

Rich but Needy

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Date: 01 January 2000

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. . . . saith I am rich and increased with good, and at need of nothing, and knowest not that thou art wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich, and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear, and anoint thine eyes with eyesalves, that thou mayest see. Now there are times when people aren't really able to make an objective assessment, an objective analysis of their own situation. You know, the person you meet who's full of lustre, and full of confidence, and ready to tell you how tremendous they are, and what they've done, what they've achieved, and how what they have, what they own, is better than what anybody else has achieved or owned. You know, fine, that that person is not necessarily the sort of person who's got the most objective analysis, the most objective view of themselves, the most objective analysis of their own situation. You say, ach, my chest all bluster.

Well, I'm sure that most of you have come across the sort of situation that I remember being in, well, more than 20 years ago now, I was spending the summer working in London, and I was staying in the foreign missions club, but of course you get people from all over the world. And one fellow there was laying forth this day in a very loud voice. He's telling us about his very important job.

And, well, he was making out he was such a great fellow, and right enough, compared to the rest of us, I suppose, well, most of us would be fairly scruffy, compared to him anyway. And we wouldn't have all that much by way of money, or the things that they can buy. And this fellow was very expensively dressed, and he was just laden with expensive cameras. And what we eventually learned about his job, was that he was some sort of theatre assistant, in a hospital operating theatre, in a setup where people had the ability to pay, and to pay a great deal of money for their operation. Now, I'm sure that the job he did was a job that did matter. But then what happened was, he turned in a very patronizing way to the little man beside him. And he asked him very condescendingly, and what do you do for a living? Well, it turned out that the little man beside him was actually one of the leading surgeons in India. And he was in London for advanced training in some of the latest surgical techniques. And that man told him very quietly, and very humbly. Now, which of the two of these was looking at themselves more objectively? Which of the two was obsessed in their work more objectively?

[3 : 51] Now, there's nothing new about that sort of situation. And it's something like that lack of objectivity that was to be found in the church at Laodicea. They were full of confidence there, and they were full of self-importance there. They knew it all. And if you'd asked them, they'd have said things are going just great here. Well, to their way of thinking, they were. If you were going to measure their prosperity in terms of how you'd measure the prosperity of a worldly organization, then they'd measure up very well indeed. They'd no shortage of money, they'd got everything that money could buy. Whatever they wanted, they had the wherewithal to buy it. But the question was, was their confidence in themselves in the church at Laodicea there really justified? Or was it not rather the case that their confidence in themselves pointed to the fact that there was something drastically wrong with them? After all, they were supposed to be a Christian church, not just another worldly organization. And if they were a Christian church, where should their hope and their confidence have been? Should it really have been in themselves? Should it not have been in Christ, the head of the church, not themselves? Wasn't it him that they should have been concerned to serve, rather than just themselves? And if they were going to measure themselves against some standard or other, surely it should have been against the standard of God's revealed will, rather than the sort of standards that you'd use to assess worldly organizations round about them. The reality was, and this is what's pointed out to them here in this message, that although they measured up well in the sort of terms that you'd use to assess a worldly organization, when you started to measure them against the sort of criteria that would be appropriate in God's terms, you began to find out that things weren't all that healthy at latest year. In fact, they were just the other way. Instead of being attractive, spiritually they were repulsive.

They'd got precious little, we're told, that was actually worthwhile in God's terms. They were impoverished, very much so. And they were not only desperately impoverished, they simply hadn't got a clue how bad their situation was, because spiritually they were blind. So where did that leave them? Were they just going to be left like that?

Were they in a situation that was completely hopeless? And the answer was no, they weren't in a situation that was hopeless. And what we have here, they given to them is not only an accurate analysis of their situation, but a series of very succinct recommendations as to what they should be doing about it.

There's your situation, there's what you should be doing about it. They were being told that they couldn't afford to remain in the complacent sort of state they were in. They desperately needed to recognize the problems that they had. They needed to identify the problems, accept the problems that were identified for them, and they needed to take appropriate action to put their situation to rights.

They needed to seek wealth. Yes. Of course they needed wealth, but they needed wealth that would last. And they needed clothing. They needed something that would cover them a whole lot better than the designer clothing that they had ever would cover them.

[7 : 38] And they needed medical attention. They needed to get things sorted out so that they could see very clearly the things that would matter, not just for time, but for eternity. Instead of putting worldly things at the top of their list of priorities.

Now, there are three things that are mentioned as a description of the church there at Laodicea, and I'd like to think with you about what's said about them. First of all, we're told that the church there was a church that was confident. So it was.

Then secondly, we're told it's a church that was rich. And lastly, we're told it's a church that was in desperate need.

But first of all, there at Laodicea, you had a church that was confident. Now, the people in the church at Laodicea were confident in their prosperity.

And you could see without any difficulty that these were people who were well off. Extremely well off. There was no shortage of money among the people in the church at Laodicea.

[8 : 54] They were respectable folk. They were an established part of the community there. They knew the people that mattered in Laodicea. And in some instances, the people in the church were the influential people in the community. Now, the whole city of Laodicea had a reputation for being a bit toffee-nosed, a bit upmarket. The city was rich.

And it had a reputation for pride and arrogance. And these things were true. These characteristics were true of the people in the church there as well.

They were proud of themselves. And they reckoned that everything had just gone fine for them. They reckoned that their present state was everything that could be desired.

If there were problems in churches anywhere, well, it certainly wasn't among themselves to their own way of thinking. As far as they were concerned, they were a fine example of what a church should be like.

And their thought was, well, if everyone was like us, there'd be no problems. All that was needed, they were thinking, was for other people to copy them.

[10 : 11] The world would be a much better place, they thought, if every church was just like they were. But you see where the problem was. Their confidence was in themselves and not in God.

And they weren't looking at themselves or their situation objectively either. And they weren't the last to be in that sort of situation. And that's the sort of situation that we can be in ourselves if we don't look at ourselves in the light of God's word.

You see, it's not a question of what do you think of yourself or what do I think of myself. It's not a question of what do other people think about us. It's not a question of how we compare with other people, how we measure up against them.

The question is how do we stand in relation to God's standards. Our attention has got to be not on ourselves or on the folk around us, but on God first and foremost.

It wasn't that way at Laodicea. The people there in the church at Laodicea were full of confidence in their own ability. And in terms of worldly things, they were able people.

[11 : 28] Laodicea was a successful city, a prosperous city. And they were part of the success. They were amongst the wealth creators of the city.

And the outward indications of success in worldly terms were real enough and evident enough. When it came to worldly things, the people in the church at Laodicea were confident and they were competent.

It wasn't the case of them having ability in worldly things and not sort of putting it to practical use. It wasn't the case of having any amount of confidence and no competence or any amount of competence but no confidence.

They had the competence to do worldly things effectively. They had the confidence to put them into practice. But the trouble was that their competence was all to do with worldly things.

When it came to spiritual things, they hadn't that clue. They hadn't that clue even where to begin. They knew nothing and they cared even less. And what a dreadful comment that was on them.

[12 : 40] So, you know, if you look at the evidence of history, it's a demonstrable fact that there's relatively few of God's people have been found amongst the rich and successful in worldly terms.

If you were a statistician, you'd say there's a negative correlation between wealth or worldly success on the one hand and sincere Christianity on the other.

It's all very well having confidence in your ability. But success in worldly things is different from success in spiritual things.

And the hard fact is that though our ability and our confidence may take us a long way in worldly terms, it won't take us anywhere in spiritual things.

And any confidence we have in our ability as a means of progress in spiritual things is misplaced confidence. What we need is not brains, it's not cleverness, it's the working of God's Holy Spirit in us.

[13 : 47] And if the working of God's Holy Spirit is evident in us, then it'll show, how will it show? You might well ask. It'll show in the form of humility.

We won't be full of pushy, misplaced confidence. The very fact that these Laodiceans were pushy and confident when it came to spiritual things was an indication that they lacked what was vital.

They lacked the working of God's Holy Spirit in them. They lacked a proper humility. They were confident in their prosperity.

They were confident in their ability. Weren't the right things to be confident in at all. And they were confident in the future as well. They reckoned they had it made.

They reckoned that if they could make worldly organizations work, then they could make the church work. They could make it prosper. But they couldn't have been more wrong.

[14 : 52] Their confidence in the future was misplaced. And it would stay as misplaced confidence until, instead of being confident in themselves or in the folk around them, it would be turned about so that they'd be aware of their own sinfulness and their own inadequacy.

And until there'd be a humble repentance before God in them for their sins and a living trust in the provision that he's made in Christ.

And until there'd be a humble dependence on the working of God's Holy Spirit in them. Guiding them to do what's worthwhile and giving them the strength and the ability that they needed to do it.

Now, their confidence in the future was wrong because it was confidence in their own ability. But you can have a legitimate confidence in the future, doesn't matter how bleak things may look at times.

The only way that we can have a legitimate confidence is if our hope and if our confidence is not in ourselves or in other people, but in God and in his provision for the needs of people like us.

[16 : 08] They were confident, but confident in the wrong way. What we need is confidence, not in ourselves, but in God and in his provision for the needs of people like us. Now, one of the other things that's said about them is that they were rich.

In financial terms, they were well off. And it wasn't just the people as individuals either. It wasn't even just the city that was rich. It was the church that was rich as well in terms of money.

The people had made the church rich in money terms so that they could buy whatever they wanted to buy. Now, I know that seems very strange indeed to us.

In fact, it seems a dream world, as it were. We used a situation in which the church never seems to have enough money, and we're always been told about how much more the church needs.

And even if for a while we're not having it battering at our ears, well, it's certainly not because the church couldn't use more money.

[17 : 15] If everything were going to be done to the church that needed to be done to or for the church organization or its property, it would use up a vastly greater amount of money than the church's access to.

But that's not how it was at Laodicea. There's plenty of money there. In terms of the balance sheet, if you could think of it in that way, the church there was a very healthy financial situation indeed.

But that immediately raises for us the question of whether that's the relevant sort of way to measure the prosperity of a church.

Now, money is a part of the story. It does matter. But what place does it really have? And what place should it really have?

It matters that we should give as God has prospered us. Now that does matter. And it's a responsibility that you and I have before God. And we ought to be giving both because God has a legitimate claim on our worldly good things.

[18 : 27] And we ought to be giving because if our relationship with God is right, our love for God will be a greater love than our desires for anything else at all. But money can never buy us a right relationship with God.

And money can never buy a church that's rich in spiritual things. It's important. But it's not the most important way to assess a church.

And it's not the most important way to assess an individual's relationship with God. There was a church at Laodicea that was rich in financial terms. But that didn't mean it was rich in spiritual things.

It was a church that as a result of being rich in terms of money, was rich in terms of worldly things. They'd got everything that money could buy. The equipment was fantastic.

And you can understand how some people in our own time might be envious. Wouldn't it be great if we got no worries at all about the maintenance of our building or the equipment that we need for the job in hand?

[19 : 33] But you can have the most comfortable, well-equipped church building in the world, and yet be lacking in the most important thing of all. It's no use having the most exotic of church buildings if there's not the sound preaching of the gospel.

If there's not the whole word of God being faithfully set forth without fear, without favor. If there's not the same thing, then you can have the most important thing. Richness, in terms of worldly things, isn't the thing that matters most.

They were rich, perhaps, in terms of what money could buy. And they could see no need. Or perhaps we should say, but they could see no need.

You know, the people in the church at Laodicea were blissfully unaware of the situation they were in, really. As far as they were concerned, everything was just great. They couldn't see their need because they were applying the wrong sort of criteria altogether, as they were looking at the state of things in the church at Laodicea.

It was as if they were blind, and the reality was that though their eyes could see physically, they were spiritually blind. Now, you know, we all know how someone can have medical problems without knowing about them, for a while anyway.

[20 : 53] But sooner or later, the problems are going to come to the surface. If they're problems, they will come to the surface. And it can be that way with spiritual things as well.

And just because the church at Laodicea didn't see that it had problems, didn't mean that it had no problems. You see, a church is very much more than just a club, or a society, or a charity.

Church doesn't even exist. A Christian church doesn't exist just for the immediate interest of its members, or those connected with it.

A church, a Christian church exists to glorify God. And it's not simply the church of those who are connected with it. It's the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And none of us dare forget that these people in the church at Laodicea couldn't see their needs. They thought they were rich.

[21 : 59] But they weren't seeing things as they really were. They were confident. They were rich in money terms. But the last thing we're told is that they were in desperate need. And they were told, look, here's what you need.

You need something. You need three things. You need assets. You need wealth. You think you're rich, but you actually need wealth.

You think that you're really stylish in your designer clothing. Well, you're in need of clothing, alright.

Because spiritually you're naked. And you think you've got a great analysis of the situation, and you're in great health. Well, there's something desperately wrong with your sight.

And you need your sight sorted out. So first of all, you need gold. Fried in the fire. That's what you need. The reality of their situation was that they were wretched, and miserable, and poor.

[23 : 07] Even if they didn't think of themselves as poor. They were impoverished spiritually. And if they were looking for wealth, the sort of wealth that they needed was the sort of wealth that they would find if they listened to and took to heart the message of the gospel.

And that's far more precious than gold. If they took that to heart, they'd find the love and faith that they'd enjoy as a result of that would be far more satisfying than anything that they could get out of financial wealth.

And what's more, they could count on it lasting in a way that money never would. They'd find it precious beyond worth. And yet not for sale in money terms.

It would be the best bargain they'd ever get. And the most precious asset and the most durable asset that they'd ever have. That's what they needed.

Wealth. Something far more precious, even than gold. They needed gold, pride in the fire. The sort of wealth they would have from hearing and taking on board the message of the gospel.

[24 : 22] And at least for ourselves, the question of what is our hearts set on? What are we directing our energy towards? Because there's nothing more worthwhile than what God offers. It's worthwhile in terms of the satisfaction it gives.

And it's worthwhile in terms of how it lasts through all the difficulties of this life. And through all eternity. They needed wealth.

But they were also in need of clothing. Now if you'd lived in Laodicea, well, it may seem very strange to us. You don't see that many people go down the street in the port or in Inver in real designer clothing.

But the very idea of somebody in Laodicea going out without really expensive designer clothing on, would horrify a lot of the folk there. But the reality of the situation of the church in Laodicea, was that spiritually, things were far worse than the leading people of the church going out without any clothes at all on.

You see, their bodies were well clothed with the best clothing, the most exotic clothing that money could buy. But spiritually, they were naked. And if they'd had a right outlook on things, they'd have been embarrassed about it.

[25 : 39] It was worse than going out dressed in rags or having no clothes at all. And yet it was a mark of how bad things were amongst them. But they weren't embarrassed even by it because they didn't realise their spiritual problem.

What they needed desperately was the spiritual equivalent of the best of clothing. Clean and beautiful and really suited to their needs.

They needed a spiritual provision that would cover them and protect them and keep them warm and beautify them. Now, I suppose you might well ask the question, how much do people spend on clothes?

How much time do people spend choosing clothes? What about when it comes to ourselves? Do we spend as much time worrying about our relationship to God as we do worrying about the clothes that we wear?

Here's a reminder that our need of a right relationship with God is far, far greater than our need of clothes. How much time do we wear? We need wealth. They needed wealth. Gold cried in the fire.

[26 : 49] They needed white clothing. They needed eye ointment, we're told. Because they weren't seeing streets, spiritually. That eyes that might be okay.

But when it came to the things that mattered most, the hard fact is that they were blind to them. Blind to the truths of the gospel. blind, they weren't seeing how relevant God's message was to their own situation.

What they needed was God's Holy Spirit working in them, opening up their understanding so that they could see the reality of their situation and see the need of a right relationship with God on the basis of repentance and faith and new obedience.

And for ourselves, we ought to be praying that God would enable us to see clearly the things that are of eternal importance. Now, I'd like to leave with you three thoughts from this.

First of all, when it comes to confidence, what about your own confidence? Is your confidence in yourself? Or is it in somebody else or some other people?

[27 : 58] Or is it confidence in God's provision for the needs of repentant sinners? Because that's where it ought to be. Not in ourselves, not in folk around us, but in God's provision for the needs of repentant sinners.

Then secondly, everybody is concerned to a greater or lesser extent about money. And, well, if you don't have very much of it, if you don't have enough of it, it may be a constant worry.

But here's the question. Are you more concerned about financial wealth than you are about spiritual wealth? Because what we ought to be concerned about first and foremost is our need of spiritual wealth.

And lastly, when we think about the needs that these people in Laodicea have, what about yourself?

Are you concerned that you be spiritually rich, spiritually well-clothed, and spiritually clear-sighted? May God grant that that's where our attention will be fixed.

[29 : 06] And may he bless to us these few thoughts from his own word. Let's join together again in prayer. Let's pray. Almighty and eternal God, we pray indeed that thou hast blessed us thy word, that thou hast righted into our very way of thinking.

We pray that we might want more than anything else the sort of wealth that we're pointed to here in this part of the book of Revelation that we've read and thought about.

That we might want gold dried in the fire. That we might want what thy word holds out to us. And we pray that we might want to be not simply well-clothed in a physical sense, but that we might want more than anything else the blessings that our right relationship with God can give us.

And we pray that our desire might be that thou hast opened up our understanding of spiritual things, that we may see that we might grasp the relevance to ourselves and the absolutely vital importance of what thy word is to say about our right relationship with thee on the basis of repentance and faith and new obedience.

We pray that thou hast make us rich in spiritual terms. Because that's richness, that's wealth that we ought to want and want urgently.

[30 : 33] Continue with us now, we pray, as we sing our closing song of praise. Come with us to the further service this day, we pray. We ask it with the forgiveness of our sins in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.