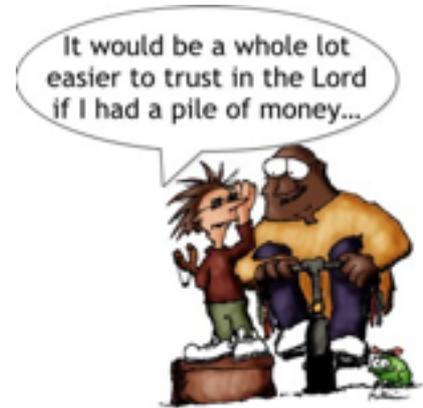


Can I Be a Rich Christian?

Luke 12:13-21; Luke 16:13-15

I came across this cartoon as I was preparing for H2H in the next weeks. I laughed a little, more of out of an uncomfortable feeling than because it was side-splittingly funny. "It would be a whole lot easier to trust in the Lord if I had a pile of money..."

Would it be easier to trust God, or not? What if I have a pile of money? Actually, I do have a pile of money, all things considered. I might not consider myself wealthy if I compare myself with other comfortable middle-class people like me, which of course is exactly who I always compare myself with; but what about the poor, in my society, or in a third-world country. So, I am rich. And a Christian. But the key question is this? Is it easy to trust in the Lord as a rich Christian?



How would you answer that? I had to say, "No." It's not easy to trust God, the more you have. Evidence would point to the fact that it's harder. Terri Churchill is a poet and a member of a movement called ReKnew.

I've got a lot of stuff
It's all mine
I've spent lots of time over the years
earning and collecting and
sorting and cleaning
and repairing and replacing
My beautiful stuff.

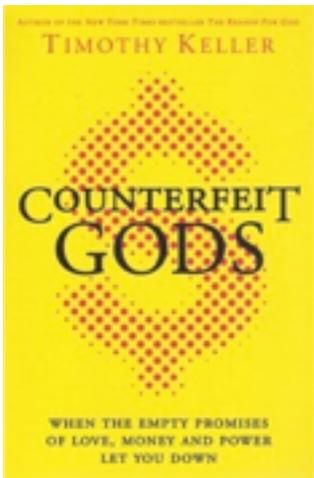
I can't understand
how this gaping hole
has formed in the centre of me
with all this stuff
to fill it in.
I can't understand the emptiness
when there's not one open space in my life.
Probably I just need
more stuff or
better stuff
then I won't feel this
hunger
and this weight
pressing on my chest
then I'll be satisfied.

just one thing more...

Possession, Terri Churchill.



Can you identify with this poem? You've got a lot of stuff. So have I. The question isn't, "How much stuff do we have, but what is the stuff that we have doing to us?" We might find this a strange question. After all, what can an inanimate object like a house, or a car, or clothes, do to us? We look at them as neutral objects. In themselves, they are neither good nor bad. The issue is the power we invest in them. It's often so subtle that we can't see it.



Can I be a rich Christian? It's difficult. Tim Keller, writing in his wonderful book, Counterfeit Gods, spoke of the time he preached a sermon series on the seven deadly sins. People packed out the sessions for lust, anger and pride, but the sin that dare not speak its name was greed, with the lowest attendance. He concluded: "Nobody thinks of themselves as greedy. No one has ever come to me and confessed that they are greedy. Greed hides itself from its victim." Come to think of it, I've had no one confess that sin either.

We are largely blind to greed because the whole of our society is in thrall to it. We don't consider that we are rich, because there are people like us who have. We are seduced to crave more and more stuff, and to call that stuff. It's my property. It's a result of my hard work. It distinguishes me from other people. It gives me security. And so we head down the path of investing power in our stuff: power to please me, satisfy me, make my life more comfortable. We "mine" what we have, thinking it gives us power over our possessions. Instead, we invest them with power to influence us.



This is exactly where the problem lies for us. "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." Jesus starkly lays the alternatives before us. You can't 'mine' things and be my disciple. You lack the power, the power that comes from heaven to be a disciple, when you spend all your energy on 'mine-ing' things. Something big is at stake here. No one has the power to serve two masters, both of whom want ultimate allegiance. You simply can't have it both ways.

The word translated here as money is not the regular Greek word for money, but something deeply spiritual, and sinister, Mammon.

This word is derived from a Hebrew word which means, "that in which one trusts." This word is used only by Jesus in the New Testament, and always with a negative connotation. Jesus doesn't speak this away about money, but about what lies behind the desire for riches. Mammon is the shelf company that the evil one sets up to divert our trust from our God and heavenly Father, the

Creator of all and the giver of all the good things that we have.

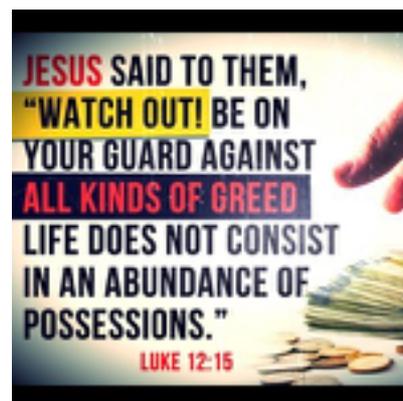
This is a pull for allegiance and worship that goes right back to the Garden of Eden, and to the first temptation. You can have it all, you can be like God, you can be in control. Look at what it will bring you. Money, riches, possessions, are one of the tools in your arsenal to get you what you want.



Is it possible to be a rich Christian? Yes, of course, but it starts with the issue of ownership. All the many things we have are ultimately gift. Our stuff is not ours. Our stuff is God's. "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." All is God's gift to us, his blessing, not our possession. God owns it. If we think otherwise, it starts to own us. And that breeds both greed and anxiety, which are the two things Jesus homes in on today.



Jesus says to us today: "Watch out. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." To "consist" of your possessions is to be defined by what you own and consume. The term describes a personal identity based on money. And so Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the rich fool, a man who looked to his stuff to control his life, and placed full trust in temporary things to provide ultimate solutions. This was his god, his idol, the thing he loved, trusted and obeyed. When the possession came calling for more space, down came the old barns and up went the new.



Even if we can't see evidence of that kind of attitude in our lives, what about the anxiety that our stuff provokes? I get something and I'm concerned about keeping it, protecting it. Take an example close to my car-loving heart. I get a new car and I'm concerned about keeping it shiny, dreading the first scratch, not wanting to let others drive it. I become obsessed, I'm not open to others. It's mine, and a statement about how I want others to see me. I'm blind to the tentacles of this stuff entangling me.

Whenever we buy something, or own something, there's a cost. Not just financially but spiritually. Am I buying this to satisfy something in me? Am I trying to impress someone? Of course, there are good and legitimate questions to ask too. Is this thing necessary, good for the environment, able to help and serve others?

The answer is not to never buy anything, but to continually cast off, cast out the spirit of Mammon. To know our hidden motives and misplaced trust. To not just say: "Do I want it?" Always yes. Or, "Can I afford it?" Rather, "what does God want me to do here?" And I have to admit that there is a spiritual calculus to not buying something. I confess a pride that comes from driving an older car and feeling smug that I've haven't succumbed to the temptation of buying something bright and shiny.

Can I be a rich Christian? Well, yes, given that all of us are rich by any standard. But a more pointed question might be, "Can we be rich and live as a faithful follower of Jesus?" We begin by

evaluating all that we are and all that we have in the light of the life of Jesus. We know that Jesus, God in human flesh, had the infinite wealth and glory of God's only Son. He chose not to luxuriate in that wealth, or consider "equality with God something to be grasped", but gave up this privileged position and made himself nothing, so that through his sacrificial obedience, his death on a cross, we would receive the treasure of a relationship with God, and eternal security.



The Apostle Paul puts it this way: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty, you might become rich." (2 Cor. 8:9) These are the only riches worth chasing after, but paradoxically we receive them as gift. Money and stuff ceases to be the currency of our significance and security. Instead, it becomes a tool through which we can bless others, as a way of putting into practice the command that Jesus gives us to love our neighbour. In that way, money loses its power over us as we allow God to have authority over us. That's what the good news does.

Can I be a rich Christian? By the virtue of being born in a wealthy country, or having emigrated here, we are rich. To be rich and a Christian is to ask the spiritual questions about the stuff we have and the more stuff we want. It means placing all our decisions before God in prayer, factoring in the spiritual calculus, and living generously, in response to the generous love God has lavished on us. This is, as Tim Keller notes, a generosity that goes far beyond 10%, a tithe. Of someone asking whether Christians should tithe (give 10%), he writes: "I'll tell you why don't see the tithing requirement laid out clearly in the New Testament. Have we received more of God's revelation, truth, and grace than the Old Testament believers, or less?" Usually, there is an uncomfortable silence. "Are we more 'debtors of grace' than they were, or less? Did Jesus 'tithe' his life and blood to save us, or did he give his all? Tithing is a minimum standard for believers."

God is our greatest treasure. Everything else we have comes from him, and pales into insignificance compared to his great love shown in his Son Jesus. Our call is to live as if we really believe this to be true. The way we spend our money and the attitude we take to the stuff we have is one of the clearest indications of our discipleship. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Amen.