

With *the* Rich and Famous



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Deut. 8:17, 18; Gen. 13:5, 6; John 3:1–15; Luke 19:1–10; Mark 4:18, 19; Matt. 19:16–26.*

Memory Text: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (*1 Timothy 6:10, NKJV*).

People,” it has been said, “spend money they don’t have, for things they don’t need, in order to impress people they don’t like.” How much truth that statement contains is debatable; what isn’t debatable, however, is that money can have a powerful influence over all of us. Because personal financial habits comprehensively represent an individual’s values, money is actually a spiritual matter. No doubt that’s why the Bible spends a lot of time talking about it.

Also, fame frequently accompanies wealth. Motion picture stars, outstanding athletes, and national politicians often possess both. Famous people exercise influence, which is one form of power. Jesus, however, was not impressed by anyone’s wealth or power. He simply sought to reach these wealthy people for the same reason that He tried to reach everyone else: He wanted them to have the kind of riches that money cannot buy.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 22.

Richly Blessed

As fallen human beings, we are subject to jealousy, especially toward those who have more money than we do (regardless of how much money we ourselves might have already). The Bible, however, does not unconditionally disparage wealth or the wealthy. As with so much else in life, problems arise not from things themselves but from the way in which we relate to them.

What counsel regarding wealth does Scripture offer? *Deut. 8:17, 18; Gen. 13:5, 6; 41:41–43; Job 1:1–3; Dan. 4:28–31.* **Why** was it so important for Israel not to forget where its blessings came from?

There is no question that people such as Abraham, Joseph, Mordecai, Esther, Hezekiah, Josiah, and Jehoshaphat were wealthy and spiritually minded, as well. Nebuchadnezzar’s example, however, shows the danger that comes from making wealth an idol, which is so easy for anyone to do. Conversely, for ancient Israel, acknowledging God’s generosity in this supplying of wealth brought spiritual and material blessings. They were specifically warned not to forget from where those blessings came. (A good lesson for all of us, is it not?)

In short, riches themselves do not indicate spiritual poverty or indifference. There have been some very pious and faithful rich people and some pretty nasty and evil ones, as well. Either way, we should not turn a desire for money into an obsession, nor should we despise those who are wealthy. They need salvation as much as everyone else does.

What are your own attitudes toward the rich? It’s easy to be jealous, is it not? How can you learn to move beyond those feelings and to see wealthy individuals as we all are, as souls in need of a saving knowledge of Jesus?

Nighttime Rendezvous

Wealthy, well-positioned famous people did not intimidate Jesus. Christ neither resented nor revered the social elite. The Savior recognized that financial prosperity could not supply peace, personal contentment, meaningful relationships, or deep-seated purpose. The wealthiest magnate could easily be lonelier, emptier, and angrier than the simplest, poorest, and most humble Christian believer.

Analyze Jesus’ interaction with Nicodemus (*John 3:1–15*). Which events probably stimulated Nicodemus’s interest in Jesus’ message? (Hint: review *John 2:13–25*.) What significance does the darkness play? What is Christ’s central message for Nicodemus?

Nicodemus had witnessed God’s power and authority as revealed through Jesus’ ministry and thus sought to meet with Him, but in secret. Jesus might have refused this secretive overture, but, unwilling that any should perish, He readily accepted this opportunity to bring Nicodemus another step closer to the kingdom. Nicodemus’s poverty was spiritual not material. Enriched with worldly goods and an elevated social position, he was, nonetheless, spiritually starving.

Instinctively, Nicodemus rebelled against any suggestion that knowledgeable Israelites like himself should require conversion. Jesus, however, persisted, presenting Nicodemus with the eternal choice between judgment and salvation. Fearing denunciation and ridicule, Nicodemus refused to accept Christ’s invitation. The interview had apparently failed. That spiritual seed, however, lay buried, slowly germinating beneath his heart’s soil.

“After the Lord’s ascension, when the disciples were scattered by persecution, Nicodemus came boldly to the front. He employed his wealth in sustaining the infant church that the Jews had expected to be blotted out at the death of Christ. In the time of peril he who had been so cautious and questioning was firm as a rock, encouraging the faith of the disciples, and furnishing means to carry forward the work of the gospel. He was scorned and persecuted by those who had paid him reverence in other days. He became poor in this world’s goods; yet he faltered not in the faith which had its beginning in that night conference with Jesus.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 177.

Rich and Infamous

Respectability does not always accompany wealth. Though many do earn their wealth honestly through hard work, industriousness, and the blessings of God, others are outright crooks. Even worse, some make their money legally but immorally, for not everything immoral is illegal, as we all know so well.

Compare Matthew 9:10–13 with Luke 5:27–32, 19:1–10. What motivated the criticism that Jesus faced? What does His reaction to the criticism teach us about grace?

Jericho, Zacchaeus's residence, had become a significant commercial center and housed the Herodian palace. Because of its geographical location, it maintained a customs gathering station. Zacchaeus could have easily enriched himself *legally* as the chief regional customs officer. The narrative, however, suggests that greed induced him to overstep legal boundaries. Zealous patriots despised even honest customs collectors, seeing them as tools of their Roman oppressors, but they greatly disdained dishonest ones such as Zacchaeus. Matthew (Levi) occupied a similar position in Capernaum, under Herod Antipas. Essentially having assumed the role of Roman governmental agents, they were viewed as traitors, or worse yet, thieving traitors.

Nonetheless, Christ was not deterred. Defying social constraints, Jesus dined with them, drawing intense criticism from priests and commoners alike. And, by Jesus' interaction with them, these despised men were eventually won to the gospel. (For example, Matthew not only became one of the Twelve but also an author in the New Testament!)

Again, we should be careful about the kind of spiritual judgments we make about people. Though not all sins are of the same magnitude, and some are certainly socially worse (and with good reason) than others, all of us are equal before God in that we are all in need of the righteousness of Christ.

Think of some well-known but despised (and perhaps understandably so) personage in your culture. Imagine what it would be like if you had a chance to witness to that person. Would you even want to? What would you say?

Gold-plated Message

Analyze the following passages: Mark 4:18, 19; Luke 1:51–53; 6:22–25; 12:16–21; 16:13. What practical advice do these verses contain? What spiritual warnings are found here? How might these Scriptures be utilized by believers to make disciples among the wealthy?

It has been said that we don't own our things; our things own us. How easy it is to be consumed by material possessions; hence, Jesus warned above about "the deceitfulness of riches."

Think through just how easy it is for money, or the pursuit of it, to blind our spiritual priorities. How crucial that we keep this truth in mind as we seek to reach those whose wealth might have already blinded them.

At the same time, we all need a reality check. Some people live as if the one question that they will be asked on Judgment Day is, How much money did you make?

Christ reverses our misplaced priorities. While possessions are not forbidden, they must be placed in perspective. Material goods are God's instruments designed to benefit humanity. They become blessings when shared rather than when hoarded. When hoarded, they become curses.

Materialistic persons, whether rich or poor, are in danger of sacrificing their eternal well-being for temporal pleasures. Eternal satisfaction is exchanged for passing fancies that deteriorate and become outdated. Humans serve God or money, never both. Everyone, rich or poor, needs to be reminded: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (*Mark 8:36*).

This warning about materialism is important for all believers, not only for their own souls' sakes but for outreach as well. After all, how can we warn the wealthy about the potential spiritual dangers contained by their wealth when we ourselves are caught up in the same thing?

Terms of Endangerment

Study Matthew 19:16–26. What spiritual dangers are revealed in this passage? How might believers benefit today’s “rich young rulers”?

He possessed credentials, qualifications, abundant material resources, unquestioned morality, and unlimited self-esteem! The youthful disciple-candidate earnestly requested the Master’s formula for salvation. Should Christ have been flattered? “Finally we’re converting the upper classes!” Apparently no such exhilaration polluted Christ’s thinking. Had this petitioner expected commendation, he was sorely disappointed. Instead, Christ established the Ten Commandments as the minimum standard of obedience. Perhaps the young ruler had congratulated himself. By his self-measurement, he surpassed the first hurdle. Christ, however, had elsewhere demanded righteousness that exceeded that which other religious leaders possessed. Would that standard be lowered to accommodate this candidate? Judas would have been ecstatic. Whoever handled public relations would have been overjoyed. Think what having wealthy supporters aboard could mean image-wise.

Spiritual deficiencies, however, cannot be overlooked nor minimized, for the mission of Jesus is sacred. Compromise cannot be tolerated. Every selfish indulgence must be surrendered. Christ outlined the three-step process: sell your possessions, furnish the poverty-stricken, follow Me. This was spiritually dangerous territory. Although young, the would-be disciple had accumulated a sizable fortune. Luxurious houses, beautiful vineyards, productive fields, fashionable clothing, jewelry collections, servants, livestock, perhaps speedy customized chariots—all these might have flashed through his mind. God’s terms were inflexible. Neither bargaining nor negotiating could reduce the price: everything for Jesus; worldly greatness exchanged for heavenly treasure.

“How many have come to Christ, ready to cast their interests in with his, and, like the rich young ruler, earnestly desiring to inherit eternal life! But when the cost is presented to them—when they are told that they must forsake all, houses and lands, wife and children, and count not their lives dear unto themselves—they go away sorrowful. They want the treasures of heaven, and the life that measures with the life of God, but they are not willing to give up their earthly treasures. They are not willing to surrender all to obtain the crown of life.”—Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 19, 1898.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Nicodemus,” pp. 167–177; “Levi-Matthew,” pp. 272–280; “ ‘One Thing Thou Lackest,’ ” pp. 518–523; “Zacchaeus,” pp. 552–556, in *The Desire of Ages*; “Ministry to the Rich,” pp. 209–216, in *The Ministry of Healing*.

“Much is said concerning our duty to the neglected poor; should not some attention be given to the neglected rich? Many look upon this class as hopeless, and they do little to open the eyes of those, who, blinded and dazed by the glitter of earthly glory, have lost eternity out of their reckoning. Thousands of wealthy men have gone to their graves unwarned. But indifferent as they may appear, many among the rich are soul-burdened. ‘He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase.’ He that says to fine gold, ‘Thou art my confidence,’ has ‘denied the God that is above.’ ‘None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him: (For the redemption of their soul is precious, and it ceaseth forever).’ . . .

“Riches and worldly honor cannot satisfy the soul. Many among the rich are longing for some divine assurance, some spiritual hope. Many long for something that will bring to an end the monotony of their aimless lives. Many in official life feel their need of something which they have not. Few among them go to church; for they feel that they receive little benefit. The teaching they hear does not touch the heart. Shall we make no personal appeal to them?”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 210.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** Wealthy converts played important roles in financially sustaining the infant Christian movement. Though exceptions existed, sacrificial giving characterized the well-to-do believers. God’s kingdom consists of honest-hearted people from every social class. Christians should be neither intimidated nor enamored by wealthy people but should fearlessly proclaim God’s revelation that they may be saved. Understanding that we should never compromise theology and principle, what practical changes can your church make so that wealthy people will find it easier to find fellowship there? How is your church’s evangelistic strategy addressing the need to make disciples among the well-to-do? What specific things can your church realistically do to reach the rich?
- 2** Look at the Bible verses that Ellen G. White used in the statement in Friday’s study. What is the essence of what they are saying? How can we help those who think that their happiness will be found in wealth and material possessions to realize that they are on the wrong track?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Timothy 6:10*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that worldly wealth brings many temptations that people of humble means don't have to contend with.

Feel: Be convicted that God regards the wealthy and important no differently than He does the less privileged.

Do: Realize that underneath each outward exterior—whether rich or poor, famous or unknown—lives a person with identical needs.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Wealth Is Not Bad. “The Love of Money Is the Root of All Evil” (*1 Tim. 6:10; emphasis added*).

A Why are we so easily swayed by displays of worldly wealth? What does that say about us as individuals? As Christians?

B How are the hopes and fears of the wealthy and the powerful different from ours? How are they the same?

II. Feel: Just as Jesus Was Unimpressed by Outward Appearances, so We Must Identify With Others as Persons No Different From Ourselves.

A What did Jesus see in Nicodemus when He spoke to the temple ruler under the cover of darkness?

B What was Jesus' message to Zacchaeus after He invited Himself to Zacchaeus's home?

C What was Jesus' attitude toward the rich young man?

III. Do: The Way We Treat Others Is Based Solely on the Fact That They Are Born in the Image of God.

A What are the most effective ways of treating everyone with the same dignity and respect?

B Share some examples of when you felt valued based on the way you were treated.

► **Summary:** If we follow Christ's example, we can reach people whether they are rich or poor, “important” or “ordinary.”

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *1 Timothy 6:10*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Wealth is a tool. Like fire, wealth can be used in ways that are both constructive and destructive.

Just for Teachers: *Wealth* is a relative term. People who live in highly industrialized countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Japan, France, and Germany would be considered rich by the standards of many others. Yet, most of us wouldn't think of ourselves as rich. We can still learn something from this lesson, however.

Opening Activity/Discussion: Identify the members of your class who have done some international traveling. Have them list some of the “luxuries” that people in developed countries take for granted. Discuss how this colors our perception of wealth.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Remember that the people in your class likely represent a broad spectrum of income levels. Be sure to be sensitive to this fact and resist painting the wealthy with too broad a brush. Not all wealthy people are selfish or morally deficient. Like some of the people we'll discuss in this week's lesson, many are doing the best they can to use their resources to build up God's kingdom.

Bible Commentary

I. The Man Who Came at Night (*Review John 3:1–21 with your class.*)

Just as Jesus attracted people of all ages, ethnicities, and educational levels, He also attracted people of all economic levels. Nicodemus was one of those who felt his heart warmed by the messages that he heard from Jesus' lips.

But there were barriers that prevented Nicodemus from approaching Jesus in broad daylight. The first barrier was his reputation; he was a Pharisee, or a member of the ruling council. Think of all the perks he and his family would forfeit if he had left the council and declared his allegiance to Christ. He might have lost his comfortable house, and his family might have had to accept a lower standard of living.

Beyond that, it was no doubt helpful to have Nicodemus stay on the council. He had access to people who were thought leaders and who would never otherwise understand what Christ's ministry was all about. We can only imagine what kinds of conversations Nicodemus had with his fellow Pharisees.

Consider This: Jesus knows us intimately. His invitation for us to follow Him takes into account all of our gifts and characteristics. That's why we should never make our experience normative and thereby expect others to conform to our experience. Jesus has something for each of us to do. How would your congregation be diminished if everyone was just like you? What gifts would it not have? The church, like creation, thrives on diversity. How is diversity in gifts celebrated in your congregation?

II. The Man Who Wanted to See Jesus *(Review Luke 19:1–10 with your class.)*

Very few in the Jewish culture were as despised as tax collectors. After all, they were agents of the hated Roman oppressors. And it was widely known that they were able to keep for themselves anything beyond that which they were able to collect for the Romans. So, when people saw the tax collectors' fine clothes and large houses, they knew they had been financed by dishonest means.

So, here's Zacchaeus up in the branches of a tree, with all the accoutrements of wealth—his version of \$300 shoes, a Hart, Schaffner & Marx blended wool suit, a \$100 Perry Ellis necktie, gold rings, and maybe even clutching a fine leather briefcase—bought and paid for by the money he was able to extort from his fellow Jews.

If Jesus had read from the same script as the rest of the Jews, He would have called Zacchaeus out right then and there. Think how Jesus could have blasted Zacchaeus and humiliated him in public. He deserved it, didn't he?

Instead, Jesus just said, “ ‘Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today’ ” (*vs. 5, NIV*).

There's something sublime about how Jesus approaches Zacchaeus. He invites Himself to Zacchaeus's home, and soon after Zacchaeus makes this announcement: “ ‘Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount’ ” (*vs. 8, NIV*).

This couldn't have turned out any better if Jesus had planned it that way. Oh, wait, maybe He did!

Consider This: Again, by recognizing Zacchaeus's unique personality, Jesus tailored His appeal so it would accomplish exactly what He wanted.

Jesus didn't ask for Zacchaeus to give away everything he had; He asked only for Zacchaeus to do the right thing. What similar kinds of things do we have to keep in mind in our dealings with people? How do things like age, education, and economic level affect these dealings? With whom are you most comfortable interacting: someone a lot like you or someone different from you? Why?

III. The Man Who Kept It All *(Review Matthew 19:16–26 with your class.)*

This may be one of the most challenging stories in all the Scriptures to interpret. Yet, that hasn't stopped generations of preachers from condemning the young man in it for rejecting Jesus' invitation to sell everything he had and give the proceeds to the poor. It's doubly ironic that in spite of all the sermons we've heard that are based on this story, we still leave church with the same financial resources that we did when we parked our cars in the church parking lot that morning.

Here's the thing: Jesus doesn't want our money; He wants us. We can sell everything, and go around wearing clothes made out of newspaper, but that, by itself, won't get us any closer to Christ.

When God said in the Old Testament, “ ‘Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse’ ” (*Mal. 3:10, NIV*), the unspoken implication was that He was inviting His people to be partners with Him by using the other 90 percent to live in harmony with His heavenly principles.

Consider This: Contrary to the opinion of some, poor disciples are not better disciples. Rather, we're all blessed with material possessions so we can live to bless others. There are rich people (as well as poor people) who use all their disposable income to serve their own selfish desires. There are also wealthy people—such as Bill and Melinda Gates—who have given more to charity than most of us will see in our lifetimes.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why is there this tension in the church (and in the world, for that matter) between the rich and poor? What might we have been supposed to learn from such disparity? What guidance does Scripture offer in resolving such tensions?
- 2 Have you ever been tempted to treat the wealthy among you differently than you treat the poor? Why? What form did it take? What can we take away from the teachings of Jesus to help change our mind-sets and our behavior in this area?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: “Money can’t buy happiness” is how the adage goes. Still, money is a reality we can’t ignore. For many, money is not just a sign of success; it’s a necessary ingredient in survival.

Life Application: The last several years have seen several countries in the world teeter on the brink of financial insolvency. Many individuals and families have seen their financial security vanish.

- ① How should the church be involved in crafting a solution?

- ② Can the church corporately or as individual congregations do anything to mitigate the world’s financial downturn?

- ③ If you had the power to miraculously change the situation, how would you use it?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Do you know the financial health of the members of your class? Do you know which people have been laid off; who, out of financial necessity, are living with their parents; who have kids in Seventh-day Adventist schools; or who is surviving on a fixed income? You’re not just teaching a lesson about wealth (or the lack of it); you’re teaching a lesson about life.

Activity: Invite your class members to share their favorite Bible promises relative to their financial status. Ask: Which is better, to focus on what we don’t have or to thank God for what we do have? Why?

End with prayer, asking God to guide all the students to be faithful stewards, whether they have a lot or a little.