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1 Timothy 6:17-19

## HOW TO GET RICH

The Apostle Paul has a message today for rich people. "As for those in the present age who are rich," he writes in our reading today. And then he goes on to give rich people some important lessons. Well, his words get our attention because we can see how the gap between the rich and the poor is ever widening in our society. Income inequalities have throughout history been the catalyst for social upheaval and violent revolutions around the world--and some would argue that the political turmoil we are experiencing in our nation at the moment is also connected to a growing frustration over income inequality. Are we content to live in a society where the rich keep getting richer while the poor are virtually ignored and the middle class is allowed to slip into poverty? What obligations do rich people have to share their wealth? Will a tax reform genuinely change things to make the situation more just or will it once again offer a safe-haven for rich people to benefit from an unfair system? We don't want to punish rich people in this country, but nor do we want the system to offer unfair benefits to the rich while others suffer from lack of basic necessities or opportunities.

The trouble is, who is rich? How do we define what constitutes being "rich"? We think we know what rich looks like here in America--we can pull up a mental picture of what rich looks like--but then, take a trip to Haiti and suddenly the definition radically changes. "Rich" is a relative term, isn't it? So, how do you know if you are rich? If we think in terms of all the world's people, here are some basic guidelines that can help us answer that question "are you rich?":

If you wake up in the morning and realize that you are low on milk and make a mental note to pick some up at the store sometime during the day . . . you are rich.

If you have a pet at home who is well-fed and has access to regular visits to the vet . . . you are rich.

If you have food in your pantry and in your refrigerator, some of which you even have to throw away because you don't get around to eating it before it spoils . . . you are rich.

If your car is running low on gas and you can stop on your way to work to fill it up . . . you are rich.

If you live in a climate controlled home and have hot water for bathing . . . you are rich.

If you and your family are planning where to take your next vacation . . . you are rich.

If you can go to the faucet and get a drink of water when you are thirsty . . . your are rich.

If you have had a busy day and no one has had time to make dinner, so you decide to go out to eat at a restaurant . . . you are rich.

I would bet that most of us here today, if not all of us, have more than we need to sustain our lives from one day to the next. And by the economic standards and living conditions of most of the world's people, that makes us rich.

I do not share this news to make us feel guilty. I share it to help us understand that we are the people Jesus was speaking about when he spoke about the rich. When you think about it, we seek to have money for two reasons: so that we can meet our physical needs for survival--which is of course a basic need--and also so that we might have certain comforts and enjoyments in life that will make life more than just a mere *survival* enterprise. The issue is, however, that the standards for what is needed for survival and what is desired for comfort and enjoyment are ever changing and ever escalating. It isn't that we just need a house to shelter us from the

elements--we need a home with central air conditioning and heating. And then we need a house with a guest bedroom, or a recreation room, or a swimming pool, and a bedroom with a walk-in closet, and a kitchen with an island. And then we need a house that has wifi and a home security system. And this is true about almost every aspect of our lives. The standards for what we need are always escalating. And before we realize it, our lives have become caught up in a never-ending process of consuming, and needing more money, and wanting to have more because the standards for what we think we need or want are ever shifting. Without realizing it in a conscious way, our lives become defined by this cycle of wanting to be richer than we already are.

A similar pattern of behavior is followed whether a person is a Hollywood celebrity or technology CEO making a ton of money each year, or whether a person is a school teacher, social worker, or electrician. We all make money. But the issue becomes what we do with the money that we make. And because of the ever escalating standards of needs and wants, and because we need to feel secure in having enough to meet our needs and wants, there is a pattern in all of us to hang on to what we make for ourselves. We need it for ourselves.

The term "house poor" is used to describe a condition where a person is financially strapped each month because a large percentage of their income is wrapped up in paying their mortgage and other housing expenses--leaving them with very little money for the rest of their monthly expenses. Such people may have a nice big house but they have almost nothing to live on. When this happens a person is said to be "house poor." I think in a similar way, a lot of us people living in western societies have become "life poor." We may have money--comfortable bank accounts, solid retirement funds, and good home equity--but in our quest to "get rich" we

have become depleted emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically of essential ingredients that make for a meaningful life

The Apostle Paul wrote words of wisdom to "rich people." In other words, he wrote to people like us. And he wrote these words of wisdom so that, as he describes it, "they may take hold of the life that really is life." The life that really is life. No more fake life. No life that is wrapped up in money or things. No empty living. Paul wants us to know genuine life. The life that *really* is life. In other words, Paul wants us all to have a rich life--a deeply meaningful life.

What is this key to having a rich life? What will make us truly rich, not in terms of money or possessions but in terms of meaning and purpose? What will make us rich? Paul gives us that answer: generosity. Paul writes that rich people "are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share." It's all about giving and sharing. It is a classic Christian paradox: that getting rich can be achieved by giving away. Paul's secret for getting rich lies in a life of generosity. Generosity is how we can take hold of the life that really is life.

Of course, generosity is not just a nice idea. Generosity lies at the core of Christianity. Generosity is the defining characteristic of our God--who created us and this world, who loves us with unconditional love, who forgives us for our broken and messed up lives over and over again, who came to us in Christ so that we might know the life that is really life, who suffers with us and for us in our times of pain and loss, who empowers us each day to rise above our brokenness. Generosity defines our God. Not wrath. Not judgment. Not rules. *Generosity.*

If you want to have a more meaningful life, a richer life, generosity is the key. Generosity with your love. Generosity with your forgiveness. Generosity with your compassion. Generosity with your time and talents. Generosity with your money.

How can you and I become more generous people in order that we might truly become rich in spirit? As I think about it, I think there are 3 actions we can take to help ourselves become more generous. The first is practice. Just like learning to play a musical instrument or learning any new skill, generosity takes practice. That means, doing it over and over again. And the important aspect here is that we incorporate a practice of giving that is regular and disciplined even when we don't happen to feel like doing it--just like when playing a musical instrument. The trouble with how we sometimes practice generosity is that we wait until our hearts are moved by something. We watch the hurricanes hit the Gulf Coast or the Caribbean and we feel horrible for the suffering we see and so we are moved to give. That's good. But what about the suffering we don't witness? Generosity should not depend upon having our hearts moved. Generosity is a way of living and needs to be a regular part of our spiritual lives whether or not our hearts have been moved. And that is why practices like pledging, which we are encouraging today, are important. Sometimes I don't *feel* like being a disciple of Christ in how I give or love or forgive or care. But being a follower of Jesus is not dependent upon how I happen to feel about it today or tomorrow. We give and share because we know that this is an important practice for ourselves and our own well-being and because it benefits others. And so we practice generosity regularly. The more we practice, the more it becomes a natural part of our lives, an integral part of our hearts, as natural as breathing in air.

Another way we can foster generosity is by surrounding ourselves with generous people. Generosity breeds generosity. We learn and are inspired by the examples around us. And that is what we do here as a congregation for one another. We gather each week to rehearse God's story of great generosity. We tell it over and over again in the scriptures we read, the songs we sing, the prayers we offer. And then we practice generosity. We as a church try to offer many

opportunities for us to express generosity. So we have people who generously give their time, their talents, their energies. And we have many opportunities to give money to many different causes and needs. And we see each other practice generosity. And it fosters it in us.

And the third way we might become more generous is through prayer. Consider making generosity the prayer you offer to God each day. Consider each day asking God to help you become more generous by helping you discover that day where you can be generous with your love, your forgiveness, your time and yes, your money. Prayer brings the matter to the front of your mind and opens your heart to workings of God's Spirit.

Generosity is not merely an act. It is rather, a posture of living. To give rather than take. To share rather than to hold on to. Generosity is, in the end, an effort to live in the image of our God. This is who you and I were created to be. Rich beyond measure.