

Enslaved to Riches: Wealthy or Not, Money has the Power to Enslave Us

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I heard a wise statement one time, “You don’t have to be rich to be a slave to riches.” Many of us think that one has to have wealth to be a slave to it. But the poor can be a slave to wealth just as much as the rich. The core of the matter is not the size of our portfolio, our ability to retire by the age of 45, or how poor we are. The issues really are - are our hearts pure? Are our intentions pure? Are our decisions to invest in the Kingdom of God greater rather than our own financial security? Jesus wants and calls us to be a slave to himself (Matthew 16:24-25). The whole goal of spiritual formation is that our obedience and loyalty rests in Jesus and his purposes on the earth that He teaches in the scriptures. The words of Mahatma Gandhi ring true to my ear as a result of traveling through the world and seeing human suffering, “The world has enough for every man’s need, but not enough for every man’s greed.” Now the need Gandhi was referring to was not the need for a vacation in the Caymans or U2’s latest album but the basic needs of survival for any human being: food, water, & shelter. I have traveled in over 65 nations and have seen human suffering in some of the poorest regions on our globe. It is always interesting to hear people’s opinions of poverty when they see it first hand. I have heard comments like, “Jesus said we will always have the poor with us, so why do anything?” or “The poor are so much more closer to God” or “Why do people suffer like this when there is so much wealth in the world?” Is it possible that there is an over spiritualized given to the poor? Can the poor be closer to God or love God more? Indeed, you can find scripture to back this position up. Look at the story of the rich man and Lazarus, James wrote, “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?” (2:5-6). However, looking at the scriptures, you cannot ignore the material wealth of people who loved God: Abraham, Moses, Job, King Solomon, and Zacchaeus. Of course, Jesus did not say it was hard for the poor to enter the Kingdom of God but the rich. Luke’s account of the sermon on the amount starts by, “Blessed are the poor.” Surely, this issue is a debate within the church and will always be. Historically, you do see the poor in many countries who respond to the gospel in greater numbers than the rich. Look around Africa or the low caste within India. In our own personal journeys and communal journeys, allow us to ponder some basic issues in our constant struggle with our relationship with money. Let me suggest also for you to pray about these issues, discuss with your spouse or children, talk about in your church group.

1.) **An issue of Discipleship:** In our process of spiritual formation to become like Christ in our thoughts and behavior, we must always see our relationship with money as a key area to grow and mature in. We must master money and not let money master us. Jesus talked about money the most in his teachings next to the Kingdom of God. I believe that in our own journeys we should seek out relationship with the poor and oppressed both in our own communities and around the world. Jesus spoke that what you have done to the least of these (the poor) by feeding, clothing, and loving you have done as unto him. (Matthew 25) The reason Jesus said that the poor will always be with us, is that we can meet and experience Jesus in the midst of loving and serving the poor.

2.) **An issue of Standard of Living: Consumption and Excess:** Many good Christians in North America have added an 11th commandment. “My salary has increased, therefore, my standard of living must increase.” Surely, the materialism that is within the church in this country is appalling to God. We all feel we have to buy things we don’t really need with money we don’t even have to impress people we don’t even know. We consume too much and have excess stuff from our shoes to our entertainment. We radically need instruction and change in this area. Imagine how many resources could be unleashed for Kingdom work if Christians radically reduced their luxuries?

3.) **An issue of Global Missions and Justice:** Our goal as Christ followers is not just for our own spiritual journey, healing, and growth. We are involved in the expansion and growth of the Kingdom of God in the world. We have been sent to be salt and light in tasteless and dark cultures around the globe. We are a part of a worldwide movement of God in the world. There still exist over 1,800 distinct ethnic groups in the world without a church in their culture. We are to champion and speak for justice, human rights, the environment, & peace in the world. Missionaries, mission organizations, and causes always have more need than funding. What a great problem it would be if missions had more money than they could spend? Is that realistic you ask? Absolutely. It is estimated that the Christians in North America alone spend over \$80 billion on charities that are not Christian causes.

4.) **An issue of the heart and not the size of your bank account.** One of the hardest spiritual disciplines to practice is giving. “Remembering the words the Lord himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” (Acts 20:35) One summer while I was in college, I worked on staff in an inner-city church in Houston, TX. One Sunday as I was locking up, a Hispanic woman said she had to go get her tithe for that day and asked if I could wait while she went to get it. Little did I know that I would wait for 45 minutes while she walked home. I got impatient and was very hungry. Finally, she arrived and handed me the small envelope and she went on her way. I saw that it was open and looked inside and found 1 dime. That is right, a 45 minute walk for 10 cents. I could not believe it. Can we learn the gift of giving like this woman? I hope her example and discipline can be a model for us all. Indeed, it is better to give than receive.