

READING

Luke 12:16-21

SERMON

A Rich Christian – an Oxymoron

If you want to make a Christian farmer feel guilty, then read that passage out in church. The farmer in the parable though had only one thing on his mind – money and then to live the high life without a thought for anyone else, to eat, drink and be merry.

But is society that we live in any different today? Maybe the attitudes of society are summed up in the following clip

ABBA – Money, money, money

Or like the person I saw on the television this week who had won 2.4 million pounds on the lottery and in the interview said that he had played the lottery from day one and that he would continue playing it – because he was on a winning streak now!

Is a rich Christian an oxymoron or not. If you're not sure what an oxymoron is, then this dictionary definition might help

a figure of speech by which a locution produces an incongruous, seemingly self-contradictory effect, as in “cruel kindness” or “to make haste slowly.”

but I feel that this one is easier to understand

A rhetorical device in which two seemingly contradictory words are used together for effect: “She is just a poor little rich girl.”

The word oxymoron is in itself an oxymoron because oxy means ‘sharp or bright’ and moron means ‘dull’. So is a rich Christian an oxymoron? Should the words rich and Christian go together?

In Psalms we read

“Praise the LORD. Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in his commands. His children will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed. Wealth and riches are in his house, and his righteousness endures for ever.” (Psalms 112:1-3 NIV)

Wealth and riches are in his house (Psalm 112:3). And we read of people like Abraham of whom it is said

“So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.” (Genesis 13:1-2 NIV)

He was a wealthy man and followed God, so a doctrine grew up that God wants all Christians to be wealthy – this also went along with good health as well. The health and wealth doctrine. But that is taking too much out of a few verses. We have people like Job who lost everything because he was righteous, because he followed God. We do not read of Jesus being wealthy. He came from the humble stock, the son of a carpenter, but does this mean that God wants us all to be poor?

There is in the Bible the fact that God does favour the poor and that the rich at times are castigated by God. Take this passage in Amos

“Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria, you notable men of the foremost nation, to whom the people of Israel come! Go to Calneh and look at it; go from there to great Hamath, and then go down to Gath in Philistia. Are they better off than your two kingdoms? Is their land larger than yours? You put off the evil day and bring near a reign of terror. You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end.”

(Amos 6:1-7 NIV)

The rich with their ivory furniture, their choice meats, their idle lives strumming away on instruments – not that all musicians are rich and idle, I might add – but these were. They got drunk and generally pampered themselves because they were rich – they would get their comeuppance from God.

So is it wrong to be rich, to be wealthy? Or to put the question the other way round – is it a virtue to be poor to have no money? Well we read through the Bible that God wants the poor not to be poor, so we would assume that we should not make a virtue out of poverty.

So let us see what there is to say about wealth in another parable told by Jesus. Turn with me to Luke 16:19, in the church Bibles

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

"But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

"He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

"Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

"No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

"He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" (Luke 16:19-31 NIV)

The man is never criticised for having money, for being wealthy. However he could have cared for Lazarus – that was his sin – not to care for the person at his door.

- Firstly the man had been blessed, verse 19

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day." (Luke 16:19 NIV)

And in conversation with Abraham after he had died, Abraham says to him

"...Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things..." (Luke 16:25 NIV)

So he had the means – he had the money, he was wealthy. God had given the means to him to help others.

- Secondly the man had the opportunity, verse 20

"At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores." (Luke 16:20-21 NIV)

Lazarus was there everyday and so he had opportunity to help him, but he would rather walk pass everyday that give him something

This is what the problems were, he had the means and the opportunity to help, but took advantage of either. It was not his wealth that was a problem but what he did with it.

Now Jesus did say whilst on earth in Luke 16:13, just a few verses before those we read

"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." (Luke 16:13 NIV)

And if we read on we see why he said it.

"The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight." (Luke 16:14-15 NIV)

Which then led on to the parable we have just read about the rich man and Lazarus.

There are dangers to having wealth

- The Wrong Loyalty – the split of having two masters and not serving either properly, or worse still, serving the wrong master, or maybe to say making money. Or allowing money to be the master and not God, so God suffers. In Amos again, a great book on wealth and how not to use it, we read

“This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: a basket of ripe fruit. “What do you see, Amos?” he asked.

“A basket of ripe fruit,” I answered.

Then the LORD said to me, “The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.

“In that day,” declares the Sovereign LORD, “the songs in the temple will turn to wailing. Many, many bodies—flung everywhere! Silence!”

“Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying,

“When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?”— skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.” (Amos 8:1-6 NIV)

Money had become so much the master that God was being pushed out, so they no longer wanted to worship him and also that honesty was a lesser virtue than making money and people were being treated as objects and so people were being exploited!

- The Wrong Trust – Psalm 52 says

““Here now is the man who did not make God his stronghold but trusted in his great wealth and grew strong by destroying others!”” (Psalms 52:7 NIV)

It must always be in God we trust and not money. A Christian millionaire was in the habit of giving, not just a tenth of his income to the church, but 20% of his income to the church. And then over a couple of years, through no fault of his own, his business went belly up and so his income dropped and so he lost his nice house, his millions, everything. He tried so hard to keep things going, but in the end he had to admit defeat. When asked if he regretted giving the church 20% for so long instead of 10% because he then could have kept going longer and maybe turned the business around, he replied that he knew that his treasure was in heaven and that this was the important place for it to be.

He was not trusting in the wrong thing – his total trust was in God and him alone

- The Wrong Source – we know and in our more spiritual moments we say that all things come from God. It is so easy though in our thinking, in our actions, in our lives to be like the person spoken of in Deuteronomy 8:17

“You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.”” (Deuteronomy 8:17 NIV)

It’s all my doing, but then the passage goes on to say

“But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.” (Deuteronomy 8:18 NIV)

All our wealth, the ability to be wealthy comes from God, so he is the source and we should never forget that because then that means it covers how we use it.

- The Wrong Centre – A bit like the wrong master, but it is when materialism takes over and becomes the centre of one’s life. In the book of Revelation, there are seven letters to seven churches and in the letter to the church of Laodicea we read

“You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”
(Revelation 3:17 NIV)

These are the dangers of wealth, but there are not the inevitable consequences of wealth, but with wealth comes responsibilities or ways that mean we need not fall in the dangers.

- ⇒ Being Generous - As we saw in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, there were responsibilities laid on the rich man and in 1 Timothy we read

“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.”
(1 Timothy 6:17-18 NIV)

They are commanded to **be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.** Something that is not too easy.

- ⇒ Being Content - They also needed to be content with what they have as Paul said to Timothy

“...godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.” (1 Timothy 6:6-8 NIV)

Contentment though does not mean lack of ambition – but that’s another sermon.

We are not to be in love with money because it is not that

money is the root of all evil

which many say, but that is a wrong quotation from the Bible. But if we look in 1 Timothy we read

“People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” (1 Timothy 6:9-10 NIV)

A Rich Christian is not an oxymoron, but it does depend what you do with the wealth that God has given you.