

WEALTH IS WHAT YOU DO WITH IT!

Today's Text: Lk 12: 13- 21

Extracts:

Then one from the crowd said to [Jesus], “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” But He said to him, “Man, who made Me a judge or arbitrator over you?” And He said to them, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.” Then He spoke a parable to them, saying, “The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully; and he thought within himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?’ So he said,”...I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods, and I will say to my soul, ...Take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.” But God said to him, ‘Fool, this night, your soul will be required of you...’ So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” [Lk 12: 13-21].

In March 2010, Gail Posner of Miami Beach, Florida, USA, died of cancer at the age of 67.¹In her will, her three dogs received a \$3 million trust fund and a mansion valued at \$8.3 million. Her former staff, including body guards, a personal trainer and housekeepers, got \$27 million. But for her only son, Bret Carr, she left one million dollars. He has gone to court to contest the will on the ground that his mother, from whom he had been estranged, did the will under the undue influence of her domestic staff.

A million dollars is a lot of money in any currency but Bret’s reaction is not surprising. We find that our lust for more is always there. A billionaire and a poor beggar share that attribute. But in this week’s Bible text, Jesus has warned us that life does not consist in the things we possess but in how we use them. Wealth is what we do with it.

How about you? God has given you wealth in one form or the other, such as material blessings or natural talents, among others. What have you done with it? Are you keeping it to yourself or sharing it with others? How does God expect you to use it? Those questions and more are the issues examined in this week’s study.

¹ Based on “Florida millionaire left more to her dogs than her son,”

<http://www.probatelawyerblog.com/2010/06/florida-millionaire-left-more-to-her-dogs-than-to-son.html> ;
June 21, 2010.

1. Background: You can be wealthy but foolish!

We came into this world naked and we shall return in like manner [**Job 1: 21; Eccl. 5: 21**]. So, why do we crave so much after material wealth as if that is the whole duty of man on earth? In this week's Bible story, somebody from among the crowd that surrounded Jesus requested Him to tell his brother to divide his family's inheritance with him [**Lk 12: 13**]. The man's brother had apparently kept everything for himself. After putting a caveat that He had not been appointed a judge or arbitrator on the matter, Jesus used the opportunity to develop some general principles that will guide all of us in what wealth means and how it should be used. He told the Parable of the Rich Fool to illustrate the theme [**vv. 14-20**]. Here are the key points to underline:

a) *There is nothing wrong with wealth but your attitude to it*

Jesus told His listeners, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" [**v. 15**]. In other words, there is nothing wrong with wealth *per se* but your attitude to it. In fact, riches and wealth are given to us as the gift of God [**Eccl. 5: 19**]. For example, Abraham (then known as Abram) "was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold" [**Gen. 13: 2**]. When his son, Isaac, went to live with Abimelech king of the Philistines during a famine, we are told, "Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year a hundredfold; and the Lord blessed him. The man *began* to prosper, and *continued* prospering until he *became* prosperous" to the extent that the Philistines envied him [**Gen. 26: 1-14**]. Therefore, God gives us wealth as well as the ability to enjoy it.

However, the problem comes when we then regard wealth as our god that we put over and above God who gives it. That is idolatry or covetousness. That was why Moses warned the children of Israel who were on the threshold of entering the Promised Land not to say in their hearts that it was their power and the might of their hand that had gained them wealth. Instead, they should remember it is God who gives "power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant" that He had sworn to their fathers [**Deut. 8: 17-18**].

Most of us can afford to dance and praise God during worship *because* we have fat bank accounts and healthy investments. Let the banks/investment schemes collapse and some of us may commit suicide as some millionaires did in 2008 when they lost their investments in Ponzi schemes run by frauds like Bernard Madoff, currently serving a 150-year prison sentence in the United States.² Therefore, we should be careful that we do not put wealth above God.

² <http://www.sec.gov/answers/ponzi.htm>

b) *The Rich Fool attributed his wealth to his own effort and kept it to himself!*

In the parable, “the ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully” [**Lk 12: 16**]. That suggests that God blessed the works of his hands. We can only plant and water. Only God can give the increase [**1 Cor. 3:6**]. That is why even different people who plant on the same kind of rich soil may wind up with varying levels of harvest, as God chooses to bless them [**Matt. 13: 23**]. But what was the Rich Fool’s attitude to his abundant harvest? Since he had more yield than his current barns could take, he decided to pull them down and build greater ones to store “all [his] crops and [his] goods.” Then, he would say to his soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry” [**Lk 12: 18-19**].

If he stored *all his crops and goods*, it is doubtful that he had tithed “all the increase” of his estate [**Deut. 14: 22**], not to talk of fair wages to his workers. He was extremely selfish, thinking only of himself and nobody else. He was self-made. He was comfortable into the foreseeable future. Now, he could just relax and enjoy his wealth for the rest of his life. Some of us do exactly the same thing. By our wealth, we have been able to move away from the maddening crowds of family, friends and hangers-on to live in an exclusive neighbourhood with high gates and strict security. We become indifferent to the needs of the poor and disadvantaged. Hiding our selfishness under the guise of political ideology, we condemn or oppose any public social security schemes for the poor and the elderly. We blame the disadvantaged as lazy and a drain on the sweat of the hardworking rich few who resent any attempt by the state to make them pay more taxes.

But the word of God says, “If riches increase, do not set your heart on them” [**Ps. 62: 10**] for “riches are not forever, nor does a crown endure to all generations” [**Prov. 27: 24**]. God has a purpose for giving you wealth but self-aggrandisement is not part of it! He who gives to the poor is lending to the Lord and He will repay him [**Prov. 19: 17**]. That is why the word of God adds, “There is one who makes himself rich, yet has nothing; and one who makes himself poor, yet has great riches” [**Prov. 13: 7**]. Therefore, God has a higher purpose for giving us wealth.

c) *Therefore, he did not live to enjoy his wealth!*

God said to the rich man, “Fool! *This night*, your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?” Jesus concluded His story by saying, “So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” [**Lk 12: 20-21**]. The man died that night and left all his wealth for others to enjoy. So it is with all of us. You cannot control what you do not own!

What is the lesson of that story for us? It is that *material wealth avails nothing if we selfishly keep it to ourselves and do not use it to glorify God*. In fact, we may not live for as long as we wish if we continue to enjoy it alone. So, apart from selfishness or self-centredness, what excuse do you have for not sharing? Let us examine a few other cases.

2. Why people may not be sharing their wealth

In the Parable of the Rich Fool, we could defend how he acquired his wealth. He worked hard for it. His only problem was unbridled selfishness. He worshipped his wealth instead of sharing it with the needy. He could not have been a happy man because he did not use his wealth to glorify God. In the end, he died prematurely and his wealth went to others. There are many so-called wealthy people in our communities today who are reluctant to share for the following reasons (among others):

a) *They cannot disclose or defend their sources of wealth*

Some people have used their privileged positions as politicians, public servants, managers of corporations or heads of churches to corruptly enrich themselves, family and associates. For fear of public anti-corruption agencies or the tax authority, they work extremely hard to hide their loot from public view so that nobody will know what they have stolen. Such people can be branded *the Gehazis of this world*.

Gehazi was the servant of the prophet Elisha. When Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Syria, came to his master to receive healing from leprosy, he brought gifts of great value. However, in spite of Naaman's insistence, Elisha refused, saying, "As the Lord lives, before whom I stand, I will receive nothing." But Elisha's covetous servant, Gehazi, ran after Naaman, lying to him that his master had just received some visitors and needed some money and items of clothing from Naaman. He gladly obliged and gave Gehazi great wealth that had to be carried ahead of him into his house where he hid it from his master. However, God had revealed it to his master and yet Gehazi tried to deny it! For his punishment, Elisha cursed him and the leprosy that left Naaman came on Gehazi and his descendants *forever* [2 Kgs 5: 1-27].

The word of God says, "Wealth gained by dishonesty will be diminished" [Prov. 13: 11]. Therefore, whoever steals wealth and uses the proceeds to benefit his family has only put an ancestral curse on them. Those who build huge mansions with corrupt wealth have just built their own graves.

Some people with such wealth may try to launder it by using the guise of a bogus business entity or political office gained through electoral gimmick to donate generously to causes that will give them a good public image. for example, they may make fat offerings in their places of worship, including building places of worship for them. They may rehabilitate badly-needed community infrastructures or donate expensive cars to community leaders. They may champion causes and set up charities or foundations for the poor and the needy. As a result, they are seen as the leading lights of their community and people would do everything to protect them! We can call such people *the Robin Hoods of this world*.

In English folklore, Robin Hood was an outlaw who lived in the woods to escape arrest. Occasionally, he would attack and rob the rich and oppressing elite and distribute his loot among the needy. Consequently, it was difficult for him to be caught because the needy that benefitted from his loot did not provide information on his whereabouts! The modern Robin Hoods have used their privileged positions in government, industry or ministry to corruptly enrich themselves, family, friends and supporters.

In most cases, such wealth cannot be probed even when such people are arrested and charged to court because corrupt practices do not encourage keeping of receipts and records! Inwardly, however, such people know themselves and they are as wicked as the Rich Fool. They cannot deceive God because “getting treasures by a lying tongue is the fleeting fantasy of those who seek death” [Prov. 21: 6]. Therefore, “as a dream, when one awakes,” so will God “despise their image” [Ps. 73: 20]. The telling conclusion is that you cannot give away what is not yours and get away with it. If the law does not get you, God will.

b) *Some cannot explain how they have wasted their wealth*

Some people may have legitimate wealth (by inheritance or grants/gifts, for example) but go on to waste it on sinful ventures. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the younger son obtained his share of inheritance from his father that had not yet died! Soon after, he “gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there *wasted his possessions with prodigal living*” [[Lk 15: 11-32]. We know what happened to him. Famine came to the land and hunger struck the young man. He had squandered his wealth on sinful exploits and he was not proud of it.

Solomon is a classical example of *the Prodigal Son*. God blessed him with wisdom and material wealth beyond measure. All the kings of the earth came with expensive gifts to Jerusalem to hear of his wisdom [1 Kgs 4: 29-33]. He spoke three thousand proverbs, some of which today constitute the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon.

He also built the temple for which his father, David, had gathered the materials. In the end, he squandered his prosperity on foreign wives and worship of false gods [1 Kgs 11: 1-15]. The kingdom of Israel went downhill from that point on. Solomon had squandered his spiritual gifts by allowing material blessings to rule over him. In the evening of his life, he knew that what he had done amounted to “vanity of vanities; all [was] vanity” [Ecl. 1: 2].

None of the forgoing practices qualifies for a God-approved way to use wealth. ***The God-fearing rich person employs honest and God-sanctioned ways to get his/her wealth and uses it to glorify Him*** for “the blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and adds no sorrow with it” [Prov. 10: 22]. In addition, “the fear of the Lord leads to life, and he who has it will abide *in satisfaction*; he will not be visited with evil” [Prov. 19:23]. There are numerous examples of people in the Bible who used their wealth to glorify God. For example, Barnabas “having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet” [Acts 4: 36-37]. Cornelius, a Gentile and a Roman officer, was called “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, *who gave alms generously to the people*, and prayed to God always” [Acts 10: 1-2]. Therefore, it is possible to be materially rich and still be God-fearing!

3. Conclusion: Use your wealth like Jesus!

The word of God has taught us concerning the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that “though He was rich, yet for [our] sakes He became poor, that [we] through His poverty might be rich” [2 cor. 8: 9]. He gave His all for our salvation in obedience to His Father’s will. Therefore, it is God who gives us the power to get wealth. However, how we use that wealth is our *responsibility*.

From our study, it is better for you to use your God-given wealth to glorify Him so that He can bless you with the ability to enjoy it through peace of mind and good health, and other marks of true prosperity. To trust material wealth more than God is idolatry which cannot save you. The God-fearing rich person “leaves an inheritance to his children’s children, *but the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous*” [Prov.13: 22]. ***True wealth is from God. Its abuse or misuse is from Satan. So, do as Jesus did. Use your wealth to enrich others.***

Wealth is what you do with it. The choice is yours!