

Sermon 44, The Relative Advantages of Wealth, Proverbs 13:7-11

Read 1 Peter 1

Proposition: Wealth is a powerful tool, but don't worship it, because Wisdom and righteousness are better than wealth.

- I. Wealth: Not Ultimate, v. 7
 - A. It can be defined in various ways
 - B. It can be faked
- II. Wealth: Highly Advantageous, v. 8
 - A. It can buy your life, v. 8a
 - B. It makes you learn better, v. 8b
- III. Wealth: Upstaged by Jesus, vv. 9-10
 - A. Righteousness supersedes wealth, v. 9
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- IV. Wealth: How you got it matters for whether you'll keep it, v. 11

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, there's something that all of you have. I know you have it. You know that I know that you have it. But in our culture, it's not polite to talk about it. This substance is called wealth. I know you have it. You don't look homeless, or starving. You are sitting quietly and able to focus on what I'm saying, rather than pondering the burning question of where your next meal might come from. To be wealthy, as all of you are, is a tremendous advantage. Ah — you don't generally think of yourselves as wealthy? That, my friends, is a mistake. Fish don't know they're wet. You don't know you're rich. But you are. Solomon in our text this morning is upfront about the advantages of being rich. But he also discusses the limitations of wealth. Its relative advantages highlight, in the discourse of the sage, the even greater advantages of knowing Christ.

I. Wealth: Not Ultimate, v. 7

Even though it's impolite, as I said a moment ago, we're going to talk about wealth. Now, my salary is public information. So are many of your salaries, because we have a number of state employees in this church. But the first point that our text makes about wealth is not related to how much wealth you have or don't have. Rather, the first point is that wealth is not ultimate.

A. It can be defined in various ways

The first reason for this is simple. The concept of "wealth" is a bit slippery. To "make yourself rich," as the Hebrew literally says, can mean a number of things. It might mean pretending to be financially well-off. You can buy the fake Rolex, carry the latest smartphone, lease a car you really can't afford, groom yourself a certain way, etc., to try to give the impression of greater financial prosperity than you really have. But wealth could also be thought of spiritually. Think

of Jesus, making Himself poor by coming to Earth, yet having great riches through it all — spiritual riches, and eternal riches, even while He had no place to lay His head. And finally, think of yet another meaning: Many people believe themselves to be well-off, and don't know that they are financially wretched and pitiable. How many more people believe themselves to be well-off, but are spiritually wretched and pitiable? In other words, wealth by one measure doesn't necessarily correspond to wealth by some other standard.

B. It can be faked

And even then, regardless of what standard of measurement you use to determine wealth, at some level it can be faked. You can fool others about your wealth. You can even fool yourself.

I said in the introduction that we have no idea how wealthy we are in financial terms. We think of ourselves as having enough but not having the insane amounts of money that we see the people around us spending. Brothers and sisters, do you have an accurate impression of where you're at financially? And how about spiritually? Are you so stuck on the material that you can't recognize the true wealth that Jesus and Paul and many other Christians throughout history possessed? We tend to mentally evaluate and classify each other based on perceived socio-economic status. But do you rightly value spiritual wealth? Are you sensitive most of all to godliness? Because the very existence of spiritual wealth makes it clear that financial wealth is not ultimate. Yes, it's good. Yes, it's nice. But it is far from being the be-all end-all of human existence.

II. Wealth: Highly Advantageous, v. 8

Well, though wealth can be faked and can be defined in various ways, yet wealth does have two humongous advantages.

A. It can buy your life, v. 8a

The first of these is that it can buy your life. If you can pay for better legal advice, better medical advice, better food, better housing, better treatment and care in general, then you can basically purchase a better life in a lot of key ways. There's a reason that you and everyone you know likes money. It's because money is a huge asset, and without it you will probably die painfully. Life is a good, and therefore wealth is a good too because it supports life. That's the obvious benefit of wealth. You hardly needed me to tell you that wealth is good and desirable.

B. It makes you learn better, v. 8b

Here, though, in the second line of the verse, is the even better news about wealth: It can actually make you wiser. Remember, the key principle of wisdom is listening. Wisdom starts by opening your ears and paying attention. It is the scoffer who does not listen to rebuke, v. 1 informs us. Well, the second line of v. 8 here has caused conundrums. If you read the commentators, they way overthink it. The line means exactly what it says: Poor people ignore rebuke. Poor people basically don't listen when you tell them that they're wrong. That's why poor people make a host of dumb decisions. Indeed, researchers have found that being poor can remove the equivalent of thirteen points from your IQ score. They tested shoppers at a mall in NJ and farmers in India before and after harvest. Those who were poor scored much worse on paying attention,

performing calculations, and answering questions. Why? Researchers theorized that their brains were already overloaded with concerns about their financial state. Brothers and sisters, wisdom begins with listening and changing. And being poor makes it much harder to do just that. You can't really listen to what someone is telling you when you're overwhelmed with your own problems. All of us, of course, have had the experience of trying really hard to get something done while a child pesters us to do their project. If you're dedicated enough to your own project, you just ignore the child. Why? Because you don't have enough bandwidth to simultaneously respond and to take care of the issue you're trying to deal with somewhere else.

Is the point that the poor cannot be wise, cannot be saved? No, it's not. It's simply a statement of the reality that poverty makes it hard to hear rebuke. Parents, we're familiar with an analogue to this truth in the lives of our children. If your child is hungry, will verbal rebukes be able to calm him? Of course not. A hungry child is a mess emotionally. He's poor — he has a prominent need in his life. And until that need is filled, you are wasting your breath to try to help him obey God.

So if you're poor this morning, what does this mean for you? It means that you need to bend over backwards to create the time and space in your life to hear the word of God. You need to pull some resources off surviving in a biopsychosocial sense and put them onto the ethico-spiritual activity of listening. I know that you're thinking "If I do that, I'll die." Maybe you will. But is your life so worth keeping? What would you rather have: An extra \$1000 per month, or Jesus? Don't let your earthly needs overwhelm your ability to walk with Christ. And if you're thinking, "You know what, rich preacher-boy, you don't know the poverty I'm in. I would take the thousand dollars and go to Hell. That's how miserable I am," then come talk to me. The church exists to help people worship God, and part of that involves financial and physical care for our members. We will help you. I promise.

And if you're not poor this morning, what should you do? Thank God for the resources to serve Him. Thank God for the leisure, both physical and mental, to think about the word of God and apply it to your life. You don't have to be rich to be a Christian. But there are certain things that get easier when you have enough to not live in constant fear, stress, and worry. And don't just thank God for what you have; look for ways to share it so that your wealth can help others serve God too. Indiscriminate handing out of \$100 bills probably isn't a good way to do that. Rather, I would say to get involved with a church or some other non-profit that's dedicated to helping people rise out of poverty. Your wealth can help others know the joy of hearing Christ say, "Repent, because I love you."

III. Wealth: Upstaged by Jesus, vv. 9-10

Well, though wealth is pretty great, Jesus upstages it. Solomon tells us this in two hard-hitting verses.

A. Righteousness supersedes wealth, v. 9

The light of the righteous rejoices, the sage tells us. What does this mean? "Light" is a metaphor for the success and well-being of the total person. We might say something like "the great blaze

of his personality,” or “I love her spark.” Wealth can give success and well-being in some respects, but not to the total person. We know that, even though we tend to forget it as we obsess over money and the joy it could bring to us. But brothers and sisters, make no mistake. Your whole being will rejoice when you know the blessing of righteousness. That’s what wholeness is. That’s what you were created for. You exist to serve God, to be right with Him, to glorify and enjoy Him. And when you’re doing that, your success and well-being will rejoice. Your life will be a watered garden; you will eat of the fruit of the tree of life and swim in the fountain of life, as the chapter goes on to say.

Can wealth do that for you? No! Righteousness is better than wealth. And how do you get righteousness? By faith in Jesus Christ. He has been to us from God wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. He is all of that, and more.

Meanwhile, the lamp of the wicked will go out. Everyone who seeks satisfaction and fulfillment in evil, whether that’s the evil of sexual perversion, of yelling at your kids, of wasting time on Facebook, or of lying to yourself about yourself, will watch his lamp go out. He will see his success and well-being dwindle away to the nothingness of Hell. Light dawns for the righteous, but the wicked go into the dark. Which would you prefer? Notice that reference to wealth has dropped away here. Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death. Riches do not deliver from death! Only Jesus, the Righteous One, can do that.

B. Listening brings Wisdom and therefore peace, v. 10

Secondly, though, listening brings Wisdom to the well-advised. Again, pride is defined by not listening. It means thinking you know better. It is an inaccurate estimate of yourself and your knowledge. Brothers and sisters, arrogance will only make strife, fights, and problems. If you are full of yourself then you are not full of Christ! It is with the humble that He dwells, by His name Wisdom. Christless people are contentious people; of course they are, not being under the rule of the prince of peace! But sadly, it seems that many church people are contentious people too. If you are one such, it’s worth asking yourself: “Does Christ dwell with me? Am I the kind of humble listener with whom He loves spend His time?” If you’re contentious, that tells me that you are arrogant. Thank God, we have very few contentious people in this congregation. Jesus dwells with those who listen.

How do you learn to listen? First, ask God to help you. Second, ask for advice, and make extra effort to impartially consider even to the advice you don’t like. And finally, keep coming to worship, where you can hear from the word of God and have your attitude challenged.

Once again, wealth has vanished from this proverb, because Jesus and the peace He brings are far better than dollars and cents. Which is more important to you — money or your Savior? Which do you spend all your time thinking about? Which means more to you? Which do you talk about? Which provides you with greater joy? Brothers and sisters, wealth is not ultimate. Jesus is. He is the one who gives you power to get wealth. He is the one who makes your life worth living. How much money you have doesn’t determine your value. Rather, your

creator and redeemer is the one who made you and makes you valuable. Seek His presence; be His child.

IV. Wealth: How you got it matters for whether you'll keep it, v. 11

Well, finally, how you get your wealth is important. Wealth gathered by vanity will dwindle away to nothing. This could mean by evil — i.e., by fraud or dishonesty. It could also mean too quickly — i.e., as fast as a temporary vapor vanishes, that's how fast you gained the wealth. In either case, this wealth is contrasted to the wealth that's gathered by hand, piece by piece, bit by bit, through honest work. So how do you plan to acquire money? Have you staked everything on playing the lottery? Winning a Jeep from the car dealership flyer? Getting a better job? Or do you work hard at the job you have and carefully manage and spend what you make there? Brothers and sisters, anything else is folly and is ultimately nothing more than a way to be poor and thus make it harder to serve your Lord and Savior.

Wisdom and righteousness are better than wealth. Wealth is good too, and it's a wonderful plan to work for it. But *work* for it. Don't expect to get it except in the way of wisdom and righteousness. And when you do, use it to serve Christ, who is the best thing of all. Amen.