**REAL WEALTH**

Some time ago John Levsay offered to loan me a book. I had recommended a book entitled Cities of God. The book is written by a sociologist named Rodney Stark. In the process of reading that book John had discovered another book by the same author entitled The Victory of Reason. He liked that book so much that he loaned me his copy.

In this book Stark offers the premise that Christianity bears much of the responsibility for the rise of western civilization. He makes a compelling argument. His argument goes something like this. Christianity teaches that all humans are equal in the eyes of God. While some may distinguish between people based on wealth, education, social class, gender, or race, God looks only on the heart. Therefore, we should do the same.

According to Stark, this premise that all people are created equal led to a trend towards liberty, which encouraged the growth of democratic and capitalist ideals and fostered scientific inquiry. The rest, as they say, is history.

I have to say, I’m intrigued by this hypothesis. I have always found Stark’s work to be well researched and his analysis to be thorough. I’m not sure I have bought into the idea one- hundred percent, but it is certainly food for thought.

Now the passage in front of us has raised some real questions for me. How do we interpret passages like this one? What does it truly have to say about wealth and the acquisition of goods? In fact, there is another question raised for me by this passage. Because the passage clearly says, instruct those who are rich to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share.

Well, let’s start with context in which this book was written. To truly understand biblical ideas about wealth we need to understand the concept of limited good. In the modern world, our economies operate on the idea that all goods are essentially unlimited. Just because I own a lot of stuff, that doesn’t automatically mean that someone owns less. If there are not enough goods to go around more can be made and distributed. If the pie isn’t large enough we can make a larger pie. If I have things, then that probably means I earned them- I worked for them.

The Ancient world thought differently. They thought that all goods were finite and already distributed. If I have a larger slice of the pie that means by definition that another person has a smaller slice of the pie. As a general rule, all persons who were wealthy were considered to be unjust or to be the heir of an unjust person. That theme is picked up to some degree in Stark’s book. Governments in the Ancient World tended to be despotic. Taxation rates were often exorbitant and there tended to be very little surplus wealth for the average person.

It isn’t surprising in this environment that we should see the scripture questioning the acquisition of wealth. However, we live in a world with different cultural assumptions. When we see a person who is wealthy we don’t, as a rule, view them as unjust, but rather as industrious. We live in a world that is relatively free so we assume that the individual in question is a hard-worker who is enjoying the fruits of their own labor.

So it’s in this context that we must interpret this passage on wealth. That said how should we live our lives? The author says that we should live our lives in pursuit of Godliness. On the surface that sounds good. However, there are at least two theological issues that we must address here: the Doctrines of Total Depravity and sanctification.

The Doctrine of Total Depravity is one of the pillars of the Reformed faith. The notion here is that as a consequence of the Fall every person is enslaved to his or her own sin. We are sinful creatures by nature. People are not inclined to love God by nature. Rather people naturally serve their own interests and reject God’s rule. For the Reformers the chief sin is pride, which we might define as self-centeredness or self-absorption.

For example, I don’t have to be a Christian to go and serve meals at a homeless shelter. Nobody I know would dispute that’s a good deed. The real question, though, is. “Why are we doing it?” Are we doing it because we feel good about ourselves when we do it? Are we doing it because we feel guilty about what we have? Are we doing it because we feel a sense of duty or obligation towards God? Are we doing it because we want to win favor with God? For the Reformers these are all sinful motives. The only proper reason for doing anything is to glorify God.

Money and wealth in and of themselves are not sinful. Given that we live in a different context where accumulation of wealth is not inherently sinful, we must ask the question, does this passage have anything to say to us? I suggest that from our theological perspective it does. This passage leads us to ask, “In what way are we using our material possessions to glorify God? “

Once we have dealt with the issue of Total Depravity we must then turn our attention to the Doctrine of Sanctification. This passage tells us to be rich in good works. Yet, our theology tells us that our works don’t save us and that we are by nature sinful even when we try to be good. Unfortunately this doctrine has led us to avoid talking about good works in our tradition. We are so afraid of being accused of espousing works righteousness, that we avoid the subject altogether.

This isn’t faithful to our tradition. In the Reformed faith we speak of Good works in terms of sanctification, which literally means becoming holy. We understand good works to be a grateful response to salvation, rather than a means to achieve salvation. We see good works as a sign that a person has been inspired by the Holy Spirit- that the Holy Spirit is working through that person. These people aren’t saved by their good works. They are doing good works because they are saved.

These people have real wealth. They live their lives for the kingdom of God. In so doing, they are building up treasures for themselves in heaven. Whatever sacrifices they have made in the here and now pale in comparison to joy they receive as servants of the living God.

Nothing you have now will go with you. When you pass on everything you have stays here. But the lives you touch- those are yours forever. The Grace and love and mercy you receive from Jesus Christ- that’s yours forever. That’s real wealth.