

Message: AR148
Series: Appearance and Reality
Section: The Lord Jesus Christ
Subsection: Truly Rich
Date preached: 2 Oct 94
Date edited: 20 Aug 10 (Revised Aug 16)

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?

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