

HOW SHOULD WE LIVE IN AN AFFLUENT COMMUNITY?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

A couple of years ago I had the privilege of being invited by the chaplain of Westmont College in Santa Barbara to be the chapel speaker for their spiritual emphasis week. When I arrived, I was introduced to a lovely Christian couple who had volunteered to host me in their home for the week. They drove me to their incredibly gorgeous home in the better part of Santa Barbara, and after giving me a tour, they handed me a set of keys to one of their cars, showed me the kitchen, and then took me to my spacious bedroom looking out on a pool and wonderful gardens. I took a shower and just before dinner lay down on the king-size bed. Glancing out the sliding glass doors, I was amazed at how quickly one can become tempted with envy and greed. I said, "Lord, please control me! This is almost too much." You know, when you are filled with envy and greed, your view of people and things gets distorted because there comes a tremendous lust that says, "I've got to have that!"

But during the first of our many long dinners I became aware that this childless couple was not consumed by their wealth. What they were consumed with was the love of Jesus Christ. They were so excited about who Jesus Christ was and about the many doors he had opened for ministry among the teenagers they were serving in a group called Young Life. I was greatly humbled living with this couple during that week. Every time I think of them I think of how they were consumed by Christ. He gave them life that they could never experience in any possession, and then they used their possessions to fill the community with love, graciousness, and contribution.

In contrast to that setting, I have found myself being placed by the Lord over the years in the homes of some very poor Christian families in this country as well as in many Third World countries. I remember one very poor woman in a little northern village in the Philippines who invited a friend and me to her home. We walked into her dirt-floor hut, and she said, "I'm so glad you're here to have dinner with me!" She put a pot and three plates on a really beat-up old table. Then she pulled the lid off the pot, and inside was the smallest chicken I had ever seen, and it had probably died of old age. It was just a wretched-looking bird. I remember the joy on her face in sharing that chicken. She cut it in thirds, and I always remember the beauty of her toothless smile and her eyes just filled with the love of Christ. She was sharing everything she had. We ate it in half a minute, but we thanked God for the relationship. What a joy! As I watched her and listened to her, I remember that I thought of the words of Paul to the Corinthians "...as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things." (2 Corinthians 6:10.)

In both of these illustrations these Christians were consumed not by what they had or did not have but by their desire to please their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ during their stay on this earth. What wonderful examples they can be for us in this present affluent community, regardless of our financial status. And yet the flip side of the coin, as we well know, reminds us that an affluent society has the power to tempt the rich to become greedy and the poor to worry about whether they will ever have enough food, shelter and clothing. As it is now, so it was in the days of our Lord, for he ministered in an affluent Roman and Jewish community to both the rich and the poor. And the early disciples struggled with the same temptations of greed or worry each of us struggle with today. So let's turn to Luke 12:13-34 and learn from our Lord the secrets of how we should be living out our lives in our present affluent community.

I. For the rich: Guard against greed

Luke 12:13-21

And someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbiter over

you?" And He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a certain rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' And he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

As our Lord Jesus moved closer to the cross, the tension between his teachings and the teachings of the Pharisees became more acute. After our Lord taught the disciples to pray, the Pharisees moved in on him and accused him for the third time of blasphemy against God. At that point Jesus warned the Pharisees that judgment would come upon them for their hypocritical lifestyle, and then immediately warned his disciples about the "leaven of the Pharisees," which was hypocrisy. He also shared with his disciples the reality of future persecution if they continued to follow him, and of the presence of the Holy Spirit who would be with them in the midst of their trials. Right in the middle of that discourse, perhaps because of the way our Lord had dealt with the Pharisees, someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Now the Law of Moses clearly defined how a family inheritance was to be divided after the death of one's father (see Deuteronomy 21:15-17; Numbers 27:8-11; 36:1-9). But for some reason this younger brother felt that the older brother was not fulfilling the law and wanted a judgment from a rabbi, which was common practice. He sounded a bit like Martha, whom we studied before, though, didn't he? "Lord, you tell my sister (brother)...." Everybody wanted to tell Jesus what to do.

But Jesus said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbiter over you? For he had not been sent to this world by his Father to become a local judge in family matters, but rather, "The Son of Man [had] come to seek and to save that which was lost." (Luke 19:10.)

(At our Lord's second coming he will become the righteous and final Judge over the souls of all humanity, but this was not his calling during his incarnation.) It may have been the way this younger brother asked the Lord the question that prompted him to bypass the immediate problem of the inheritance and zero in on a deeper problem in the hearts of both brothers, as well as in the hearts of many in the crowd. So our Lord turned to the crowd and gave them the second of five warnings: Beware of greed and trusting in one's wealth to provide the meaning of life, followed by a proverb, a parable of a rich man who was getting richer, and a spiritual principle.

The warning: "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed..." In every culture and society and in every generation since the creation of humanity, man has had to deal with the temptation to be discontented with what he has. We are all tempted to desire more power, more possessions, or more position. The bumper sticker, "He who dies with the most toys wins," is tragic, isn't it? That's the theme song of this community. Our Lord warned his disciples as well as this crowd to beware, and be on our guard against every form of greed. Greed or covetousness comes in a variety of forms. It comes in the form of sensuality, as Paul tells the Colossian church: "...consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry." (Colossians 3:5.) It also comes in the form of materialism, wanting to have what belongs to others, which violates the law of God: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Exodus 20:17.) In this context the Lord is addressing the problem of materialistic excess. How much is enough? A Roman proverb from the time of Jesus says, "Money was like sea water; the more a man drank the thirstier he became."

The proverb: "...for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." David Gooding wrote in his book *According to Luke* ,

"Our Lord is not saying that a reasonable supply of goods in this life is either wrong or unnecessary; he is saying that necessary to life as enough goods are, a man's life does not consist in what he has over and above what is necessary to meet his needs."

The apostle Paul reminded Timothy who was living in the affluent city of Ephesus: "...godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction." (1 Timothy 6:6-9.) A person's life is not held together or made complete by things he may possess, even if he has an abundance of them.

The parable:

"The land of a certain rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself saying,

'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?...
This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul,

"Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" He never once thought that he might die.

The Pharisees taught that "whom the Lord loves he makes rich." But notice that this rich man did not in any way acknowledge the presence of God or the law that directs a rich man to consider the poor, the widows and orphans (Deuteronomy 15:4): "However, there shall be no poor among you, since the LORD will surely bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess." (God's heart is that there be no poor among us! I don't know how many times I look at the homeless and think, "Wait a minute-what happened? I'm responsible for this. Where did I go wrong?") The man our Lord was speaking of was already rich; his present barns were already filled with grain, and yet in this new harvest the land was once again very productive, so much so that he was forced to sit down with himself and make a plan about how to handle this excessive abundance. His basic problem was that he thought it was his field, his grain, his barns, his problem, his decision, his soul, and his future. In his folly he became proud, selfish, self-indulgent, and God-forgetting. And he concluded in his committee of one: "This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'"

In the midst of his overwhelming abundance he went blind and deaf to the great giver of all good things. But the great giver of all good things was not blind to this rich man's greed. He made a very severe statement here: "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you [in the Greek, God requires your soul]; and now who will own what you have prepared?'" Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 2:18-20, "...I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun."

Spiritual principle: "So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." The Lord had no problem with the man's being rich, but judged him because he did not consider God in his decision-making about his abundance. Rather than submit to the Lord with a grateful heart and ask for his counsel in the proper distribution of the excess to the poor and needy, he became rich in goods and poor toward God. Paul encouraged his spiritual son Timothy, "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed." (1 Timothy 6:17-19.) The Lord is not opposed to riches. The issue is, what are we doing with them? To whom are we accountable? The God of heaven is rich toward us in all things. He wants us to be

accountable to him for that which he supplies us so we can distribute it in this world in such a way that all join together in joy.

Sometimes I think the Lord has a sense of humor and is allowing Donald Trump to remain on the earth in this generation just so preachers will never run out of illustrations. Once again this week as he parades his wine, women, and song before all the world, you can't help but think of a man who is a fool. He is actually living his life as if there is no God, no accountability, and no responsibility for all that he has. As I read this parable all I could think of was the poor, famous, and fading Donald Trump. Sooner or later he may hear the same words spoken to him by God that the rich man heard: "You fool! This very night your soul is required of you. For you are not rich toward God," unless he repents of his sin before the living God.

In contrast to Donald Trump in his public exposure are the mostly unseen but faithful men and women who love Jesus Christ and are seeking to invest their lives, time, and money so that they can become rich toward God. That same energy that they could be using to become rich among us on this earth with God's goods, they decided to pour into the lives of men and women who otherwise would never have heard about Jesus Christ. Some of these folks are ministering to the Mexican families in East Palo Alto, who need help in learning English and job skills, counseling, food, and clothing. These dear people also provide Back Yard Bible Clubs in the summer months and bring the parents and children here for worship service and Sunday school. And I know that the half has not been told, but the Lord knows who they are and that they are becoming rich toward him as they invest toward eternity.

How should we live in an affluent community? For the rich, be on your guard against every kind of greed, and...

II. For the poor: Guard against anxiety

Luke 12:22-30

And He said to His disciples, "For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. For life is more than food, and the body than clothing. Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; and they have no storeroom nor barn; and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span? If then you cannot do even a very little thing, why are you anxious about other matters? Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass in the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, how much more will He clothe you, O men of little faith! And do not seek what you shall eat, and what you shall drink, and do not keep worrying. For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek; but your Father knows that you need these things."

Our Lord then turned away from the man who had asked the question and the crowd to whom he was addressing the warning, the proverb, the parable, and the spiritual principle; and he zeroed in on his own disciples, who had truly left everything to follow him (Mark 10:28-31). I'm sure they were thinking about the differences between being rich and being poor in this world's goods, and perhaps wishing that they had the problem of being rich. But their poverty was tempting them to become anxious about the basic needs of life, especially in light the forthcoming persecution that the Lord and each one of them would have to face. Someone once said, "Greed leaves a person feeling they can never get enough, and worry leaves a person afraid he will never have enough." So with that tension in mind our Lord encouraged his disciples, "Do not be anxious for your life..." That is, don't let the needs of this present world draw you away so that you care more about food, shelter, and clothing than you do about your relationship with God, to whom he taught us to say, "Our Father who art in heaven...give us this day our daily bread..." (Matthew 6:9-11.) "...for life is more than food, and the body than clothing." If all you had on this earth was all the food you needed and wanted and all the clothes you could ever wear in a lifetime, you would find a great leanness within your soul, a spiritual poverty that the world of materialism could not satisfy. So rather than chase after the elusive butterfly of

materialism, let's heed Jesus' words of encouragement.

First, don't be anxious about food. The rich man had barns and was able to build bigger barns, but in the end God required his soul. Jesus was saying to his disciples, "I know you've left much to follow me, but listen carefully. Don't get consumed by worry over things that you need to follow me with, like food. All you have to do is look around you. Look at the ravens-the law says they're unclean, and my Father even feeds the unclean birds. Now, if he's going to feed an unclean bird, don't you think he's going to take care of you? Aren't you more valuable than birds?" [The Lord had encouraged his disciples a few moments earlier, "Do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows." (Luke 12:7)]

Second, don't be anxious about how long you will live. As we have no power to even add 18 inches to our height, so we have no power to add to our days on earth. David of old wrote in Psalm 39:4-5, "LORD, make me to know my end, and what is the extent of my days, let me know how transient I am. Behold, Thou hast made my days as handbreadths [18 inches], and my lifetime as nothing in Thy sight, surely every man at his best is a mere breath."

Third, don't be anxious about clothing. Look at the way our Father clothes the fields around us with the beauty of the lilies. They don't toil or spin, and Solomon with all his wealth and power, at the height of his glory, could not dress beautifully enough to match them. And if God fills the fields around us with grass for our cattle and tomorrow it is turned into fuel for our homes, and then he replenishes the fields again, "...how much more will he clothe you, O men of little faith!"

I want to pause a moment and give you a word of caution. We have all heard of men, women and children who at this moment in history are living without food, shelter, or clothing, and as a result are facing immediate death. Some of these people may very well be Christians. How are these words of Christ of any comfort to them?---for all that he promised is nonexistent for them. We need to keep in mind the spiritual reality that because we gave our lives over to Jesus to become our Lord and Savior, our lives are no longer our own, and he is free to do what he wants with us to his honor and glory. He may call us home through starvation, freezing to death, or being physically destroyed in some other way. That's God's choice. But as long as we are given life on this earth and are seeking in a variety of ways to bring his kingdom to this earth, God is the one who promises us that we will have the material means necessary to live and carry out his purposes. Then when he desires to bring us home to be with him, there is not one thing including worrying that can extend our life's span on earth.

"And do not seek what you shall eat, and what you shall drink, and do not keep worrying. For all these things [food, shelter, clothing] the nations of the world eagerly seek, but your Father knows that you need these things." I noticed in our Wednesday morning businessmen's breakfast (Agora) that when Eff Martin asked the men if they had any prayer requests, several asked that God would provide them with work. As we prayed, I realized that in the middle of this affluent society in downtown Palo Alto, eight out of some fifty men were looking for work. But they didn't panic; they were willing to place their faith in their loving heavenly Father for their future rather than to allow their hearts to be filled with worry and fear.

How should we as Christians live in this affluent community? (1) For the rich, beware and be on your guard against all forms of greed; (2) for the poor in this world's goods, guard against anxiety; and (3) for the rich and the poor alike...

III. Seek eagerly for the kingdom of God

Luke 12:31-34

But seek for His kingdom, and these things shall be added to you. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves purses which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near, nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Our Lord wanted his disciples to understand that while most of the people in the community around them were using up all their time and energy seeking ways to acquire possessions as a means to an end, they were called to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all the food, shelter and clothing would be provided by their loving heavenly Father. As hard as the world seeks and invests great time, thought, planning, and seminar-hopping in building up their treasures on earth, we should be using that same energy to bring God's kingdom, his rule and his will to earth. But we can't serve two masters; we can't have it both ways, for we will either love the one and hate the other, or hate the one and love the other. We can't serve God and money at the same time. But the promise from our Lord Jesus Christ is that if we "seek for his kingdom," his Father will provide all the necessities of life to his honor and glory and to our joy and amazement. We are to seek to understand the spiritual kingdom of God-the joy, peace, and righteousness that he wants to fill our lives-and then seek with our life, energy, time, money, and creativity, ways to bring it to this earth until Christ comes again.

As the Lord looked at his small band of former fishermen, tax collectors, politicians, etc., he saw them in contrast to this great crowd as his "little flock," and he realized how tempted they would be to become afraid of the present as well as the future. But our Lord then gave them these great words of comfort as the great, good and loving Shepherd (John 10): "Your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom." Because they had given their lives to him and believed that he was their Messiah, Lord and Savior, his heavenly Father and theirs had chosen with great gladness to give them all the resources of his spiritual kingdom.

Because you have these resources of God's spiritual kingdom, hold on to all your possessions lightly and don't be afraid to sell some or all of them when you are confronted with a genuine opportunity to give to charity. (Now, don't sell all of them, of course, or we'll all be on welfare.) But don't be like the rich farmer, who allowed all his material wealth to possess him and make him spiritually blind to the poor all around him. Be ready and willing to transfer as much of your material possessions into your eternal account as needed. This statement is a check against our inherent selfishness, greed and fear. In 2 Corinthians 8:3-9, the apostle Paul used the suffering Christians in northern Greece as a model of how Christians should deal with their money: "For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability they gave of their own accord, begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God...For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."

The rich farmer was consumed by fear of the uncertain future, so he torn down his small barns and built bigger barns for security. But in opposition to his foolishness, Jesus said, "I want you disciples to make and carry a very small wallet that will hold only enough money for the day's needs, which, if necessary, can be given away as soon as you see a need arise. If you do that, then the Roman coins will not be stored up to eventually wear a hole through the leather and fall to the ground and be lost. And as you bring the charity from the heart of God toward the poor and needy on earth, you are building "an unfailling treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near, nor moth destroys."

I always loved a dear friend of mine who would put ten or twenty dollars in his pocket every day, and that's all. And every day that I was with him, I'd watch him, and he'd give it away. I asked him what he was doing, and he said, "Well, I didn't use it today, so I gave it away." Isn't that great? Don't you love God? Isn't he wonderful? Give it away-there's more where that came from, because he's in charge.

"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." David Gooding wrote in *According to Luke*, "We eventually give our lives, time, energy, and money to that which we value most. The heart and treasure go together, for what a person loves they serve."

How should we as Christians live in an affluent community? The real issue of life as far as God is concerned is not whether we are rich or poor in the things of this world, but whether our hearts are given over to greed and worry, or we seek the kingdom of God.

Our Lord (1) warns the rich among us to guard against greed, (excessive materialism). In view of the many

needy among us we should become rich toward God and rich in good works.

Our Lord (2) warns the poor among us to guard against anxiety, which will in time weaken our faith in our heavenly Father to supply all our daily needs.

Our Lord (3) encourages all of us, regardless of our position in this life, to seek first the kingdom of God, and then God will gladly provide all that is necessary to live out our lives on this earth until he calls us home.

Our Lord (4) challenges all of us to examine our hearts to find out where our treasure is, for where our treasure is there is our heart also.

Catalog No. 4153
Luke 12:13-34
38th Message
Ron Ritchie
July 14, 1991

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