

## **Is It Immoral and Unchristian To Be Rich?**

One of the things which has troubled the Christian Church over the years, more so perhaps individual Christians, is the question of riches and wealth. By some people they have been taken to be the greatest possible hindrance to our chances of salvation. Many have renounced them and made themselves beggars, deeply and sincerely believing that by so doing they were enhancing their prospects for admission into the kingdom of God.

To be sure, people look upon the matter with varying degrees of seriousness. But the fact that there is unease and sensitiveness at all is not really to be wondered at. We have only to remind ourselves of some of the things the Lord said while on earth to see how it is that people came to so quickly see things this way.

We have, first of all, His encounter with the rich ruler, described in each of the first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, though it is Luke's version I have in front of me here. It is from the Revised Standard Version:

And a ruler asked Him, 'Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' And Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the Commandments: "Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honour your father and mother". And he said, 'All these I have observed from my youth'. And when Jesus heard it, He said to him, 'One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor; and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me'. But when he heard this he became sad, for he was very rich. Jesus, looking at him said, 'How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For 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'.

Then again there are the parables of the rich man and Lazarus and of the rich man whose ground, you may remember, "brought forth plentifully", in both of which riches could be taken to be synonymous with a corrupt kind of life which separates a person from God. Lastly, Luke's version of what we call 'The Beatitudes' commences with the somewhat stark statement, "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God". (6:20). If you so wish to take it that way, what could be plainer?

I say again that it can't be altogether wondered at that the idea should have so quickly established itself; an idea that persists to this day with some and in some quarters; that it is immoral and unChristian to be rich, and that one of the hallmarks of a true Christian is his or her preparedness to renounce material wealth and possessions. Is this, though, really so? Was this what the Lord was saying? Are we the better, as Christians, dispossessed of any wealth or property or riches we may possess?

In point of fact we need go no further than the Gospels themselves for things said and teaching given which, if examined carefully, cannot but cause us to hesitate at such conclusions and must call into question any notion we may have that riches, in themselves, are wicked or the barrier to salvation they are thought to be. It is true that right at the beginning the disciples thought the Lord meant this. Having heard Him say that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven, those around Him asked incredulously 'Then who can be saved?' But in time they seemed to realise that they were taking Him too literally or understanding Him the wrong way. Mark points to this in his Gospel where he quotes Jesus as saying, by way of further explanation, 'How hard it is for them that trust in

riches to enter the kingdom of God!' (10:24). And it's interesting that after the crucifixion, someone who was known to be a disciple of Jesus yet who is described as a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, went to Pilate to beg the body of Jesus and laid it in his own new tomb. Clearly, Joseph of Arimathea hadn't felt called upon to renounce all his riches and to discard his material possessions. It seems, like we've said, that the disciples and followers of the Lord, or at least some of them, had come to see that He had not urged the abandonment of possessions as if that, in itself, was a virtue or was a fundamental requirement for entrance into heaven.

It seems, indeed, that they had grasped, or were beginning to grasp, a point dealt with at length in the teaching revealed in Swedenborg's writings, that the outward circumstances of our lives are not in any way a determining factor where salvation and entrance into the Lord's kingdom is concerned. We have noted the point that many people have mistakenly thought that those outward circumstances do matter; that it's better and safer to be poor than to be rich, as if that in itself matters. But it doesn't. What matters, and what will always matter, is the type of person we are within. What matters is not whether we are rich or poor, but and rather how we react to the fact that we are rich or poor. Whether, if we are rich, we set our hearts on more riches and are greedy and selfish with what we have, or not. Or whether, if we are poor, we are discontented, always complaining, and endlessly covetous of the possessions and what we might regard as 'good fortune' of others. Let's be really clear in our minds about this. It is the life of a person which is the determining factor as to whether they enter heaven or not. It is what is within people, the kind of character they have chosen to become which matters.

Swedenborg has a section on this in his book, *Heaven And Hell*, part of which I would like to quote to you here:

"Poor people do not enter heaven because of their poverty, but because of their life. Each individual's life follows him, whether he is rich or poor. There is no special mercy for one more than for the other. The person who has lived well is accepted; the person who has lived evilly is rejected. Moreover, poverty leads a person astray and draws him away from heaven just as wealth does. There are many of the poor who are not content with their lot, who solicit many things, and who believe that riches are blessings. So when they do not get them, they get angry and think ill of Divine Providence; they envy other people their goods. In particular, they too cheat others just as much when they have the chance, and live just as much in squalid pleasures.

It is different, though, with poor people who are content with their lot.... and lead a Christian life as well." (*Heaven and Hell*, 364).

The point is there in Mark's Gospel that it's not the riches themselves which are the handicap, or the point at issue, but a person's attitude towards these, how he or she regards them, what they do with them. 'How hard it is for them that trust in riches....' That's the point that's made there. This is what is crucial. What we are doing with what we've got; whether we are putting it to some useful purpose.

It is not wrong to have riches and wealth and we are not disadvantaged by them when it comes to the question of our entering heaven. Where the disadvantage enters in is in the area of our attitudes towards, and feeling about, such riches and wealth, if such attitudes and feelings are not as they should be. We can regard ourselves, in such circumstances, either as stewards of riches and wealth, which in fact is what we are, the riches and wealth to be used to enhance our usefulness in the world to the Lord and to others, as also to be used in beneficial ways; or we can use what we have for selfish indulgence, ego building and unnecessary waste and luxury. And it is in the

attitude adopted that disadvantage and difficulty arises where entrance into heaven is concerned.

Here again, it's not wrong to have ambition where riches and wealth are concerned, not if at the heart of such ambition there is the desire to accomplish things for others and to perform uses from what is acquired. Amassing wealth for the sake of amassing wealth is one thing. And it is to be condemned. (We remember the Lord's words about laying up treasure on earth where only moth and rust destroys it). If it's just easy living and a reputation for being successful that drives us then that's wrong. But if it is the desire to have the means to be more useful, as we may believe we could be, then that's another thing altogether. And that can't be condemned.

We are, as is obvious, all inclined at one time or another, to dream of what we would accomplish for others if we had the means of doing so. But if those means never come our way it shouldn't matter. We should trust the Lord that He gives us what is necessary for us to have and that He withholds from us what would be harmful for us to have. It just shouldn't worry us which, as so sadly and so often it does do. (see *Arcana Caelestia*, 8478).

Earlier in the talk we read the description of the Lord's encounter with the rich ruler which is bound to be, as it has been with us, the starting point for a discussion like this one about a Christian's attitude to wealth and riches. The story deserves another reading in your own time because the more we read and think about it the more we come to see something deeper in it which the Lord also touched upon in His answers to the questions put to Him. Notice, will you, what the ruler said to Jesus: "Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" And when Jesus told him about the Commandments he was able to say he had kept all these. He was, in other words, though fearful and worried about eternal life, very conscious of his accomplishments and good deeds. Besides being rich in worldly terms he was, also, in his own eyes, rich in the things he knew and the good deeds he had done. He was rich in spirit, or so he thought he was. And this, also, and even more importantly, is what the Lord was getting at. 'Truly, I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven'. As He said on another occasion, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. It was this need for poverty of spirit which the Lord was, at a deeper level, urging here.

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