

HOW MONEY CAN BUY HAPPINESS

Scriptures: Selected Proverbs; I Timothy 6:6-10

As you probably noticed, the book of Proverbs has an interesting view of money. Some parts of the Bible treat money with suspicion. In our first scripture lesson I Timothy 6:10 says, “For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.” No doubt that is true. But Proverbs still has a healthy respect for money. Look at Proverbs 10:15: “The wealth of the rich is their fortress; the poverty of the poor is their ruin.”

We saw how true that was after Hurricane Katrina. Katrina destroyed or flooded much of the city of New Orleans, rich neighborhoods as well as poor neighborhoods. But if you remember, the desperate people crowded into the Superdome were not rich people; they were poor people. Why? Because rich people had the resources to get out of the city. Apparently what many government officials did not realize when they gave the order to evacuate New Orleans is that many poor people do not have cars. Many of the people who took shelter at the Superdome walked there pushing grocery carts. That was as much evacuating as they could do. The rich and middle class of New Orleans had cars which they loaded up with clothes and food and drove out of town to stay with relatives or friends, or they stayed in a motel they could afford to rent. The poor had none of those options. And when the flood receded, the rich and middle class had insurance to help them recover, or at least they owned the land on which they could try to rebuild. The poor rented the places where they lived, so even if they wanted to return to their homes, they were at the mercy of landlords who may or may not want to rebuild. “The wealth of the rich is their fortress; the poverty of the poor is their ruin.”

Look at some of the other Proverbs on the insert: Proverbs 19:4: “Wealth brings many friends, but the poor are left friendless.” Proverbs 22:7: “The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender.”

Just this week I got a call from a woman whose electricity was about to be turned off. She had gotten behind on her Avista bill because of indebtedness. She was on Social Security disability, which is not a lot of income, but it is something. But then she had some medical expenses, for which she had no insurance, though she made too much money for Medicaid. When she ran out of money, she resorted to payday loans to pay rent and buy food. But the next month she got further behind because now she had to pay interest on the payday loans. You get the picture. Of course, there are several things she might have done different that would have helped. When I talked to her on the phone she did not even know about CHAS, the community health clinic, or Christ Clinic, or own Presbyterian-sponsored low-income medical clinic. She was not only poor, she did not have the social connections to know what help might have been available to her. Fortunately, our Deacons were able to help her with her immediate need, and Avista, along with a debt counseling service, is working to help her get out of debt. But the whole thing illustrates Proverbs 22:7—“The borrower is the slave of the lender.”

One of my all time favorite movie characters is Tevye, the Jewish milkman in *Fiddler on the Roof*. At one point in the movie Tevye says, “If riches are a curse, may I be stricken with it and never recover.” That is how Proverbs feels.

And yet, Proverbs acknowledges that, though money is important, it is not everything. The amount of money you have is far less important than the quality of your relationships. Notice on the insert all the “better than” Proverbs on the subject of money:

Proverbs 15:16-17—“Better is a little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure and trouble with it. Better is a dinner with vegetables where love is, than a fatted ox and hatred with it.”

Proverbs 16:8—“Better is a little with righteousness, than a large income with injustice.”

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

Proverbs 28:6—Better to be poor and walk in integrity, than to be crooked in one’s ways even though rich.”

All of these “better than” Proverbs compare money to relationships. As important as it is to have money, relationships are even more important.

I have shared this story at a number of weddings, but I think it also applies to the book of Proverbs. It is told by a Jewish rabbi named Harold Kushner. One day Kushner was sitting on a beach watching two children build an elaborate sand castle near the edge of the water. It had walls, gates, towers, passageways, and a moat running around it filled with water. It was a beautiful piece of work. But just as they were putting on the finishing touches, a big wave came in from the ocean, crashed onto the beach, washed over the castle, then slid back into the ocean leaving behind nothing but a pile of wet sand. Kushner said he expected the children to burst into tears, but they didn't. Instead laughing and holding hands they ran up the shore away from the water and sat down to build another sand castle. He concluded with this observation:

I realized that they had taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Only our relationships to others endure. Sooner or later, the wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build. When that happens, only the person who has somebody's hand to hold will be able to laugh (*When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, p. 166).

Look at Proverbs 23:4-5—“Do not wear yourself out to be rich; be wise enough to desist. When your eyes light upon it, it is gone; for suddenly it takes wings to itself, flying like an eagle to heaven.” Sooner or later, the wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build. When that happens, only the person with somebody’s hand to hold will be able to laugh. That’s why relationships are more important than money, especially your relationship to God.

When Proverbs talks about money, it does not talk about how to make it. It talks about how to use it to build relationships—your relationship to God and your relationship to others.

Proverbs 19:17—“Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full.”

Proverbs 22:9—“Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.”

In our Junior Sermon this morning, would you say that Abby, the little girl, was more blessed before or after she began sharing with the homeless woman? Would you say that the older couple, Mr. and Mrs. Snyder, were more blessed before or after they got involved in the meal for poor people on their street? Those who are generous are blessed, Proverbs says. It is that simple.

By the way, I think this helps explain some of those Proverbs on the insert that suggest sharing will make you richer. I’m talking about verses like Proverbs 3:9-10—“Honor the Lord with your substance 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.” Or Proverbs 11:24—“Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due and only suffer want.”

I know there are cases, we have heard some in our church, where people have given money to some need or some mission and ended up with more money than they had before. Sometimes God does that. Sometimes God gives us a little surprise. But there is more than one way to grow richer. When we share with people in need, we always grow richer, even if we don’t end up with more money. When we share with others we build relationships, and in the Kingdom of God, when all our money is gone, relationships are the only currency we will have left.

In the musical *Hello, Dolly*, near the end of the show Dolly makes this observation. She says, “Money, if you’ll pardon the expression, is like manure; it’s not worth a thing unless it’s spread around encouraging young things to grow.”

That is the wisdom of the book of Proverbs. Money actually can buy happiness, but only if it is treated like manure: spread around encouraging young things to grow.

- Ken Onstot