

WILL RICH MEN BE SAVED?

AT no time did God indicate that salvation is limited only to the poor. There are a number of evil things enumerated in the Holy Scriptures that can prevent men from entering His Kingdom of endless peace and life abundant, but wealth is certainly not among them. Yet riches can be a source of ruin in the end of those who abuse them or count only on their material advantages at the expense of the truth and righteousness of God.

A rich man is a male person who has large possessions, as of money, goods or lands. Men become rich either through the blessing of God by means of just resources and honest labour, or through oppression, fraud or other evil means at the instance of Satan. The spiritual worth or true greatness of a rich man does not therefore depend on the extent of his wealth but the means of its acquisition and the purpose it is used to serve.

We must as well point out that it is an act of fanaticism for anyone to think that poverty is a credential for entry into heaven or for obtaining salvation. Priests, prophets and bishops who are in the habit of exhorting their adherents to be poor like Lazarus, the beggar, so as to go to heaven are charlatans. The case of Lazarus is a purely spiritual matter. It is a parable. (We discoursed it briefly in *The Weekly Sermon* of May 11, 1969, No. 36.) So, to interpret or apply it literally will for sure lead to error.

Well, if anyone wants to be like Lazarus literally he should equally be a beggar and have sores all over his body. Of course, he would in addition allow dogs to be licking the sores in order to be an accomplished "Lazarus" indeed!

The pity of it is that the priests who engage in this sort of preaching are waxing fat in wealth – riding cars, enjoying palatable meals, drinking the best of wines and so on. Why the priests too should not be like Lazarus the "devout" simpleton does not care to ask.

No prophet of God in the Holy Bible ever encouraged people to be poor in order to be saved. There are rich men who, having met certain spiritual requirements, will be saved by the grace of God; and there are poor people who because of their wickedness will be condemned by God.

True Riches

Wealth itself is not evil. There are instances in the Scriptures of men who were blessed with plenty of possessions by God. Abraham was very rich and Lot his nephew, who went with him to the land of Canaan, was also a man of great substance. (Genesis 13: 2-6) In Egypt God made Joseph great and rich. (Genesis 45: 3,4, 7,8, 13) Boaz who became the husband of Ruth the faithful, was a mighty man of wealth. (Ruth 2: 1) Kings David, Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah were also notable for their wealth. – 1 Chronicles 29: 26-28; 2 Chronicles 17: 5; 32: 27-29.

In all of history Solomon was one of the richest kings who had ever lived. When God asked what He should give him he (Solomon) desired wisdom from God. The Lord was particularly pleased with the desire of Solomon. "And God said unto him, because thou hast asked this thing, and has not asked for thyself long life; *neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor has asked the life of thine enemies*; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment, behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. *And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches, and honour: so that there shall not be any among the king like unto thee all thy days*" – 1 Kings 3: 5-13.

Mention can also be made of Joseph of Arimathaea who was a disciple of Jesus Christ. He was a rich man. And when our Saviour was crucified, he (Joseph) took his body, which he wrapped in a clean linen cloth, and placed in his own rock-hewn tomb. – Matthew 27: 57-60.

From the foregoing, it is abundantly clear that it is not a sin to be rich and that true riches come from the Almighty God. "The Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich" said Hannah in her thanksgiving to God for the birth of Samuel. She added: "He bringeth low, and lifteth up. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dung- hill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory..." – 1 Samuel 2: 7, 8; see also 1 Chronicles 29: 11-12.

What is more, King Solomon did say: "The blessing of the LORD, it maketh rich, and He addeth no sorrow with it." – Proverbs 10: 22.

Trust in Riches

Some people often misconstrue the words of Jesus Christ to a certain young rich man, and express the view that rich men will not enter the kingdom of God. Mark's account of what happened between Christ and the rich man goes as follows: "And when he was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God. Thou knowest the commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Defraud not, Honour thy father and mother. And he answered and said unto him, Master, all these have I observed from my youth. Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up thy cross, and follow me. And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked round about, and saith unto his disciples, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! And the disciples were astonished at his words. But Jesus answereth again, and saith unto them, Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to 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." – Mark 10: 17-25.

We can understand therefore that Christ did not say that rich men will not enter the kingdom of God But he did say it would be hard or difficult for them to enter. Even then this does not apply to the rich who make God rather than wealth their trust, and place premium on things spiritual over material or worldly things. That was why when Christ's disciples expressed astonishment at his statement he made it more explicit by saying, "How hard is it for THEM THAT TRUST IN RICHES to enter into the kingdom of God!"

Those who trust in riches are always INFLATED WITH PRIDE because of the worldly prominence they derive from their wealth. Self-sufficiency and an overbearing spirit become ingrained in their character. Yes, King Solomon said: "The rich man's wealth is his strong city, and as an high wall in his own conceit, The poor useth entreaties; but the rich answereth roughly." (Proverbs 18: 11,23) Again he said: "The rich man is wise in his own conceit; but the poor that hath understanding searcheth him out." – Proverbs 28: 11.

Such an attitude of trusting in riches often leads men to forgetting, denying, or forsaking God. It was in order to guard against this dangerous influence of wealth God inspired Moses to warn the Israelites: "Beware that thou forget not the Lord thy God, in not keeping His commandments, and His judgments, and His statutes...*lest when thou hast eaten and art full, and hast built goodly houses, and dwelt therein...and all that thou hast is multiplied; then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the Lord thy God...and thou say in thine heart, my power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God: for it is He that giveth thee power to get wealth...*" – Deuteronomy 8: 11-18.

Moreover, Job who too was rich in his days said: "If I have made gold my hope, or have said to the fine gold, Thou art my confidence; if I rejoiced because my wealth was great, and because mine hand had gotten much (without giving the glory to God)...This also were an iniquity to be punished by the Judge; for I should have denied the God that is above." – Job 31: 24-28.

With the rich who lack faith, it is difficult for them to resist the worldly influence of riches. For the fact that they trust in riches they are unable to please the Almighty God. And Jesus said: "Ye cannot serve God and mammon." (Matthew 6: 24) *Mammon* means wealth regarded as idol or worldliness personified.

We can therefore appreciate why it will be difficult for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God. It is this difficulty Christ expressed in these words: "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."

Jesus Christ was not referring to an ordinary needle, for, taken literally, it will mean an impossibility since a camel can never go through a needle's eye. Rather he alluded to a wicket gate or small door to Jerusalem that was known for its straitness or narrowness. A camel could not get through it unless it was unloaded and made to kneel. Jesus thus used this in a figure of speech to mean that before the man who trusts in his riches could enter God's Kingdom he must divest himself of the pride and evil influence of wealth and be prepared to submit to the will of

God and to make sacrifice – even if it will require his parting with any material thing – in order to please his Creator. He must also stoop to the humble duties of the Christian Faith. – Philippians 3: 7, 8; Mark 8: 36, 37.

Vanity of Riches

The end of those who because of their wealth deny or forsake God is never blessed. Jesus Christ in a parable illustrated the vanity of riches without God. He told of a certain rich man whose land produced plenty of fine crops; so much that his storehouses were full to overflowing. He said he would pull down his barns and build greater ones to store his produce. Then he would say to himself: "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." But God told him: "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?" Jesus then concluded: "*So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.*" – Luke 12: 15-21.

To get wealth and live long enough to enjoy it is a big blessing. Said Solomon: "Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God." – Ecclesiastes 5: 19.

Some people think that wealth is all that matters in life. They feel that once a man is rich he must be happy, respected by people and has nothing to care for. There are a number of blessings that do not necessarily go with wealth. A man may be rich and yet has no peace of mind; he may not have good health; and he may not be the father to any child. There are other things that may continue to haunt or pester him and make him unhappy or miserable!

Jay Gould, the American millionaire, was said to have graduated from school life with the degree of "LSD". He had plenty of money. But when dying he was quoted as saying: "I suppose I am the most miserable man on earth." (*Sunday Times*, July 13, 1958).

We can also recall the incident of the death of Samuel Udechukwu, a very wealthy man, at Onitsha in 1960. He committed suicide. The report of the Coroner's inquest was published thus: "Coroners verdict of death due to hanging has been returned by his worship Magistrate J. O. Obianwu in an inquest held into the cause of death of an Onitsha financier and a well known landlord, Samuel Udechukwu of Agulu who was found hanging from his magnificent storey building opposite Central School Road, on May 4, this year.

"In his verdict the Coroner referred to the evidence of the doctor who performed the post mortem examination adding that he was satisfied that death was caused by lack of air as a result of hanging." (*Nigerian Spokesman*, Onitsha, June 25, 1960, page 4)

The state of mind that should lead one to suicide cannot be a happy one. If wealth is everything – comfort, peace of mind, etc. – why did the “Onitsha financier and a well known landlord” commit suicide?

Those who are privileged to be rich should therefore take warning and make the most of their wealth to the pleasure and glory of God. Riches are temporal things, for they are not for ever. (Proverbs 27: 24) God said through the Psalmist: “Trust not in oppression, and become not vain in robbery: *if riches increase, set not your heart upon them.*” – Psalm 62: 10.

And in Proverbs 23: 5, it is written: “Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not? for riches certainly make themselves wings: they fly away as an eagle toward heaven.”

The wealth of many a rich man in different parts of the world had vanished at a time they did not expect, God’s word is always true. This we will the more appreciate from the following excerpts from a publication: “In 1923, a very important meeting was held at Edgewater Beach hotel in Chicago. Attending this meeting were nine of the world’s most successful financiers. Those present were: the president of the largest independent steel company; the president of the largest utility company; the president of the largest gas company; the greatest wheat speculator; the president of the New York Stock Exchange; a member of the President’s cabinet; the greatest “bear” in Wall Street; head of the world’s greatest monopoly; president of the bank of International Settlements. Certainly we must admit that here were gathered a group of the world’s most successful men. At least, men who had found the secret of making money. Twenty-five years later let’s see where these men are:

“The president of the largest steel company – Charles Schwab – died a bankrupt and lived on borrowed money for five years before his death. The president of the greatest utility company – Samuel Insull – died a fugitive from justice and penniless in a foreign land. The president of the largest gas company – Howard Hopson – is now insane. The greatest wheat speculator – Arthur Cutten – died abroad, insolvent. The president of the New York Stock Exchange – Richard Whitney – was recently released from Sing Sing Penitentiary. The member of the President’s cabinet – Albert Fall – died a suicide. The head of the greatest monopoly – Iva Krueger – died a suicide. The greatest “bear” in Wall Street – Jesse Livermore – died a suicide. The president of the Bank of International Settlements – Leon Fraser – died a suicide.

“ALL OF THESE MEN LEARNED WELL THE ART OF MAKING MONEY BUT NOT ONE OF THEM LEARNED HOW TO LIVE.” (*Sunday Observer*, January 2, 1969) The fate of the worldly rich men just quoted would make sober, godly people appreciate the words of Agur the son of Jakeh, It was really for spiritual reason that he prayed to God in this vein: “Two things have I required of Thee; deny me them not before I die: remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me; Lest I be full, and deny Thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain,” – Proverbs 30: 7-9. Yes, he prayed for a moderate, godly life.

Admonition

However, it is not a sin to be rich, we must re-emphasise. We as Christians serve God with the hope or receiving through Jesus Christ His blessing which makes one rich (Proverbs 10: 22) – rich in both spiritual and material things. Said St. Paul: “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.” – 2 Corinthians 8: 9.

But let no one be deceived in his heart as to think that his wealth can save him. The incident of January 15, 1966, in Nigeria was enough to strike fear rather than joy in everyone of us who is living, by God’s grace, up till today. Among those who died were men who lived in opulence but their money could not deliver them. So too in God’s visitation silver and gold cannot save anyone. “Riches profit not in the day of wrath;” said Solomon, “but righteousness delivereth from death.” – Proverbs. 11: 4.

Our humble admonition is that rich men as well as the poor should serve God – and that faithfully in truth. If they continue in righteousness till the end they will be saved. “Blessed are they that...doeth righteousness at all times.” – Psalm 106: 3; see also Matthew 5: 6,20; 6: 33.

And so we end this sermon with the following warning of St. Paul: “Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate (with those who preach the truth of God’s word and are sincerely dedicated to the service of humanity); laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come (when God will punish wickedness on earth), that they may lay hold on eternal life (in God’s perfect Kingdom).” – 1 Timothy 6: 17-19.

Yes, rich men who do not use their riches to oppress people or do mischief but are sober, humble and godly will be saved.