

In the year 1923, nine of the world's wealthiest men held a meeting in Chicago. In attendance were the presidents of the world's largest steel, gas and electricity companies, the world's greatest wheat speculator, the president of the New York Stock Exchange, a member of the cabinet of the US President, a Wall Street tycoon, the head of the world's largest monopoly, and the president of the Bank of International Settlements. Those men knew all the secrets of generating capital and accumulating wealth. They could own anything and everything that money could buy. But there was one more thing that they had in common - and that was that within the next 10 years they all lost everything they had. One of them lived on borrowed money for the last 5 years of his life and died bankrupt. Another went insane. A third died in a foreign land, penniless and a fugitive from the law. Still another also died abroad and insolvent. The president of the New York Stock Exchange was sent to the infamous Sing Sing prison. The member of the Presidential cabinet was pardoned from prison so that he could go home to die. And the remaining 3 committed suicide. Although it is sad, and shocking, the story of these 9 men should not be surprising, for the Bible warns the rich not "to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God" (1 Timothy 6:17).

1. A Postscript for the Wealthy

This word for the wealthy comes in the postscript Paul added to his first letter to Timothy. The main body of the letter ended with Paul's doxology in verse 16: "To him be honour and might forever, Amen". But then it seems that, perhaps on rereading the letter, Paul realized that something was missing. You will remember that back in verse 9 of chapter 6 Paul had warned that "people who want to get rich" are headed for destruction. That warning was not just for the poor - it was for anyone who wanted more money. Left by itself, however, it might give the impression that it is wrong for Christians to be rich. That would be a wrong impression, for there is nothing wrong with money, in and of itself. The gospel is for everyone - for the haves as well as the have nots, rich and poor alike. We are all sinners in need of a Saviour.

Although there were many poor Christians in Ephesus (including a number of slaves), Paul also knew committed Christians there who happened to be rich. With them in mind, he wrote to Timothy, "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (v.17). In the providence of God, some Christians are rich already in this life - they live in comfortable circumstances. They own their own homes, wear nice clothes and have more than enough to eat. And Christians who are blessed with such material prosperity do not need to feel guilty about it - nor do they need to give away their wealth. They are even allowed to enjoy themselves. For everything we own comes from God himself, "who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment". God is no miser. He provides for the rich and the poor alike, and whatever he provides is for our enjoyment.

This doesn't mean that we should live for luxury. Paul has already warned against that kind of attitude in chapter 5 when he said that "the widow who lives for pleasure (who is self-indulgent) is dead even while she lives" (5:6). Earthly pleasures can give no lasting joy. The one real and lasting joy is God himself, but anyone who finds joy in God, the good and generous Giver, will also enjoy his gifts. Enjoyment doesn't mean self-indulgent living. The reason everything may be enjoyed lies in the recognition that everything, including our wealth, is a gift, the expression of God's gracious generosity. Surely Paul's postscript to Timothy must come as a great relief to Christians in the Western world. Compared to the rest of the world, not to mention the ancient Ephesians, we are very rich. We need not feel guilty about this, but grateful for what God has provided for our enjoyment.

2. In God We Trust

But the Bible has more to say about our prosperity than simply to say that we should enjoy it. Although there is nothing wrong with our money in and of itself, it is not to be trusted.

Paul warns of two sinful attitudes that are common among the rich - a false sense of importance and a false sense of security: "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain" (v. 17a).

Some rich people are proud of what they can accumulate, and this makes them rather arrogant. They boast about their latest purchases and acquisitions. They feel so important that they expect to be treated with a degree of deference. In the church, they think they are entitled to influence simply because they are wealthy. These attitudes are all too common in the business world - there is a sense of entitlement. The rich - and that includes us - must not think too highly of themselves. The only reason we are prosperous is that God has made us prosper.

Another common attitude among the wealthy is a false sense of security. Instead of relying on God, they depend on their financial instincts and trust in their own resources. Since we are a wealthy nation, these are common Australian attitudes. If the economy is good, the mood in the country is generally good, and the politicians will stay in office. If the economy is bad, the mood in the country is bad, and the politicians will have to go. This is a sure sign that our culture bases its ultimate sense of security on money. The false sense of security even pervades the church. A former editor of Christianity Today, when asked what he considered the greatest problem facing the contemporary church, answered, "It is not liberalism.....or wrong views of revelation or inspiration or other controversial points in theology.....Rather the most serious problem facing today's church is materialism - materialism not as a philosophical theory, but as a way of life".

The reality is that money is a shaky foundation. After a decade of economic strength in the 1990s and into the early 2000s, with investors holding on to the stock market for the ride of their lives, the Global Financial Crisis was a stark reminder that, when it comes to the economy, there are no guarantees. The writer of the book of Proverbs put it well: "Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle" (Proverbs 23:5). Riches are here today, gone tomorrow. They cannot be trusted.

The only safe place to put our trust is in God himself. All prosperity comes from him. Thus the only place to put all confidence is in God, in whom we have everything we need. Those who do trust in him are able to say, "Lord, you have blessed me with more than I could ever deserve. But you could take it all away tomorrow and I would still be full of joy, for I have everything I need in Jesus Christ". You cannot trust both God and money - it is either one or the other (Matthew 6:24). So which will it be? Coins issued by the United States must bear the motto "In God We Trust". That indeed is sound theology. As Christians, it is in God we are to trust and not money.

3. The Generous Lifestyle

One of the best ways to learn how to trust God rather than money is to give our money away. That is what Paul wants Timothy to tell the wealthy people in his congregation to do: "Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share" (v.18). In other words, rich Christians are to be good and generous.

There are a number of surprises in this verse. One surprise comes from the way Paul plays with his words. Notice that he actually commands the rich to be rich - to be rich in good deeds. The world tells us to aspire to be rich - to be wealthy.....but are you rich in good deeds? Remember how Paul describes Christians - those saved by grace - in Ephesians 2: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (v.10). Have you learned that the way to be truly wealthy is to give your life away in serving Jesus Christ?

Another surprise is that God does not come begging for money. The first 2 things that Paul mentions in verse 18 do not require any cash. The first thing God wants from the rich is not their money. What he values most of all is a servant's heart. He wants us to be "rich

toward God”, as Jesus put it when he explained the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:21). This means that it is not enough for the wealthy to give money to charity, although of course there is a place for that. What God demands first is active service. It is one thing to pay someone else to feed the hungry or care for the sick - it is another thing to feed the hungry yourself, or to take care of someone who is sick. There are no idle rich in God’s kingdom. Every Christian is called to active, personal involvement in deeds of mercy.

However, some deeds of mercy also require money. And so another way that wealthy Christians can glorify God is through the wise use of their money. God calls all his children “to be generous and willing to share” (v.18) - that is to embrace a lifestyle of giving. The stewardship of personal wealth is an important aspect of a rich Christian’s calling. How are you going with the stewardship of your wealth? In the days of the early church it was generosity, more than anything else, that showed the difference between Christianity and paganism. The pagans did not care for the poor because the poor could give them nothing in return. What made Christians different is that they did care for the poor. In Acts 4 we read that the believers “shared everything they had” and “there were no needy persons among them” (vv.32, 34). Not only did Christians care for their own poor, but they also cared for the pagan poor. They fed the hungry, cared for lepers and rescued babies and children left to die. By the second century, Tertullian was able to boast that Christians spent more on the poor in the street than pagans spent at the temple. The result was rapid, worldwide expansion of the gospel.

The reason Christians are able to be so generous is that we serve a generous God. God is richer than the richest man who ever lived. He not only owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:10), but he also owns the hills! Yet God does not hoard his treasure. As Paul has said in v.17, “God.....richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment”. It is impossible to think of God’s rich giving without thinking of his most lavish gift of all: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). Those who have become rich by the grace of God must therefore be willing to enrich others.

More capital is being generated in the world now than at any other time in human history, yet the disparity between the rich and the poor has never been greater. At the same time, many valuable Christian ministries, including mission enterprises, are hindered by lack of funds. The problem is not that there are not enough Christians, but that many of the new Christians live in poor countries in Africa and South America and that most Christians, in the western world at least, are not Christlike enough (generous and sacrificial) in their giving. The gospel has not really impacted the use of their money. I wonder, is that the case with you?

One way for us to become more like Christ in our giving is to train ourselves to be generous in the little sacrifices of daily life. Take the smallest piece of cake or helping of food. Let someone else have the parking space. Make sure there is plenty of hot water for the next person taking a shower. Share your power tools or garden implements with a neighbour. Put a little extra in the offering plate. For the Christian generosity ought to be a way of life.

4. Saving Up for Eternity

The command to be generous and willing to share is hard for some wealthy people to follow. After all, if a rich man gives his riches away, he won’t be rich anymore. Remember that this was why the rich young man refused to follow Jesus. Jesus told him, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21). Unfortunately, the young man was not ready to be so generous: “When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth” (Matthew 19:22). As Jesus watched the rich young man slowly walk away, he said to his disciples” I tell you the truth, it is hard for a

rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:23). The apostle Paul understood this and so, in order to encourage the rich to be generous, he appealed to their business instincts. People who are generous and willing to share thus “will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life” (v.19).

From the spiritual perspective, the eternal perspective, storing up earthly treasure actually turns out to be a bad investment! The goal of any investor is to gain long-term financial security. But even if a man spends his whole life trying to build up a fortune, he will lose all his assets at death. The Rich Fool in Jesus parable (Luke 12:13-21) discovered this, didn't he?

According to the Bible there are really 2 kinds of wealth. Paul hinted at this in v.17 when he referred to “those who are rich in this present world”. This phrase suggests that there is also a world to come. And being rich in that world in the coming age and being rich now in this world are two entirely different matters. Where earthly treasure is concerned, the old saying is true, “you can't take it with you”. But when it comes to spiritual capital, you can send it on ahead! This is why the Bible often describes the blessing of heaven as treasures. This was the teaching of Jesus himself who said, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21).

When Paul talks about the kind of treasure that will make a solid foundation for the age to come, what he has in mind is the treasure of eternal life. One thing money cannot buy is life itself. Earthly riches have no life-giving power. But a man or woman who gives his or her possessions away for the sake of Jesus Christ and his kingdom has begun “to take hold of the life that is truly life” (v.19). The Bible encourages us to amass a fortune in heavenly treasure, and thereby take hold of eternal life. This is not salvation by works. Paul isn't teaching that wealth is a means to secure our salvation. There is no way to buy our way into heaven. Eternal life is a free gift of God entirely dependent on his grace to us in Jesus. But anyone who is rich in good deeds and generous out of gratitude to God for salvation in Jesus Christ has already begun in this life to enter the joy of eternal life. The Bible promises that when earthly treasure is given away in the name of Jesus Christ, it is exchanged for heavenly treasure. Unlike earthly treasure, heavenly treasure cannot be lost. It is a lucrative investment because it secures the infinite riches of heaven. It is a long-term investment because it will last for all eternity. It is the ultimate investment providing “a firm foundation for the coming age”. Having received the glorious gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ through faith in him, are you investing in heavenly treasure by doing good, being rich in good deeds and being generous and willing to share in the name of Jesus Christ, your Saviour and Lord?

Amen