

MATERIAL WEALTH CANNOT SATISFY!

Today's Text: Eccl., Chaps. 5, 6; 1 Tim. 6: 6-12

Extracts:

- 1. *He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; nor he who loves abundance with increase. ... All the labour of man is for his mouth; and yet the soul is not satisfied* [Eccl. 5: 10; 6: 7]**
- 2. *Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition* [1 Tim. 6: 6-9]**

Bill Gates, the Microsoft founder and Internet whiz kid, is the wealthiest person in the world, a position that he has held for over ten years. In 2005, at the age of 49 years, he is worth US\$46.5 billion. To give you an idea of what a billion dollars is worth, it means that you can spend US\$50,000 everyday for 55 years without having to work! In 1994, when Bill Gates was already a billionaire, his mother, Mary Maxwell Gates, lay dying of cancer. Bill was her only son among other children and he could afford to put her in the best hospitals and procure the best doctors to keep her alive. However, on 9 June 1994, she died, barely six months after he got married.¹ Money could not buy her life.

Perhaps that experience has fueled Bill Gates' passion today for charity. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funds college scholarships for underprivileged minorities and medical programmes in Third World countries. This year, the Foundation has an endowment of approximately US\$28 billion. Bill Gates is getting satisfaction by giving away his material wealth to the needy.

We learn two principles from that story. First, material wealth cannot satisfy no matter our level of abundance. Second, there must be a higher purpose for which God gives us material wealth and that is where our satisfaction lies. These are the themes that we shall explore in today's lesson.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Gates

1. Are you pursuing or being pursued by material wealth?

Wealth has been defined to include money and property. A wealthy person is “someone who has accumulated substantial wealth *relative to others* in that society or reference group.”² In the word of God, silver and gold [**Prov. 22:1**], lands and houses [**Matt. 19: 29; Mk 10: 29**], and treasures [**Matt. 6: 19**] in abundance [**Eccl. 4: 12**] have been counted as material wealth. King Solomon was so rich that his “drinking vessels were gold, and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were pure gold. Not one was silver, for this was accounted as nothing in the days of Solomon” [**1 Kgs 10: 21**].

Wealth is relative in the sense that everyone sees somebody else who is richer. A little child who sees her mother holding a few dollar bills may consider her rich whereas all the child needs are a few cents to buy her favourite ice cream! A millionaire would be unhappy to see a billionaire spending so freely. Would a billionaire notice if a few hundred-dollar bills dropped out of his pocket while picking a handkerchief to blow his running nose?

There is nothing wrong with material wealth *per se*. After all, it is God’s blessing for those He loves [**1 Kgs 3: 13-15**]. He is the One who gives us the power to get wealth [**Deut. 8: 18**]. The trouble only comes by the way we pursue and/or enjoy material wealth. As I look around me, I see two categories of human beings: those pursuing material wealth and those who are being pursued by it!

a) *Those pursuing material wealth*

God expects us to work. He chastises the lazy person, saying, “How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep- *so shall your poverty come on you like a prowler, and your need like an armed man*” [**Prov. 5: 9-11**]. Therefore, we should not blame God when we are poor if it is as a result of our laziness. Even in the Garden of Eden where God supplied *everything in abundance* to Adam and Eve, He still required them “to tend and keep it” [**Gen. 2: 15**]. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with pursuing material wealth.

We need to feed, house and clothe family members and ourselves. In order to enhance our ability to do so, we may need education and better jobs. Since other people need the same things and resources are limited, we may have to compete with others. It is from there that the pressure comes.

Some of us may keep to the path of honour by obeying the rules and fearing God. Some others may throw caution to the wind and use foul means to accumulate their material wealth. Their thinking may be that

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/wealth>

nobody will notice, especially in a society where the institutional checks and balances are too weak to control excesses. Their battle cry is “the end justifies the means!”

Speed also becomes a major pressure. Since we all have a reference group by which we measure our performance, we must beat the record by building the first house or buying the first expensive car at an earlier age! We give up on family life and building friendships and concentrate *singularly* on making it big and early.

The price we then pay can be quite high for “he who hastens to be rich will not go unpunished” [Prov. 28: 20]. Young men and women are postponing the time to get married until they will have “made it” by which time, they are in their early 40’s and getting too steeped in their ways to promote any healthy partnerships for marriage and child-bearing. In the process of acquiring material wealth, we may have offended others who are not ready to forgive. Therefore, assassinations, litigations and other vices litter the battlefields. Divorce, single parenting, STDs (sexually-transmitted diseases) and high blood pressure are common “rewards”! In the end, what have we achieved?

b) *Those being pursued by material wealth*

Some of us do indeed succeed in acquiring material wealth. In other words, they have more than they *need*. Some of such people have been lucky (e.g., through inheritance) or by dint of hard work (as in the case of Bill Gates) or as a result of God’s blessing (as in the case of Solomon). The next battle for such people is how to protect their wealth.

Many of such people use *human methods* of protection. They invest their wealth in safe endeavours. They take out insurance policies for themselves, family members and property. In addition, they hire security guards and gadgets to keep away thieves and paparazzi. In the name of enjoyment, some of them worship their tastes for wine, women (or men) and worldliness. In the end, they cannot be satisfied! Some of them get killed and forfeit their wealth to others [Eccl. 2: 26]. Some of them cannot find sleep [Eccl. 5: 12] even when they lie on the most comfortable beds in the world. Solomon took to marrying multiple wives who led him into idol worship [1 Kgs 11: 1-9]. Nabal, Abigail’s husband, drank himself to death [1 Sam. 25: 36-38].

2. Why material wealth cannot satisfy

Among several reasons, the following should be noted:

a) *You can NEVER have enough of it!*

Our needs are *generic*, that is, nonspecific or broad. We need food, clothing, shelter, transportation, etc. Our commonest need for survival is air and that is why God has given it free of charge to *everyone*, both the good and the evil in His sight. Interestingly, all that God promises us is to meet our needs. This is well put by Jesus Himself when He said in the Sermon on the Mount [**Matt. 6: 31-32**]:

*Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we **drink**?" or "What shall we **wear**?" For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you **need** all these things.*

Needs are easy to satisfy. For example, if I am hungry, *any nutritious food* will do. If I must go from one city to another, there is a variety of modes of transport that I can use. However, we go by *wants* or desires which are *brand-specific*. For example, if I am hungry, I want a specific food item, such as prime ribs or hamburger or peas, etc. For drink, one person may ask for ordinary water while somebody else is asking for rare wines. That is from where the problem comes! Our wants keep changing, depending on our changing taste and means. For example, self-sponsored students who lived on snacks all their student days want to graduate to more expensive foods when they finish school and get good jobs.

It is this gap between want and need that is called *greed* and "all the labour of man is for his mouth and yet the soul is not satisfied" [**Eccl. 6: 7**]. The Old King James Version calls it "appetite." That is why even a "trillionaire" will not stop working!

b) *It is not even yours!*

The earth and everything therein belong to God [**Ps. 24: 1**]. Therefore, we only hold material wealth in our *custody* on His behalf but it actually belongs to God. In law, you cannot use for yourself what you do not own or what you hold in trust. If you do, it is regarded as misappropriation for which you could go to jail.

A good way to understand this matter is to put yourself in the place of a CEO who is representing his/her employer in an important negotiation outside of the country. You fly First Class and stay in a 5-star hotel, all paid for by your employer. You came into the hotel with just your brief case or a suit case (if you are fashion conscious!). You eat and drink whatever you like during your stay. Finally, you return home. At no time would you regard yourself as the owner of the hotel room while you were there because you left as you came. Secondly, if you were to make that same journey on your own on vacation or after retirement, you might not

fly First Class nor stay in a 5-star hotel. Those privileges were tied to your position as CEO. Therefore, the material wealth that a man may treat as his own is not his because “as he came from his mother’s womb, naked shall he return, to go as he came; and he shall take *nothing from his labour*” [Eccl. 5: 15].

c) *You are holding it for God’s purpose!*

Let us stretch our earlier metaphor of a CEO on official assignment abroad. In *return* for the abundance that your employer has provided by way of First Class air travel and a suite in a 5-star hotel, you must represent your employer’s interest as much as possible in accordance with your ability. How do you think your employer will feel if you oversleep because of partying all night and miss the vital appointment? You can be sure that your sack letter will welcome you home! In like manner, it is God that gave us the power to “get wealth that He may establish His covenant.” Therefore, “if you by any means forget the Lord your God, and follow other gods, and serve them, I testify against you this day that you shall *surely* perish” [Deut. 8: 18-19].

You are supposed to use your material wealth “for all” including the state, represented by the king [Eccl. 5: 9]. You are to pay your vows [vv. 4-5], tithes and offerings [Mal. 3: 8-10], provide for the poor and needy [Prov. 28: 27], enjoy part of it for yourself and your descendants [Eccl. 5: 19].

The main conclusion that we can draw from the forgoing analysis is that unless material wealth is used for God’s purposes, it can never satisfy. That is why Jesus has enjoined us to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” [Matt. 6: 33].

3. Conclusion: How to obtain satisfaction with material wealth

The word of God says, “Godliness with contentment is great gain.” Since we brought nothing into this world and will surely take nothing out of it, then “having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.” We only run into trouble when we lust for material wealth which breeds temptation and a snare that can lead us to destruction [1 Tim. 6: 6-9]. Some of us have gone too far already on the road to destruction. Can we come back? Some of us are at the threshold of succumbing to temptation and pressure from hardship, family or opportunity. Can we be restrained? The answer to both questions is “Yes!” and here are some suggestions:

a) *The Zacchaeus model*

Zacchaeus was a “chief tax collector and he was rich” [Lk 19: 2]. During the ministry of John the Baptist, a group of tax collectors came to him to be baptized and asked John, “Teacher, what shall we do?” John replied,

“Collect *no more than what is appointed for you*” [Lk 3: 12-13].

Therefore, we can infer that tax collectors, not to talk of the chief of them, were corrupt. Zacchaeus was desirous to come to Jesus as He passed through Jericho. The first thing he did was to clean up his act. As the Pharisees complained about what Jesus was doing to come and dine with a sinner, Zacchaeus said, “Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and *if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.*” Jesus assured him, “Today salvation has come to this house” [Lk 19: 6-9].

Joy and satisfaction returned to Zacchaeus because he had restituted. He gave back four times more than he took in bribes and shady deals. You can do the same thing. Return what you have stolen with your pen or gun. Give up your adulterous life and return to the spouse of your youth. Then, Jesus will also say to you, “Today, salvation has come to this house!”

b) *The Haggai reminder!*

As the returning exiles from Babylon built for themselves “paneled houses” to the neglect of God’s house, they soon discovered that they sowed much but reaped little; they ate and drank but were never full; they clothed themselves but were never warm; and it was as if they earned their wages and put them into “bags with holes.” Haggai, one of the post-exile prophets, brought them God’s word saying, “build the temple that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified.” The people obeyed God’s voice by the prophet and God told them, “I am with you” [Hagg. 1: 3-13]. Today, right now, put God first before your goods and He will say for your good, “I am with you!” Can you accept that challenge?

Material wealth outside of God’s approval can never satisfy!