

Christian Retirement

Part 49

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ON THE DANGER OF RICHES

There is a beautiful harmony in the doctrines and precepts of Scripture, whether promulgated under the Patriarchal, Mosaic, or Christian dispensation, which strikingly proves its divine origin. Every enlightened reader of the Bible will perceive a rich vein of truth running through the whole of the sacred volume. What is obscurely revealed under the patriarchal dispensation, is more fully made known under the Law, and exhibited in its brightest colors by the Gospel.

A short review of the Scriptures, with respect to the sin of covetousness, will verify this observation.

Job, when vindicating his character, makes the following declaration: "Have I put my trust in money or felt secure because of my gold? Does my happiness depend on my wealth and all that I own? Have I looked at the sun shining in the skies, or the moon walking down its silver pathway, and been secretly enticed in my heart to worship them? If so, I should be punished by the judges, for it would mean I had denied the God of heaven." Job 31:24-28. We have here the closest connection between covetousness and idolatry. The two sins are classed together as twin evils springing from one common source, the unbelief and earthliness of the heart.

This is in strict accordance with the other parts of the sacred oracle. Paul styles covetousness, idolatry; (Coloss. iii, 5;) and a covetous man an idolater. (Ephes. v, 5.) Our Savior explains the nature of this idolatry: "How hard is it for those who trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God!"

To possess wealth, when imparted in the providence of God, is not sinful; for it was said of Abraham by his servant Eleazar, "The Lord has blessed my master greatly and he has become great; and he has given him flocks and herds, and silver and gold, and men-servants and maid-servants, and camels and donkeys." But the sin lies in trusting in these things; hence Job says, "If I have made gold my hope, or have said to the fine gold, you are my confidence; if I have rejoiced because my wealth was great—I would have denied the God that is above."

David was aware of the same danger arising from the possession of wealth, and he gives this salutary caution: "If riches increase, set not your heart upon them." Or in the words of Job, "make them not your hope and your confidence." Solomon points out the same evil "He that trusts in his riches shall fall." (Prov. xi, 28.) Moses strongly cautions the Israelites against this misuse of temporal things: "The Lord your God will soon bring you into the land he swore to give your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is a land filled with large, prosperous cities that you did not build. The houses will be richly stocked with goods you did not produce. You will draw water from cisterns you did not dig, and you will eat from vineyards and olive trees you did not plant. When you have eaten your fill in this land, be careful not to forget the Lord, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt." Deut. 6:10-12.

From where does this proneness to depart from God arise? this cleaving to earthly things? It springs from the fall of Adam. It is the very fault and corruption of our nature. We are all naturally idolaters, "loving the creature more than the Creator, who is over all, blessed for evermore;" and therefore this evil justly exposes us to eternal death. Nothing but divine grace can save us from this idolatrous attachment to earth. Who does not daily feel its influence? Oh! how much I need the sovereign grace of God to wean my affections from the world, and cause me to seek my all in him! Herein consists true happiness. Until God in Christ be my all-sufficient, my all-satisfying portion, I cannot be truly happy. A divided heart must of necessity be a wretched heart. "Lord, unite my heart to fear your name. Collect my scattered powers, and let them work for you alone. As it was with the Israelites, so may it be with me. In my departure out of a wicked world, let not 'a hoof be left behind.' May all that I possess be wholly consecrated unto you."

Were we told of some highly-favored individual, whose every desire after wealth and pleasure might be gratified; should we not be ready to exclaim, this must be a happy man? A slight acquaintance with human character would soon dissipate this illusion. The desire of man which is the very essence of covetousness, makes us dissatisfied with what we already possess. While an increase of possessions, by increasing our cares and troubles, tends only to diminish our portion of actual enjoyment.

The experience of Solomon, so feelingly described in the book of Ecclesiastes, speaks volumes on this subject. He made the dangerous experiment of gratifying his desires, with an eagerness which could only be equaled by his means of gratification— I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. "Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly--my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.

I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well--the delights of the heart of man. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor." Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun." Eccles. 2:1-10.

But what was the fruit of such unbounded gratification, which by thousands is esteemed the climax of human happiness? Hear the humiliating confession of Solomon, than whom no one had ever a fairer opportunity of reaping happiness, if ever it sprang out of worldly pleasure "Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun." And after enumerating a variety of vanities, he closes his book with these important words: "Here is my final conclusion: Fear God and obey his commands, for this is the duty of every person. God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad." Eccles. 12:13-14.

Nothing is so restless as the spirit of a covetous man. He is continually pursuing after a phantom. Dissatisfied and miserable, "They have planted the wind and will harvest the whirlwind. The stalks of wheat wither, producing no grain. And if there is any grain, foreigners will eat it." Hosea 8:7. "We are merely moving shadows, and all our busy rushing ends in nothing. We heap up wealth for someone else to spend." Psalm 39:6. Solomon felt this when he said, "I hated all my labor which I had taken under the sun: because I shall leave it unto the man that shall be after me; and who knows whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? This is also meaningless."

How contentedly happy is the child of God! He views every event as directed by Infinite Wisdom; and reviews every gift as the expression of Infinite Love. He knows that God is well acquainted with the nature of his own gifts, and is therefore satisfied with the portion which Infinite Love bestows; as well as with the dispensation by which infinite Wisdom takes away. With childlike acquiescence in the divine disposals, he learns, in whatever state he is, therewith to be content. He does not labor to be rich. He finds, by experience, that riches cannot confer happiness, or health, or honor. He sees many rich men miserable, and many poor men happy. He blesses God for his daily bread; eats his food with gladness and singleness of heart; and praises God for his hourly mercies

flowing to him through that precious medium of communication between heaven and earth, the Lord Jesus Christ.

He has, however, covetous desires. He covets earnestly the best gifts. He longs and labors to possess these eternal blessings, which never cloy, but increase the joy and happiness of the soul by their increased possession. He prays with fervent desire for the graces of faith and love; for humility and purity; for the filling of the Spirit; for the presence of the Savior; for the love of the Father; for a heart filled with all the fulness of God.

This is the happy man, whose desires are accomplished. He delights in the Lord, and the God of all grace gives him the desires of his heart. The character of his life is contentment with moderation in earthly things, combined with ardent desires after the increase of spiritual blessings. He is diligent in business as a duty; fervent in spirit as a blessedness; active in serving the Lord as his highest honor.

Oh! for this contentment, this thirsting after God, this devotedness to his service and glory! He who trusts in riches, is like one who endeavors to repose upon the foam of a tempestuous sea. No sooner does he throw himself upon it, than it separates, and he sinks as lead in the waters; while he who trusts in the Lord, resembles the man, who, securely stationed upon a rock, sees the billows spend their fury at his feet. He views the wild uproar, and smiles at the storm.

In this fallen world, where sin has planted sorrows in awful profusion, is it not amazing, that creatures, liable to continual change, are not solicitous to find a shelter from the tempest? They are anxious, indeed, to obtain rest, but they seek for it where it never can be found—in earthly things.

Men are apt to imagine, that if they can only amass a fortune, and reach the hill of prosperity, they shall escape those troubles which overwhelm the many who dwell in the valley below. But are not mountains the most exposed to storms? Are they not the most bleak and barren parts of the earth? while the sheltered valleys stand so thick with corn, that, in the poetic language of David, "they laugh and sing?"

History furnishes abundant proofs that elevated stations expose men to perpetual dangers, and cause the soul to be barren in those fruits of peace, contentment, and piety, which enrich the heart of the lowly, retired believer. Why, then, should I envy the great, or labor to be rich? Even if I should happily escape the common snares of wealth, yet death will soon transfer it into other hands, and then what will all my riches profit, if at that solemn period I should be destitute of faith and love!

"Lord, make me anxious for the true riches. May I daily lay up my treasure in heaven. May my heart be there. Let no idol be seated on the throne of my

affections. May you reign the sovereign Lord within. Oh! may all my powers be subject unto you. May I own no sway but yours. All will then be well. Whether prosperous or afflicted, all things shall work together for my good."

The Scriptures point out in the strongest manner the danger of riches. Many monuments of wrath are there presented to our view. Achan, Gehazi, Judas, Ananias, and Sapphira, being dead, yet speak with warning voice. The love of money proved their downfall.

We all naturally love ease. We have a natural love of rest. Toil and pain are alike irksome to the savage and the sage. Those earthly possessions which promise the greatest portion of enjoyment, are the most coveted by mankind in general. In civilized countries it may be said, in the expressive language of Solomon, "Money answers all things." It is able to procure for us those various conveniences which tend to smooth the path of life. It provides us with food and clothing; with innumerable elegancies and superfluities; with opportunities of extending our researches after knowledge, of visiting distant countries, and treasuring up the labors of the dead. Money can command almost everything, but what is most essential to our happiness—peace of conscience, joy in God and victory over sin and death.

Here, then, arises the danger of riches. They furnish us with every requisite to earthly pleasure. They give us a commanding influence over our poorer neighbors; and an importance in the circle in which we move. Hence we secretly pant after their increase. They engross the affections; they fill the mind; they captivate the will; they usurp the place of God in the soul.

When riches flow into the coffer, trouble is never apprehended; but when they cease to flow, the darkened clouds seem rapidly to threaten the destruction of our earthly joys; the smile then forsakes the worldling's countenance; gloom settles upon his once laughing face; despair seizes on his heart, and death not infrequently closes the fatal scene.

Such a state of mind as this, infallibly proves the love of money to be the predominating passion in the soul. And such a state of mind is incompatible with salvation. Our blessed Lord has declared, in words too plain to be misunderstood, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man—trusting in his riches—to enter into the kingdom of God." Paul in like manner bears his testimony against this sin of our nature: "Charge those who are rich in this world, that they do not be high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who gives us all things richly to enjoy." He cautions believers most solemnly against the evil of covetousness, by declaring that "the love of money is at the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows." 1 Tim. 6:10.

If true believers, we ought again and again to impress upon our hearts this sacred truth— that real happiness consists in having God for our portion; in being satisfied, yes, thankful for the allotments of his providence; in feeling ourselves to be pilgrims and strangers upon earth, hastening along the stream of time to that blessed world, where every trial will be forgotten; or, if remembered, will only, by its recollection, enhance our everlasting joy.

This state of mind, this holy frame of heart, is the work of the Spirit, the fruit of faith. "All your children shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children." "You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you." "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus." Philip. 4:6-7. "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

"Oh, blessed Savior! wean my foolish heart from the world. Save me from the love of money, which is spiritual idolatry. Raise my affections to high and heavenly things. May you in time and through eternity my all in all."

Why, Oh my soul, should earthly joys
Detain you prisoner here below?
The richest gems are trifling toys,
Compared with those believers know.

How glorious their immortal crowns,
More dazzling bright than mid-day sun
Jesus their happy souls adorns
With wreaths, which he himself has won.

How vain are all the scenes of earth,
Beneath their now exalted view!
They feel the honors of their birth,
The friends or God, and angels too.

Oh! blissful state of holy joy!
Awake, my soul, and upward soar;
Your rebel passions now destroy,
Let earth engross your heart no more.

Yet, Lord! I look alone to you
Exert your sovereign, saving power;
Oh! set my captive spirit free;

Be this redemption's joyful hour!

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