humble and gentle spirit — especially when we face adverse circumstances and difficult people, and when we are under spiritual pressure and attacks. It requires strength of character to have the true heart of a servant, and we need to learn from the Lord Jesus on how to develop strength of character and how to persevere in serving God and man with humility and gentleness.

Along with concentrating on being more like the Lord Jesus in His character, we should also seek to live on the basis of truth and the will of God. This will require that we also concentrate on knowing God and the truth and on nurturing our relationship with Him and having our minds renewed. As we grow in our knowledge of God and increasingly live according to the attitudes and ways of Christ, we will become increasingly conformed to the image of Christ, and we can then enjoy deepening fellowship and oneness with God and attain to true greatness.

*Guard against a negative spirit of comparison and self-exaltation*

A spirit of comparison is often present in the desire for greatness. A person usually desires to be greater, more powerful, more influential, and more capable than others. We may not always be aware of the presence of such a spirit. Sometimes there is a mixture of motives — we serve because we genuinely care for others, but there may also be the desire to be regarded as being more spiritual, more caring, more loving, than others.

Then there are also other negative aspirations, such as trying to draw attention to ourselves, desiring to be recognised and praised, enjoying the exercising of authority over others and being flattered.

At the heart of these problems is self-exaltation. This explains the response of the Lord Jesus to His disciples in Luke 9:46–48.

**Luke 9:46–48**

46 An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest.

47 But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side,

48 and said to them, “Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great.”

The disciples argued among themselves over which of them might be the greatest. The Lord Jesus responded: “... the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great”. Some may find this statement difficult to understand. “Least” has the sense of being the lowliest, whereas greatness has the sense of being in an exalted position. So how can one who is least be great?

What the Lord Jesus was advocating is opposite to seeking prominence, power or authority. He wanted to correct the wrong notions and negative attitudes in the hearts of the disciples and so He made it very clear that the attitude and conduct of the one who is truly great is the very opposite of all the negative elements that are associated with worldly greatness. One who is truly great will be free from these negative elements. True greatness involves being “least” among others. The one who is truly great is the least — he does not exalt himself.

Our motivation to grow well and nurture positive qualities should not be because we want to be better than others or to be regarded as great, but because we recognise that these are what the Lord desires of us and because we desire what is good. Our attitudes and approach to life, and our ways and conduct, must be positive. Our service must be motivated by a sincere love for the Lord and for others.

*Learn from the fall of Satan: pitfalls of pride and self-exaltation*

Let us look at two passages generally recognised as referring to the fall of Satan.

**Isaiah 14:12-14**

12 “How you have fallen from heaven,  
O star of the morning, son of the dawn!  
You have been cut down to the earth,  
You who have weakened the nations!  
13 “But you said in your heart,  
‘I will ascend to heaven;  
I will raise my throne above the stars of God,  
And I will sit on the mount of assembly  
In the recesses of the north.  
14 ‘I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;  
I will make myself like the Most High.’

The “star of the morning” is a reference to the evil one. Satan fell because he was proud and he desired to be great. He wanted to “ascend to heaven”, to raise his throne “above the stars of God” and make himself “like the Most High”. He wanted to be exalted, to be compared with and be like God Almighty. Notice the number of times “I will” occurs, showing the arrogant emphasis on the self.

In Ezekiel 28:12, we are told he was created full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. But in verse 17, we are told that his heart was lifted up and his wisdom corrupted because of his arrogance.

**Ezekiel 28:12, 17**

12 “You had the seal of perfection,  
Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.  
17 “Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty;  
You corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor.  
I cast you to the ground;  
I put you before kings,  
That they may see you.

The evil one wants to move man in the same direction. He tempts man to seek greatness, stirring up within the heart the spirit of pride and self-exaltation. This happened at the very beginning of the story of man, in the Garden of Eden, and continues throughout the history of man.

**Genesis 3:4–6**

4 The serpent said to the woman, “You surely will not die!

5 “For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

The evil one drew Eve in the direction of pride and self-exaltation by tempting her to want to be like God, knowing good and evil, to have fleshly aspirations, longing for attainments and positions not intended by God for her. Eve saw that the fruit was good for food, a delight to the eyes and desirable to make one wise. In disobedience to God, Eve, and then Adam, ate from the fruit of the tree that God had forbidden.

So let us be careful not to strive for greatness in the eyes of the world or in ways that are not according to God’s will.

*Seek earnestly to grow well*

While we should be careful not to strive for greatness in the wrong way, we must not be complacent either. We should not hide under the excuse of wanting to be “least” and thus become slothful and fail to work towards achieving our full potential.

God desires that we earnestly seek to grow well, to be the best that we can be. And by His grace, He will provide what is needful for us to achieve these goals. We must therefore strive to develop to our full potential in Christ, doing so according to His ways, in humility and deep gratitude to God — at the

personal level and together in the expression of body-life. It is in such a context that we can be built up in love (Eph. 4) and have deep fellowship with the Lord and with one another. And as we develop and work at our lives in this way, we will move in the direction of true greatness.

I now want to consider with you this question: Why did the Lord Jesus link true greatness with being a servant?

### **True greatness and being a servant**

Let us look at the passage in Mark 10:42–45.

#### **Mark 10:42–45**

42 Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them.

43 “But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant;

44 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all.

45 “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

In verse 43, the Lord Jesus linked “become great” with being “your servant”, and in verse 44, “to be first among you” with “shall be slave of all”. He gave Himself as the example (v. 45).

The Lord also made this link between greatness and being a servant in Matthew 23:11 when He stressed that “the greatest among you shall be your servant”. And in John 13, He illustrated the meaning of that link by washing the feet of His disciples.

There are other aspects associated with true greatness, but the Lord Jesus highlighted the link between greatness and the heart of a servant again and again. Why?

By doing so, the Lord Jesus is helping His disciples, in an effective and penetrating manner, to recognise the wrong notions, attitudes and problems associated with the desire to be great. At the same time, He is showing them how these negative features

can be resolved, and what the path to true greatness is.

Greatness does involve exaltation — not self-exaltation or exaltation by man but exaltation by God. God Himself is truly great and good, and He is exalted on high. The Lord Jesus wants to impress upon us that to attain true greatness and receive exaltation from God, we must nurture the key qualities of the heart of a servant. These key qualities are significant moral and spiritual qualities in God's kingdom.

### *Humility*

A key quality of the heart of a servant is humility. Humility is the opposite of self-exaltation and pride. It counters and resolves the issues of self-exaltation and pride and is the pathway to true greatness.

The Lord Jesus spoke much about the issues of pride and humility.

#### **Matthew 23:5–7**

5 “But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments.”

6 “They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues,

7 and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men.”

In this passage, the Lord told the crowd and His disciples that the Pharisees loved to be recognised by men. They enjoyed being seated at places of honour and being treated with respect. So whatever they did, they did so with the intention of being noticed by others. These are manifestations of pride. In this context, the Lord taught a very important principle: “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (v. 12).

We see the Lord Jesus illustrating this principle in two parables. In Luke 18:9–14, the Lord told a parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and viewed others with contempt. He contrasted the attitude of a Pharisee with that of a tax collector.



**Luke 18:10–14**

10 “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

12 ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’

13 “But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’

14 “I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The Pharisee exalted himself, and had to be humbled. The tax collector, on the other hand, humbled himself and was by that justified and exalted by the Lord: “for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (v. 14).

This principle is also illustrated in Luke 14:7–11. The Lord Jesus noticed that at a feast, invited guests were picking out places of honour at the table. So He told them a parable:

**Luke 14:7–11**

7 And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, saying to them,

8 “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him,

9 and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this man,’ and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place.

10 “But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will have

honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you.

11 “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The Lord Jesus is not saying that a person will be exalted whenever he chooses the lowliest position. It is the attitude within the person that counts. If the person is truly humble, he will be exalted. But if he exalts himself, he will be humbled. And if he occupies a lowly place because he wishes to be regarded as humble when in fact he is arrogant, God will not exalt him because there is no true humility. In verse 11, the Lord Jesus crystallises the truth He wants to teach us through this parable: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”.

In his epistle, the apostle James reflected much of the teaching of the Lord Jesus in the gospels. In James 4:10, he exhorts: “Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you”.

Likewise, the apostle Peter was also deeply impressed with this truth, and he instructed:

**1 Peter 5:5–6**

5 You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

6 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.

So where there is true humility and a true humbling of ourselves in the presence of God, He will exalt us. There will be true exaltation and true greatness.

*Perseverance in humble service motivated by love*

Another key feature of true greatness is perseverance in humble service motivated by love for others. The Lord Jesus came into

this world not to be served, but to serve. Why? It is because of His love for us. Despite the intense agony and suffering, He did not waver, but persevered and gave His life “a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

The life of the apostle Paul also exemplified true greatness and the heart of a servant. We see this in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23.

**1 Corinthians 9:19–23**

19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.

20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law;

21 to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law.

22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.

23 I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

Paul voluntarily made himself “a slave to all” because of his love for others. He wanted to “win more” for Christ. He was concerned for the perishing, that they might come to know the Lord and enter God’s kingdom. He was willing to endure whatever was necessary to achieve the goal of saving as many as possible.

Paul sought to identify himself with Jews, with Gentiles, with all men. He was willing to be “all things to all men” that he might “by all means save some” and to do “all things for the sake of the gospel”. Like the Lord Jesus, he persevered in the mission God entrusted to him, going through many struggles and hardships, and becoming a spectacle to the world, a fool for Christ’s sake, being without honour and roughly treated (1 Cor. 4:9–11). Indeed, Paul served with commendable humility and perseverance.

We see evidence of this also in Acts 20, where Paul addressed the elders of the church at Ephesus:

**Acts 20:18–24**

18 And when they had come to him, he said to them,  
“You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in  
Asia, how I was with you the whole time,  
19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with  
trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews;  
20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was  
profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house,  
21 solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of  
repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.  
22 “And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to  
Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there,  
23 except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in  
every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.  
24 “But I do not consider my life of any account as dear  
to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry  
which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of  
the gospel of the grace of God.”

The elders in Ephesus could see how Paul served the Lord with humility and how in the face of trials and difficulties, he did not shrink from his responsibility. Despite fierce opposition from the Jews and despite knowing that “bonds and afflictions” awaited him in Jerusalem, Paul persevered because of his commitment to the ministry he received from the Lord, and because of his love and concern for the believers.

Paul’s attitude and conduct are manifestations of true greatness. They are opposite to the desire for honour, position, power and exaltation in the sight of men, which are often associated with aspirations for worldly greatness. In Paul’s life and attitude, we see an illustration of the heart of a servant the Lord Jesus teaches us in the Gospels.

## **Importance of nurturing the heart of a true servant**

The problems associated with wanting to be great can be countered and resolved in a meaningful and beautiful way when we nurture the heart of a true servant.

In Galatians 5:13, Paul exhorts believers to have the heart of a true servant:

### **Galatians 5:13**

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

The heart of a true servant is one that serves others through love. Christ has given us true freedom, freeing us from the law of sin and death. We are to use this freedom to serve one another in love and humility. This is the basic approach to life that we should take. One who lives in this way manifests true greatness.

### *Having the heart of a true servant resolves the problem of a negative competitive spirit*

One who desires to be great often desires to be looked up to, to be admired and respected. More than that, he desires to be compared favourably with others — to be better, more admired and more respected. But the Lord Jesus teaches us that the one who is great is the one who is “least among you”, and He illustrates this concept of greatness using the attitude of a servant. A servant is regarded as lower than others. So when we have the attitude of a servant, and are prepared to be regarded as lower than others, we will not have the negative competitive spirit often seen in those who have wrongful desires for greatness.

### *Having the heart of a true servant resolves the problem of the desire to exercise authority over others*

One who seeks greatness often also has the desire to lord it over or exercise authority over others. When we have the heart of a

servant, we will not seek to lord it over others, but will seek to serve them instead.

*Having the heart of a true servant resolves the problem of self-centredness and self-indulgence*

Self-centredness is often the force that drives the desire for greatness. We seek authority and recognition so we can gratify and indulge in our own desires. But when we have the heart of a servant, we seek to serve others out of love for them. Instead of self-centredness and preoccupation with our self-interests, we will look out for the interests of others.

It is therefore important that we nurture the heart of a true servant and effectively put away all the problems associated with wrongful desires for greatness.

**Concluding remarks**

In Act 2, Scene 5, of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, there is this statement: "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them". Do you agree with this statement?

A person born of a king or ruler may be "born great". Some may achieve greatness through hard work or improper ways. Some may have greatness "thrust upon" them because of circumstances. But all such greatness is temporal.

True greatness cannot be obtained through birth, worldly achievements, or by having it thrust upon us. True greatness has to do with our moral and spiritual stature in the kingdom of God. To attain true greatness and to achieve that which is of value in the kingdom of God, we will need to develop our moral and spiritual qualities and deepen our walk with God. Let us be earnest and prayerful in doing so.

## Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What is the pathway to attaining true greatness?
2. What can we learn from Satan's fall and the way he tempted Eve in this area of greatness (Isa. 14:12–14, Ezek. 28:12–17, Gen. 3:1–6)?
3. The Lord Jesus often links true greatness to being a servant. What is He seeking to teach us by doing so?
4. How are the problems associated with wanting to be great countered and resolved in a meaningful and beautiful way when we nurture the heart of a true servant?

## Learning From the Lord Jesus Christ — Our Perfect Example of True Greatness

**I**n this final message, we will continue to consider the biblical presentation of the meaning of true greatness, especially as exemplified in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, our perfect example.

We have seen that God does not want us to pursue worldly greatness. Yet, He may put some of us in positions of earthly honour. There are biblical examples like Daniel, Joseph and David.

Daniel walked faithfully with God and was highly esteemed by Him. He did not seek earthly positions, but rose to a very high position in Babylon. Joseph was made a ruler over Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. He had power, fame and prestige. David was made king of Israel on the instructions of the Lord.

These men were in their earthly positions as part of their faithful walk with God. They neither strove for nor clung on to such positions.

What about us in our context today? We may not achieve such positions as king or governor but we may be great in our fields or professions — a great engineer, a renowned surgeon, an eminent scientist. It is not wrong to be recognised in this way, but it is important that it comes about because God sees it fit as part of our walk with Him.

It is common to think that when we are great in some way, we can have a sense of fulfilment and success. But this sense of fulfilment and success is only temporal. When we attain earthly status, even if it is as part of our faithful walk with God, we must



be prayerful and vigilant. Otherwise, we can be easily caught up with the prestige and fame it brings, enjoying the recognition, the praises of men, and the status associated with it. We may then cling to them and become proud, and thus our spirit is adversely affected by the success we have achieved.

The important question for us to ask is whether we are, from a Christian perspective, good doctors, scientists, engineers, teachers. In the eyes of the Lord, are we responsible and do we work with good attitudes and a positive spirit?

Yes, true greatness is good and desirable. But, as we have seen, it is not so helpful to concentrate on pursuing greatness directly as this tends to develop within us negative traits like pride, self-exaltation and a negative competitive spirit. It is more helpful that we concentrate on developing the qualities of our heart that are important to God. As Christ is our Lord and perfect example, we should seek to know Him more deeply and learn to be more like Him in character and attitude.

### **Jesus, the suffering Servant**

When we think of the Lord Jesus, what kind of ideas come to our mind? We may think of Him as the King of kings and as One having immeasurable authority. But one prominent biblical description of the Lord Jesus is “Servant”. The Lord Jesus exemplified the heart of a servant and taught His disciples to likewise have the heart of a servant — to serve God and others in a spirit of love, humility and perseverance. In John 13, the Lord Jesus washed the feet of His disciples and exhorted them to follow His example. In Mark 10:45, He said: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”.

### *The suffering Servant in Isaiah*

A prominent characteristic of the coming Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament is that of the Messiah as the suffering Servant.

There are several prophetic passages of the coming Messiah in Isaiah commonly known as “The Servant Songs”. I will refer to only one of them: Isaiah 52:13–53:12. This is one of the most significant prophetic passages in the Scriptures on the coming Messiah and it paints a picture of Him as a suffering Servant:

**Isaiah 52:13**

Behold, My servant will prosper,  
He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.

“My servant” here refers to the coming Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Servant will prosper and be greatly exalted. We see here the unexpected but biblical notion of the connection between servant and exaltation. Generally, our concept of “servant” is someone who is lowly. But here is a Servant who is greatly exalted — One who is truly great.

However, Isaiah went on to prophesy in vivid terms the Messiah as a suffering Servant, together with many features which are contrary to worldly concepts of greatness.

**Isaiah 52:14**

Just as many were astonished at you, My people,  
So His appearance was marred more than any man  
And His form more than the sons of men.

**Isaiah 53:2–5**

2 For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,  
And like a root out of parched ground;  
He has no stately form or majesty  
That we should look upon Him,  
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.  
3 He was despised and forsaken of men,  
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;  
And like one from whom men hide their face  
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.  
4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore,

And our sorrows He carried;  
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,  
Smitten of God, and afflicted.  
5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions,  
He was crushed for our iniquities;  
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,  
And by His scourging we are healed.

This Servant had no stately appearance that would draw man's notice and regard. He was, instead, despised and forsaken. He was pierced through, crushed and scourged. He suffered indescribable pain for our transgressions so that we might be healed.

**Isaiah 53:6–9**

6 All of us like sheep have gone astray,  
Each of us has turned to his own way;  
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.  
7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted,  
Yet He did not open His mouth;  
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,  
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,  
So He did not open His mouth.  
8 By oppression and judgment He was taken away;  
And as for His generation, who considered  
That He was cut off out of the land of the living  
For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due?  
9 His grave was assigned with wicked men,  
Yet He was with a rich man in His death,  
Because He had done no violence,  
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

**Isaiah 53:11–12**

11 As a result of the anguish of His soul,  
He will see it and be satisfied;  
By His knowledge the Righteous One,  
My Servant, will justify the many,  
As He will bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great,  
And He will divide the booty with the strong;  
Because He poured out Himself to death,  
And was numbered with the transgressors;  
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many,  
And interceded for the transgressors.

In His service for God and man, this Servant would suffer immensely. He would be oppressed and afflicted and would suffer anguish of soul. He would be treated like a criminal and crucified with criminals. But God will allot Him “a portion with the great” because He was willing to suffer for the sake of others. He will be truly great in the eyes of God. His greatness is demonstrated in His strength of character, His unflinching determination to do God’s will, and His perseverance in the face of indescribable agony and suffering as He bore the sins of men and interceded for the transgressors.

*True greatness and servanthood: Philippians 2:3–11*

Let us look at another important passage in the Scriptures concerning the Lord Jesus — this time from the New Testament — that illustrates the meaning of true greatness and the way to attain it. This passage has a prominent theme: servanthood. It highlights again the relationship between true greatness and the heart of a servant and emphasises the spiritual reality that the truly humble will be exalted. This passage powerfully depicts the Lord Jesus living out His teaching on greatness and the heart of a servant.

**Philippians 2:3–11**

3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;

4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,

6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not  
regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,  
7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant,  
and being made in the likeness of men.  
8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by  
becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.  
9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and  
bestowed on Him the name which is above every name,  
10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those  
who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is  
Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

There is controversy over this passage with regard to the meaning of “emptied Himself” (v. 7). An interpretation put forward is that when the Lord Jesus was on earth, He “emptied Himself” in the sense that He divested Himself of His divine attributes — that is, He became man, and was no longer God. This is known as the Kenotic theory. There are variations to this line of interpretation. But this idea of the Lord Jesus divesting Himself of His divine attributes when He came to earth is a serious error. The Lord Jesus on earth was the God-Man, not just merely man.

The Scriptures teaches us that the Lord Jesus is “Immanuel” which means “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). That is the name of the Lord Jesus Christ during His time on earth. The Word became flesh without ceasing to be God. When He was on earth, He had authority to forgive sins. If He had been just man, He would not have been able to do that. A mere man cannot forgive sins (Mark 2:5–11).

This area of truth has important implications with regard to the meaning and significance of His life and ministry on earth, and more importantly, with regard to His death. It is the God-Man alone who can bear our sins on the Cross and pay the price for all mankind.

The Lord Jesus existed in the form of God, but He humbled Himself by taking the form of a bondservant and served in obedience to the will of God the Father. For this, God the Father highly exalted Him.

### *Features of true greatness in Philippians 2*

This passage in Philippians 2 helps us to appreciate various features of true greatness exemplified in the life of the Lord Jesus, including features mentioned in the previous messages.

#### *1. Right attitude*

In verse 5, we are told to “have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus”. Let us realise that the right attitude is essential. Indeed it is at the very heart of true greatness. Outward conduct, expressions and achievements, no matter how great in the eyes of man, will not count as true greatness if the right attitude is absent.

#### *2. Servanthood*

In verses 6 to 8, we are told that the Lord Jesus, although He existed in the form of God, took the form of a “bondservant”, and He was obedient to the point of death on the Cross. Here, we see the link between true greatness and being a servant.

#### *3. Humility*

Verse 8 tells us that the Lord “humbled Himself”. In verse 3, Paul instructs believers to “do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind...” The attitude Paul commends is humility. He describes conceit as “empty” or futile.

There cannot be true greatness in the eyes of the Lord without genuine humility. Pride being the antithesis of true greatness, its presence will erode the reality of greatness within us. However, it does not mean there must be no tinge of pride in us at all for God to appreciate us. At different levels of our development, we will have different degrees of humility. But to the degree pride is

present in us, to that degree true greatness will be diminished.

So, if we want to progress well in the direction of God's calling, we will have to deal decisively with pride in whatever form it exists and learn to nurture humility to the highest degree.

#### *4. No selfishness or contentiousness*

Verse 3 exhorts us to “do nothing from selfishness” (or “contentiousness”: margin of NASB). In the original text, this word can also be translated as “rivalry”. The spirit of rivalry, often seen in those who desire to be great, drives them in the very opposite direction of true greatness.

Instead of acting from selfishness, Paul exhorts us to look out for the interests of others (v. 4), to consider them as more important than ourselves (v. 3). Instead of harbouring a sense of self-importance, we are to be concerned for the welfare of others and be considerate towards them, and have proper regard and respect for them. This is to be translated into service motivated by a heart of love.

We are exhorted to have the attitude of the Lord Jesus, who came as a “bondservant” of God for our welfare. His death was for us. He suffered untold agony when He paid the penalty for our sins. In this, we see the exact opposite of selfishness and contentiousness. This is love at the highest, purest level. Such marvellous love — who can fully appreciate it! May the Lord fill our hearts with His divine love so that we may learn to also serve with such self-giving love.

#### *5. Sacrifice*

Verse 7 tells us the Lord “emptied Himself”. He gave up His glorious position and circumstances with the Father in heaven and came into a fallen, sin-filled world as a bondservant. For the sake of man, He suffered ill-treatment, humiliation and crucifixion.

It is not easy to give up a comfortable context and a position of great honour and willingly be subjected to great humiliation

and suffering. It would seem unfair for one to be put in difficult circumstances just to help others. But at the heart of true service is the love for God and man that moves us to willingly give up whatever we hold dear and go through whatever God sees fit for us to go through.

As we reflect on the sacrificial life of the Lord Jesus, we will appreciate better what He meant when He taught His disciples that to become great, one ought to be a servant and slave of all.

### *6. Perseverance*

Verse 8 tells us that the Lord was obedient “to the point of death, even death on a cross”. His earthly life of service was one of suffering, culminating at the Cross, where He suffered intense agony as He bore the punishment due to all mankind.

True greatness requires service not just with a heart of love and humility, but also with the quality of perseverance. The degree of greatness is related to the extent to which we are willing to go in the path of true service. The Lord Jesus was willing to serve to the point of death on the Cross. That is a reflection of the greatness of the Lord Jesus and the quality of the service He rendered. He was prepared to pay the ultimate price, and He did.

To some extent, we may have the heart of a servant. But how deep is the quality? How far are we prepared to go to be obedient to God, to make sacrifices, to persevere in spite of great odds, humiliation, excruciating pain, anguish and severe afflictions from the evil one?

The real qualities of the Christian faith are deep, strong qualities of character and spirit. They are never superficial or primarily emotional. We may feel a surge of love so strong that we feel we are prepared to go through all odds to serve. But if it is primarily emotional, then it is not an indication of real quality of faith. The test is whether we waver and shrink back when the going gets tough.

It is important that we nurture good character with deep



quality of love and humility with perseverance. This is not possible on our own; only God can bring it about in our lives as we let Him fill our hearts with divine love and as we learn to walk according to the Spirit. We can then face the trials of life with true confidence in the Lord, knowing that His grace is sufficient for us and that He will lead us in triumph in Christ. The trials we go through can help us see to what degree we have developed the positive qualities of the inner man. And if we go through the trials well, the qualities will deepen.

### *7. Obedience to God*

Verse 8 tells us that the Lord Jesus humbled Himself by “becoming obedient” to the Father. Obedience to God the Father is an essential element of true greatness. There is true greatness in service only when the service is expressed in the context of obedience to the Lord. We may try very hard to serve others in love, humility and perseverance, but if it is not in obedience to the Father, it is not in the truth. Whatever we do that is not in fellowship with the Lord is not true service; it is not an expression of true greatness. True service cannot be according to our own thinking and inclinations, or in response to the expectation of others; nor can it be dictated by circumstances. It has to be according to the truth and to what the Lord requires of us.

### *8. Exaltation is from God*

Verse 9 tells us that “God highly exalted Him”. True greatness and exaltation is of the Lord, not of man. Man may accord us prestige and power, but if God does not appreciate us, there is no true greatness. However, there can be true greatness even if man does not recognise it.

### *Appreciation of the greatness of the God-Man*

May the Lord help us appreciate the greatness of the Lord Jesus and all that He went through on our behalf. Because of His love

for us, He left His glorious position and existence in heaven and came into this fallen world. To identify with us and to die for us, He humbled Himself and became man — even a bondservant. Yet He did not cease to be God. All that He went through, including the pain, humiliation and mockery at the Cross, He experienced them all both as God and as man.

Let us reflect on how much the Lord Jesus, as God, was prepared to go through on our behalf. Let us also reflect on Him, as the perfect man, whose life is a perfect example of true greatness. Let us learn from Him how we too can move in the direction of true greatness.

### **Qualifications on the meaning of being a servant**

There can be misconceptions with regards to what it means to be a servant as an expression of true greatness. The following qualifications may help to clarify two common misconceptions on this subject.

#### *1. Heart of a servant does not mean submitting to whatever others expect of us*

Having the heart of a servant does not mean that we must literally become servants or slaves of other people. It does not mean we have to submit to them in whatever they require or expect of us. If we fail to understand how this area of truth ought to work out, we can become unduly disturbed and frustrated. We may not know how to respond to unreasonable demands and expectations of others, including those who try to take advantage of us. We may even conclude that the Christian faith is not practical and cannot be lived out in this fallen world.

When the Lord Jesus spoke about being a bondservant or slave of all, He is referring to having the heart of a servant in the context of submission to God. God is the only Lord and Master whom we should serve with full obedience. We owe absolute submission only to Him. And in submission to the will of God, we serve others humbly, in love and truth, in sincerity, for their welfare.

### *Example of Paul*

In 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, the apostle Paul expressed how he was prepared to identify himself with the Jews, with the weak, and with both those who were under the Law and those not under the Law. He made himself a “slave to all” so he might win them to Christ. He said: “I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel...” (vs. 22–23). But Paul lived in this way always in the context of “not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ” (v. 21).

Paul was prepared to do all he could to reach out to others for their eternal well-being, but without violating “the law of Christ”. True service is always within the framework of the truths and principles God has revealed in the Scriptures, and according to God’s will and guidance in specific situations.

### *Example of the Lord Jesus*

The Lord Jesus Christ declared that He came to serve and He did, laying down His life as a ransom for many. But, quite clearly, He did not allow anyone to simply order Him around. Nor would He satisfy all the demands and expectations of others.

Let us look at His response to Herod in Luke 23:6–9:

#### **Luke 23:6–9**

6 When Pilate heard it, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.

7 And when he learned that He belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who himself also was in Jerusalem at that time.

8 Now Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him.

9 And he questioned Him at some length; but He answered him nothing.

Herod questioned the Lord Jesus with the hope of seeing Him

perform some sign. But the Lord did not oblige him with any.

The Lord Jesus knew that His teaching and His ways would, from time to time, arouse the antagonism of the religious leaders. He came to serve, but He did not try to appease them by refraining from saying or doing anything that might arouse their hostility. Instead, He continued to do what was required of Him by the Father.

Likewise, when the multitude wanted to make Him king, the Lord Jesus did not accede to their desire because it was not God's will for Him to do so (John 6:15).

## *2. Heart of a servant does not mean having no authority*

Having the heart of a servant does not mean the believer has no authority and cannot properly exercise authority over others. It may sound paradoxical — the authority of the slave of all — but having the heart of a servant is compatible with exercising authority.

The Lord Jesus took the form of a bondservant, yet He had great authority and He spoke with authority. The apostles and the elders of the churches were given spiritual authority. In Titus 2:15, Paul instructed Titus:

### **Titus 2:15**

These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you.

True authority can be exercised by those with the heart of a servant. But this authority must be from the Lord, and it is for building up and not for tearing down. Paul spoke of the authority given him in 2 Corinthians 13:10:

### **2 Corinthians 13:10**

For this reason I am writing these things while absent, so that when present I need not use severity, in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me for building up and not for tearing down.

Such authority is different from that which lord it over others. It is given by God so that His people may be built up in their faith.

Beyond the spiritual authority which the Lord entrusts to those with specific roles and responsibilities, such as the apostles and elders, for the advancement of His kingdom, there is also the spiritual authority that God's children may manifest generally.

When there is a true heart of servanthood and the attaining of true greatness in God's kingdom, God's children can manifest true spiritual authority in the spiritual realm. This spiritual authority may be manifested in different contexts, including confronting and overcoming the forces of darkness, and in effective prayer that contributes to the advancement of God's kingdom. It can also be manifested in various forms of ministry, such as in preaching, teaching and communication of the truth. The significance of the spiritual impact of their lives and ministry bears a relationship with the degree of true greatness attained.

### **Concluding remarks**

There are believers who profess eagerness to serve God but are not eager to serve others, especially if their service goes unnoticed, or is difficult or unglamorous. If this is true of us, then we are deficient in this important quality of the heart of a servant.

When the Lord Jesus exhorted every disciple of His to be a servant or slave of all, He is encouraging a servant's heart that is prepared to serve others. When we serve others with a true heart of love, we are in fact serving the Lord.

So in our expression of love for the Lord and all that He has done for us, we must be willing to serve others according to God's will — humbly, consistently, with perseverance and for their edification.

Two verses from Matthew can help us appreciate how to look at acts of service that may seem insignificant.

The Lord Jesus tells us how He will judge as the Son of Man when He comes, and when He sits on His glorious throne.

**Matthew 25:40**

“The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’”

Service rendered even to “the least” of “these brothers” of the Lord Jesus is considered by the Lord to be service to Him.

**Matthew 10:42**

“And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.”

Giving a cup of cold water may seem a simple insignificant act of service. But the Lord says that a person who does even such an act in the name of a disciple shall not lose his reward. True service in a spirit of humility is deeply appreciated by the Lord.

What we can appreciate from these two verses is that we should not neglect to do good, even if it appears to be insignificant in men’s eyes. We should not think that only doing “big” things or serving important people counts for God. What appears great may not be great in the eyes of God and conversely, what appears little may be of great value to Him. The commendation by the Lord of the poor widow who contributed just two copper coins is a good illustration and reminder of this principle (Mark 12:41–44).

Let us learn to perceive things from the perspective of God and His kingdom and learn to serve humbly in love in all situations, whether our service appears significant or not. Our service should not hinge on how others may regard us. Let us concentrate on developing good character and positive attitudes, not just for the moment, but for our whole life. It is indeed feasible for every child of God to be truly great in God’s kingdom.

## Questions for reflection and discussion

1. How should we view and approach the issue of positions of status, honour and authority in this world? What do you think God is looking for in the way His children go about fulfilling their responsibilities in their work and professions?
2. What can we learn about true greatness from the prophetic passage in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 on the coming Messiah as the suffering Servant?
3. How does the passage in Philippians 2:3–11 help us to appreciate various features of true greatness as exemplified in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ?
4. Having the heart of a servant is an integral part of true greatness. Does this mean:
  - One should submit to whatever others expect of us
  - It is improper for believers to exercise authority over others or to manifest authority in their lives?
5. Reflect over whether you are truly prepared to devote your life to serve the Lord and others with the heart of a servant — humbly, consistently, with perseverance — to the glory of God and the well-being of others.

# Closing Words

**M**any people in the world are preoccupied with the pursuit of material riches and worldly fame, status and greatness. They regard these as important goals in life and see how one fares in these areas as indicators of success.

The negative influence of the spirit of the world is pervasive, and what the world is preoccupied with has significant impact on all who live in this world. God's children are not exempt.

As citizens of heaven living in this fallen world, we are called by the Lord Jesus to be the salt of the earth and the light of this world. In order to be salt and light, we have to resist the influences of the world, and our mind-set and values have to be shaped by the eternal perspective and the realities in God's kingdom. This is what the apostle Paul exhorts us to do in Romans 12:1–2. We are not to be conformed to the world, but instead, we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. This is integral to the expression of our worship of God, our commitment to Him, and our presenting ourselves to Him as living sacrifices.

We need to have a good grasp of the biblical teaching on these issues. Our understanding and conviction in these areas, and what we are committed to, will have a direct bearing on our personal relationship with God, our growth in moral and spiritual stature, and how effectively we participate in the fulfilment of God's purposes.

## **Being truly rich**

In the first five messages, I considered with you what it means to be truly rich.

We noted that material riches do not endure, yet many long for these because of greed and the desire for indulgent living, and



also because they seek a sense of security.

Christians can also falter in this area of material wealth. That is why the Lord Jesus warns us about it time and again. He warns us against laying up for ourselves treasures on earth and teaches us not to be anxious about the material things of life. At the same time, He urges us to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven and to seek first the kingdom of God.

The Lord Jesus does not desire that we be materially rich but spiritually poor. He desires that we be spiritually rich, even if we are materially poor.

The life and teaching of the Lord Jesus help us to see that our attitude and approach towards material wealth and possessions have a direct bearing on our relationship with God, our being truly rich, our spiritual health and our eternal well-being. Although the love of money can be a snare and can ruin our lives, material wealth can be put to good use.

Thoughtful giving to the Lord's work can help to advance His kingdom. It can contribute to the well-being of others. At the same time, we are being blessed, and our walk with God and our own spiritual life enriched.

In exercising good stewardship of what the Lord has entrusted to us, there is a proper place for thoughtful planning for the future and wise investments, and careful spending on ourselves and our loved ones.

The Lord Jesus wants to impress upon us that having the right attitude towards material things is part of the wider issue of consecration and true discipleship — the giving up of all our own possessions and following Him, regarding nothing as our own to do as we please, and consecrating everything to the Lord to be used as He pleases. Are we truly His stewards? When we tell the Lord we consecrate to Him our all, do we really mean it, or are we merely paying lip service, with little reality in practical outworking?

It is important that we grasp the Lord's intent when He instructs us to give up all our own possessions. When we do so, we will be able to appreciate better the central thrust of the meaning of the spirit of true discipleship with regards to material wealth and other aspects of the Christian life.

May the Lord search our hearts and help us to see in what way and to what degree we have a problem in this area of material wealth, and may He strengthen us to resolve these properly and deeply.

Are we materially rich and doing well by the world's standards, but in reality spiritually poor? Do we think we are spiritually rich, and do others also regard us to be so, when in reality we are spiritually poor, miserable and wretched? Will we be content if we are spiritually rich though materially poor?

Many have fallen prey to the wiles of the evil one and their lives ruined by the deceitfulness of riches. Instead of desiring to get rich and longing for material wealth, let us flee from these things and concentrate on pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Let us nurture the quality of our character and attitudes and the positive moral and spiritual realities in our life. Let us nurture these based on sound knowledge of truths revealed in the Scriptures and seek to express them appropriately in our lives.

### **Being truly great**

In the last three messages, we considered what it means to be truly great.

We noted that worldly greatness is futile and has no true value. It is fleeting; it passes with this age. Worldly greatness does not bring true fulfilment. Instead, it often brings about pride, jealousy and strife. It is often motivated by self-interest — a desire for fame, power and self-exaltation, and a desire to exercise authority over others. We should not seek to be great in this way.

True greatness, on the other hand, is extremely precious and

of enduring value, and we must set our hearts on the path of true greatness.

But, as we have seen, our primary focus should not be on attaining greatness. If we make it our primary focus, we are in danger of being tainted by negative elements such as a spirit of pride and superiority, a spirit of self-exaltation, and a competitive spirit.

It is more helpful that we concentrate on developing inner qualities that are important to God. As Christ is our Lord and perfect example, we should set our heart to know Him more deeply and learn to be more like Him in character and attitude. As we do so and make progress in these areas, we will then be making progress in attaining true greatness.

On several occasions, the Lord Jesus taught His disciples the truth that true greatness is vitally linked to having the heart of a servant.

The heart of a servant is not merely a single trait but a whole mind-set, an approach to life, the attitude of heart. It is perfectly exemplified in Christ's own life and vividly presented by the apostle Paul in Philippians 2. Although He existed in the form of God, He emptied Himself and took on the likeness of men in the form of a bond-servant. And as a bond-servant, He served humbly, out of a heart of love. In the midst of intense pain and agony, He persevered in doing God's will, to the point of death on the Cross. Such is a life of true greatness, and God the Father highly exalted Him.

To be a servant or slave of all is to have a servant's heart that is prepared to serve others according to the will of God — humbly, with perseverance, with a heart of love and for their edification. And we will do so even if our service goes unnoticed or is difficult or unglamorous. When we serve with such a heart, we are in reality serving the Lord.

We ought not neglect doing good, even if it appears to be insignificant in men's eyes. What appears great may not be great in the eyes of God, and conversely, what appears little may be

of great value to Him. Let us take heed and learn well from the Lord's commendation of the poor widow who contributed just two copper coins.

Let us learn to perceive things from the perspective of God and His kingdom and learn to serve humbly and in love in all situations, whether our service appears significant or not.

Let us concentrate on developing good character and positive attitudes, not just for the moment, but for our whole life. This is something feasible for every child of God. It is indeed feasible for every child of God to be truly great in God's kingdom.

When we persevere, learn and grow well, and serve the Lord faithfully and effectively, we will be truly rich and great. God will have the freedom to work in and through our lives. We will be laying a good foundation for the future and can look forward to the crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:8) and the crown of life (James 1:12, Rev. 2:10).

May the Lord be pleased to help each one of us to be truly rich and great in His sight and in His kingdom.