

October 24, 2004

Godly Wealth

Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life. (1 Timothy 6:17-19)

Before breaking into his rich praise to God, Paul confronts the ever-present dilemma of folks who “will be”—who want to be—rich. When people set wealth as a goal, they often become obsessed with it to the extent that they compromise other more important values. Love for money can excite people to plunge into almost any evil that exists. I observe further that a person who does not have wealth, but is too preoccupied with money, is liable to becoming envious of others who appear to have more than they. It doesn't take money, just the inordinate love for it, to create a world of hurt.

Paul now deals with a different issue. There are some believers who are wealthy. They don't crave it; they already have it. He doesn't direct them to throw it all away or to give it to worthy causes. He rather urges them to see to it that they put it to good use—to kingdom use—and that they make sure that they do not become too complacent with their wealth and that they avoid trusting it excessively.

“Highminded” suggests a spirit of carnal pride. Perhaps they might come to think that they are wiser in their money management than others. They might even think that they have been more righteous, so God rewarded them with wealth because of their superiority. Such pride inevitably leads to idolatrous trust. The next step of caution is that they not grow to trust in “uncertain” riches. Regardless of how wealthy people guard their wealth or use caution in its investment, it can slip away overnight. In a parable regarding this problem Jesus told the story of a man who continued to grow more crops than he expected. One harvest season after another he found himself stretching his storage barns with bumper crops. Finally he decided to build larger barns. In the “punch line” Jesus warns him that on the very night that he decided to build larger barns he could die. Then nothing that he grew would matter to him. All of his planning and pride in his wealth vanished in one night. Several years ago I was asked to preach the funeral of a dear friend who died after a lengthy illness. When his family started looking through his important papers, they found his personal note to them, telling them every detail regarding his burial and funeral service, along with other details that they would need to close out his estate. He had arranged with the local mortuary to be buried in a simple pine box. He had also arranged to be buried in his “birthday suit,” with only his old worn out Bible in his hands. Novel? Yes, but he had his reasons. He understood that whatever he possessed in this life would mean nothing to him upon his death. He understood the subtlety that Paul taught in this lesson. We

may honor God with wealth that we possess, but we can corrupt our faith with wealth that possesses us.

Paul makes an interesting point by reminding Timothy that wealth itself does not guarantee enjoyment. Only God can give us all things, even poverty, to enjoy. And with God's enriching presence and peace of mind, even poverty can become wealth in its own unique way.

Richness in good works, according to Paul, is of more value than money in the bank, however much you invest there. Along with the possession of wealth, Paul also urges that these folks be mindful to distribute their wealth in kingdom work. "Communicate" as used in this passage refers to the sharing of something. As we share our thoughts with words, New Testament writers use the word to describe the sharing of money or other material resources. A preacher once told me about a man who moved to his community in his old age. He had been an active church member in his prior church. As his health declined and he could no longer live alone, his new pastor helped him move into a senior apartment where he would receive assistance with the chores of living. On a regular basis the old man would call his pastor and ask him to take him back to his former residence. He had retained title to it. At first the pastor thought nothing about it and kindly accommodated the old fellow's wishes. On one of these occasions the old fellow invited the pastor to join him in his former home. The pastor was appalled to discover that the old man had hidden a large sum of money behind walls and in various hiding places throughout the old house. He had not made these trips for the purpose of visiting his former home and reliving memories. He wanted to visit his money! He would spend several minutes checking on each stash of money, repeatedly running his hands through it. In the end the old man died. He could no longer find comfort in his hidden wealth. He could no longer visit it. For years this man had complained to others for their not making larger donations to their church, but he had made only meager contributions himself. He demonstrated the classic example of wealth owning the man instead of the man owning the wealth. He had the money, but not the joy.

"That they may lay hold on eternal life" does not refer to a lost sinner gaining salvation. Timothy is teaching Christians in the church at Ephesus. They are already saved. Laying hold on life refers to using one's life effectively for the benefit and blessing of others. Does our use of our money tell us—or others—anything about our spiritual condition? Indeed it does. Christian stewardship includes our finances as fully as any other part of our lives. True Christianity calls us to the realization that God has a Creator's and a Savior's right to govern every aspect of our existence. In Philippians 4:18-19 Paul equated money donated by the Philippian church to his needs as a sacrifice that God accepted as a sweet incense offering. Few Christians mature to the point of viewing their regular contributions to their church as a true act of worship to God. Some give grudgingly. Others give fearfully and minimally. Only a few reach the state of spiritual maturity that prompts them to give sacrificially and with joy. How do you measure "sacrificial" giving? Some will teach you to give at least ten percent, often

referencing the Old Testament tithing. Others will use various measures to determine the right amount to give. Paul's use of the concept of sacrificial giving makes the whole process of giving far simpler. You give till it hurts! That makes it sacrificial. You don't use your perception of the church's needs as a barometer for your giving. You don't adopt an artificial formula and give according to that rule, comfortably budgeting that amount. You commit to giving to the point of pain, and you faithfully, consistently give at that level.

This whole question of giving cannot be closed without a rather unusual point. We live in an era in which high-visibility preachers exploit Christians on television and radio for personal profit. I fear that many local pastors who would never consider exploiting anyone for any reason do not appreciate their personal role in church leadership where the practice of giving is involved. If Scripture requires that the pastor lead by example in moral and ethical matters—and it clearly does—we must realize that Scripture no less requires that the pastor lead by example in his giving habits as well. Sadly, many pastors view the church's role as giving to them, but they fail to consider their personal obligation to give to the church in an exemplary manner. I would ask every pastor who reads this chapter a personal question. If every member of the church practiced exactly the habit of giving that you practice, what would be the church's financial status? Would the church consider closing its doors because it had no funds to pay even the simplest routine costs? Or would the church have sufficient funds to meet its needs and even to reach out to help others outside its membership? Paul led the way in publicizing the need of the church in Jerusalem among predominantly Gentile churches. On occasion he actually used his personal funds to pay the rent so that he could receive and minister to those in need (Acts 28:30). Obviously he did not periodically engage in his secular profession of tent making for personal gain but for the furtherance of his ministry. I am convinced that a major flaw in many contemporary church situations must fall at the feet of the pastor who views giving only in terms of his receiving and not in terms of setting an example for the church by his personal giving habits.

I believe the New Testament teaches the necessity—not the optional luxury—of a full-time ministry. I also believe that pastors need to work harder at setting a personal example for the church by their own giving.

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