

# EQUIPPING THE SAINTS

“...FOR THE EQUIPPING OF THE SAINTS FOR THE WORK OF SERVICE...” ~ EPHESIANS 4:12

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## WHY WAS JESUS SO HARD ON RICH PEOPLE?

*By David McClister*

One thing becomes clear when we read the gospel stories about Jesus: he seldom had anything good to say about riches and rich people. He said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:23). In his parables, rich people are usually the bad guys. He called money “**unrighteous wealth**” (Luke 16:11). In the parable of the sower Jesus said that riches are a hindrance to hearing the word of God (Luke 8:14). Sure, there are a few rich people in the gospels who are not bad guys, but that is because they get rid of all their riches (like Zaccheus, Luke 19:8) or they used them for Jesus (like Joseph of Arimathea). In fact, over and over in the gospels, Jesus teaches that the best thing to do with our money is to get rid of it (Luke 14:33: “**none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions**”)!

This same attitude is continued in the letter of James. He speaks of rich people who blaspheme the name of Jesus, and who cheat their workers (Jam. 2:7; 5:1-6). Similarly, Paul warns the rich in 1 Tim. 6:9, 17f, and Jesus criticized the rich church in Laodicea for their spiritual blindness (Rev. 3:17).

Did Jesus and his apostles have some kind of chip on their shoulder against all rich people? Was this a political

thing (like the modern anti-wealth movement in this country), basically driven by envy? Or was it just that the rich people in Jesus' day were particularly bad people? The answer is: none of the above. But is this fair, for Jesus to lump all rich people basically into the same group and roundly condemn them as a group? The basic answer is: yes.

This is no academic exercise. The fact is that everyone of us is rich by comparison not only to the people of Jesus' day, but by comparison to almost everyone else in the world. Because we live in the United States of America, we all share in a wealth that was unthinkable to the ancients, and is still unimaginable to most people elsewhere in the world. It should strike us that all of these passages about rich people are about us.

The fact is that riches are a temptation that hardly anyone can ignore. The fleshly side of our constitution sees them and covets them as having the potential to satisfy and make our lives easy. All of us, to some extent, have fallen for this lie. Riches are a temptation in both directions, as it were. First, they are a temptation to the poor, to those who **“want to get rich”** (1 Tim. 6:9). Poor people can easily be deluded by the worldly idea that enough money will make us happy or that money would somehow mean that we have “arrived” and we are legitimate and successful (although Jesus said, **“not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions,”** Luke 12:15). But second, they are also a temptation to those who have them. That's right, having riches can be just as dangerous of a temptation as not having them. How? Because the simple fact is that when we have money, we tend to rely on it.

And therein lies the problem. God wants us to rely on Him for everything, for our daily bread, our clothing, our shelter, and for everything we need in life (Matt 6:25-34). That's what Israel was supposed to have learned in the wilderness, that man does not live by bread alone, but by God's promise word to us. If we have anything, God gave it to us. And if we have more than we need, it is because God wants to use us as channels of blessing to others.

But that's not how we are trained to think, is it? We think that if we are too generous with our money then we "won't have anything" (as if that is a bad thing), and if we don't invest in our IRA's and 401K's then we won't have anything when we retire. Aside from the idea that "retirement" is never mentioned as part of a "normal" life in the Bible (it is an ideal we have cooked up), it is again the problem of trusting in our money and not in God. Do we think that God won't take care of us?

We often say, "God doesn't condemn riches, he condemns the love of riches." But only a small part of that is true. First, that particular way of putting the matter is never stated in the Bible. It may comfort us to say it that way, but Jesus never said that. Second, we must not delude ourselves into thinking that "Even though I am rich, I am handling it properly." Maybe you are, but the chances are good that we probably are not. Again, we tend to trust our money, regardless of the amount. Whatever "love of money" is, we tend to think that it is what the other guy is doing, not us.

Jesus spoke of the deceitfulness of riches (Matt 13:22), and this is why he seldom had anything good to say about them or about the people who love them. The plain fact is that riches deceive us into a false sense of security, and

we become self-deceived by them. It is a powerful force that has ruined countless lives, including those of God's people.

Furthermore, the quest for money is a form of selfishness that is exactly opposite of the love that we are to have for others. The love of money causes us to mistreat other people. This is why the rich man in the parable of Luke 16 was condemned, because in his greed he had no love for others (namely, poor Lazarus, whom he saw every day). In short, wealth is the enemy of love.

This is why Paul told Timothy **“Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.”** This is the only right way to view, and use, riches.

*[Originally published at focusmagazine.org]*

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**AM LESSON:**

Is Jesus Worth Following?

**PM LESSON:**

You Were Running Well  
(Galatians 5:7-12)

**“GO THEREFORE AND MAKE DISCIPLES...”**  
**(MATTHEW 28:19-20)**