

Riches and Wealth (and Money Changers)

Tyndale Bible Dictionary

RICHES Wealth measured by money or the amount of property owned, whether land and buildings (Is. 5:8–10), livestock (1 Sam. 25:2–3), or slaves (8:11–18). Great riches brought great influence and power, as the Hebrew word for wealth implies.

The Bible seems to speak with two voices on the subject of riches, sometimes describing material wealth as a sign of God’s blessing and approval (e.g., Gn. 24:35), at other times virtually identifying the rich with the wicked (e.g., Ps 37:7, 16).

God made all things for people to enjoy (1 Tm 6:17). That is why being rich is a matter for thanksgiving, not embarrassment. Every possession that a person can possibly own comes from the Creator (Ps. 24:1), so all wealth can rightly be counted as a blessing from God. It was in this spirit that David could pray to God, “Riches and honour come of thee” (1 Chr. 29:12, KJV). Even when wealth is earned by hard work, the Bible reminds its readers that both their talents and their resources are God-given. Jesus illustrates this important lesson in the parables of the 10 talents (Mt 25:14–30) and the 10 minas (Lk. 19:11–26).

Nowhere, then, does the Bible say that having possessions and becoming wealthy are wrong in themselves. There would be no point in the Ten Commandments’ ban on stealing and envy if it was wrong for God’s people to own anything at all. Jesus himself never taught that it was sinful to be rich.

However, Jesus warned that riches could keep a person out of the kingdom: “How hard it is for rich people to get into the Kingdom of God!” (Mk. 10:23, NLT). Affluence, he taught, can destroy peace (6:24–34), blind people to the needs of others (Lk. 16:19–31), stand between individuals and the gateway to eternal life (Mk. 10:17–27), and even bring God’s judgment (Lk. 12:16–21). He told his disciples not to accumulate personal wealth (Mt. 6:19), and he praised those who gave up their possessions (19:29).

Jesus’ warnings against wealth are not, in fact, directed against riches in themselves. What he condemns is the wrong attitudes many people have toward acquiring wealth, and the wrong ways in which they use it. Longing for riches, not having them, chokes the spiritual life like weeds in a field of grain (Mt. 13:22). The greedy desire to have more wealth doomed the unforgiving servant (18:23–35). And the rich man’s selfishness, not his wealth, sealed his fate (Lk. 16:19–26). Paul captured the main theme in these parables when he said, “The *love* of money is at the root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tm 6:10, NLT, emphasis added).

The greatest danger of all arises when riches gain the mastery in a person’s life. The whole Bible warns against this idolatrous attitude to material things (e.g., Deut. 8:17–18; Lk. 14:15–24). Satan tempted Jesus to put material wealth and power in God’s place (Mt. 4:8–9), and Jesus delivers the clearest warning against making money one’s master (6:24). In this light Jesus instructs the rich young ruler to sell everything (Mk. 10:17–22). Here was a wealthy man who had allowed his possessions to possess him. Jesus’ aim was to make him recognize his bondage so he could escape from his self-made prison. The fact that he turned away from Jesus demonstrates the powerful pull of riches.

These blunt warnings are the most striking aspect of Jesus’ teaching on wealth. But alongside his exposure of wrong attitudes he was careful to sketch in the outline of right attitudes. Those who recognize that they are God’s trustees (not owners) of their possessions, he taught, will find many

valuable outlets for their riches in the Lord's service (Lk. 12:42–44). Instead of making them tight-fisted, their riches should allow them to express love in many practical ways (2 Cor. 8:2). And instead of having their inward peace ruined by anxious greed, they would find the secret of serenity in an increasing sense of dependence on their heavenly Giver (Lk. 12:29–31; 1 Tm 6:17).

According to the Bible, then, the morality of riches depends entirely on personal attitudes. And nowhere does this come out more than in the frequent comparisons Scripture draws between material and spiritual wealth. Those who make material riches their goal in life have wrong values. However wealthy they may appear, they are poverty-stricken in God's sight (Mt. 16:26; Rev. 3:17). In his view, the truly rich are those whose main aim in life is to serve him as King (Mt. 13:44–46). Their wealth lies in the currency of faith and good works (1 Tm. 6:18; Jas. 2:5)—a heavenly bank balance that no one can steal and nothing can erode: “Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be” (Mt. 6:21, NLT).

See also Money; Poor, The; Wages; Wealth.¹

MONEY CHANGER Ancient profession that undertook many of the services performed by the modern banker, particularly in the area of exchanging the currency of one country or province into that of another, or of exchanging small coins for coins of greater value or vice versa. Naturally, a fee was charged for such a service.

Standardized coinage as such does not go back beyond the seventh century BC. In earlier periods pieces of silver were weighed out in payment for commodities (Gen. 20:16; 37:28; Js. 17:2). Once the standardized coin was adopted in Asia Minor the idea was copied in other lands, but since coins differed from country to country, equivalents had to be worked out by the money changers.

The need for such procedures was particularly important in Palestine, where every adult male Jew had to pay a half-shekel offering (Ex. 30:11–16). Jews from various countries who came to pay this sum might bring a variety of types of coinage. Temple authorities had to authorize a coin appropriate for the purpose. This was the silver Tyrian half-shekel or tetradrachma (cf. Mt. 17:27, where Peter was told to pay the temple tax for Jesus and himself with the coin he found in the mouth of a fish). The Mishnah states (*Sheqalim* 1:3) that money changers operated in the provinces on the 15th of the month of Adar (the month before the Passover) to collect this tax. Ten days before the Passover the money changers moved to the temple courts to assist Jews from foreign countries.

Jesus encountered the money changers in the temple courtyard when he “cleansed the temple” (Mt. 21:12–13; Mk. 11:15–16; Lk. 19:45–46; Jn. 2:13–22). The reason for this action has been a matter of debate. Worshipers needed to procure the half-shekel to pay their tax. But they needed also to purchase birds, animals, or cake offerings in some cases. This wholesale activity in buying and money changing seemed inappropriate in the temple precincts, which constituted a sacred area (cf. Mk. 11:16), although Jesus evidently approved the payment of the temple tax as such (Mt. 8:4; 17:24–26; Mk. 1:44; Lk. 5:14). There is also the possibility that the charge made by money changers and by those who sold sacrificial birds and animals was exorbitant, whether for their own profit or for the profit of the temple authorities. Such operations could be carried on at a suitable distance from the sacred area so that the haggling and noise associated with such activities in an Eastern setting did not unnecessarily disturb the prayer and the offering of sacrifices carried on in the temple courts (cf. Jer. 7:11). *See also* Coins; Money.

¹Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible dictionary*. Tyndale reference library (1133). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.