

## TRUST NOT IN RICHES

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SCRIPTURE: Mark 10:17-22

And when he was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeling 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, Honor 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 the cross, and follow me. And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions.

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How hard it is for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God!

In one of Whittier's poems these lines occur:

For of all sad words of tongue or pen,  
 The saddest are these: "It might have  
 been!"

If these words be true, then one of the greatest tragedies of the New Testament is the tragedy of the rich young ruler who came running eagerly to Jesus seeking his good counsel and advice, but who went away sadly without having made any commitment of his life to Christ, because the price of discipleship was too high -- "for he had great possessions."

This rich young ruler was a good man. He came seeking greater good. He knelt before Jesus and addressed him as "Good Master." He had kept all the commandments of the law from his youth up. The scripture says that "Jesus, beholding him, loved him." Doubtless he loved him for what he was, but even more for what he might have become. He had great potentialities. He might have been another Peter, or James, or John, or Paul. Only one thing this likable and potentially great man lacked -- a self-forgetfulness which would take him outside the narrow legalism of the prohibitory commandments, and make him lose himself in devotion to some great Person, or cause, or principle.

When Jesus told the rich young ruler

to "sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor," he was not proposing a universal rule which must be followed by every Christian. He was rather prescribing a course of action suited to the needs of this one man, whose spiritual malady could be cured only by the severest sort of spiritual surgery -- severing him from all his material wealth. Why did Jesus advise him to sell all that he had, and give to the poor? It seems probable from Jesus' comment at the close of this incident that this man, in spite of his observance of the law, trusted in his riches more than he did in God; for Jesus said, "How hard it is for them that trust in riches to enter 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."

It is probable, too, that this rich young ruler had the attitude so often encountered in the Old Testament -- that prosperity, riches, and wealth are an indication of God's favor, and hence a proof of one's righteousness. Of course that is a false assumption, for some of the greatest saints of all time have been paupers, and some of the greatest scoundrels of history have been wealthy beyond all computation. Riches -- prosperity -- wealth, in and of themselves are neither right nor wrong, good nor bad. But each man shows himself to be right or wrong, good or bad, by his attitude towards his possessions, his manner of acquiring them, and the use he makes of them. There is no indication that the rich young ruler had gathered his

riches dishonestly or unjustly. His sin was that his wealth was the center of his life. His trust was in his great possessions; his first allegiance was to his wealth, not to God.

This is the peril of riches. They are deceitful. Paul observed that "the love of money is the root of all evil." Riches give a hypnotic feeling of security, and make their possessor forget that there is no ultimate security save in God. Riches give the owner a certain prestige and power over others. They give a feeling of self-satisfaction and self-righteousness, as one accepts the idea that wealth is a mark of God's special favor. Yet a rich man is seldom contented or satisfied; riches create a narcotic craving for more and more. Riches tempt men to become unsympathetic and calloused to the needs of others, lest sympathy impose an obligation to share. One can read between the lines and surmise that the rich young ruler had fallen prey to many of these temptations which come to men of wealth.

Jesus never condemned wealth, or the possession of private property. A certain amount of material wealth, of food, and clothing, and a reasonable provision for comfort and security in times of adversity, sickness, or old age, are necessary and legitimate. But after all, material things can sustain and nourish only the material body; and when we lay down the body, none of our material wealth has any further meaning. The only true riches are those we can take with us when we die -- the riches of the spirit, of the personality, of character, which will endure in the heavenly kingdom.

Jesus never condemned wealth, but he did deplore wrong attitudes towards wealth, wrong methods of acquiring wealth, and wrong use of one's possessions. He condemned those who trust in riches, rather than in God. He told the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give to the poor because that was the specific treatment he needed. But he had no condemnation for the wealth of Simon, in whose luxurious home he was a guest when Mary anointed his feet with the costly ointment. There is never any hint of condemnation for the well-to-do men among his friends and followers, such as the un-

known person who provided the upper room, or Joseph of Arimathea, who supplied his tomb. Zacchaeus was a wealthy man, and yet Jesus never demanded that Zacchaeus sell all. Under conviction of his own conscience, it was Zacchaeus himself who offered to restore fourfold any money he had acquired by fraud. There is no record that Jesus ever commanded, or even advocated, that one man's wealth should be taken from him and given to another who had not worked for it.

When Jesus told the parable of the talents, there is no hint of accusation or blame for that man who had been given five talents (a very considerable amount of money for that day) and who used them wisely to produce five talents more. The condemnation was all for the poorer one-talent man who was not a good steward over what he had, and did not produce any increase. The principal stress of this parable is not on the amounts of wealth involved, but on the principles of stewardship, and on proper attitudes towards wealth. All the stewards had absolute possession and control over their wealth. The stewards demonstrated the kind of men they were by their attitudes towards their money, and the use they made of it.

This is the kind of stewardship Jesus always taught. Jesus was always a great champion of human agency and personality -- of the right of every man to make his own decisions without compulsion, subject to a final accounting to God. But if every man is to be held accountable for the use he makes of his possessions, every man must have the right to own, to control, and to manage his own stewardship -- his own property. And private ownership means capitalism, not socialism or communism.

Your attitude towards God will be shown by your attitude towards your wealth, be it little or much. Because no man can enter the kingdom of heaven save by the grace of God, it is impossible for those who place their trust in riches to enter therein -- as impossible as for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. The Christian should produce all the wealth he can, then use it as God would have him use it, remembering always that he must some day account to God for his stewardship.