



## Rich Toward God.

**W**hat would you say if you met the Lord? I mean, face to face, on the street, as one person meets another. Here are some answers people have given, some, of course, facetious:

If I met the Lord, I'd ask him to start all over again.

If I met the Lord, I'd ask him which came first, the chicken or the egg.

If I met the Lord, I'd ask him for money:—a loan, actually, or better yet, a grant.

If I met the Lord, I'd ask him, "Did you enjoy the show?"

If I met the Lord, I'd ask him about mushrooms. To wit, "Dear God, I mean, really, what's up with mushrooms? 'Edible fungus?' Just what were you thinking? Are mushrooms the first and greatest cosmic joke?"

If I met the Lord, I'd wouldn't really ask him anything, I'd just say 'thanks.'

If I met the Lord, I'd say, "So, God, what's next on your agenda?"

If I met the Lord, I would ask God, "what are you doing here? Nietzsche told me you were dead."

If I met the Lord, I would say, "God, dear God, please help me."

One day, a man did just that. He met the Lord, in the midst of a great crowd of people. This was nothing unusual. Throughout his ministry crowds thronged about Jesus, pushing him, pulling him, longing to touch him, manipulate him, even—if that were possible—so to be lifted out of this day-to-day grind of facing one challenge after another, so to be healed in our hurting places, instantly, if possible;—because hurting is not an easy thing.

And do you know what this man said, on meeting Jesus? Not, *hi*, or *hello*, *good morning*, or even, *Greetings, Jesus of Nazareth*, but "Lord, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!" He wasn't concerned about Jesus' mission, or message, or how the former might impact him as his person. What was he concerned about? Money. As the Russians say, "When money speaks, the truth keeps silent."

According to Deuteronomy 21, the eldest son in any family was entitled to receive twice the inheritance of any other son. For example, if there were three sons, the inheritance would be divided into four parts, with the firstborn receiving two parts, and the other three sons each receiving one part. (Now you know why second-born Jacob filched first-born Esau out of their father's blessing . . . !) The story doesn't tell us what had happened in *this* man's family—but it was probably an old, old story, leading to fratricidal malevolence of an all-too-familiar kind. "All happy families are alike; but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," wrote Leo Tolstoy, but I beg to differ.

My father had one brother, and my mother one sister. Even as children we had a sense that both relationships were deeply compromised, and had been that way for a long time.

In fact at a certain point in their lives my father and their brother stopped speaking to one another, completely. What drove them to part ways, forever? Their parents' estate. Go figure . . . Both my father and his brother knew how to drink, but my father's brother was also fond of the racetrack, And various other modes of gambling, leading to a constant need for cash. I mean *constant*. And so when my grandfather died, my grandmother went into care, which gave my uncle access to their home. She, that is my grandmother, lived another year, during which my uncle began selling off their furniture to pay his debts. And since my father lived here in Penticton, and my uncle in Vancouver, there wasn't anything he—that is my father—could do about it. And when my grandmother died, they discovered there was no will. You can imagine what happened from there. My father never spoke to my uncle again.

“Money never made a man happy yet, nor will it,” said Ben Franklin, of all people. “There is nothing in its nature to produce happiness. The more a man has, the more he wants. Instead of its filling a vacuum, it makes one.”

Had my father met Jesus, at that time—this was in the 70's—he too may well have said, “Lord, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” I would hardly have blamed him for asking that. I mean, it was a brutal shock for him to discover that his brother had stolen virtually everything. Many lawyers later, my father's share of the estate was almost nothing. Yet here, as elsewhere, Jesus doesn't quite respond as we think proper. In our touchy, feely, therapeutic, *I'm-okay-you're-okay* sort of culture, we would be tempted to say something like, “Oh dear, I'm sorry to hear that. You must be really hurt and angry. Tell me how you're feeling.” Instead, Jesus responds rather angrily. “Man,” he says, “who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” Moreover, he goes on to add insult to injury. “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

“Greed? What do you mean, greed?” the man might have replied. “Jesus! How insensitive can you get? All I want is what I have coming to me; all I want is my fair share.”

Remember Sally from the Charlie Brown Christmas, and her letter to Santa Claus?

“Dear Santa Claus,  
*How have you been? Did you have a nice summer? How is your wife? I have been extra good this year, so I have long list of presents that I want. Please note the size and colour of each item, and send as many as possible. If it seems too complicated, make it easy on yourself, just send money. How about 10s and 20s?*

“10s and 20s??!!?” laments Charlie Brown, “oh, even my baby sister!”

“All I want is what I have coming to me,” responds Sally. “All I want is my fair share.” That’s what most of us would say, *All we want is what we have coming to us. All we want is our fair share.* Yet on hearing that, rather than proving himself sympathetic, Jesus tells a parable. There’s no one on the planet more adept at offending people! Here’s the parable:

“The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”

Remember the rich young ruler from Mark 10? He too stepped out of the crowd, to speak to Jesus. “Good teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life? What? Tell me. I really want to know.” “You know the commandments, replies Jesus: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.’” “Teacher,” he interrupts, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” “One thing you lack,” Jesus says. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

“How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!” Jesus goes on. Neither the rich young man, nor the disciples standing by know what to say. “How hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God,” he *again* says. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter Kingdom of God.” “Who then can be saved?” the disciples ask.

It is hard for the rich to enter the Kingdom of heaven. It is. “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,” wrote Paul. “Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.”

“Really?” most people would be tempted to respond. “I just saw yet another rerun of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, and I just don’t see it. Had I that sort of cash, I wouldn’t feel trapped at all:—nor would I give myself over to, quote, ‘foolish and harmful desires.’ I would probably be happier than I’ve ever been before!”

Yet riches are, or can be, a problem, spiritually. Spiritually. It’s more than a matter of “the more you have, the more you want”—as if riches were related to happiness by way of an ever-increasing spiral of “inverse dissatisfaction.” It’s more like *the more you have, the less you want.* Yes, I’m serious. The more you have, the less you want, *to pray:*

because, frankly, you don't need to. Prayer is for those who are poor, blind, needy, and hurting. The more you have, the less you want, *to give*: because, frankly, most people think—rightly or wrongly—the well-off are well-off because they deserve to be, Because they earned it. Because it is their “entitlement.” So if you are such a person, why give away what you have so carefully earned, and worked so hard to get? It makes absolutely no sense in human terms.

Moreover, most people also think—rightly or wrongly—that the poor and poor because they deserve to be, because they are corrupt, criminal, or have made bad choices, and must therefore be bound to them, “forever and ever . . . Amen....,” like Prometheus to the rock, or Ixion to the wheel.

Is it a crime to be rich, in financial terms, to be well-off? No, it isn't. Never has been. If it were, the whole of Canada itself would be itself, a fundamentally criminal regime, for in real terms, *we are all rich*, beyond our wildest imaginations. Go to a third world country, and you will instantly know what I mean. I went to a third world country in 1992, and came back understanding that I, as a person, was fabulously, indeed, outrageously rich. I have good clothes, I eat lovely, nourishing food, (whenever I want to—I just walk in to a restaurant, or a grocery store, and buy it—), I hang out in deliciously warm buildings, I own my home. I drive a car. You name it. I am dripping in wealth. I am.

But being rich imposes upon us special responsibilities. It does, both as a church, and as a society. We need to support the going forth of the Gospel, and the doing of good. In other words, we need to share. We really do. And the more we have, the *greater our responsibility* in this regard. I am told that when I talk about money, which I do about once every three or four years—if that—some people go away and as they are driving home, say, “Ooo.....I hate it when he talks about money. I can't stand it, I hate it!” Yet the Bible—you know, that wild book we troupe in here every week, with exalted reverence—talks about money all the time. So the truth is, I don't talk about it nearly enough. The fact we almost never talk about money around here, is, in my view, one of the reasons we have the financial problems we do. Go to many other churches, and they'll tell you, straight up: *You claim to be God's people? You claim to serve and live for him? You claim to love him, and the church that loves him??* Okay, fine. Put *your money where your mouth is*. Right now.” I've heard it done! “We've got important work to do, and it's not going to happen if you don't support it. And so they do.

I have an old university friend in Vancouver who does tax returns. She is also a Christian, and what she often sees in the tax returns of other Christians frankly blows her mind. She encounters Christians who are so rich they have more money than they could spend in a hundred million years:—they have 10, 20, 100, 200 times more money than they need, and then she sees the annual receipt for their contributions to their church—and is speechless. I mean, speechless. It's as if such folk are lucky if they throw \$5.00 in the plate *en route* to Venice or London or Paris, or their latest Caribbean cruise. The church, for them, is just some sort of bizarre afterthought. God help the church if it

doesn't meet a person's need. But as for the church's need to pay the rent..."well, it's time for you, dear church, to live by faith!"

Since many of us are as rich as we are, we must not only share, but must start becoming "rich toward God." What a curious phrase, "rich toward God." Jesus does not explain what this means, but I suspect it's not too hard to figure out. "But you, man of God," writes Paul to his beloved Timothy, "flee from all this,"—by which he means greed, and the maniacal pursuit of riches—and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Moreover, fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

These are rich, strong, and beautiful verbs. In other words, don't sit around, my dear Timothy, contemplating your spiritual navel. Instead, pursue these things, as a hunter pursues his prey. Pursue a right standing with God—and right living. Emulate the work and person of the Lord Jesus, so to become godly. Have faith. Show love. Endure, and clothe yourself with the gentleness and humility which befit all Christ-like folk. Don't wander from the faith; don't pierce yourselves with many griefs. Fight!!!!, in fact, the good fight of the faith, taking hold of the eternal life which is the reward of all who believe. By so doing, you will become rich toward God. It's not like cashing a cheque. It's a whole way of life, vigorously pursued. Let's do it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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