

Closing Words to the Rich and Their Leader



THE PURITAN COTTON MATHER, alarmed by the trend toward materialism in New England society, made this statement in his famous book *Magnalia Christi Americana*: “Religion begat prosperity and the daughter devoured the mother.”¹ Mather was noting a common, though not inevitable, effect of Christianity. Authentic conversion to Christ so changes people’s lives that bad habits fall away, and they become better workers and managers as they live out the Scriptures, resulting in economic prosperity. But tragically, in many cases the new prosperity and material wealth devour the same Christianity that gave them birth—especially in the second or third generations.

This cannibalism by prosperity, so to speak, has haunted God’s people throughout history. The apostolic church itself was not exempt, especially in centers like Ephesus. When Christianity came to Ephesus, it was already a rich city, one of the wealthiest in the ancient world. Quite naturally some of the Ephesian converts were “rich in this present age” (v. 17). Some, in fact, were wealthy slave owners (cf. 6:2). And Christianity went on to make them even richer as they abandoned wasteful excesses, managed their households better, and profited from the hard work of converted slaves. As a result the jaws of prosperity opened wide, ready to devour a fresh harvest of the rich.

Just a few lines earlier in this chapter Paul had attacked the greed that seduced the false teachers in Ephesus, who thought “godliness is a means of gain” (6:5), characterizing them as “those who desire to be rich” (6:9). Then he gave Timothy an extended charge that began, “But as for you, O man of God, flee these things” (v. 11) and ended with a resounding doxology.

Now Paul returns to the subject of riches in order to say a few words—not to those who want to get rich, but to those who are *already* rich. Here Paul does not condemn riches as such but delivers the plain truth about the dangers and responsibilities of wealth. His final words to a rich church have not lost their edge over the centuries. Prosperity is always ready to devour its Christian mother—and today’s rich church must not forget it.

Closing Words for the Rich (vv. 17–19)

About attitude. Paul’s closing words to the rich cut right to the chase: “As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty” (v. 17a). “Haughty” here is a composite of two Greek words meaning “to think” and “exalted thoughts”²—to cherish high thoughts of yourself. Arrogance is self-conscious pride, and haughtiness is its telltale sign. And it breeds insolence and contempt.

Haughtiness is accompanied by dark, telltale shadows. Wealth deludes people into imagining they are of superior value. The delusion goes like this: “I have more than other people—therefore I am superior. And certainly God sees my superiority—otherwise I would not be so *blessed*.” Of course, a Mafia don could use the same reasoning. Nevertheless, that is the way our culture thinks, with its pathetic elevation of the rich—so that a vacuous millionaire prominent in the media or the entertainment industry or whatever is held in awe by the masses. Moral superiority is believed to be a matter of homes and cars

and yachts and designer labels. Timex and Rolex both end in *ex*, but the wearer of one is seen as a universe of superiority above the other. The novelist Boris Pasternak touched on this when his Dr. Zhivago observed of the Russian aristocracy that wealth “could itself create an illusion of genuine character and originality.”³ The same can be said about the rich and famous in America. The materialistic illusion.

Of course, Christians are not to think in this crass way. It is sub-Christian. But the shadows can be found in the church. An air of distance develops between us and the poor. We do not really connect with those who struggle financially. A subterranean contempt roots in our hearts, then surfaces in insensitive slips of the tongue, revealing the shadows. There is also the dark inclination of the well-off to overestimate their own wisdom, to take themselves too seriously and throw their weight around. When such happens, generosity can become nothing more than part of the rich Christian’s *noblesse oblige*. Arrogance too easily overshadows and darkens the Christian life.

This was a danger in the opulent homes and in the house churches in Ephesus. Similar shadows loom large over the middle-class church in America today—in my church, in your church. Prosperity can devour the church. The apostle’s injunction calls to us today: “As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty.”

About hope. The other cannibalizing temptation for the rich is misplaced hope. Paul’s injunction says it clearly: “As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy” (v. 17).

Negatively, we Christians are not to “set [our] hopes on the uncertainty of riches.” How hard this is if you have an abundance! If you have a comfortable, well-furnished home and a top-of-the-line car, it is hard not to rely upon your things to insulate you and carry you through life. In truth, the only thing *certain* about material riches is that they are passing away. In fact, your possession of them is so transitory that upon death, they will become like things unknown. This is the certainty of wealth.

The other certitude is that wealth does not satisfy. Christina Onassis, heiress of a Greek shipping tycoon and stepdaughter of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, inherited an annual income of one million dollars a week. Once when she was out of Diet Coke, she dispatched her private jet on a \$30,000 round-trip to America for a few cases. “I left my David Bowie tape in Switzerland, but the helicopter’s on the way!” Your friends are too busy to spend time with you? Just pay them \$20,000 or \$30,000 a month to do so. That is what Christina did.

But all the money in the world didn’t satisfy Christina during her short thirty-seven years. She died of heart failure brought on by dieting and barbiturates.⁴ Riches may grow, but they do not bring happiness. In this life wealth is “uncertain.”

Do not toil to acquire wealth;
be discerning enough to desist.
When your eyes light on it, it is gone,
for suddenly it sprouts wings,
flying like an eagle toward heaven. (Proverbs 23:4, 5)

The reality is that today’s gains are tomorrow’s losses. And we all know it—like the Wall Street broker who sleeps with three telephones!

Positively, Paul urged Timothy to command the Ephesians (and us) to set their hopes “on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.” Notice very carefully: Paul did not tell those rich in this world to divest themselves of their wealth, but not to place their hope in it. Paul does not call for the false self-denial that was being preached by the false teachers. The believers were not to exchange materialism

for asceticism. Nevertheless, they had to divest themselves of hope in their possessions and invest all their hope in God, whose divine intention for his children is not asceticism but “everything to enjoy.”

So the question that our text asks is: On what does our hope honestly depend? If Jesus (who knows all things and will call you to account for any lie) were to sit in your home today and ask you that question, how would you answer? Another good question is: Has the arrogance of wealth darkened your soul? Do you imagine you are somehow better than those who have little—say, for example, a homeless person? God knows. We must own up to the truth, however painful, because arrogance due to riches and misplaced hope in them will devour our faith.

About generosity. On the other hand, a conscious move away from arrogance toward humility, and from hoping in wealth to hoping in God alone, will liberate God’s people to live out the command to be generous—“They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share” (v. 18). This is an “I’ll help you get it” sentence because it repeats the same message three times, with each repetition being a bit more specific.

First, “They are to do good.” “Do good” is a single word in the Greek, a word used only one other place in the New Testament, where it speaks of God showering his good gifts on his hearers (Acts 14:17). We are not called to shapeless good but to substantive action.

Second, and more specifically, they (and we) are “to be rich in good works.” Such richness, by contrast, suggests good deeds that involve giving. Get it, Ephesians?

Third, “to be generous and ready to share” nails the meaning down, emphasizing giving that is from the hand as well as from the heart (“ready to share” comes from the Greek word *koinonia*, meaning “fellowship”). As Frank Gaebelin says, “A kind heart as well as a generous hand is demanded of the rich.”⁵ One’s whole being is to be involved in giving. The rich in Ephesus had to understand and heed this, and so do we.

We must remember that Paul wrote this to real churches in Ephesus and that Paul’s letter was read aloud in the wealthy Ephesian homes—to the well-to-do host elders and to their mixed congregations of wealthy masters and poor slaves. We can imagine that in some of those wealthy homes there were those who took a long, painful look at themselves and repented. They turned away from the arrogance of wealth, became more humble, and apologized to their brothers and sisters. They likewise turned from hoping in their wealth and placed their hope in God. And they gave generously from both hand and heart toward the welfare of needy members of the Body of Christ.

The New Testament teaches that wealth is not a sin, but it is an immense responsibility. If it feeds pride and roots us deeper in this world, it will devour us. But wealth is also a vast opportunity because as Calvin wisely remarked, “A man’s opportunities to do good to others increase with the abundance of his riches.”⁶ Awesome opportunity lies before our affluent generation as we enter a new millennium—“to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share.”

About incentives. Paul closed his final word to the rich with a dazzling incentive: by their generosity they are “storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life” (v. 19). The amassing of treasure in Heaven by generous giving is consistent with what Jesus repeatedly taught. We read in his Sermon on the Mount, “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” (Matthew 6:19, 20). And later to the rich ruler he declared, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Luke 18:22).

Of course, neither Jesus nor Paul taught that one could buy salvation or promoted moralism based on human merit. Far from buying shares in Heaven, Paul is emphasizing that true riches have nothing to do with earthly wealth, which is uncertain and for this age only. The only riches that will survive this world are those invested by God’s people through generous giving. God reconciles us through his free grace,

moves us to serve him, and then accepts our services, flawed as they are, and bestows on our services a reward they do not merit.⁷ Those who give never suffer loss but get richer and richer and richer in the age to come. Incredible incentive! Listen to Augustine:

From the goods which they distributed to others and so placed in greater safety, they derived more happiness than they incurred sorrow from the goods which they anxiously hoarded and so lost more easily. Nothing could be really lost on earth save what one would be ashamed to take to heaven.⁸

Such generous giving hangs on tightly to “that which is truly life” (v. 19). Believers already have life, but a generous, giving Christian is one who has taken hold of eternal life now (cf. v. 12) and is riding life for all it is worth. Generous givers thrill in their salvation, rejoice in the fruit of the Spirit, and live the life of the coming age now.

What incentives—amassed treasure in Heaven and a hold now on “that which is truly life”! A church with such people escapes Cotton Mather’s dictum. They are not devoured by prosperity. The rewards are so high!

We must remember that Paul was so concerned about this church because it was the missionary lighthouse to Asia. His stated reason for writing was that “you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” (3:15). The way they used their money was crucial, and that is why the apostle’s final words dealt with it. May they not be lost on us!

Closing Words to Their Leader (vv. 20, 21)

Paul also gave some closing words to Timothy, the church’s leader, which by virtue of their final position in the letter carry the same urgency for him personally. As with the leaders, Paul goes again right to the chase: “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith. Grace be with you” (vv. 20, 21).

Guard! The opening command is simple and direct: “Guard the deposit” (cf. 2 Timothy 1:14). The deposit is the pure faith of the gospel, the essential apostolic teaching, which became known as “the rule of faith” or “the canon of truth.” This was not something Timothy was to work out for himself or was entitled to enlarge. It was divine revelation committed to his care.⁹ In the fifth century St. Leo gave Timothy’s charge classic expression:

What is meant by *the deposit*? That which is committed to thee, not that which is invented by thee; that which thou hast received, not that which thou hast devised; a thing not of wit, but of learning; not of private assumption, but of public tradition; a thing brought to thee, not brought forth of thee; wherein thou must not be an author, but a keeper; not a leader but a follower. Keep the deposit.¹⁰

This defines the essential work of the church and its leadership today. It is not responsible to do new theology but to guard and exposit the apostolic deposit. As William Barclay has suggested, an elder and preacher does well to remember that his duty is not to himself but to the truth and to his children and his children’s children. If in our day the church is weakened and enfeebled by inattention to the deposit, if in our day Christian ethics are more and more melded into the world because of neglect of the deposit, if in our day the Christian faith is distorted by attempts to make it culturally relevant, we would not be the only losers, but also our children and their children.¹¹ We must guard the deposit. The apostolic urgency has not diminished.

Avoid! Guarding the deposit requires avoidance: “Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith” (vv. 20, 21).

In distinct contrast to simply guarding the deposit are godless empty sounds. The false teachers made great use of pseudotheological rhetoric, as do many of today’s revisionist theologians. Take, for example, the “God is Dead” theologian J. J. Altizer and his ridiculous “god talk” jargon: “Insofar as an eschatological epiphany of Christ can occur only in conjunction with a realization in total experience of the kenotic process of self-negation, we should expect that epiphany to occur in the heart of darkness, for only the universal triumph of the Antichrist can provide an arena for the total manifestation of Christ.”¹² It makes no sense at all.

This “irreverent babble” also involved “contradictions [Greek, *antitheseis*] of what is falsely called ‘knowledge.’” The false teachers had systematically developed antitheses to Christian truth that denied the gospel.¹³ And they pretentiously called their system “knowledge,” *gnosis*—a pseudoscience that would become full-blown Gnosticism by the second century.

Paul’s advice here is: Do not engage these men on their terms. He does not want Timothy to fall to the seductive maze of their thinking. Such knowledge, says Paul, is “falsely called ‘knowledge.’”

Leo the Great was right—the apostolic deposit is to be guarded, not embellished. And it is not best served by a foolish dialogue.

Final words carry great weight, and when they come from the great apostle, we must listen closely. “The rich in this present age” must flee the besetting sins of arrogance and faith in wealth. They must do a difficult thing—place all their hope in God. And they must give. And we must remember that they are us! May it never be true of us that “religion begat prosperity and the daughter devoured the mother.”

Those who are leaders must guard the truth. We have received gold, and we must render gold!