

Español
Northwest Nazarene University

The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 108

On Riches

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." Matthew 19:24.

1. In the preceding verses we have an account of a young man who came running to our Lord, and kneeling down, not in hypocrisy, but in deep earnestness of soul, and said unto him, "Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life" "All the commandments," saith he, "I have kept from my youth: What lack I yet" Probably he had kept them in the literal sense; yet he still loved the world. And He who knew what was in man knew that, in this particular case, (for this is by no means a general rule,) he could not be healed of that desperate disease, but by a desperate remedy. Therefore he answered, "Go and sell all that thou hast, and give it to the poor; and come and follow me. But when he heard this, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. So all the fair blossoms withered away! For he would not lay up treasure in heaven at so high a price! Jesus, observing this, "looked round about, and said unto his disciples," (Mark 10:23, &c.) "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God! And they were astonished out of measure, and said among themselves, Who then can be saved"--if it be so difficult for rich men to be saved, who have so many and so great advantages, who are frees from the cares of this world, and a thousand difficulties to which the poor are continually exposed

2. It has indeed been supposed, he partly retracts what he had said concerning the difficulty of rich men's being saved, by what is added in the tenth chapter of St. Mark. For after he had said, (verse 23,) "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!" when "the disciples were astonished at his words, Jesus answered again," and said unto them, "How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God!" (Verse 24.) But observe, (1.) Our Lord did not mean hereby to retract what he had said before. So far from it, that he immediately confirms it by that awful declaration, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." Observe, (2.) Both one of these sentences and the other assert the very same thing. For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for those that have riches not to trust in them.

3. Perceiving their astonishment at this hard saying, "Jesus, looking upon them," (undoubtedly with an air of inexpressible tenderness, to prevent their thinking the case of the rich desperate,) "saith, With men it is impossible, but not with God: For with God all things are possible."

4. I apprehend, by a rich man here is meant, not only a man that has immense treasures, one that has heaped up gold as dust, and silver as the sand of the sea; but anyone that possesses more than the necessaries and conveniences of life. One that has food and raiment sufficient for himself and his family, and something over, is rich. By the kingdom of God, or of heaven, (exactly equivalent terms,) I believe is meant, not the kingdom of glory, (although that will, without question, follow,) but the kingdom of heaven, that is, true religion, upon earth. The meaning then of our Lord's assertion is this,-that it is absolutely impossible, unless by that power to which all things are possible, that a rich man should be a Christian; to have the mind that was in Christ, and to walk as Christ walked: Such are the hinderances to holiness, as well as the temptations to sin, which surround him on every side.

I. First. Such are the hinderances to holiness which surround him on every side. To enumerate all these

would require a large volume: I would only touch upon a few of them.

1. The root of all religion is faith, without which it is impossible to please God. Now, whether you take this in its general acceptation, for an "evidence of things not seen," of the invisible and the eternal world, of God and the things of God, how natural a tendency have riches to darken this evidence, to prevent your attention to God and the things of God, and to things invisible and eternal! And if you take it in another sense, for a confidence; what a tendency have riches to destroy this; to make you trust, either for happiness or defence, in them, not "in the living God!" Or if you take faith, in the proper Christian sense, as a divine confidence in a pardoning God; what a deadly, what an almost insuperable, hinderance to this faith are riches! What! Can a wealthy, and consequently an honourable, man come to God as having nothing to pay Can he lay all his greatness by, and come as a sinner, a mere sinner, the vilest of sinners; as on a level with those that feed the dogs of his flock; with that "beggar who lies at his gate full of sores" Impossible; unless by the same power that made the heavens and the earth. Yet without doing this, he cannot, in any sense, "enter into the kingdom of God."

2. What a hinderance are riches to the very first fruit of faith,--namely, the love of God! "If any man love the world," says the Apostle, "the love of the Father is not in him." But how is it possible for a man not to love the world who is surrounded with all its allurements How can it be that he should then hear the still small voice which says, "My son, give me thy heart" What power, less than almighty, can send the rich man an answer to that prayer,--

Keep me dead to all below, Only Christ resolved to know; Firm, and disengaged, and free, Seeking all my bliss in Thee!

3. Riches are equally a hinderance to the loving our neighbour as ourselves; that is, to the loving all mankind as Christ loved us. A rich man may indeed love them that are of his own party, or his own opinion. He may love them that love him: "Do not even Heathens," baptized or unbaptized, "the same" But he cannot have pure, disinterested good-will to every child of man. This can only spring from the love of God, which his great possessions expelled from his soul.

4. From the love of God, and from no other fountain, true humility likewise flows. Therefore, so far as they hinder the love of God, riches must hinder humility likewise. They hinder this also in the rich, by cutting them off from that freedom of conversation whereby they might be made sensible of their defects, and come to a true knowledge of themselves. But how seldom do they meet with a faithful friend; with one that can and will deal plainly with them! And without this we are likely to grow grey in our faults; yea, to die "with all our imperfections on our head."

5. Neither can meekness subsist without humility; for "of pride" naturally "cometh contention." Our Lord accordingly directs us to learn of Him at the same time "to be meek and lowly in heart" Riches therefore are as great a hinderance to meekness as they are to humility. In preventing lowliness of mind, they of consequence prevent meekness; which increases in the same proportion as we sink in our own esteem; and, on the contrary, necessarily decreases as we think more highly of ourselves.

6. There is another Christian temper which is nearly allied to meekness and humility; but it has hardly a name. St. Paul terms it *epieikeia*. Perhaps, till we find a better name, we may call it yieldingness; a readiness to submit to others, to give up our own will. This seems to be the quality which St. James ascribes to "the wisdom from above," when he styles it,-- which we render, easy to be entreated; easy to be convinced of what is true; easy to be persuaded. But how rarely is this amiable temper to be

found in a wealthy man! I do not know that I have found such a prodigy ten times in above threescore and ten years!

7. And how uncommon a thing is it to find patience in those that have large possessions! unless when there is a counterbalance of long and severe affliction, with which God is frequently pleased to visit those he loves, as an antidote to their riches. This is not uncommon: He often sends pain, and sickness, and great crosses, to them that have great possessions. By these means, "patience has its perfect work," till they are "perfect and entire, lacking nothing,"

II. Such are some of the hinderances to holiness which surround the rich on every side. We may now observe, on the other side, what a temptation riches are to all unholy tempers.

1. And, First, how great is the temptation to Atheism which naturally flows from riches; even to an entire forgetfulness of God, as if there was no such Being in the universe. This is at present usually termed dissipation,--a pretty name, affixed by the great vulgar to an utter disregard for God, and indeed for the whole invisible world. And how is the rich man surrounded with all manner of temptations to continual dissipation! Yes, how is the art of dissipation studied among the rich and great! As Prior keenly says,--

Cards are dealt, and dice are brought, Happy effects of human wit, That Alma may herself forget.

Say rather, that mortals may their God forget; that they may keep Him utterly out of their thoughts, who, though he sitteth on the circle of the heavens, yet is "about their bed, and about their path, and spieth out all their ways." Call this wit, if you please; but is it wisdom O no! It is far, very far from it. Thou fool! Dost thou imagine, because thou dost not see God, that God doth not see thee Laugh on; play on; sing on; dance on: But "for all these things God will bring thee to judgment!"

2. From Atheism there is an easy transition to idolatry; from the worship of no God to the worship of false gods: And, in fact, he that does not love God (which is his proper, and his only proper worship) will surely love some of the works of his hands; will love the creature, if not the Creator. But to how many species of idolatry is every rich man exposed! What continual and almost insuperable temptations is he under to "love the world!" and that in all its branches,--"the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life." What innumerable temptations will he find to gratify the "desire of the flesh!" Understand this right. It does not refer to one only, but all the outward senses. It is equal idolatry to seek our happiness in gratifying any or all of these. But there is the greatest danger lest men should seek it in gratifying their taste; in a moderate sensuality; in a regular kind of Epicurism; not in gluttony or drunkenness: Far be that from them! They do not disorder the body; they only keep the soul dead,--dead to God and all true religion.

3. The rich are equally surrounded with temptations from the "desire of the eyes;" that is, the seeking happiness in gratifying the imagination, the pleasures of which the eyes chiefly minister. The objects that give pleasure to the imagination are grand, or beautiful, or new. Indeed, all rich men have not a taste for grand objects; but they have for new and beautiful things, especially for new; the desire of novelty being as natural to men as the desire of meat and drink. Now, how numerous are the temptations to this kind of idolatry, which naturally springs from riches! How strongly and continually are they solicited to seek happiness (if not in grand, yet) in beautiful houses, in elegant furniture, in curious pictures, in delightful gardens! perhaps in that trifle of all trifles,--rich or gay apparel! Yea, in every new thing, little or great, which fashion, the mistress of fools, recommends.

How are rich men, of a more elevated turn of mind, tempted to seek happiness, as their various tastes lead, in poetry, history, music, philosophy, or curious arts and sciences! Now, although it is certain all these have their use, and therefore may be innocently pursued, yet the seeking happiness in any of them, instead of God, is manifest idolatry; and therefore, were it only on this account, that riches furnish him with the means of indulging all these desires, it might well be asked, "Is not the life of a rich man, above all others, a temptation upon earth"

4. What temptation, likewise, must every rich man have to seek happiness in "the pride of life!" I do not conceive the Apostle to mean thereby pomp, or state, or equipage; so much as "the honour that cometh of men," whether it be deserved or not. A rich man is sure to meet with this: It is a snare he cannot escape. The whole city of London uses the words rich and good as equivalent terms. "Yes," say they, "he is a good man; he is worth a hundred thousand pounds." And indeed everywhere, "if thou doest well unto thyself," if thou increasest in goods, "men will speak well of thee." All the world is agreed,

A thousand pound supplies The want of twenty thousand qualities.

And who can bear general applause without being puffed up,-- without being insensibly induced to think of himself "more highly than he ought to think"

5. How is it possible that a rich man should escape pride, were it only on this account,--that his situation necessarily occasions praise to flow in upon him from every quarter For praise is generally poison to the soul; and the more pleasing, the more fatal; particularly when it is undeserved. So that well might our Poet say,--

Parent of evil, bane of honest deeds, Pernicious flattery! thy destructive seeds, In an ill hour, and by a fatal hand, Sadly diffused o'er virtue's gleby land, With rising pride amid the corn appear, And check the hope and promise of the year!

And not only praise, whether deserved or undeserved, but every thing about him tends to inspire and increase pride. His noble house, his elegant furniture, his well-chosen pictures, his fine horses, his equipage, his very dress, yea, even "the embroidery plastered on his tail,"--all these will be matter of commendation to some or other of his guests, and so have an almost irresistible tendency to make him think himself a better man than those who have not these advantages.

6. How naturally, likewise, do riches feed and increase the self-will which is born in every child of man! as not only his domestic servants and immediate dependants are governed implicitly by his will, finding their account therein; but also most of his neighbours and acquaintance study to oblige him in all things: So his will being continually indulged, will of course be continually strengthened; till at length he will be ill able to submit to the will either of God or men.

7. Such a tendency have riches to beget and nourish every temper that is contrary to the love of God. And they have equal tendency to feed every passion and temper that is contrary to the love of our neighbour: Contempt, for instance, particularly of inferiors, than which nothing is more contrary to love:-- Resentment of any real or supposed offence; perhaps even revenge, although God claims this as his own peculiar prerogative:--At least anger; for it immediately rises in the mind of a rich man, "What! to use me thus! Nay, but he shall soon know better: I am now able to do myself justice!"

8. Nearly related to anger, if not rather a species of it, are fretfulness and peevishness. But are the rich more assaulted by these than the poor All experience shows that they are. One remarkable instance I was a witness of many years ago:--A gentleman of large fortune, while we were seriously conversing, ordered a servant to throw some coals on the fire: A puff of smoke came out: He threw himself back in his chair, and cried out, "O Mr. Wesley, these are the crosses which I meet with every day!" I could not help asking, "Pray, Sir John, are these the heaviest crosses you meet with" Surely these crosses would not have fretted him so much, if he had had fifty, instead of five thousand, pounds a year!

9. But it would not be strange, if rich men were in general void of all good dispositions, and an easy prey to all evil ones; since so few of them pay any regard to that solemn declaration of our Lord, without observing which we cannot be his disciples: "And he said unto them all,"--the whole multitude, not unto his Apostles only,--"If any man will come after me,"--will be a real Christian,--"let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." (Luke 9:23.) O how hard a saying is this to those that are "at ease in the midst of their possessions!" Yet the Scripture cannot be broken. Therefore, unless a man do "deny himself" every pleasure which does not prepare him for taking pleasure in God, "and take up his cross daily,"--obey every command of God, however grievous to flesh and blood,--he cannot be a disciple of Christ; he cannot "enter into the kingdom of God."

10. Touching this important point, of denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily, let us appeal to matter of fact; let us appeal to every man's conscience in the sight of God. How many rich men are there among the Methodists (observe, there was not one, when they were first joined together) who actually do "deny themselves and take up their cross daily" who resolutely abstain from every pleasure, either of sense or imagination, unless they know by experience that it prepares them for taking pleasure in God Who declines no cross, no labour or pain, which lies in the way of his duty Who of you that are now rich, deny yourselves just as you did when you were poor Who as willingly endure labour or pain now, as you did when you were not worth five pounds Come to particulars. Do you fast now as often as you did then Do you rise as early in the morning Do you endure cold or heat, wind or rain, as cheerfully as ever See one reason among many, why so few increase in goods, without decreasing in grace! Because they no longer deny themselves and take up their daily cross. They no longer, alas! endure hardship, as good soldiers of Jesus Christ!

11. "Go to now, ye rich men! Weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you;" that must come upon you in a few days, unless prevented by a deep and entire change! "The canker of your gold and silver" will be "a testimony against you," and will "eat your flesh as fire!" O how pitiable is your condition! And who is able to help you You need more plain dealing than any men in the world, and you meet with less. For how few dare speak as plain to you, as they would do to one of your servants! No man living, that either hopes to gain anything by your favour, or fears to lose anything by your displeasure. O that God would give me acceptable words, and cause them to sink deep into your hearts! Many of you have known me long, well nigh from your infancy: You have frequently helped me, when I stood in need. May I not say, you loved me But now the time of our parting is at hand: My feet are just stumbling upon the dark mountains. I would leave one word with you before I go hence; and you may remember it when I am no more seen.

12. O let your heart be whole with God! Seek your happiness in him and him alone. Beware that you cleave not to the dust! "This earth is not your place." See that you use this world as not abusing it; use the world, and enjoy God. Sit as loose to all things here below, as if you were a poor beggar. Be a good steward of the manifold gifts of God; that when you are called to give an account of your stewardship,

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