

Wealth and Contentment

I grew up reading Reader's Digest jokes. As I was writing about wealth and contentment I was reminded of one of my favorites.

Lying on his deathbed, the rich, miserly old man calls to his long-suffering wife. "I want to take all my money with me," he tells her. "So promise me you'll put it in the casket." After the man dies, his widow attends the memorial service with her best friend. Just before the undertaker closes the coffin, she places a small metal box inside. Her friend looks at her in horror. "Surely," she says, "you didn't put the money in there." "I did promise him I would," the widow answers. "So I got it all together, deposited every penny in my account, and wrote him a check. If he can cash it, he can spend it."

No study of the book of Proverbs would be complete without considering the connection between wisdom and wealth. So what does Proverbs have to say about wealth and contentment?

Proverbs presents wealth as a fruit of wisdom.

Proverbs 21:20. Precious treasure and oil are in a wise man's dwelling, but a foolish man devours it.

For starters, generally speaking wisdom leads someone to maintain the sort of lifestyle that will often lead to an abundance of resources. Like all Proverbs, this is not a promise, but a general reality of the world. Wealth is not a measurement for wisdom because it is often gained in a variety of ways, but growth in resources is a product of godly wisdom. God made the world to be fruitful, and living in it according to God's wisdom will lead to the gathering of fruit.

Proverbs 8:18. Riches and honor are with me, enduring wealth and righteousness.

So wealth is portrayed in Proverbs as a generally positive thing.

Conversely, Proverbs explains that foolishness leads to squandering resources. Now I want to be careful here to keep us from making a direct correlation with individuals level of wealth or income and their wisdom and foolishness. That being said, Proverbs gives a major warning about the connection between foolishness and sin, and the squandering of resources that lead to material fruitfulness.

Proverbs 21:17. Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich.

The love for pleasure here carries a negative connotation. Think of it as having a dominating passion for pleasure over and above wisdom that leads to hard work, diligence, planning for the future, or leaving an inheritance for children. We especially think of the desire for sinful pleasure like we see highlighted in Proverbs 29:3.

Proverbs 29:3. He who loves wisdom makes his father glad, but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth.

The evil of prostitution represents one of many ways in which wealth that could be multiplied, invested, or used to bless others is squandered on sinful pleasures.

Proverbs instructs us to use our wealth to honor the Lord.

Proverbs 3:9-10. Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.

Now before I make my main point here, I want to point out that many people have read verses like his as a sort of formula and from it concluded that if you “honor the Lord” it will be seen by your increased abundance. A sort of automatic formula for forcing God to give you wealth.

But what is really going on in these verses? The writer of Proverbs is setting our life into the big picture of its overall meaning. We exist to honor the Lord. Everything we possess should demonstrate this chief priority. If we have intellect, use it first and foremost to honor the Lord. If we have skills and talents, use them first and foremost to serve the Lord. Honoring the Lord is what all things are really for. When it comes to our material resources, we do wait to honor the Lord if we have some left over after guaranteeing that we have honored ourselves. We think first about how our resources can be used to honor the Lord as our greatest joy.

Now, it is the case that God regularly entrusts people with additional resources when they have demonstrated their heart to honor him with the first fruits even when they had little. Ultimately this verse is similar to Matthew 6:33, Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you. God often entrusts wealth to those who have demonstrated generosity of heart.

But let’s not forget, all wealth is not the same, and there are many warnings about the prioritization of wealth over other things.

Proverbs commends wealth gained through diligence over wealth gained quickly.

Sometimes wealth is acquired through means other than hard work and wisdom. It is often the case in the real world that people become wealthy because of someone else’s hard work, or because of systems that take advantage of others to accrue wealth quickly, or just by being at the right place at the right time, born into the right family, etc. But more often than not, quickly gained wealth without the presence of actual wisdom leads to ruin.

Proverbs 13:11. Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it.

Proverbs 21:5. The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty.

It is not only acquiring it with haste that is warned against, but also a sort of frugality that doesn't think about others around us. In a sense the stingy person is also like the greedy in their relationship to wealth. There is something unhealthy in it.

Proverbs 28:22. A stingy man hastens after wealth and does not know that poverty will come upon him.

Proverbs reminds us that there are many things more important than wealth.

*Proverbs 22:1. A **good name** is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.*

*Proverbs 3:13-15. Blessed is the one who finds **wisdom**, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.*

*Proverbs 11:4. Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but **righteousness** delivers from death.*

*Proverbs 19:22-23. What is desired in a man is steadfast love, and a poor man is better than a liar [**honesty**]. **The fear of the LORD** leads to life, and whoever has it rests satisfied; he will not be visited by harm.*

*Proverbs 15:16. Better is a little with **the fear of the Lord** than great treasure and trouble with it.*

Proverbs warns that wealth is an alluring trap.

We can be enchanted by its allure.

Proverbs 23:1-7. When you sit down to eat with a ruler, observe carefully what is before you, and put a knife to your throat if you are given to appetite. Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceptive food. Do not toil to acquire wealth; be discerning enough to desist. When your eyes light on it, it is gone, for suddenly it sprouts wings, flying like an eagle toward heaven. Here the

Others can will be drawn to the wealthy by its allure and appear to be friends.

Proverbs 14:20. The poor is disliked even by his neighbor, but the rich has many friends.

Proverbs 19:4. Wealth brings many new friends, but a poor man is deserted by his friend.

Even possessing wealth can make a person a target for dishonest threats.

Proverbs 13:8. The ransom of a man's life is his wealth, but a poor man hears no threat.

Ultimately, Proverbs teaches that the security of wealth is not to be trusted.

Proverbs 11:28. Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish like a

green leaf.

Proverbs 11:7. When the wicked dies, his hope will perish, and the expectation of wealth perishes too.

Proverbs 18:10-12. The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe. A rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his imagination. Before destruction a man's heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor.

So, what do we do?

Resist Greed by prioritizing righteousness over riches.

One sure sign of greed is when you are willing to forfeit your integrity to save or gain money. *Proverbs 15:27. Whoever is greedy for unjust gain troubles his own household, but he who hates bribes will live.*

Or, when you are so stingy that you cannot enjoy blessing others.

Proverbs 23:6. Do not eat the bread of a man who is stingy; do not desire his delicacies, for he is like one who is inwardly calculating. "Eat and drink!" he says to you, but his heart is not with you.

Greed is a great danger that ensnares people in a life of ruin. They may gain money but lose everything else in the process.

Proverbs 28:25. A greedy man stirs up strife, but the one who trusts in the Lord will be enriched.

Proverbs 1:18-19 ESV. they set an ambush for their own lives. Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain; it takes away the life of its possessors.

Rediscover Generosity by prioritizing service over security.

Proverbs 11:24-26. One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered. The people curse him who holds back grain, but a blessing is on the head of him who sells it.

Respect God's Provision by prioritizing diligence over desire.

Proverbs 27:23-27. Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herds, for riches do not last forever; and does a crown endure to all generations? When the grass is gone and the new growth appears and the vegetation of the mountains is gathered, the lambs will provide your clothing, and the goats the price of a field. There will be enough goats' milk for your food, for the food of your household and maintenance for your girls.

Look to Christ - It's interesting that one of the last things the book of Proverbs has to say about wealth helps remind us that wealth is just one of the many playing fields on which

the realities of our sinful heart is played out.

Proverbs 30:7-9. Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the LORD?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.

Did you hear that? getting rid of all your money will not be the solution! As many who have very little will have us know. There are temptations in every situation and greed can spring up in the midst of your heart, rich or poor. Injustice grows in poor hearts and rich hearts alike.

Additionally, gaining money will not solve the problems because there is the ever present danger of trusting in wealth and forsaking the Lord. Maybe for some of us reading we have experienced both realities. What we really need is a bigger vision of life that helps us see where our real treasure is. It is infinitely more valuable for us to know God as our supreme joy and solid hope for now and eternity. God has given us life and it is God alone that sustains life. God is the only person in the universe that can use his resources to sustain our joy for all Eternity. Everything else will run out.

Wealth is a poor master because it cannot deliver what we hope it will, but God can and does deliver true lasting joy by reconciling us to Him through his Son Jesus and preparing a life of abundance for all Eternity for those who have repented of sin like greed and selfishness and trusted the provision of Jesus cross on their behalf. Jesus himself said, the kingdom of God is the surpassing treasure that makes all the wealth in the world worth forfeiting to have it.

And he would know, because Jesus actually traded all the wealth of the universe to bear the burden and punishment of our sin. He left His strong position to identify with us in our weakness. For our sakes and for our access to the Kingdom of God, though he was rich he became poor for us, to save us from a life of greed and the false security of wealth. He dealt a death blow to the idol of wealth and invites us to know true wealth by faith in Him. He is the master that can rule over our money and cause it to be turned from a tool for self-indulgence to a powerful stream with which we bless our neighbor and the nations with the gospel of the Kingdom.