

# Does God Want You Rich?

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Martyn Minns

Mark 10:17–27 (28–31)

**A**s Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good — except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.’” 20 “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” 21 Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” 22 At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. 23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 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.” 26 The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?” 27 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.” 28 Peter said to him, “We have left everything to follow you!” 29 “I tell you the truth,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel 30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields — and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

Does God want you to be rich? Does God want you to be wealthy? Does God want you to prosper and enjoy all of the comforts of this life? Or does God want you to suffer?

Does God really prefer that we live lives of poverty, suffering and self-denial?

Are we to live as beloved and blessed Children of the King, or are we to walk the Way of the Cross?

What do think?

Three weeks ago this was the question on the front page of *TIME Magazine*. Also included was the picture of a Rolls Royce with a gold cross in place of the emblem that usually crowns the familiar radiator grill. The article pointed out a disagreement between some rather heavyweight evangelical leaders on this issue.

Joel Osteen, pastor of the Lakewood Mega Church in Houston, Texas, the largest church in the nation with more than 30,000 members is clearly on the prosperity side of the equation. His book,

*Your Best Life Now* has sold more than 4 million copies, and both in his writing, and in person, he exudes a relentless enthusiasm that God always wants the very best for us. As far as Pastor Osteen is concerned there is no question that God wants all of us to be happy and prosperous. If we speak words of faith and victory we WILL receive God’s favor and live well.

“Not so!” replies fellow mega pastor Rick Warren, whose book *The Purpose Driven Life* has outsold Osteen’s by a ratio of 7 to 1. “This idea that God wants everybody to be wealthy? There is a word for that: baloney. It’s creating a false idol. You don’t measure your self-worth by your net worth. I can show you millions of faithful followers of Christ who live in poverty.” [If the prosperity message is true] . . . “Why isn’t everybody in the church a millionaire?”

Another popular television preacher and author, Joyce Meyer, disagrees, “Who would want to get in on something where you’re miserable, poor, broke and ugly and you just have to muddle through until you get to heaven? I believe God wants to give us nice things!”

Or, as the pastor of the largest United Methodist Church in the country puts it, “Jesus did not die and get up off the cross so we could live lives full of despair and disappointment.”

What are we to make of all this?

Truth is we can quote scripture to support both sides of the argument. (John 10:10) Jesus says, “. . . I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” (John 15:16), “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit — fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.”

But then we have to balance these verses with Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for

yourselves treasures in heaven, . . . for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matt. 6:19,21)

So how do we make sense of all this—does God want us to be rich or not?

There was a rich young man who knew what it was to be wealthy, but he also knew that it wasn’t enough. He had heard Jesus talk about the Kingdom of God and he wanted to know more.

One day, he decided that living at the edge of the crowd was no longer enough. He wanted to be close to Jesus, he longed to be a follower, so he burst through the crowd “ran up to [Jesus] and fell

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on his knees before him. ‘Good teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’”

This question sounds like a great opening for a life changing conversation. It is the question that every person must face at some point in his or her life and yet the answer that Jesus gives is less than enthusiastic, “*Why do you call me good?*” Jesus answered. “*No one is good—except God alone...*” Jesus sounds unusually abrupt in his reply, surely there is something deeper going on in this conversation. One thing is clear, Jesus is not playing word games with this earnest young man. In verse 21, we are told that Jesus looked at him and loved him. So why does he correct him? Perhaps it is to prepare him for what is coming next! Jesus gives the young man a rather condensed version of the second half of the ten commandments: “*Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.*”

Back comes the confident reply—no problem, “*Teacher,*” he declared, “*all these I have kept since I was a boy.*” And I am sure that he had, but Jesus could see past his outward display of piety to a deeper issue. This young man was holding on tight to a lot of things and not about to let them go.

What he owned, owned him.

His possessions, possessed him.

Without realizing it the man’s riches kept him from an intimate relationship with God. They were his ultimate security.

Jesus looked at [the young man] and loved him. “*One thing you lack,*” he said. “*Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*” At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

GO, SELL, GIVE, COME and FOLLOW. It was a radical invitation that was too much of a challenge for this young man. The cost was too high. It was more than he was willing to pay for entrance into the kingdom. He went away sad, because he had great wealth and he was unwilling to let go of it.

But surely some of you are thinking what a missed opportunity. Think what a man with resources like this could do for the kingdom. Our financial challenges would be over. We could finally install the new organ; fix all the building problems and double our outreach budget. Jesus, go after him! Perhaps if you let him join us he will learn about stewardship. Jesus, please back off!

But then Jesus looks at us.

Why do we so identify with this confused young man? Why

does this story bother us? Does he ask the same of us?

Make no mistake about it, we are the wealthy of this world. And which of us could stand the test? We are all caught up in the consumer culture, we are all members of the materialistic society. I believe that we miss the full intent of this passage unless we can cry out, “*Lord, I am just like that man! I am no more ready to sell all and give to the poor than he was!*” We are all infected by the lie that our worth, our security, our life is somehow measured by our success and we cling to it like a drowning man holds onto a life preserver. But it is a lie.

One of the great gifts of being part of the Anglican Communion is that we constantly bump up against faithful Christians from other parts of the world. Places where all of the stuff that we take for granted is simply not available. I can still remember

our very first visit to East Africa. Angela and I were guests of our friend Bishop Alpha Mohammed. When we first arrived in Dodoma he served us bread and honey with a cup of tea. We said a prayer of thanksgiving for our safe arrival and the food before us. It all seemed very ordinary until we discovered that there had been a famine and this was the first loaf of bread that they had seen in weeks. The stores were empty and yet Alpha had managed to find this one jar of honey and he was more than willing to share all of it with us. And he did it with such great joy.

I also remember a conversation that Bishop Alpha had with a friend of mine, “it must be so difficult to be a Christian in America,” he said, “You have so many distractions!” He is right. It is so easy to let Christianity become the yes-man for our culture. We can so quickly let the American dream become the sign of God’s blessing.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “*How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!*” The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “*Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!*”

We have the resources to make it easy to view Christianity as little more than an extra spiritual dimension to our already overcrowded lives. Instead of becoming a revolutionary society that turns the world upside down, the church evolves into a polite gathering for people who enjoy the finer things of life.

Jesus said, “*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.*” This proves one thing—Jesus had a sense of humor! Camels are funny, lumpy creatures. They make strange noises and even stranger smells. The

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# It will be a life that is characterized by simplicity rather than excess, sharing rather than ownership, and freedom rather than bondage.

thought of a camel squeezing through the eye of a needle is meant to be ridiculous. Even if you interpret the needle to be one of the narrow doors in the city gate, the picture of a camel crawling through the dirt, grunting, snorting, and complaining as it inches through the narrow passage is hilarious.

But it is also a painful picture because it is a graphic reminder that there is nothing that we can carry, and nothing that we can do, to earn our place before God.

*“The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, ‘Who then can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.’”*

How are we to learn this lesson?

How are we to learn to be completely dependent on the Lord?

Is our only hope to give everything away?

What about all of the bills that need paying?

Who will take care of all of our responsibilities?

Are we all meant to be poor?

I don't believe so, but I do believe that Jesus is calling each one of us to change the way that we think of success. It will affect the way that we live and the way that we spend our money.

It will be a life that is characterized by

- Simplicity rather than excess,
- Sharing rather than ownership,
- Freedom rather than bondage.

It actually doesn't matter how little or how much money we have, but rather on what we do with what we have. God does want to bless us, but that doesn't mean more stuff. Instead it will be a life that centers on God and not on us. It is a life that celebrates the depth of love that a family shares rather than the size of house they occupy. It is a richness of spirit that is measured by how much we give rather than how much we get.

• For some it may well mean selling everything and giving it to the poor.

• For others it may mean downsizing and simplifying so that more time and money can be made available for others.

• For some it will mean making the decision to give up a successful career to follow the Lord's call to sacrificial mission.

• For others it will mean risking promotion by standing firm as a witness for Christ.

• For all of us it will mean coming to realize that our lives are not measured by how much is written in our checkbook, but our true

value comes because our names are written in the Book of Life.

I can remember the time when I first embraced this truth. Money had an enormous hold over me. I grew up in the industrial Midlands of England in the post war era and we were poor even though we worked hard. My dad washed windows in addition to his regular job and my mother cleaned houses and sold flowers from our garden. I delivered groceries as soon as I was able and I had a variety of other paying jobs during school. Life was hard and I was determined to break out of this cycle of poverty and seek the “good life” in America. When we first arrived I was paid \$12,000 year. That was four times my salary in England and I thought we were super rich! I could not imagine how we could ever spend a \$1,000 a month...but not for long! However, very quickly earning money began to consume me.

Then I heard our Rector preach on that familiar text *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ... But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* (Matt 6:25,33) and I knew that God was speaking to me. I needed to seek God's kingdom first, I needed to get away from the false security of the checking account. But little did I know how radical that change would become. Before long God called us to let go of everything and trust him for three years of seminary with four young children and no guaranteed income. It took two years of prayer but God gave us the grace to let go and we never missed a meal!

GO, SELL, GIVE, COME and FOLLOW.

These were not empty words for Angela and me. They actually became God's gift to us.

They also influenced our children and earlier this year our son Jon and his wife Celeste followed our footsteps and headed off to seminary with their four children in tow to begin their own preparation for ordained ministry

Does God want you to be rich?

**Very quickly earning money began to consume me.**

His answer is,

**“GO, SELL, GIVE, COME and FOLLOW!”**

Jesus says this because he loves us. He wants us to remove the false idols in your life.

• It doesn't mean that we stop working, but it does mean that we stop worshipping our work.

• It means that we will look at every thing that we have as a gift from God.

# We cling to our possessions because we are anxious about tomorrow. But God can be trusted to provide for us.

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• It also means that we will be quick to share what we have with those in need.

Martin Luther once said, “If our goods are not available to the community they are stolen goods.” We cling to our possessions because we are anxious about tomorrow. But God can be trusted to provide for us. We don’t need to be afraid of the future.

That is a powerful lesson for all of us in these 40 Days of Discernment. The future is uncertain. No doubt about that. There is a great danger of clinging to all that is familiar and refusing to let go for fear that we will lose everything.

That was one of my biggest struggles during the week of prayer before my consecration. I didn’t want to give up everything to take on this new challenge. I didn’t want to be poor again. I didn’t want

to give up the security of a regular paycheck. I didn’t want to risk losing all of the friendships that we have developed over the years.

But then I remembered.

*“I tell you the truth,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.”*

If we let go of everything that stands in the way of our relationship with God, if we “GO, SELL, GIVE, COME and FOLLOW” then God promises to bless us a hundred times as much in this age and in the age to come have life everlasting! That’s God’s promise and you can count on it!



*Martyn Minns, Rector*

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