

Sermon – 13/03/2011 am

Rich and Popular

Study Text: Luke 6:24-26

Jack Whittaker woke up one morning in 2002 to the news that he had won \$315m in the jackpot lottery. He was a very happy man. He had no way of knowing that he was embarking on a journey that would lead to tragedy and the loss of everything he held dear (ABC news report). His story is not unusual, with one third of all lottery winners ending up worse off than they were before.

Here is what happened to Jack. People came from everywhere for a hand-out. He had lots of friends for a while. He found that people started suing him in the courts and his business went broke. He began to drink; he drank too much. After a while he had no friends and became very lonely. Worst of all he showered gifts on his 17-year-old granddaughter – new dresses, new car – whatever she wanted. She got in with the wrong crowd, started taking drugs and two years later was dead. Jack cursed the day he won the lottery.

It is not just lottery winners who get deceived by riches. Those who inherit wealth often lose their money and destroy their lives in the process. The prodigal son that Jesus spoke of is a prime example. And it is not just those who win or inherit riches. There are those who attend wealth creation seminars in order to make good investments. They get so wrapped up in making money that they have no time for other things – more important things in life.

We have seen many such people come to grief in recent years. And there are others in our society who are so intent on getting rich that they work day and night, to the detriment of their health and their personal relationships. *The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil* warns the apostle Paul (I Timothy 6:10).

1. Alas You Rich

If you have read the book of Proverbs you will know it contains many wise sayings about riches. Years ago in an attempt to understand this part of the Bible I labelled the proverbs as being about laziness, finances, poverty and women... many fell into these categories. For example in chapter 11 we read:

Wealth is worthless on the day of wrath (vs4)
People curse the man who hoards grain (vs26)
Whosoever trusts in his riches will fall (vs. 28)

Alas to those who do not pay heed to this wisdom? *Alas/woe to you who are rich* said Jesus (6:24). Most of his disciples were poor but among them, or among the multitude that came to him from the trading cities to the north and even from Jerusalem, were rich people. The sermon on the mount does not have these 'woes' as such, but Matthew does record positive statements like *lay up your treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also* (Matthew 6:20, 21).

We may be able to buy our way out of trouble in this world, but in the next money will be of no help whatsoever. Wealth is worthless on the day of wrath – it is of no value in the Day of Judgment. No one will buy their way into heaven or out of hell. Money will be of no value in either place. Why then do so many put their hope in money. It can only be a blindness inflicted by Satan. Jesus knew what he was talking about here because he had been tempted by Satan with worldly treasures and fame.

Alas you who are rich for you have been comforted. This is not a direct curse but a solemn warning. Riches so easily become a curse because when we are seeking after riches we are not seeking after God. When we buy the comforts of this world we miss out on the gifts that God has for us. When our hands are filled with the treasures of this world there is no room for the treasures of heaven. When our lives are filled with the things of this world there is no room for the things of heaven.

Jesus saw the curse of riches time and again. One of the saddest moments in his life was when a young man turned away from him because of his riches. This fellow came seeking eternal life. It was his wealth that kept him from entering the kingdom of God. Is money keeping people from entering the kingdom of God today? Of course it is – and many are blind to this reality. They are not even seeking to enter the kingdom of God.

If Jesus walked on the earth today would people stop to ask him ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life’? The teaching of evolution and eastern religions has brainwashed our generation. People believe that we have evolved from apes and that we will die just like these creatures. Others think they will be reincarnated, or maybe go to live on another planet after they die. Jesus speaks to us today just as he did 2000 years ago. We have his word here in the Bible. *Alas you who are rich.*

But what about Abraham you ask – he was a rich man and he was blessed by God. Abraham was very rich with livestock, silver and gold (Genesis 13:2). But he lived in a tent all his life. Besides, when God tested him he did not fail the test. Job was a rich man also. God tested Job by taking away all that he had. Moses was prince of Egypt. He was rich and powerful but he *regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked to the reward in heaven* (Hebrews 11:26).

2. Alas You Gluttons and Party Goers

Alas you who are full for you shall hunger

Alas you who laugh now for you shall mourn and weep (6:25).

These woes come as opposites to the blessings just declared by Jesus. He declared a blessing to those who hunger now (6:21). To those who are full now he declares a curse. In fact they will come to experience hunger, if not in this world then in the next. The focus is probably on the latter, as we see in the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

Those who laugh now will find themselves weeping one day. This laughter refers to a shallow merriment. It refers to the attitude of ‘eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die’. It refers those whose laughter comes from going to one party after another, to those who live for the next party. Jesus often spoke of the destiny of the wicked as the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

A certain rich man lived in luxury every day (16:19). At his front gate sat a starving beggar called Lazarus. This story vividly pictures what Jesus is teaching in this sermon. The rich man sat down to a sumptuous feast every day and ate till he was as full as a tick. He probably had his friends over every weekend and brought out the finest wine from his cellar. He enjoyed life to the full.

Was there anything wrong with what he was doing? Food and drink is not evil in itself, but if this was all he was living for then yes, he was doing wrong. *The kingdom of God is not about eating and drinking, but about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit* (Romans 14:17).

Many would disagree. Such a proposition would be outrageous to many in our city today. Why? Because they live for such things! Listen to them when they come back to work after the weekend. All

they can talk about is the parties they went to and how they had lots to drink – often too much. Some cannot wait till the weekend – they have to party during the week also.

The rich man lived the good life. He never did any harm. But see what happened when he died. The message of this story is very solemn. He died and was buried – and he was in torment in Hell (16:23). There was no more feasting and no more laughter for this man. He was mourning and weeping, just as Jesus said in this sermon.

3. Alas You Popular People

If you went into a school and asked the students what they wanted most in life what answers would you get? Two things would be high on the list. What would these be? They would want to be rich or famous, or both.

We live in a celebrity culture. People will do anything to get their face on TV, or their body on the cover of a magazine. Famous sports people are coming out of retirement. Why? Because they miss the limelight. Fame is the aim of many people today. In order to get that fame they will do foolish things and sometimes destroy their lives – like young girls with football stars, and those who take performance-enhancing drugs.

Alas when all men speak well of you said Jesus (6:26). To be popular with the crowd is so important, especially to young people. To some extent we all like to be popular. It is part of our ego or pride. But beware of letting that ego control your life. Beware of letting popularity direct your life. In this age of self-esteem it is very easy to become dependent on the praises of people around us. The number of contacts you have on Facebook or twitter seems to be the latest ego booster – I have 36 people waiting for me to go on Facebook if that means anything to you!

There is nothing wrong with being liked by other people. Samuel grew in stature and in favour both with the Lord and with men. The same is written about Jesus. We must maintain a good testimony with outsiders. But seeking to be popular will lead you to compromise and sacrificing your principles.

Why? Because this world is a fallen world. If you hold to the principles of truth and righteousness sinners will not like you. Popular people go along with the world. This world is sinful, and also fickle. Celebrity status is often short lived. ‘Stars’ often die as lonely and sad individuals.

Jesus referred to the fathers speaking well of the false prophets (6:26). They persecuted the true prophets but praised the false prophets. False prophets told the people what they wanted to hear. Sadly it is the same today. There are preachers who tell the people what they want to hear. People do not want to hear about sin and the judgment of God so these topics are carefully avoided in some mega churches. In fact some do not want to hear much at all from the Bible – or from the preacher. They just want to be entertained by with music and song.

Bishop Ryle wrote ‘Few of our Lord’s sayings are more flatly contradictory to the common opinion of both the church and the world than this. What is more common in the world than the love of everyone’s praise? What is more frequent in the church than to hear it said in commendation of a minister that ‘everyone likes him’. It seems to be entirely forgotten that to be liked and approved by everybody is to be of the number of those to whom Jesus says ‘woe unto you’. To be universally popular is a most unsatisfactory symptom, and one of which a minister of Christ should always be afraid’. What sort of minister of Christ are you?

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