

“To Have All the Riches”

The Reverend Dr. Robert M. Zanicky

**First Presbyterian Church
Wilkes-Barre, PA
Colossians. 2:1-7**

July 24, 2011

An elderly preacher was dying. He sent a message for his banker and his lawyer, both church members, to come to his home.

When they arrived, they were ushered up to his bedroom. As they entered the room, the preacher held out his hands and motioned for them to sit, one on each side of his bed. The preacher grasped their hands, sighed contentedly, smiled and stared at the ceiling. For a time, no one said anything.

Both the banker and the lawyer were touched and flattered that the preacher would ask them to be with him during his final moments. They were also puzzled; the preacher had never given them any indication that he particularly liked either of them. They both remembered his many long, uncomfortable sermons about greed, covetousness and avaricious behavior that made them squirm in their seats.

Finally, the banker said, "Preacher, why did you ask us to come?" The elderly preacher mustered up his strength, then said weakly, "Jesus died between two thieves ... and that's how I want to go."

Unfortunately this preacher did not serve First Presbyterian Church – where he would have had multiple angelic church members surrounding him to enrich even his lasts moments.

This morning I want to briefly share with you thoughts on riches.

Sometime back Time Magazine asked, on its front cover, an interesting (irritating) question. Does God Want You to be Rich? (Financially) It went on to declare that a growing number of evangelical ministers are raising in answer to this question a joyful yes! But (it says) to the more mainstream pastors the idea is poison.

Does God want you to be Rich?

In a sense, only in America would this even be broached. Within the Evangelical stream it's a very personal, intimate consideration. For the mainstream, perhaps too personal, almost out of bounds, something we should not toy with.

My goodness, if you "go there", what's the limit?

- Does God want you to...be poor?
- ...have a low IQ?
- ...find a good parking space?

Does God want us consumed with consumerism? Does having "things" primarily contribute to our finding life worth living? Is this the badge of being a Christian?

I am one of those “mainstream pastors”, who worries about declaring that God wants Christians (you) to be rich. I can see its many pitfalls. For one thing, the majority of the two billion Christians throughout our world, I can assure you, are not rich! Of course a quick retort is that the majority of so called Christians are either not really Christian, or have yet to realize God’s blessings of riches.

There is always an answer!
Let’s look at the Bible!
Certainly, God wants you to be rich!

Then you say in your heart, “My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.” And you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

Deuteronomy 8:17-18

Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage. As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor – this is the gift of God.

Ecclesiastes 5:18-19

“Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house, and try Me now in this,” says the Lord of hosts. “If I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it.”
Malachi 3:10

Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.
Luke 6:38

Then Jesus said... “I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.”
John 10:10

For literalists (choosy ones of course) these texts strongly declare, get in good with God, and you’re in good with riches!

- Power and wealth!
- Riches and wealth!
- So much, not enough room!
- Give and get back!
- Abundant life!

Is that it? Some verses (And there are others) and viola! God wants you to be rich!

What about other verses and events in our Bible?

Jesus

- never had money.
- never sought it.
- died for his way of looking at life.

Paul

- never well off.
- suffered most of his life for being a Christian.
- spent a lot of time in prison, because of his commitment to Christ.
- had to ask for contributions to live.

No evidence that any apostle ever had more than two shekels to rub together.

How about these verses?

Do not be afraid when one becomes rich, when the glory of his house is increased; For when he dies he shall carry nothing away; His glory shall not descend after him. Though while he lives he blesses himself – For men will praise you when you do well for yourself – He shall go to the generation of his fathers; they shall never see light. A man who is in honor, yet does not understand is like the beasts that perish.

Psalm 49:16-20

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:19-21

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.

Mark 10:24-26

Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys.
Luke 12:33

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire.

James 5:1-3

Ouch! Wow! There is more to economics than picking out Bible verses! Wealth can be for good or ill. Literally – No, God does not want you (all of us) to be rich in things! Biblically, existentially, historically – I feel I am on safe ground.

But, for those certain Evangelicals that go overboard in declaring “God wants you to be rich!” – there is a mindset, a vision, a view for the future – that undergirds this naïve declaration.

From the earliest beginnings, Christianity has been forward looking, from the spiritual freedom in Christ, to the freedom of individuals to map out their own lives; from the early apocalyptic future scenarios of judgment and redemption, to Puritan Calvinism's "Protestant work ethic" economic theory (expressing God's favor through working hard and planning for the future); to today, where we need to believe in the future, God's future, active, hardworking, believing that "we" (you and I) can and must make a difference in our own lives, and the communities we live in! Accumulating wealth can be a good thing!

There is a precious kernel of truth in this puffed-up over inflated declaration!

- If you believe that you are merely a cog in the world's machinery, of little if any value,
- If you believe that whatever you do, it doesn't matter,
- If you would rather let others do, and you just drift along,
- Then you have missed out on all the riches that are found in Christ! And I'm not referring to just material things, for life is so much more!

These particular Evangelicals have tapped into a positive source, but have taken the wrong road.

Life brings many surprises!

Question: Are you a spectator, or are you an active participant?

There are all types of riches, awaiting those who step out in faith.

But – you must first step out in faith.

Amen.