

Rich People

R. David Pogge
6 May 2012

It is hard for rich people to be saved.

Part 1

Our web site says the title of this broadcast is “Rich People” because it is too dangerous to give the real title. “Rich People” isn’t a very good title because it doesn’t tell you what I’m going to say about rich people. Am I going to talk about people who are financially rich or spiritually rich? What am I going to say about rich people? The title, “Rich People,” is just so ambiguous that it isn’t a very good program title.

The real program title is a really good title, but it is unprintable because some people might misunderstand it. I’m more than a little afraid to tell you the real title.

Jesus would not have been afraid to use the real title because He often said things that He knew people might misunderstand, but He said them anyway. For example, He said to be saved you have to “drink His blood and eat His body,” knowing that some people would think you had to be a cannibal to be a Christian. When He said this, some people said, “That’s a hard teaching!” and stopped following Him.

Jesus also said that if they tore down the temple, He could rebuild it in three days. That statement was one of the main reasons they crucified Him. They thought Jesus was a lunatic who thought He could rebuild Herod’s temple in three days.

Why wasn’t Jesus afraid to say outrageous things? Maybe He said outrageous things that could be misunderstood because He knew more people would talk about them. He knew that it is necessary to make points dramatically to make people remember them.

The real title of this program is informative, dramatic, and memorable; but it could easily be misunderstood. If I put the real title on the web site some people might read it with the wrong inflection, and get entirely the wrong idea. The title isn’t “Rich People Can Go to Hell! It is “Rich People CAN Go to Hell.” It is the warning Jesus gave to people who thought that material wealth was a sign of God’s approval, and therefore a guarantee of salvation.

Three out of four Gospel writers quoted Jesus as saying that, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to be saved.” That shocking statement provoked discussion. That’s precisely why Jesus said it that way.

Jesus said that it is hard for rich people to be saved; but it’s not impossible. I certainly expect Abraham, Job, Joseph of Aramethia, Nicodemus, and some other wealthy people to be saved; but Jesus clearly said that the list of rich people who will be in heaven is a short list. The Bible is very clear as to why it is hard for rich people to be saved.

In Revelation 3, Jesus told the church at Laodicea,

You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the

fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. (Rev. 3:17-18)

Hosea said, in chapter 12 of his book,

Ephraim boasts, "I am very rich; I have become wealthy. With all my wealth they will not find in me any iniquity or sin." (Hosea 12:8)

Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, wrote in Proverbs 18:11,

The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it an unscalable wall. (Proverbs 18:11)

Jesus explained Solomon's proverb in Luke, chapter 12.

And he told them this 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." (Luke 12:16-21)

These verses tell us that rich people might think that their only problem is that their barns might not be big enough to hold all their riches. Rich people might trust in their money to save them. If so, they will think they don't need a savior. If they don't think need one, they won't have one.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell this story:

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: '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 declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”

Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.” (Mark 10:17-27)

Ellen White commented on this encounter in Chapter 57 of her biography of Christ, Desire of Ages. Here are some excerpts from that chapter.

And when He was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeled to Him, and asked Him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?"

The young man who asked this question was a ruler. He had great possessions, and occupied a position of responsibility. He saw the love that Christ manifested toward the children brought to Him; he saw how tenderly He received them, and took them up in His arms, and his heart kindled with love for the Saviour. He felt a desire to be His disciple. He was so deeply moved that as Christ was going on His way, he ran after Him, and kneeling at His feet, asked with sincerity and earnestness the question so important to his soul and to the soul of every human being, "Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?"

"Why callest thou Me good?" said Christ, "there is none good but One, that is, God." Jesus desired to test the ruler's sincerity, and to draw from him the way in which he regarded Him as good. Did he realize that the One to whom he was speaking was the Son of God? What was the true sentiment of his heart?

This ruler had a high estimate of his own righteousness. He did not really suppose that he was defective in anything, yet he was not altogether satisfied. He felt the want of something that he did not possess. Could not Jesus bless him as He blessed the little children, and satisfy his soul want?

In reply to this question Jesus told him that obedience to the commandments of God was necessary if he would obtain eternal life; and He quoted several of the commandments which show man's duty to his fellow men. The ruler's answer was positive: "All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?"

Christ looked into the face of the young man, as if reading his life and searching his character. He loved him, and He hungered to give him that peace and grace and joy which would materially change his character. "One thing thou lackest," He said; "go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow Me."

Christ was drawn to this young man. He knew him to be sincere in his assertion, "All these things have I kept from my youth." The Redeemer longed to create in him that discernment which would enable him to see the necessity of heart devotion and Christian goodness. He longed to see in him a humble and contrite heart, conscious of the supreme love to be given to God, and hiding its lack in the perfection of Christ.

Jesus saw in this ruler just the help He needed if the young man would become a colaborer with Him in the work of salvation. If he would place himself under Christ's guidance, he would be a power for good. In a marked degree the ruler could have represented Christ; for he possessed qualifications, which, if he were united with the Saviour, would enable him to become a divine force among men. Christ, seeing into his character, loved him. Love for Christ was awakening in the ruler's heart; for love begets love. Jesus longed to see him a co-worker with Him. He longed to make him like Himself, a mirror in which the likeness of God would be reflected. He longed to develop the excellence of his character, and sanctify it to the Master's use. If the ruler had then given himself to Christ, he would have grown in the atmosphere of His presence. If he had made this choice, how different would have been his future!

"One thing thou lackest," Jesus said. "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow Me." Christ read the ruler's heart. Only one thing he lacked, but that was a vital principle. He needed the love of God in the soul. This lack, unless supplied, would prove fatal to him; his whole nature would become corrupted. By indulgence, selfishness would strengthen. That he might receive the love of God, his supreme love of self must be surrendered.

Christ gave this man a test. He called upon him to choose between the heavenly treasure and worldly greatness. The heavenly treasure was assured him if he would follow Christ. But self must yield; his will must be given into Christ's control. The very holiness of God was offered to the young ruler. He had the privilege of becoming a son of God, and a coheir with Christ to the heavenly treasure. But he must take up the cross, and follow the Saviour in the path of self-denial.

...

The ruler was quick to discern all that Christ's words involved, and he became sad. If he had realized the value of the offered gift, quickly would he have enrolled himself as one of Christ's followers. He was a member of the honored council of the Jews, and Satan was tempting him with flattering prospects of the future. He wanted the heavenly treasure, but he wanted also the temporal advantages his riches would bring him. He was sorry that such conditions existed; he desired eternal life, but he was not willing to make the sacrifice. The cost of eternal life seemed too great, and he went away sorrowful; "for he had great possessions."

... To give up his earthly treasure, that was seen, for the heavenly treasure, that was unseen, was too great a risk. He refused the offer of eternal life, and went away, and ever after the world was to receive his worship.

Thousands are passing through this ordeal, weighing Christ against the world; and many choose the world. ...

Christ's dealing with the young man is presented as an object lesson. God has given us the rule of conduct which every one of His servants must follow. Only those who will become co-workers with Christ, only those who will say, Lord, all I have and all I am is Thine, will be acknowledged as sons and daughters of God. All should consider what it means to desire heaven, and yet to turn away because of the conditions laid down. Think of what it means to say "No" to Christ. The ruler said, No, I cannot give You all. Do we say the same? The Saviour offers to share with us the work God has given us to do. He offers to use the means God has given us, to carry forward His work in the world. Only in this way can He save us.

The ruler's possessions were entrusted to him that he might prove himself a faithful steward; he was to dispense these goods for the blessing of those in need. So God now entrusts men with means, with talents and opportunities, that they may be His agents in helping the poor and the suffering. He who uses his entrusted gifts as God designs becomes a co-worker with the Saviour. He wins souls to Christ, because he is a representative of His character.

To those who, like the young ruler, are in high positions of trust and have great possessions, it may seem too great a sacrifice to give up all in order to follow Christ. But this is the rule of conduct for all who would become His disciples. Nothing short of obedience can be accepted. Self-surrender is the substance of the teachings of Christ. ...

When Christ's followers give back to the Lord His own, they are accumulating treasure which will be given to them when they shall hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant; . . . enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." "Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." Matt. 25:23; Heb. 12:2. The joy of seeing souls redeemed, souls eternally saved, is the reward of all that put their feet in the footprints of Him who said, "Follow Me." ¹

[Music – Larry deFluiter and JoAn Witzel, “I’d Rather Have Jesus”]

Part 2

In the first segment, we saw that dependence upon wealth can be an obstacle to salvation. Rich people are often reluctant to trade earthly treasure for heavenly treasure. Rich people tend to think they don't need a savior because they are used to getting everything they want simply by paying for it. Hopefully, rich people listening to the first segment were inspired to re-evaluate their lives and make some wise decisions about how to live their lives and use their money and power.

In this segment, however, I want to focus on the responsibility of your church to share the gospel with rich people. Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” He didn't say this to encourage us not waste our time evangelizing the rich. He said this to keep us from being discouraged when rich people reject the message. Jesus told us this parable to acknowledge that it is very hard to save rich people because they think that they can trust in their wealth, and don't need to trust in God.

I've noticed that whenever a church holds an evangelistic series, very few wealthy people come. If they don't come to hear the message, they won't be converted by the message.

Perhaps few rich people come because most outreach programs aren't designed to attract rich people. For example, many churches freely give away used clothing, and canned food. Of course, that's a good thing to do, and I certainly don't want to discourage anyone from doing it. My point is simply that rich people aren't attracted by used clothing and food that has passed its expiration date. If you are fishing for rich people, that's not the right bait to use.

Clearly, it is easier to share the gospel with poor people than rich people. Poor people recognize their need. They are looking for a better life. We Christians can give it to them.

¹ Ellen White, *Desire of Ages*, Chapter 57, "One Thing Thou Lackest", <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/da/da57.html>

In light of that, should we just write off rich people as lost causes? Should we concentrate our evangelism on the “low hanging fruit” that is easy to reach; or should we get out a ladder to try to get those few apples at the very top of the tree?

All souls are worth the same in God’s eyes, regardless of how much money they have. So, one could easily argue that it is better use of resources to save 99 poor people than to save 1 rich person. Since time is short, and resources are limited, we should try to save as many people as we can, as fast as we can. Since it is easier to convince poor people of their need of a savior, we should concentrate on them.

There are two fallacies with this argument. First, Jesus did say a good shepherd would leave the 99 sheep to save the 1 lost sheep, so, in Jesus’ opinion, it isn’t simply a numbers game. God wants to save every individual, no matter how difficult that individual is to reach. Jesus wants us to save the 99 poor sheep and the 1 rich sheep. Evangelism isn’t an either/or proposition.

Second, there is a practical aspect to evangelism. Specifically, it takes money to reach the poor. If everyone in the congregation is poor, you won’t have the money to give away free food and clothing. The apostles depended upon the generosity of a few rich people for them to save the less fortunate.

Your church, and our radio station, both depend upon the generosity of people who believe that what your church, and our radio station, are doing is important. All donations are needed—including the proverbial widow’s mite. All donations, large and small, are important. But operating your church, and our radio station, takes a lot of money. Rich people are in a position to give more money to the cause of Christ than poor people are. We can give rich people the opportunity to help spread God’s word through large donations; but they won’t do it unless they hear and accept the Gospel call. We have to tell the Good News to rich and poor alike.

So, how, you ask, can your church take the gospel to rich people? I’m glad you asked. I’ll tell you, right after this song.

[Music – Becky Richardson, “Fill My Cup, Lord”]

Part 3

Jesus said we will always have the poor around us always, so there will always be opportunity to give them the message. But we will only be able to evangelize the rich during certain opportune times. We Christians need to recognize those opportunities and take advantage of them.

In Part 1 of this broadcast we read some scriptures that said rich people tend to trust in money instead of God. It logically follows that rich people won’t listen to the Gospel unless they fear that their money might not be able to save them. If their stocks drop half their value over a period of one year, they might fear losing everything. If their 401K loses much of its value, or if the government starts spending money recklessly, which could lead to dramatic inflation, wiping out the value of savings accounts, rich people might feel afraid. If it looks like the government is going to play Robin Hood, stealing from the rich to give to the poor, the rich might get worried. If real estate values plummet, the rich might get worried. If unemployment goes up, the rich might get worried.

So, if any of those things ever happen, it might be a good time to tell the rich people they need to trust in Jesus instead of trusting in their money. Ooh. Come to think of it, maybe now is one of those rare opportunities to take our message to the rich!

But who, you ask, is rich? That's easy. You know the answer. Anybody who has more money than you is rich! That's just about everybody else, isn't it? You have lots of friends, neighbors, and co-workers who are rich. Many of them need to hear the Gospel.

How do you bring up the topic? That's the wonderful thing. You don't have to. They will. I can guarantee you that in the near future someone will start a conversation with you about the stock market, inflation, taxation, real estate values, or unemployment. That's all anyone seems to be talking about these days. You don't have to start the conversation. You just have to guide it.

People are starting these conversations because they are afraid. They are worried about what could happen in the future. Get them to express their fears to you. Ask them things like,

- How low do you think the stock market is going to go?
- What are you going to do if the market really crashes?
- Suppose the value of a dollar drops to one cent, and your savings are worth 1/100th of what they are now, how will that affect you?
- Can you afford to pay much more income tax?

Listen to what people are saying. Find out what they are worried about. Ask questions that relate to their fears. Get them to verbalize their fears. Get them to speculate about a worst-case scenario.

You don't need to know anything about the economy. In fact, it might be better if you don't. That makes it easier for you to ask them questions about the economy. Let them tell you how bad things are.

You don't need to argue with them about the economy. In fact, you want to agree with them. You may not agree with the details, but you certainly agree with the basic conclusion, which is, in these times of financial uncertainty, you can't depend on money to save you.

So, step one is to let them begin the conversation about any part of the economy that worries them. Step two is to get them to convince you how bad the economy is, and let them tell you how frightened you should be about it. Step three is to agree with them. Validate their fears. Yes, the economy is in terrible trouble. It's frightening. We could all lose everything.

You have let them take the conversation exactly to where you wanted it to go. They've done all the talking. Now it is time to take control. Tell them that even though it is a frightening situation, you aren't worried. Show your confidence. You sleep just fine at night.

You can see the signs of the times. You know we are living in the last days. The Bible has predicted this time of trouble; but you know that God is in control, and things are proceeding as predicted. Therefore, you have confidence that God will take care of you.

Since you know these things, you have something they want. You have peace in a difficult situation. You have confidence that God will take care of you. They can have what you have. You can help them get it. They want it. You've got it. Give it to them.

There is strength and comfort in the Bible. Psalm 49 explains it all.

Hear this, all you peoples; listen, all who live in this world, both low and high, rich and poor alike:

My mouth will speak words of wisdom; the utterance from my heart will give understanding.

I will turn my ear to a proverb; with the harp I will expound my riddle:

Why should I fear when evil days come, when wicked deceivers surround me—those who trust in their wealth and boast of their great riches?

No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him that he should live on forever and not see decay (the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough).

For all can see that wise men die; the foolish and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others.

Their tombs will remain their houses forever, their dwellings for endless generations, though they had named lands after themselves.

But man, despite his riches, does not endure; he is like the beasts that perish.

This is the fate of those who trust in themselves, and of their followers, who approve their sayings.

Like sheep they are destined for the grave, and death will feed on them.

The upright will rule over them in the morning; their forms will decay in the grave, far from their princely mansions.

But God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself.

**Do not be overawed when a man grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases;
for he will take nothing with him when he dies, his splendor will not descend with him.**

**Though while he lived he counted himself blessed— and men praise you when you prosper—
he will join the generation of his fathers, who will never see the light of life .**

A man who has riches without understanding is like the beasts that perish.

We also have Psalm 23.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

**Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.**

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

If rich people knew what you have, they would want it, especially now. It doesn't cost you anything to give it to them. You have to give it to them because, if you don't, those rich people can go to Hell.

[Music – Steve Green, “People Need the Lord”]