

What the Bible Teaches About Rich People

Rich Nathan
Sunday, February 13, 1994
Mastering Your Money
Matthew 19:16-22
Luke 12:13-21

This morning I want to continue in a series that I have been doing on money. I have emphasized repeatedly over the last several weeks that here is a subject that has extensive coverage in the Bible. There are more verses on money than virtually any other of life. More verses on money than on marriage; more verses on money than on child-raising; more verses on money than on sex. And it is also an area that profoundly affects us, the church, us as individuals, our marriages, affects our relationships and yet, there is a tremendous amount of teaching on this. That is why I have decided to take an extended look at the subject of money beyond just giving money.

Well, today what I want to do is to consider the subject of being rich. I don't mean being Rich Nathan—being me, I mean the subject of being wealthy and what the Bible teaches about being a rich person. Next week we will talk about what the Bible teaches about being poor. There is so much confusion and odd teachings about God's will for everyone to be rich or God's will for everyone to be poor that I would like to sort through it all and look at what the Bible actually says about being rich.

Now, in the United States we have a love/hate relationship with the wealthy. Americans are really ambivalent about people with lots of money. On the one hand, we Americans have a fascination with the rich and famous. We have TV shows, you know, like the "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." We want to look inside their houses. There are movies that portray people unlike anyone we know who live in huge mansions and palaces. You know, who drive exotic cars and jet off on the spur of the moment to far off places. We are fascinated by that. The magazines—Architectural Digest, Better Homes and Gardens, portray homes that few of us live in. We have a fascination with the wealthy.

And you notice that you don't see too many shows called "Lifestyles of the Middle Class." Or "Lifestyle of the Working Poor" we go to the home of the Jones' family. The Jones' are out shopping at Sears for a new dishwasher. Let's check in and find out whether they bought that new dishwasher on sale. Next week we will examine the life of the Smith family of Columbus. They have been shopping around for a new sofa and they have heard about a great deal at Glicks. They are going to go check it out. Note their living room; they just bought new carpet from Buddy's Carpet Barn. Don't you just love that Buddy? What a guy. Wouldn't you like to have him as a neighbor? This family is even thinking of roofing the garage in the spring. We will fill you in on details as they become known.

This is not great TV. People are not fascinated by the lifestyles of the middle class. But they are fascinated by the lifestyles of the wealthy. On the other hand, there is tremendous envy and suspicion and great anger that is directed toward the wealthy that is frequently rubbed raw by politicians.

You know one of the cheapest and really despicable ways for a power broker to gain power is to appeal to the baser instincts of their constituency, to appeal to a group's racism and to rub that racism or to rub their anti-Semitism until it is raw, is an easy way to gain power and gain a following—to rub suspicion. They rub the already existent envy and covetousness in the lives of the poor and middle class toward the wealthy.

The short of it is that in American life we have tremendous ambivalence toward the rich. And you know that the Bible has a mixed message about money and about the wealthy? The Bible basically teaches that wealth is very much of a mixed blessing. We need to understand that if we are to have the mind of God about lots of money. See, unfortunately, in the larger American Christian church, we have two polarized camps. Both of whom say that the biblical teaching about the wealthy is relatively simple. That it is uniform. And so, you have one camp in the American church saying that having lots of money is an un-mixed blessing. They get up at these pyramid sales meetings and there are testimonies about how I used to be a poor schnook. I didn't have much money, but then I got involved in this program. It is really God's program, Jesus thought of it first and he lets us cash in on it. Now I am driving this great car and I have a Cadillac in the garage. We just built a big new house. I am also able to give money. What an un-mixed blessing. There is this celebration of accumulation and a celebration of abundance. Some of the so-called prosperity teachers have taught a simple perspective toward money, saying that money and wealth are a sign of blessing period, with no caveat and no complexity. So, on the one hand in the American church, you have this position that wealth is an un-mixed blessing.

On the other hand, you have the guilt-mongers who approach the wealthy with condemnation and a message of guilt. "You should feel bad if you have a big house. Those of you who have more than—and they always set some limit—if you are living in more than a 1000 square feet, you know, a place larger than a garage; if you have anything other than a really old car, there is something wrong with you. You should feel bad. If you are going to have money, then we are not going to be happy unless you feel bad about it."

What I want to communicate today, as we go through what the Bible teaches about rich people, is that the whole subject is like a many faceted gem. You can not summarize the Bible message by looking at only one facet of teaching. There are many facets about the teaching of the rich in the Bible. Unless we acknowledge the complexity of the subject, we are not communicating what the Bible teaches about the rich. To use a different metaphor, we are going to have to look at this subject through three different lenses – the lens of creation, the lens of the fall and the lens of redemption. Before you switch me off and say that this message is only for 5% of this audience, remember, on global terms and in world history terms, virtually all of us are really, really well off. And you will find – the vast majority of you – that the principles that apply to our better off business people and professionals apply to you as well. And so, we are going to look at it from the top and underneath and around the sides. My message today is called, very simply, *What the Bible Teaches About Rich People*. Let's pray.

I want to begin in talking about what the Bible teaches about rich people by starting with the view that wealth, abundance, material possessions, are often seen in the Bible as a blessing from God. As the creator of the universe, God gives material to individuals in great abundance. As creator, he set up the Garden of Eden and gave abundantly to Adam and Eve. And those of you who have read through your Bibles, know that God gave abundantly to Abraham and to the patriarchs, to Isaac and to Jacob tremendous abundance. God gave to Job and Solomon.

In the New Testament there are many wealthy people who are rich in faith, people who helped to propel the early church, like Lydia and Philemon, Barnabas, Cornelius, an Ethiopian eunuch, Nicodemus. Wealth is seen very often as blessing in the Bible.

And so to the guilt mongers, to those who always make us feel bad about having something or having something nice, we ought to remember that God is not embarrassed by rich people. And he is not embarrassed to have rich people who are Christians.

Indeed, 1 Timothy 6 says in verse 17, "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant or to put their hope in wealth which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God [and then, listen to this] who richly provides everything for our enjoyment."

And if you go back a couple of chapters, Paul writes that "in the latter days some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving because it is consecrated by the Word of God in prayer."

This whole ascetic line of teaching that says that abundance is necessarily bad was present in the early church and Paul called it the teaching of demons. That accusation toward the wealthy, that somehow they have necessarily acquired their money in a dishonest way, that they ought not to have so much, that it is necessarily wrong to be rich is not the Bible. And, frankly, I believe that much of the negative teaching against rich Christians is propelled by poorer Christian's covetousness. We envy what somebody else possesses and we are jealous. So, if we can't get up to their level, we will pull them down to ours. Or at least make them feel bad while they are above us.

Now, let's admit that there are blessings in this life that flow with having money. That it is not entirely a bad thing to have money. And I love the Bible because the Bible is realistic. The Bible doesn't deny what we all know, that it is nice to have a little bit of money. The Bible says that one of the blessings that flow with having some money is the blessing of increased security. Money brings about an increased measure of security. Not total security, but it brings about a measure of security in this life. Proverbs 10:15 says, "The wealth of the rich is their fortified city, but poverty is the ruin of the poor." Obviously wealth is not an impregnable fortress. God alone is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in times of trouble, but having money does help. When trouble strikes, the wealthy can buffer themselves to some degree against the ravages of the flood,

or the ravages of fire or theft by having insurance. If a wealthy person's child is sick, they can afford the best doctors. They have health insurance. If there is a problem with business, a wealthy person can afford an attorney, the best law firms that money can buy. There is a measure of security in being wealthy.

On the other hand, without money, Proverbs 10:15 says we are very vulnerable to unexpected disasters, illnesses, lay offs. Not only does wealth bring a measure of security, it brings a measure of friendship. Rich people have more friends than poor people do. That is what Proverbs teaches. Proverbs 14:20, "The poor are shunned even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends." I certainly have observed that. Probably because the wealthy place fewer demands on others than the poor do. The wealthy are self-sufficient. They are taking care of their own needs and as a result people are drawn to the wealthy, whereas, the poor are dependent and needy. And so folks shun them. This is simply a description of what is, not of what ought to be. Understand that. We will talk about what ought to be. But there is a blessing of friends for the wealthy.

And wealth brings the blessing of power. Proverbs 18:23 says, "A poor man pleads for mercy, but a rich man answers harshly." When you have nothing, when you are a borrower, you come to a situation begging. You come with entreaties, with hat in hand, humbly. But when you have the money, when you are the boss, when you are the creditor, you can answer quite sharply. Watch the way presidents of large corporations relate to subordinates. They answer sharply. They give curt answers to requests because they have power. That is what the wealthy have.

So, there is a measure of blessing in having money in terms of increased security and relationships and power. And of course it increases our enjoyment of this world. And all this flows from creation.

Now, listen to me. Anyone who stops here with the celebration of wealth without immediately adding, but there are lots of dangers and lots of risks in having money, is not giving you the whole truth. You see, we live in a world that is not only created by God, but in a world that is in rebellion against God. And, as a result of the fall, there is nothing in creation that doesn't carry with it risk and danger to our souls. We can't touch anything in creation without having the potential to misuse that thing. Yes, sex is a blessing. It was created by God to bring us blessing. But it is not an un-mixed blessing. And most of us have experienced the two-sided nature of sex. Because of the perversity of the human heart as a result of the fall, everything we see carries with it danger. Whether we are talking about work and our tendency to make work into an idol or family, our marriage, even Christian ministry, even things that we would say are directly associated somehow with God and his kingdom can be perverted. So, that same thing is true with money and there are risks and dangers that the Bible teaches that the wealthy—those of us who are rich, face in a fallen world. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 6:9 that people who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap, and into many foolish things and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.

What are the risks of having a lot of money? What are the risks? Well, for the first risk of wealth, I would like for you to open your Bible to Matthew 19, beginning in verse 16. Let's read that.

“Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, ‘Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?’

‘Why do you ask me about what is good?’ Jesus replied. ‘There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.’

‘Which ones?’ the man inquired.

Jesus replied, ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.’

‘All of these I have kept,’ the young man said. ‘What do I still lack?’

Jesus answered, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell you possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.’”

Now, let’s consider this man. This story is found in the first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Each of them fills us in on aspects of this man and aspects of this story that the other two writers leave out. And here in Matthew we find out that the man was rich and that he was young.

Luke tells us that he was a ruler. Essentially, this guy has everything going for him in life. It is better to be wealthy than it is to be poor, in the eyes of the world. It is better to be young and healthy than old. And it is better to be a ruler than someone serving under the ruler, even in that society in that day. It was much better to be a man than it was to be a woman. Men had all the power. Here is a guy who has it all. He even had religion. He was a man who was interested in eternal life.

In verse 16, “What good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?” And in verse 20 he talks about keeping the commandments. Here is a man who not only has it all in terms of possessions and material wealth, but he has it all in terms of religion. He is a good and decent man. This isn’t some dissolute wealthy person getting drunk and partying every night in his house, some polluted pagan. He is a good, decent, up-standing citizen—a religious man who is also wealthy.

But this man suffers from the common tendencies of wealth. And the common tendencies that we see regarding the wealthy is first of all, this man is used to doing. He said, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life.” He is used to making his own way. He is a “can-do” kind of guy, just like most wealthy people. What needs to be done, I can do it. What needs to be fixed, I can fix it. Just tell me. I have a positive attitude. I am optimistic about the future. I am “can-do, Rich.”

He is not only used to doing, but he is used to succeeding. Jesus lays out the commandments. If you want to enter life, obey the commands. And he says, “Which ones?” Jesus knows this is a can-do guy and so he says, “OK, well let me tell you if you want to do, here are the commands. Don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t give false testimony, honor your father and mother and love your neighbor as yourself.”

The man surprisingly says, “All of these I have kept.” The wealthy are not only doers, but they are succeeders. They are people who are used to accomplishing

what they set out to do. They want to have an impact, they can have an impact. They want to set up an organization, they set up the organization. They want to get people to do stuff, people come around and do it.

And note Jesus' surprising, completely unsettling and uncomfortable statement to this wealthy man— "Well, if you want to be perfect, my friend, go sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and then come and follow me."

"When the young man heard this he went away sad because he had great wealth." Jesus goes on and he says, "I tell you the truth it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven."

What is the problem with wealth? The problem with wealth, simply put, is that material fullness creates the illusion of spiritual fullness. A person who is a can-do person, a person who is used to succeeding, a person who has lots of things, has an illusory sense of spiritual fullness. I look around me and everything I touch is succeeding. I am succeeding emotionally. I am succeeding relationally. I am succeeding in business. Therefore, I must be succeeding with God.

See, the problem is that to come to God, if any man or woman wants to come to God, they must feel their need for him and they must come as failures. There are two requirements to come to Jesus. You must feel your need for Jesus and you must come as a failure. No one can be saved unless they acknowledge their need and unless they know they are failures according to God's standard of success. Is Jesus saying that wealthy people can't receive the gospel? He is not saying that at all. We see in the New Testament, as I mentioned before, there are wealthy people who respond. There are the Lydias and the Nicodemuses and the Philemons who respond to the gospel. But if you look at it in your own experience, what Jesus is saying here is absolutely born out as a general rule, that those of us who have already come to Jesus came to him as a result of some experience when our own resources proved to be inadequate. It was only the result of coming to the end of ourselves, as a result of a hard time, we were going through a divorce. We were going through a relational break with our parents or a boyfriend or girlfriend. We were going through a very painful experience with sickness or the sickness of a child. We were struggling in school or on the job. We were just generally dissatisfied with the emptiness that we felt, the lack of satisfaction that we were experiencing in school, or the lack of satisfaction that we were experiencing with life, with our jobs, with money. Our resources didn't cut it; we really needed a savior.

Understand, brothers and sisters, we don't turn to Jesus unless we feel our need. To come to him you must be in need and you must come as a failure. I cannot do this by myself. And, oh, success—success gives the illusion that you have no need for God. That is true in success in church. That is true in this growing church. It is so easy to believe that we can do it, that we can succeed without God.

That is why Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." There is no great honor in being poor. Poverty is not some wonderful state. Except in our lack it is easier to believe that we are also spiritually poor, that we have need of God.

But wealth, success, is like a narcotic – it dulls our sense of need and our sense of failure, especially our need for God. Brothers and sisters let me give you a real simple barometer to see whether you are in touch with your need for God. How much time do you spend in prayer everyday? See, it is so easy to be so full of ourselves. And so, the first risk of wealth is that we would find no need for God and that is why this parable taught as a story of spiritual perfection that here was a man who wasn't willing to go on to some height for the saints in giving away all that he had; he wasn't willing to be a major donor; he wasn't willing to be a great benefactor of a university or a great benefactor of a hospital—completely misses the point. But we must feel our need for Jesus and we must be broken.

Let me talk for a minute about need here in the Vineyard. Do you know I have expressed this thought, actually beginning several months ago, but more recently in the last few weeks that we, in the Vineyard, have a profound need for a fresh visitation by the Holy Spirit. And I don't know where each one of you are at, but I know I was personally living with a fairly significant amount of dryness in my life without feeling the pain of that up until about a month and a half ago. And I think that God turned something up inside of me where I got to the place personally of saying that I just don't want to live this way any more. I don't want to live anymore not seeing God come. And I don't want to just play church anymore. I am so tired of not seeing the Holy Spirit come. And I think that when God creates that longing, the sense of need in us is a God-given gift. Jesus said in answer to who can be saved? Jesus said, "With man it is impossible. But with God all things are possible." I think that God is the one who initiates in our life a sense of tremendous need. And then he comes along and meets that need.

So what has been going on, just to share with you, is that we got together last Sunday evening and we had a wonderful time. For those of you who were there, we had a wonderful time. All we did, and all I know to do—I don't have a great leading about this, I am not going to stand up here and hype what I don't know—all I know to do is to get up and ask the Holy Spirit to come. And he has been coming. He came on Sunday evening and he came in some of your groups. A number of you have come to me and said that you saw some things happen in just the last couple of weeks. I want to tell you something. This sense of need and then revival is breaking out throughout the Vineyard nationally.

I heard reports of the Anaheim conference that were just wonderful. God came in great power and many, many people just fell under the presence of the Lord. Folks were healed and folks were just experiencing the Holy Spirit in ways that they haven't ever before.

And I have also gotten a fax from Toronto and have been invited to go up to Toronto. Apparently, there is a remarkable revival breaking out in Toronto where the Lord is just coming in power and power night after night. Pastors from various denominations are coming and the Lord is falling on them in a way that we experienced 7 or 8 years ago, but haven't of late. And so that is happening up there. And our missionaries down in Brazil are seeing remarkable displays of power.

Here is what I would like to propose, brothers and sisters. I believe we need to have room for God. We cannot be so full of ourselves and so full of programming and our plans and so full of structure that there is no room for God.

And so, very simply, what I would like to do is cancel groups this next week on Wednesday and Thursday nights and ask kinship leaders to cancel their groups this next week and come together here at the church. We will worship and we will ask God to come. And we will come with a profound sense of our need and a profound sense of our own failure and of our own inability to carry on the Christian life without God's presence on us. We are going to pray for empowering. We are going to pray for renewal. But we are just going to ask the Lord to come. We are going to do that Wednesday night and Thursday night. Next Sunday night we are going to get together like we did last Sunday night and do the same thing. Because I have a sense that it is the heart of God for this particular time to create increased hunger and expectancy and I think he wants to meet that. But we are going to get together and we are going to ask the Lord to come in power.

I really want to encourage as many of you as can to come on Wednesday and Thursday nights this week to come out here. We are going to worship. You can invite your friends. We are not going to do much teaching. We just want to invite the presence of the Lord and ask for fresh empowering. I especially invite teens and young people to come with their parents.

The second risk of wealth is related to the first and that is to forget God. Not only do we find no need for God, but there is a tendency as a result of success and wealth, to forget God. Take a look at Deuteronomy 8:6. I am going to read from verse 6 to verse 20.

“Observe the commands of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and revering him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills: a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you. You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’

But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.

If you forget the Lord your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. Like the nations the Lord destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the Lord your God.”

Now, this is a tendency that many of us have experienced. See, we are all wealthy in some way—whether it is in money or we are, perhaps, better endowed intellectually than someone else, maybe you are wealthy in terms of love. There are folks who love you. You have lots of relationships. You have a loving spouse or loving friends, or loving parents or loving children. Maybe you are good looking.

The tendency for fallen human beings is to attribute their wealth in whatever area they experience wealth, to attribute that wealth to themselves. I am doing well because of me. I produced this success. My power and my hard work produced this. I did it. We especially do this as we see somebody who lacks in the area that we have an abundance. You know, those of you who have a wealth of relationships and experience great blessing by being loved by many people, you might look at a bitter person, a person who is all by themselves, living alone who has no social skills, and you say, “What is the matter with them? You know, it is not that hard to have friends. It is not that hard to have a loving relationship. It is not that hard to have a loving marriage. Just be more loving yourself. Why don’t they do that?”

There is a haughtiness and smugness with being intellectually endowed. You know, what is the matter with this person? Don’t they understand? Don’t they get things quickly? Their minds aren’t able to capture this vast breadth of information of knowledge the way that I can. And there is a haughtiness and a self-satisfaction that comes with success in any area. And that is certainly true with making a lot of money. Perhaps you did work hard. Do you see that your ability to discipline yourself and your ability to study and your ability to go through the long hours of schooling and the long hours of training that got you to your present place was not self-driven? Never say to yourself [verse 17] “my power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me. [Moses writes] Remember the Lord your God. For it is he that gives you the ability to produce wealth.” He gives the ability to you currently to make money and he gave it to you in the past. There is not one of us, no one in this room, no one you have ever met who is a self-made man or woman. Such a creature doesn’t exist. I pulled myself up by my bootstraps—NO! That is not the whole story. God endowed you. God gave you the opportunities. God opened the doors in front of you and God blessed what you touched. The reason you are doing well is because God was pleased to open his hand favorably to you. And you have been fed out of his hand!

Wealth causes us to forget that. That it was the hand of God that was opened to us. I see this in spiritual wealth as well. At the beginning of our Christian life it was so apparent to us that we come to God broken and needy, as failures having nothing to offer God. But as God gives us, teaches us, blesses us, trains us up, we begin to think that it is a result of something in us. And we must be pretty good people and we forget God. This profound temptation exists for churches that are growing like the Vineyard.

“How did you get to this place, church—Vineyard?”

God is calling us to account, you know, all the time. God tests hearts. He tests the spirit of the church all the time. “How did you get to this place?”

Because we were such sincere seekers? Because we had this great plan? Because we have all these neat people? Because of our power and our programs and our planning?

Or for no other reason than the hand of God was open. And right now, we feed from the hand of God. And should the hand of God ever close, we will have nothing. So we pray, "Oh, God, keep your hand open to us. Give us today our daily bread." Success and wealth carries with it always the tendency to forget who gave it to us.

And then the third tendency, I believe, is to miss God's purpose for our lives. Luke 12:13, I am going to read from verse 13 to verse 21:

"Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.'

Jesus replied, 'Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?' Then he said to them, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.'

And he told them this parable: 'The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

Then he said, 'This is what I will do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'

But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

You know, God has a purpose for your life. There is a Greek word, the word "telos"—it means "the end or purpose to which something is made." And God has a purpose, of telos, for you. His purpose for you begins in coming into relationship with him and to experience his goodness for you. His purpose is to share that goodness that you experience in relationship with God toward others. His purpose for you is to experience his presence, to grow in love for both God and men.

And do you know what wealth does? Wealth distorts the telos, the purpose, the goal, the end for which God has made us. The great risk of money is that we would miss God's purpose and get on an entirely different track for our lives.

We see in this parable that a man came up to Jesus with, what on the face seemed to be a legitimate request, he wants to get justice. He wants Jesus to decide between he and his brother regarding an estate. Many of you may have been in that situation where a brother or sister or a cousin completely consumed an inheritance and you were shut out. Your share was stolen by a family member. It is a very common situation.

Jesus looks past the plea for justice and he discerns in this man a problem that will cause him to miss the purpose of God in his life. He discerns in him greed. And he says to him, "Watch out! [Verse 15] Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Then he tells a story about greed. In this story of the rich fool, we see a man who lives to accumulate. A man who rather than walking out the purpose of God for his life is on a track where enough is never enough. A man who has abundance but is not satisfied. And so we see this man saying, "I have to build bigger. I have to have bigger barns and bigger store houses." Of course, we see this man whose life is inverted in on itself. It has often been pointed out that when you look at the pronouns in this passage—he uses the word "I" six times. "What shall I do? I have no place. This is what I will do. I will. I will tear down my barns. I will store. I'll say to myself." He uses the word "I" six times.

The word "my" five times. "My crops. My grain. My barns. My soul." This man, who's life is inverted in on itself, who is caught in this accumulation treadmill, believes that there is going to be a point in his life where he will be able to just kick back and relax and take life easy and enjoy the fruit of his labor.

What an illusion.

Let me read to you from Ecclesiastes 5 about the risk of money. Solomon writes:

"Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income." Ecclesiastes 5:10—Enough is never enough!

Haven't you experienced this in your own life? That when the preoccupation of your life becomes "accumulating," when you get on that treadmill, you never get off. You never reach the point of saying, "Well, I finally have enough clothes. That's it. No more for the next five years." You never have enough furniture. You never have enough stuff on your walls. Your house is never big enough. Your car is never new enough. Your clothes are never fashionable enough.

Someone recently told me about a friend of his that is making \$200,000 a year. He is thinking of quitting his job because he feels that he really isn't making enough. How much is enough when possessions come toward the fallen human heart? No amount will satisfy. Possessions create in that fallen heart, not satisfaction, but a need for more. Possessions toward the fallen heart, toward the heart inverted on self, toward the heart inverted on accumulation—possessions are like food that create hunger. Possessions can be like pornography. Rather than satisfying sexual desire, creates it. Possessions can cause us to miss the telos, the end to which we are created.

There is a fourth thing. Wealth can make us dull to the cry of the poor. Luke 16:19:

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores."

Let's apply this story of the rich man and Lazarus to today's world. You have a rich man who gets up, climbs into his sleek car in the morning in a locked garage. Before he does he turns off the car alarm that protects his car every night while he sleeps. He opens the garage door with the opener and drives out. He pulls out along the highway. Races downtown 65 miles an hour passed the Lazaruses, past the homes of the poor. Perhaps he listens to worship tapes on the way to work and sings along. He pulls into a patrolled garage, walks to his office that has a guard at the front desk, works all day, gets back into the car and drives home. He pulls it into his garage that he locks after making sure that his

home is double bolted in the evening, rests comfortably knowing that his home is protected by the latest in modern technology.

There is a problem. Let me read to you from the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 22:9 and share with you what the problem is. Proverbs 22:9 says, "A generous man will himself be blessed for he shares his food with the poor." Now, literally, in Hebrews it says, "He who has a generous eye will be blessed, for he gives his bread to the poor." He who has a generous eye...

Do you know what the problem is with the man who I just described and with most of us? We have bad eyes. In baseball, good hitters are said to have a good batting eye. They can spot the ball. And a man or woman with a generous eye is a person who can spot the Lazaruses in the church, the Lazaruses at our food pantry, the person who is at the back door wanting something from us.

See, the problem of wealth is that it has a dulling effect, not only to our own sense of need for God, but it has a dulling effect of our ability to see the poor and to hear their cries. It is a narcotic to our compassion.

Understand that the reason why God wants us to open our hearts to the poor? Because that is the kind of God he is. Because our father in heaven wants his children to really bare his image. He wants his children to look like him.

Now it says in Proverbs 21:13, "Whoever shuts his ears to the cries of the poor, will also cry himself and not be heard." This is a profound and very unsettling threat. Because understand that at some point or another in our lives we will be the beggar, Lazarus. We will be in need. We will be the people, at some point, laid up in a hospital bed. We will be wheeled down the hallway in some lonely nursing home by a stranger. And we will find ourselves, however wealthy, with a child who has a disability or with a parent who has come down with Alzheimer's. We will find ourselves with a teenager in rebellion. And we will be pushed out onto the fringes of society because we find ourselves in an unsuccessful marriage with a spouse who now asks us for a divorce. We will find ourselves in need because of a failing business or an inability to conceive a baby. Each of us, each of us, if we haven't already been there, is going to be Lazarus at some point in our lives.

When we cry out, we want to be heard, we need to be heard; so does the person who is on the edge now needs to be heard. Brothers and sisters, wealth is a blessing as a result of creation. But it carries with it tremendous risk as a result of the fall.

And my final point is that wealth can be redeemed as a result of responsible usage. Let me put it very plainly. Your ability to make money, your ability to make money is a talent, an opportunity for influence, and not just affluence. You see, whatever we have by way of gifting or by way of talent or by opportunity is to be used for King Jesus. "To whom much is given, much will be required," from everyone who had been given much, much more will be demanded, Jesus said. And you know, whereas the church in America has taught for many years that if you have a spiritual gift it is to be employed; if you can teach then you should use that teaching ability for the church; and if you can evangelize, you should use that evangelistic ability to share your faith with the world; and if you have musical gifts, use those musical gifts for the glory of God; the church in America has not taught successfully that the ability to make money is a talent that is to be invested in the kingdom, no different that any other talent.

And so we find in America that it is the exceptionally rare, wealthy person who uses their affluence to spread the influence of the kingdom. Secular people understand the use of wealth. Norman Lear, whatever you may think of him, has used his wealth to create an organization, *People for the American Way*, which is opposed to religion in America. He is using his affluence to spread the influence of his particular belief system. And you have to respect that.

But how rare is the Christian who uses their affluence for the sake of influence? How rare it is to find Christians who are making more than \$40,000 or \$50,000 who say to themselves, "It is not sufficient that I give away 10% of my income for the work of the kingdom of God." My goodness, if we are in that salary range or above that, wouldn't it be time for us to sit down with our spouses and say, "You know, we need a plan for giving away this year 15% of our income. Let's tithe, but give an additional 5% to world missions." And if we are in the \$100,000+ range, is giving away 20% of our income too much? Let's set up a systematic plan to give to those in need. To whom much is given, in any area of life, much will be required.

I believe that truth applies to this large church. God has given us a lot. He has given us a lot of people who have a lot of talents. All that has done is to increase our responsibility before God. God didn't give us all of this for the purpose of hoarding. He gives us additional responsibility when he gives us additional blessing.

Let me finish with a few thoughts. Back in Matthew 19, after Jesus tells the man to give away everything that he has, and he says, "You know, I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." The disciples asked a question. They said, "Well, if wealth carries with it so many risks, and so much burden, that there is a possibility of missing the kingdom, well, who can be saved?" Jesus said, "With man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Now, I don't believe that any of us who are well endowed, whether it is in money or in any other area of life—in church, in ministry, in relationships, in looks, in athletic ability, in intellectual ability—I don't believe we can earn our way into the favor of God. The only thing that is going to save us is the grace of God. But, you know, brothers and sisters, we can choose to open doors of receptivity to the grace of God.

Let me explain what I mean. I believe that the grace of God is available for the wealthy. Wealthy monetarily, wealthy in any other area, the grace of God is available for us. But we need to open the door of receptivity to that grace. And if you are wealthy in some way today, let me share with you some ways to open yourself up to the grace of God that is there for you.

First of all, as a person who may have a tendency to fill full because you are full materially, as a person who may walk around saying, "I am OK. I am doing fine," one of the best things that you can do for yourself is rub a need in your life. Rub a need. The need may be for self-control in an area where you are out of control, where you are in bondage. The need may be for love. The need may be for you to be able to express your emotions. The need in your life may be for a heart of generosity. Full people rub a need in your life.

When we have a tendency to say, “I have a done this. I am a self-made man or a self-made woman.” Pop the door of thanksgiving. Learn to say “thank you.”

You know the form of words can be very important for us spiritually. What we say can often be indicators of our hearts. Over the years, God has instructed me over and over again, when we describe ministry success to start off saying, “By God’s grace...” If you have a tendency to forget God, to forget that God is the one who gave you the success, then say, “By God’s grace, I have such and such.”

Then third, in your own circle, if there is a Lazarus, an inconvenient brother or sister, an inconvenient person, a person in need, a person who is making demands, let’s not shut our hearts. Let’s allow the compassion of God to flow. God can redeem our wealth as we move out with his compassion. Let’s pray.