HOW TO BE GOOD AND RICH

1 Timothy 6:17-21

By

Steven J. Cole

July 10, 1994

Copyright, 1994
Is it possible to be good and rich? After watching the rich young ruler walk away from eternal life, Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:23-24). He meant a literal needle, not a low gate in the wall of Jerusalem, as is sometimes taught. He was saying that it’s impossible, not merely difficult, for the rich to enter God’s kingdom. He instructed His followers: “Sell your possessions and give to charity; ...” (Luke 12:33). “So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions” (Luke 14:33). “You cannot serve God and Mammon” (Matt. 6:24).

James cries out, “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! Behold the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter” (James 5:1-5).

In the Revelation, John depicts the judgment that will befall the rich, “And they threw dust on their heads and were crying out, weeping and mourning, saying, ‘Woe, woe, the great city, in which all who had ships at sea became rich by her wealth, for in one hour she has been laid waste!’” (Rev. 18:19).

We have recently studied the words of Paul (1 Tim. 6:9-10), “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. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil,
and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang.” After reading such portions of Scripture, we must ask ourselves: “Is it possible to be both good and rich?”

You may be thinking, “That question doesn’t concern me, because I’m not rich and I never will be.” Not so! Perhaps none of us are super rich. But by world standards, we’re rich. Our homes have indoor plumbing, electricity, heat, and furniture. We own many convenient appliances. Most of us own at least one automobile. We all have several changes of clothes. We enjoy clean drinking water and have access to the world’s best medical care. We’re all rich!

Because we’re rich, and because the Bible contains so many warnings to those who are rich, we need to consider carefully Paul’s words in 1 Timothy 6:17-21. Even though money is dangerous, as we saw in 6:9-10, it is possible to be both good and rich if we become generous people, with our hope fixed on God, with the right perspective toward material things.

To be good and rich, we must aim to be rich toward God.

Being “rich toward God” is Jesus’ phrase. After telling the parable of the foolish rich man who planned to store up much for himself, only to find himself standing before God that very night, Jesus warned, “So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:21). The only way to be both good and rich is to strive to be rich toward God. Paul shows us four ways to aim for that goal:

1. To be rich toward God, guard against the dangers of riches.

   Paul mentions two specific dangers for all who are rich:
   A. Guard yourself against pride.

   The word “instruct” is the same word translated “charge” (6:13). It’s a military word meaning “command.” Paul isn’t dispensing helpful hints here, but God’s authoritative command for His people. “Conceited” is used only here in the New Testament, and means to be high-minded, to think you’re better than others. Pride is a problem for everyone, but especially for those who are rich. It’s easy to look down on the poor and think, “If they would
work as hard as I do, or, if they just used their heads like I do, they wouldn’t be poor.” In other words, “I am the reason I’m rich. I worked hard; I used my smarts. I deserve it.”

A person with that kind of high-minded attitude is not going to be generous. He’s going to hang on to what he thinks he has earned. Even those who have money they acquired through no effort of their own are often proud of the power and prestige that comes from their wealth.

Paul gives the right attitude (1 Cor. 4:7): “... what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” God has given us all we have. Like Job in days of old, it all could be taken away in a day. If we want to be rich toward God, we need repeatedly to judge our pride.

B. Guard yourself against trusting in riches rather than in God.

“Command those who are rich ... not ... to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, ...” Riches are “uncertain” because they pertain to “this present world” (6:17), which is passing away. If the Lord tarries, we, too, all will pass away, along with our possessions, and stand empty-handed before God. All the money in the world will be worthless then. Proverbs 11:4 states, “Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.” Although we all know that intellectually, we’re still prone shift our security for the future to our finances rather than to God.

Let me say it plainly: If you aren’t right with God, then you’re not set for the future. You may be the richest person in the world, but you’re going to die and in that moment, you will face God. If Mammon has been your god rather than the living and true God, you will come under His awful wrath, not His mercy. The only way to be right with God is to turn from your sin and put your trust in the only substitute whom God provided for our sins, the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you’re rightly related to Him as His child through faith in Christ, then the final part of verse 17 applies to you: God richly supplies you will all things to enjoy. As a loving Father, He provides His children not only with what we need, but often He de-
lights to give us many other good things as well. But we need to be careful never to forget the Giver and get caught up with the gift.

Paul shared with the Philippians (4:11-13) how he had learned to be content in whatever state he was in, whether he had plenty or whether he was in poverty, because Christ was the source of his contentment. If we fix our hope on God Himself, then we can enjoy everything good as coming from His loving hand. We can overflow with thanksgiving for life itself, for food, housing, clothing, family and friends, material possessions, and the beauty of His creation. Even if all this is taken away, we can still have the joy of knowing that our sins are forgiven and that we will live eternally with Him.

Most of us need to loosen our grip on things and tighten our grip on the Lord. We need to be good stewards of the things the Lord allows us to have and we can rightly enjoy them, but we also need to hold them loosely. Have you ever thought about what you’d miss the most if your house burned to the ground? We once had about three hours to evacuate our house due to a forest fire that threatened our area. We grabbed our pictures, a few irreplaceable items, some sentimental things, musical instruments, enough clothing to get by for a few days. The rest can burn. It’s a good lesson on where your hope really rests.

Is your hope really in God Himself? Or, could it be in your things? With things, you’ve got moths, rust, and thieves to contend with, as Jesus pointed out. If your happiness or hope is tied up with things, you’ll be a nervous wreck trying to protect them. If you trust and hope in God, then you can rightly enjoy what He allows you to have, but let things go if He takes them. Albert Schweitzer rightly said, “If you have something you can’t live without, you don’t own it; it owns you.”

So to be rich toward God, guard against the dangers of riches: pride; and trusting in things rather than in God Himself.

2. To be rich toward God, be rich in good deeds.

“[Instruct them] to do good, to be rich in good works” (6:18). The Apostle Paul was abundantly clear that no one is saved by good works, but only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. But he was equally clear that everyone who is truly saved by faith is saved
for good deeds, to walk in them (Eph. 2:8-10). If a person claims to be saved by faith, but his life is not growing in holiness and good deeds, his claim is suspect.

A story is told of a man years ago in a village who sold wood to his neighbors. He always took advantage of them by cutting his logs a few inches short of the specified four feet. One day the word spread that this woodcutter had been converted. No one believed it, saying that he was beyond being reached. One man, however, slipped quietly out of the store where the discussion was going on. He soon came running back in excitement and shouted, “It’s true! He has been converted!” Everyone asked, “How do you know?” “Well, I went home and measured the wood he sold me yesterday, and it’s a good four feet long!” That convinced the crowd!

Rich Christians should be rich in good deeds as an evidence of their overflowing gratitude to God for His gift of eternal life. It should include being generous with finances, as we’ll see in the next point. But, also, rich Christians aren’t exempt from giving their time and labor to help others or to work for Christ. Not only by our words, but also by our lives, we should show that we are children of God, rich in good works.

3. To be rich toward God, be generous and ready to share.

Christians should not be stingy, but generous, because our God is generous and kind, especially to the undeserving. We were alienated from God, in rebellion against Him. He had every right to condemn us. But instead He sent His Son to pay the penalty for our sins. As Paul expresses it in Romans 8:32, “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?”

As God blesses us with more income, we ought to look for how He wants us to give more, not just use it to improve our lifestyles. Gallup polls have shown that as income goes up, people give less proportionately. A 1989 poll showed that households earning under $10,000 gave away 5.5 percent; those making $50,000 to $60,000 gave away 1.7 percent; and those with incomes of $75,000 to $100,000 donated 3.2 percent. As I’ve said before, we need to get out of the tithe mentality. If you earn a decent income and only give 10 percent, I believe you’re robbing God (Mal. 3:8-10). Start at
10 percent and work up from there, but don’t get stuck there. Remember, God owns it all; we’re just His managers.

During the summer of 1970, God changed my life as I read for the first time George Muller of Bristol, by A. T. Pierson. Muller’s life showed me that I could live by faith in God and that He answers prayer. Muller founded an orphanage that grew to over 2,000 children. He never solicited funds, except in prayer to God. But one secret of Muller’s success with God was that he lived very simply and generously gave away vast sums to missions.

In 1874, for example, he received for personal income (from donations) 3,100 pounds. That was a tidy sum in those days, and he could have lived lavishly. But he and his family lived on 250 pounds and gave away the rest (he lived on 8% and gave away 92%). To put that in today’s money, if the 250 pounds were equivalent to $25,000, then Muller received $310,000, but gave away $285,000 and lived on $25,000! From 1870 on, Muller personally fully supported 20 missionaries with the China Inland Mission. Over the years 1831-1885, I calculated that he gave away 86 percent of his income to the Lord’s work! God funneled it in the top, but Muller kept the bottom open, never hoarding it or squandering it on personal luxury.

Do you want to know a main reason we aren’t generous givers? We don’t trust God! We mistakenly think that we’ve got to cover all possible contingencies, and so we’re afraid to give because we aren’t trusting in the living God to meet our needs in the future. But it’s a great adventure to trust God by giving and then trust Him to supply our needs.

I heard about a man who wasn’t giving as he should. His pastor pushed tithing, giving 10 percent, but this man didn’t see how he could give that much and still meet his bills. The pastor said to him, “John, if I promise to make up the difference in your monthly bills if you fall short, do you think you could try tithing for just one month?” As a moment’s pause, John responded, “Sure, if you promise to make up any shortage, I guess I could try tithing for one month.” The pastor shot back with, “Now what do you think of that! You’d be willing to trust a mere man like myself, who possesses so little materially, but you couldn’t trust your Heavenly Father who owns the whole universe!”
Another reason we don’t give generously is that we’re sloppy, impulsive managers of the Lord’s resources. We get caught up with American consumerism, mistakenly thinking that we need more junk and we need it right now. So, we spend money we don’t have on junk we don’t need. Let me put it bluntly: If you’re in debt, you don’t have money to spend on entertainment or meals out. If you’re in debt and not giving above 10 percent to the Lord’s work, you don’t have money to spend on non-essentials (a new TV set or better computer is not essential!). If you’re in debt, then you aren’t “ready to share.”

Maybe you’re wondering, “How much are we supposed to give?” The New Testament answer is, “Give as God has prospered you” (1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 9:8-11). C. S. Lewis said, “I do not believe I can settle how much you ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditures on comfort, luxuries, amusements, etc. are up to the standards common among others with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little.”

So, to be rich toward God, we must guard against the dangers of riches, namely, pride and trusting in money; we must be rich in good deeds; and, we must be generous and ready to share.

4. **To be rich toward God, focus on the reality of eternity.**

“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” (6:19). Do you want to store up treasures that are absolutely secure for the future? Then put your money where neither moths nor rust corrupt, where thieves can’t break in to steal (Matt. 6:19-21). Anything you invest in this life can be taken from you. Anything you invest in eternity is secure in the bank of heaven. If you had thousands of dollars in paper money that you needed to store in a safe place, you wouldn’t put it in a shack in a forest known for its frequent fires. And yet people who take a measure of caution in making sure their earthly goods are safe never stop to consider that the earth is going to burn (2 Pet. 3:10). Only what you invest in God’s kingdom will remain.

I find it ironic that Sigmund Freud’s favorite story was about a sailor shipwrecked on a South Sea island. The natives captured
him, put him on their shoulders, carried him to their village, and set him on a crude throne. Little by little the man learned that it was their custom each year to make some man a king for a year. He liked that idea until he began wondering what had happened to all the previous kings. He discovered that after the year was up, the kings were banished to a deserted island where they starved to death.

The sailor didn’t like that idea, but he still had some time left. So he put his subjects to work, building a house, transplanting fruit trees, and planting crops on the island. So when his year was up, as he knew it would be, he was banished, not to a barren island, but to a place of abundance. Too bad Freud didn’t apply it!

We all know that we will die and face eternity. We only have so many years to be storing up treasures in heaven, by giving generously to God’s work. It would be short-sighted and foolish of us to live well here but to have no regard to that which certainly lies ahead.

To be good and rich, we must work to be rich with God by guarding against the dangers of riches, by being rich in good deeds, by being generous and ready to share, and by focusing on the reality of eternity.

**Conclusion**

Paul concludes with a final warning to Timothy (6:20-21) which I’m just briefly going to touch on. He appeals to Timothy to guard the deposit (lit.) which God had entrusted to him by avoiding the empty speculations of the false teachers, who claimed to have knowledge, but didn’t know what they were talking about. This brings him full circle back to the warnings of chapter one. Paul meant the deposit of the gospel as well as the spiritual gifts Timothy had been given.

Not just Timothy, but each of us who knows Christ has been given a deposit from God: the gospel message, the truth of God’s Word, the spiritual gifts and the material resources He has entrusted to us. Each of us is accountable to God to guard that deposit by being faithful managers of all we have received, so that we may someday hear from our Lord, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”
Next week I’m going to devote the entire message to a specific application of this text. I’m much in prayer about it and would ask you to pray that I would faithfully deliver God’s message for this church at this time. I ask you to be in prayer this week, asking God to open your heart to what He may want to do through you in response to that message.

I would also ask you to seek God about whether you are being faithful to store up riches in heaven. Do you view all that you have as belonging to God, not to yourself? Do you view yourself as God’s manager, accountable to Him for how you handle all He entrusts to you? Do you evaluate your income, your possessions, and your spending in light of God’s purpose? Is your aim to become rich toward God?

The late comedian, Jack Benny, who joked often about his miserly love of money, had a skit where he was walking along when an armed robber accosted him, stuck a gun under his nose, and ordered, “Your money or your life!” There was a long pause; Jack did nothing. The robber impatiently said, “Well?” Jack replied, “Don’t rush me, I’m thinking about it.”

God’s Word clearly says to each of us, “Live for yourself now, store up treasures on earth, and miss out in eternity; or, invest generously in eternity now, become rich toward God, and you will take hold of that which is life indeed.” We shouldn’t have to think very long about our decision!

### Discussion Questions

1. How do we decide how much to give to the Lord’s work and how much to spend on our own enjoyment?
2. How do we decide how much to save for future needs (kids’ education, retirement, etc.)? When does prudent savings cross the line into hoarding?
3. Is it sinful for American Christians to live in luxury when people live in utter poverty in other countries? How do we determine an appropriate lifestyle?
4. How can we tell if our trust has shifted from God to riches?

Copyright 1994, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.