

Labour Not to be Rich

The Lord Jesus Christ taught a vital truth, which ought to govern our thinking with regard to riches, labour, and the motivating force that drives our labours:

“Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Lu. 12:15).

This is the underlying principle of the Proverb that we have taken as our title for this article: “Labour not to be rich: cease from thine own wisdom” (Prov. 23:4). It is a major theme that runs throughout Scripture like a golden thread: “wisdom is a defence, and money is a defence: but the excellency of knowledge is that wisdom giveth life to them that have it” (Eccl. 7:12). Material goods do not comprise a man’s life—but wisdom does give life. Wisdom therefore is to be sought after like silver, or hidden treasure (Prov. 2:4) – such is the value placed upon it by those who follow the teaching of Scripture.

Matthew chapter 13 recounts the Master’s parable regarding this situation:

“the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and, buyeth that field” (Mat. 13:44).

Unlike Judas who purchased a field with the reward of iniquity, this man purchases a field in order to obtain the treasure hidden in it. The lesson is plain: we must search out and obtain the hidden treasures of the Word. We shall return to this idea shortly.

LABOUR A CURSE

Genesis chapter 3 recounts the circumstances of Adam and Eve’s fall from a position of favour and grace, where everything they needed was freely provided in the Garden of Eden. Since their expulsion from the garden, a curse was placed upon them:

“Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow thou shalt eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Gen. 3:17-19).

We see then, that labour and travail came upon man following his expulsion from the Edenic Paradise. From the moment of man’s birth, till the day of his death, his life is filled with labour. As the Preacher spake:

“this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith” (Eccl. 1:13).

And again:

“Yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail” (Eccl. 4:8).

This last passage demonstrates the vanity of labour in carnal things: the human constitution is never satisfied; there is a constant craving to obtain more and more: “neither is his eye satisfied with riches.” Yet all that can be obtained is lost when the owner thereof descends into the grave:

“As he came forth of his mother’s womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand” (Eccl. 5:15).

And the Apostle drawing upon this passage expounds the implied exhortation:

“we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (1 Tim. 6:7-8).

Because in the day of our death we can take nothing out of this world, anything we might lay up by way of this world’s goods can have no lasting profit. But the advantage of Wisdom, is that it is able to give life—the Wisdom of the Gospel being able to make a man “wise unto salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15). So the Prophet spake:

“Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money, and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? And your labour for that which satisfieth not?” (Isa. 55:1-2).

Here is an ironic situation: men of the world work hard and go to great lengths to earn the riches of this life – yet so few seek after the wisdom that cometh from above. Students attend the serpent’s centres of learning – the colleges and universities that teach human philosophies and wisdom – yet so few engage the Scriptures in their studies. Yet the Bible can give life, whereas the very best of man’s wisdom is temporary, ending with death.

Moreover, men and women who are motivated by money place themselves in a precarious situation: the love of money is stated by the apostle as being a “root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10), “which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows”. Again, the vanity of seeking material gain is expressed by the Lord himself:

“... labour not for the meat which perisheth, but of that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of Man shall give unto you ...” (Jno. 6:27).

Interestingly, in response to this statement, we read on:

“... Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent ...” (vs 29).

Here is the point: instead of being covetous, our work is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. As the Psalmist has it: “incline my heart unto thy testimonies, and not to covetousness” (Psa. 119:36). Covetousness is idolatry (Col. 3:5), as it places Mammon rather than God as being the focus of our hearts and endeavours.

LABOURING FOR SPIRITUAL FOOD

Rather than to focus our endeavours to obtaining natural food, we must rather concentrate on seeking first the Kingdom of God, and His Righteousness (Mat. 6:33), and then all these things will be added to us. We still need to labour in natural things – that is the curse upon Adam that we all inherit - yet our earnest endeavours ought not to be in the pursuit of uncertain riches but engaging in matters pertaining to “the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17). We therefore must seek the spiritual food that can nourish us in the ways of Truth and Righteousness:

“as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby: if so be that ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious” (1 Pet. 2:2-3).

And we must progress onto solid food, as we mature in the Truth: “but solid food belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Heb. 5, see verses 13-14).

There is a vital need then, to labour in spiritual things. Hence Paul exhorts Timothy to give those who do so added respect:

“Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, **especially they who labour in the word and doctrine**” (1 Tim. 5:17).

This is why we respect the labours of our earlier brethren, John Thomas and Robert Roberts – not out of any misguided adoration, but rather because they were good Bible students. Hence, according to the Apostle, they ought to be counted worthy of double honour. But labouring in the word and doctrine is not something to be left to the more academically minded; it is a work in which all the called must engage:

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15)

This is the work of God, that we might believe – and we can only believe in something that we know about! Hence we must engage much effort in searching out the hidden treasures of the Word, else we will need to be ashamed at the coming of the Lord.

RICHES AND POVERTY

According to Proverbs, “There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing: there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches” (Prov. 13:7). This is that class of men who suppose “that gain is godliness” (1 Tim. 6:5). They go to great endeavours to make themselves rich in this world’s goods, yet in real terms, have nothing. The ecclesia at Laodicea were like this: they laboured to be rich, and thought they were not needy:

“because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich ...” (Rev. 3:17-18).

In this age of spiritual darkness, a person's status and respect in life is largely determined by his "success" in worldly matters. A person who has a large and luxurious house and an expensive car, and sumptuous raiment, and delightful food is said to be truly successful. But whilst it is not wrong to have riches (indeed, Abraham was a very rich man), we must not trust in them, or keep building bigger barns to accommodate them (cp. Luk. 12:18). Rather, we must use all that we have in the Lord's service, knowing that our labours in the Lord will not be in vain (1 Cor 15:58).

By contrast, we look to the Lord Jesus Christ, as one who was rich, yet became poor, being despised and rejected of men:

"... ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye though his poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

In the Lord Jesus Christ, we can obtain true riches. He is the one "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). He "was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing" (Rev. 5:12). And his brethren who lay down their lives in faithful service can be glorified in him (Rom. 8:17).

In conclusion therefore, we find that by seeking after the spiritual food that gives life, the way of the wise is to search after the treasure of knowledge contained within the Word. Showing himself to be a workman that needeth not be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth, (2 Tim. 2:15), the way of the wise is to labour in spiritual things, to lay up treasure in heaven (Lu. 18:22). There are two "ways" before us: the broad way that leads to destruction for those who sow to the flesh, and the narrow way that leads to life for those who sow to the spirit. Which way will we choose? Wisdom is profitable to direct.

Christopher Maddocks