



Being Content

Dewayne Bryant, M.A.

How would you like to make \$8,000 dollars for throwing one pitch in a baseball game? After signing a \$28 million contract with the New York Yankees, that's approximately what Roger Clemens makes every time he throws the ball. If you prefer football, in 2004 Indianapolis Colts quarterback Peyton Manning averaged \$70,000 per pass. For those basketball lovers, Michael Jordan made roughly \$10,000 for every minute he stepped onto the hardwood in a Chicago Bulls uniform.

In less than five minutes, a sports superstar can make more money than most people will earn in a year. Careers in music and film can be just as lucrative. Because this wealth is so fabulous, so unreal, the average bystander is often left in wide-eyed wonder thinking: **What would I do with all that money?** Television is there to answer the question for us. Shows like MTV's *Cribs* take us on personal tours of the homes of music, movie, and sports icons. We are given a backstage pass to see the nearly vulgar opulence of the rich—which cars they drive, where they eat and sleep, what activities they enjoy. We get to live vicariously through them, admiring their wealth in a 30-minute show that takes us to the doorstep of fortune, even if we will never step inside.

Believers have approached wealth in different ways. Many a preacher has railed against the dangers of worldly wealth, lauding the poor while excoriating the rich. Others have given up fame and fortune, trading in worldly goods for the simplicity of poverty. On the other hand, some have amassed fortunes and done incredible work for the Church out of their generosity, showing that having money is not inherently evil. There are plenty of people in Scripture who enjoyed prosperity and still lived godly lives.

Joseph is one of the greatest rags-to-riches stories ever told. As a teenager, his brothers sell him into slavery. He's later thrown in prison after being unjustly accused of sexual assault. By the time Joseph meets Pharaoh, he is nothing more than still a prisoner when he meets him in a foreign land with no hope of making anything of himself. But with a God-given ability to interpret dreams and a little creative ingenuity of his own, Joseph becomes the prime minister of Egypt. In a land where the pharaoh is god, Joseph finishes a close second.

The account of Solomon is like an ancient episode of Robin Leach's *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. He is a major player on the international scene, ruling a mini-empire situated on impor-

tant trade routes running between Egypt and Mesopotamia. For the average person his income would have been mind-boggling. Imagine having 700 wives and 300 concubines to buy for on Valentine's Day when the average person barely had enough to eat, and you get the picture.

Not everyone was so magnanimous with his money. The prophets frequently indicted the Northern Kingdom for its failure to treat the poor fairly (cf. Amos 4:1-3). One face of Israel's luxury can be seen in some important artifacts called the Samaria ivories. These beautiful works of ivory have a variety of animal and floral designs. Some are in the shape of a window with the face of a person gazing outward. The ivory trade seems to have done well in Israel. 1 Kings 22:39 notes that Ahab had built an "ivory house," probably a palace decorated with expensive ivory inlays. Despite his power and

The message of Jesus is a simple one: serve God first and contentment will follow.

fortune, Ahab went down in history as one of the worst rulers in the Bible, and the people he ruled were guilty of abusing the poor for the sake of their own gain (Amos 8:5-7).

Centuries after the glory days of Israel had come and gone, Jesus tells his disciples, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:25 ESV). Many people assume that Jesus couldn't possibly mean the **literal** eye of a needle. Many popular sources insist there was a gate called the "Eye of the Needle" somewhere in Jerusalem. It was small, and a camel would have had an extremely difficult time making it through, but it wasn't impossible. The fact is that no such gate has ever been found, and the earliest sources that mention it come from over eight hundred years after the time of Christ. Jesus really is talking about the eye of a needle. Sound ridiculous? You bet.

That's exactly what He intended.

People in Jesus' day believed that material wealth was a sign of God's blessing, almost as if there were an inseparable link between piety and prosperity. Indeed, believers throughout history have thought affluence to be a sign

of God's favor. Going against popular belief, Jesus focused the attention of the disciples on a correct understanding of wealth. He used an exaggerated illustration to open the discussion, to which they asked, "Then who then can be saved?" In other words, "We know the rich are blessed by God, so if they can't be saved, who can?"

The answer is simple: material wealth is not an indication of membership in God's Kingdom. Jesus wasn't teaching that there is a salary cap on who can enter heaven. He was highlighting the fact that wealth can bar a person from heaven not because of having it, but because of his or her attitude toward it. This was illustrated beautifully in the episode involving Zacchaeus. Tax collectors often abused their power in order to line their pockets with extra cash, and this "wee little man" was no exception. After Jesus ate at his house, he all but confessed to cheating other people (Luke 19:8). It is only after he promised to repay his ill-gotten gain that Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9). Clearly in the case of this man, wealth was an impediment to his spiritual standing with God.

Living in a well-to-do, capitalistic society where few people want for necessities of life, it is easy to be sidetracked by the lures of affluence. There is a series of credit card commercials asking the question, "What's in your wallet?" It joins the veritable chorus of worldly voices begging us to focus on our mortgage, checking account, or retirement fund. Everywhere we look, there are ads to refinance our homes and take advantage of low interest rates. Lottery commercials inspire financial fantasies about fabulous wealth to be had for virtually nothing. **We are taught to be discontent with what we have, ever striving to stay ahead of the Joneses at all costs.**

The message of contentment is an ancient one that should be reexamined in our culture of prosperity. A four thousand-year-old Sumerian proverb says, "He who has much silver may be happy; he who has much grain may be glad; but he who has nothing can sleep." This message is echoed in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus tells His audience to store their treasures in heaven and let God handle the concerns of the world. Some chase after food and clothing, but Christ says, "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33 NIV). The message of Jesus is a simple one: serve God first and contentment will follow. ▲