Riches and Poverty

There was a song in the mid 1980’s that was very popular in youth culture. Part of the song’s lyrics proclaimed, “I want to be rich . . . . I want money, lots and lots of money. . . .” As you can guess the song was nothing more than the expression, glorification and craving for wealth. I would guess that within our society the obsession with wealth remains a popular desire. In fact, I have met a fair number of people whose expressed ambition was for the freedom and opportunities that could be potentially theirs by a new found wealth or by the age of retirement. The desire was so compelling that they would sacrifice, and enslave themselves, for the freedom they perceived it would bring.

This desire also seems to affect the values and morals of a great many professed Christian and of the North American church culture. Who has not heard it said, “God helps those who help themselves!”? Television evangelists also have a perception of monetary navel graving.

“What do you need? Start creating it. Start speaking about it. Start speaking it into being. Speak to your billfold. Say, “You big, thick billfold full of money.” Speak to your checkbook. Say, “You, checkbook, you. You’ve never been so prosperous since I owned you. You’re just jammed full of money.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

“…to get you out of this malaise of thinking that Jesus and his disciples were poor….The Bible says that he left us an example that we should follow His steps. That’s the reason why I drive a Rolls Royce. I’m following Jesus’ steps.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Is it a sin to be rich? Is it a sin to crave for wealth and the comforts it purportedly provides? Is it a sin to be poor? Saint John Chrysostom, a golden mouth preacher and bishop and later Patriarch of Constantinople in the 5th century, has some very thoughtful and beneficial perspectives on wealth and poverty. The years have preserved for us 6 discourses, or sermons, about riches, from St. John’s analysis of the Parable of the rich man and Lazarus[[3]](#endnote-3), as detailed in the Holy Gospel of Saint Luke, chapter sixteen.[[4]](#endnote-4)

St John Chrysostom calls us to remember the distinguishing characteristics between temporal and eternal time. This life and context we find ourselves in is only temporary. For most people presently the average lifespan is 80 years. We are much like the grass that withers and passes away after only a short lifespan. But the context of the Holy Scriptures is that this short lifespan is quickly replaced by another lifespan, eternal, and the quality of that eternal life is dictated to by the life we lived during the temporal one. “All our present life is brief when compared with the age to come.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

When this day is cast aside, and that horrible night comes, or rather day, night indeed for sinners, but day for the righteous- when the play is ended, when the masks are removed, when each person is judged

with his works- not each person with his wealth, not each person with his office . . . .When the masks are removed, then the truly rich and truly poor are revealed.[[6]](#endnote-6)

If the eternality of life is casually related to activities of the temporal one, we should not be focused at all on the comforts and desires of the temporal life because we will then cheat ourselves out of the bliss of that time to come, and it is endlessly measured. For instance St John concludes,

. . .we may not follow the easy road at all times nor be eager to enter by the wide gate, but may seek out the narrow gate and walk the road of tribulation, in order that we may be able to meet a good end full of comfort.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Throughout the discourses St John constantly warns of the dangers of wealth. With reference to the rich man, “His prosperity in all aspects of his life drowned his reasoning and blinded the eye of his mind.”[[8]](#endnote-8) The enormity of riches causes blindness by self-delusion[[9]](#endnote-9) and misplaced hope that in reality is false hope. What happens in economic downturns, or investments swindled by the appetites of scrupulous characters and events?

. . .how long will you be attracted to the things of this world? How long does money last? How long does wealth? How long ostentatious houses? How long the frenzied quest for pleasure in material things? See the earthquake came: how did wealth help anyone? The labour of both rich and poor was shattered. The possession perished along with the possessor, the house along with the builder.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Not only does wealth blind us to the realities around us but it also leaves a legacy of forgetfulness towards the one who bestowed that wealth in the beginning. “In this way luxury often leads to forgetfulness. . . .Fill your belly so moderately that you may not become too heavy to bend your knees and call upon your God.”[[11]](#endnote-11) This theme is similarly expressed in the thirtieth chapter of the book of Proverbs. “But give me neither riches nor poverty, and appoint what is necessary and sufficient for me; Lest being full, I become a liar and say, ‘Who sees me?’ Or being poor, I steal, and swear by the name of God.”

In contrast to riches and the spiritual poverty that is common, St Chrysostom highlights many positive and beneficial qualities of poverty. One of the rewards of poverty is that, “ . . . many of those who live in extreme poverty give thanks continually; while others who enjoy wealth and luxury are constantly blasphemers.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Poverty also keeps one from falling into excess by leading “them to a spiritual feast.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

For it was not for this that we were born, and exist----namely, that we should eat and drink; but let us eat for this----namely, that we live. It was not given us at first to live for the sake of eating, but to eat for the sake of living. But we, as if we had come into the world merely to eat, upon this we spend everything.[[14]](#endnote-14)

As poverty guards against excess it will also enable the glorification of the adherent. For example, “hunger, and disease, and other apparent evils, are used on the soul instead of steel, and fire to prevent the spread of disease.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Further on St John emphasises that the evil that befalls a man is payment of sins now so that rewards may come in the after life. As he, “may put away his sin here and depart clean to the other world.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

It does not take long to notice a similarity that St. John Chrysostom has with Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. When I was attending college one of my professors called this particular teaching of Jesus’ as “the cursel reversals.” The point being addressed is that what we would think of as the blessings and the joys of life, are in fact, its opposites. For instance we probably think that power and prestige are wholesome attributes as also being able to do what we would like. However, Jesus said that “blessed are the poor”, “blessed are the meek”, “blessed are those who mourn” and there are many more. Elsewhere is Jesus recorded as saying, “those who love their lives will lose it and those who lose their lives will have gained it.”

It is with particular interest that St. John seems to pick up on such a theme. He warns us to place particular attention upon our ideology because the rich should not be regarded as fortunate and blessed. Fortunate and blessed that they have the ability to help others in unique ways but as to the holding of wealth is to be used upon others.[[17]](#endnote-17) “For you have obtained more than others have, and you have received it, not to spend it for yourself, but to become a good steward for others as well.”[[18]](#endnote-18) St John identifies several reversals that need to take place. The first is that we need to always remember that eternality is not financial.

But this parable is sufficient to afford a remedy to make the wealthy more wise, to console the poor; it teaches the former not to be high-minded; it comforts the poor with respect to their present condition; it forbids the former to boast if, while living wickedly, they pay no penalty in this life, since a severe examination awaits them in the next world; it persuades the latter not to be troubled on account of the prosperity of others, and not to imagine that our affairs are not under the control of Providence, even if the just suffer ills here, while the wicked and depraved enjoy continual prosperity. For both will hereafter receive their dessert . . . . [[19]](#endnote-19)

The rich are not to boast and the poor are not to envy[[20]](#endnote-20) because we need to content ourselves with our situations. As Saint Paul reminded the Philippians “I have learned to be content in all things.” So it is that we need to “learn the true nature of riches and poverty, of honor and dishonour, and of all the other bright or gloomy conditions, we shall be freed from the disturbance which arises from each of these classes of things. For they all are more deceptive than a shadow . . . .”[[21]](#endnote-21) Wisdom then is, “to keep sobor and watchful in prayer, not to desire other’s property, but to distribute our goods to the needy, to reject and repudiate all luxury, whether of clothing or table, to avoid drunkenness and slander. . . .”[[22]](#endnote-22)

A second turning point is bluntly given by St John. What then is theft? St John answers with “not only the theft of other’s goods but also the failure to share one’s own goods with others is theft and swindle and defraudation.”[[23]](#endnote-23) In reference to the rich man, St John states again to make his point understood, “See the man, and his works: indeed this is also theft, not to share one’s possessions.”[[24]](#endnote-24)

A further point of expressed concern from St John, is that physical appearances are not what the reality is. “The poor man lay at the gate, you see: poor outwardly, but rich inwardly. He lay wounded in body, a treasure chest with thorns above, but pearls underneath.”[[25]](#endnote-25) In a latter reference St John proclaims, “You see, when continual troubles come upon you in quick succession, you must not be confused, you must not be annoyed, but wait for the end. Undoubtedly, the conclusion will be worthy of God’s great generosity, if only you endure what happens in the meantime with thanksgiving.”[[26]](#endnote-26) It is one of those unique ironies in life that we grow the most in virtue when we are experiencing turbulent times.

Here is this rich man, you see, but poor from now on; or rather, when he was rich he was poor. What benefit is it to a man who has other people’s possessions but does not have his own? What benefit is it to a man who has gained money but has not gained virtue? . . .if someone gives you a deposit of money in trust, I cannot call you rich, can I? No. Why not? Because you have another’s money. For this is a deposit; I wish it were only a deposit, and not a sum added to your punishment.[[27]](#endnote-27)

So it is that we should grieve for those who appear not to be ill and to not think of the wealthy as lucky but as the unlucky.[[28]](#endnote-28) With that in mind, if steel sharpens steel and fire benefits steel in making it more endurable, poverty is also to our benefit as, “hunger, and disease, and other apparent evils, are used on the soul instead of steel, and fire to prevent the spread of disease.”[[29]](#endnote-29)

If poverty is more beneficial than riches and virtue more beautiful than diamonds, then as the psalmist declares, “more beautiful beyond description; too marvellous for words. More wonderful than comprehension; in nothing ever seen or heard. Who can grasp of your infinite wisdom? Who can fathom the depth of your love? Majesty enthroned above!” At stake is our salvation. “It is no common task to bridle foolish desire, to stop vain glory, to restrain presumption, to refrain from luxury, to persevere in austerity. A person who does not do these things and others like them cannot ever be saved.”[[30]](#endnote-30)

This leads us to ask then, what are the implications of the topic of wealth and poverty? We cannot ignore this topic or try to shoot the messenger. We ignore the warnings to the detriment of ourselves and the salvation of those around us. History dictates that this was an important topic and theological point of St. John’s, and he lived the principles to his death. First, let us remember that we do not own anything. Legally speaking, the courts of Canada recognize ownership, but God does not. The Psalmist says, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” If God has created, then ownership is God’s. Therefore, this means that we are only the stewards of creation until our repose. Do not forget that when we repose, we can not take anything with us. So massive fortunes are to no avail and minor fortunes are for naught. What should we then be doing?

. . .[T]hat not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life; we do not possess our own wealth but theirs. If we have this attitude, we will certainly offer our money; and by nourishing Christ in poverty here and laying up great profit hereafter, we will be able to attain the good things which are to come . . . .”[[31]](#endnote-31)

This leads into our second point that wealth is entrusted to us to help others. We do not have a claim to any of our possessions. They are all gifts of God even if we declare otherwise. Did not God give you the health and abilities to “earn” a fortune? Our possessions may have been from our own sweat equity but remember, He who allowed it to happen. We have to ask, if wealth does not lay up treasure in heaven, what does? It is the bestowing of love unto others. Have you ever wondered how it is that some people have no hesitation to spend allot of money for physical food. Yet when it comes to the spiritual food they have a hard time giving a pittance? Why should the giving for the former be any different than giving for the latter? It is as the Parable of the Good Samaritan indicates: love for others by taking the time and giving to our neighbours as the situation indicates. And our neighbour is anyone we meet and know. As Saint Paul was prone to say, “Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act becomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

Do not lose sight of the enduring legacy. Wealth is fickle and lasts for a short duration, before we have left it behind us. But what riches are waiting for us for eternity. Will we be like those who are saved with nothing more than their resurrected bodies? Or will we pass through the fire with crowns of glory? How many Saints can we list who had amassed wealth here on the earth? Can we affirm the equation that the greater the saint, the greater the harvested fortune? We are called to love God with our whole heart, soul and mind. We are called to imitate the Saints and to be Saints ourselves. Can we reflect the Divine Glory around us if we are reflecting our own ends? Do we not honour the Saints because of their generosity? Are they not remembered because they gave up what they could not keep to receive what can not be lost?

Let us be true to our calling, true to our God, and true witnesses of the Divine Glory. We are not islands among ourselves but inter dependent upon one another. Will we be generous with God’s gifts? Will we make excuses and procrastinate about doing tomorrow what ought to be done today? Will we horde the gifts with clenched fists and hard defiance? Will we support the foolish notion that God can be served faithfully with mammon? St John’s response is a reminder not to be deceived by wealth. It does not comfort and it is a poor substitute for the God who loves us.

1. Marilyn Hickey, “Claim Your Miracles” (Denver: Marilyn Hickey Ministries, n.d.) audiotape #186, side 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Frederick K.C. Price. As quoted in Christianity In Crisis, Hank Hanegraaff, pg 187. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. We will primarily focus on the discourses of the Parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The first four sermons are posted on the internet on several websites, such as [www.tertullian.org](http://www.tertullian.org) and [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org) and www.monachos.net. But the entirety of all 6 discourses have been translated and published in “On wealth and Poverty” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A brief outline of the parable is as follows. Lazarus was so poor, helpless and friendless that he had no food, no home or family and was ghastly sick to the extent that the dogs even felt sorry for him by licking his wounds. Lazarus is contrasted with a certain rich man who’s wealth apparently had no bounds. Lazarus lay outside of his door to his house but this rich man never helped that sick man in anyway possible. Eventually both men die. The first reposes to eternal comfort, personally escorted by the angels, while because of the rich man’s own actions he is condemned to eternal torment. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. On Wealth and Poverty, 133. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 109-110. In more poetic nuances, St John also declared,

   “Where are your ostentation and your luxury? They were leaves-winter seized them, and they are all

   withered up. They were a dream-and when day came, the dream departed.” Ibid., 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 133 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 132 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 48. See also [www.tertullian.org](http://www.tertullian.org)/fathers/chrysostom\_four\_discourses\_04\_discourse2.htm. heading number three, paragraph, three. For instance, within this same heading St John interpolates in the mind of the rich man,

   “What need have I of piety and goodness? All things flow to me as from a perennial fountain. I enjoy

   great honor, great prosperity. I suffer no unwished-for casualty. Why should I strive after goodness? This

   poor man, though he lives in piety and goodness, suffers a thousand ills.” [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 27. Not once does the rich man give heedance to any selfless act or thought. Only at his reposement does he now dwell on the existence of others. Prior to this new conviction God, the originator of all things, has been completely forgotten about. What reason does this man need God in his abundance of self-sufficiency?

    It is also referenced in the first discourse of St John Chrysostom, Four Discourses, chiefly on the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus at [www.tertullian.org](http://www.tertullian.org)/fathers/chrysostom\_four\_discourses\_04\_discourse1.htm. Heading number eight. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 71. [www.tertullian.org](http://www.tertullian.org)/fathers/chrysostom\_four\_discourses\_04\_discourse3.htm. Heading number seven. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. [www.tertullian.org](http://www.tertullian.org)/fathers/chrysostom\_four\_discourses\_04\_discourse1.htm. Heading number 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. On Wealth and Poverty, 103. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 117-123. Compare page 29 where, in the case of Lazarus, he endured 9 chastisements: poverty, illness, loneliness, the lack of sympathy, the perception of inconsolable distress, no resurrection thoughts, a slandered reputation, suffering his entire life, and witnessing everyday the very person who could help him. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. “This is why God has allowed you to have more: not for you to waste on prostitutes, drink, fancy food, expensive clothes, and all other kinds of indolence, but for you to distribute to those in need. . . .[further] the rich man is a kind of steward of the money which is owed for distribution to the poor.” Pg 50. Cf. also Pg 5 of Discourse II Heading 3 paragraph 5. Another iteration is found on page 136-137 as we are commanded to not call material possessions good for they are only a means and improperly used, will be the “cause [of] our destruction.” [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Pg 82 discourse 4 heading 2 paragraph 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. This parable teaches the poor to “bear poverty with equanimity” and as a warning to the rich that to not share of their possessions makes them the most “pitiful of all person.” Page 57. Discourse 3 heading 1 paragraph 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Pg. 83 ibid. Further St John states “Learn what really is the virtue of a human being, and do not be confused.” Pg 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Pg 68. Discouse 3 heading 6 paragraph 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Pg 49. Discourse 2 heading 3 paragraph 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. Also, “This is said in order to show to the rich that they possess things which belong to the poor, even if their property be gained by inheritance . . . .” Getting near to the end of his lectures it is stressed yet again, “Do not let him remain in poverty because of your wealth.” Page105. St John compares this also to the Holy Prophet Malachi chapter 3:8-10 wherein the people plundered the poor because they did not bring tithes from the fruits of the earth. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Pg 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Page 93. Discourse 4 heading 6 paragraph 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Pg 116. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. 102. Previously St John had stated “. . .a person living in wickedness and enjoying great prosperity, without suffering any misfortune, you should mourn particularly for this reason, because although he is afflicted with a very serious disease and ulcer, he aggravates his illness, making himself worse by his luxury and self-indulgence. For punishment is not evil, but sin is evil. The latter seperates us from God, but the former leads us towards God and dissolves His anger.” Pg 65. Discourse 3 Heading 5 paragraph 1. Elsewhere, “Let us call fortunate not the wealthy but the virtuous; let us call miserable not the poor but the wicked.” Pg 37. Discourse 1 Heading 12 paragraph 3. Compare another statement on page 101, “But do not let your resolution be shaken. In the case of diseases and injuries we do not grieve for those who are being cured, but for those who have incurable diseases. Sin is the same as disease or injury; retribution is the same as surgery or medicine.” [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Pg 103. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Page 67. Discourse 3 Heading 6 paragraph 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Pg 55. Discourse 2 heading 6 paragraph 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)