

New Testament

**Words of Jesus:  
Riches**

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***“For a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Luke 12:15).***

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Generation after generation, mortal men have developed cultures and traditions for their time. A common practice that occurs in nearly all cultures is the ranking of people and placing them into social levels or castes. Invariably the highest positions in these social systems are given to those who have the greatest wealth.

To understand what the Savior taught about riches as He walked the earth among men, we must realize that He paid no heed to the traditions of men. The words of Jesus contain lessons that are counter to the traditions of our day. His teachings guide us on the acquiring, amassing, and spending of wealth and are as applicable today as they were when He first uttered them.

**Getting Riches**

Most of us can be easily caught up in thinking we are poor and imagining what we could do if we only had more material possessions. In the movie made from the famous Broadway play *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye, a poor Jewish milkman who struggles to support his wife and several daughters, ponders and speaks about riches. He asks, “Would it spoil some vast eternal plan if I were a wealthy man?” (Sheldon Harnick, “If I Were a Rich Man” [1971]).

The Master taught that the obtaining of temporal wealth does not produce or equate to righteousness. His doctrine was that the accumulation of wealth is often an enemy to righteousness. In His teachings on this matter, He cautions that great spiritual danger awaits when we own a lot of money or things.

Said He to His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal” (**Matt. 6:19**). When a man asked how he should divide an inheritance with his brother, Jesus replied, “Beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (**Luke 12:15**).

To the rich young ruler who desired eternal life, He said, “Sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven” (**Mark 10:21**). The young man turned away, preferring his riches over following Christ. This prompted the Savior to lament, “How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!” (**Mark 10:23**).

As we analyze the world around us, it becomes obvious that having wealth can easily divert a person’s attention from righteousness toward the accumulation and care of those possessions. People thus distracted become preoccupied with providing for their own pleasure, neglecting service to others in order to better serve themselves. The Savior referred to this temptation when He gave the following explanation of what happened to some of the seeds in the parable of the sower: “And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of *this life*, and bring no fruit to perfection” (**Luke 8:14**; emphasis added).

### **Accumulating Riches**

A temptation often associated with the acquiring of riches is the almost obsessive desire to obtain more and more wealth, for the getting of money can be quite habit-forming. Men and women often begin to scheme and push to the edge, sometimes crossing over the line of ethics and honesty, in their quest for more wealth. Riches then become a false god in whom they put their trust. The parable of the rich fool (see **Luke 12:16–21**) condemns this endless amassing of wealth.

The rich young ruler mentioned above appears to have fallen prey to this kind of seduction, for the Master further said of him: “How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (**Mark 10:24–25**). Astonished at this doctrine, Jesus’ disciples did not understand that He was using hyperbole, an exaggeration, to make a point. They wondered who then could be saved, for they knew it was impossible for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle! Jesus helped their understanding: “With men that trust in riches, it is impossible [to be saved]; but not impossible with men who trust in God and leave all for my sake” (Joseph Smith Translation, **Mark 10:26**).

There is perhaps no more pointed and succinct saying from the Savior on riches than “Ye cannot serve God and mammon [or riches]” (**Matt. 6:24**; see Bible Dictionary, “Mammon,” 728).

Many of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day trusted in riches. At His cleansing of the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus overthrew the tables of the money changers, saying, “Make not my Father’s house an house of merchandise” (**John 2:16**). The sanctity of the temple was, for these Jewish leaders, less important than the obtaining of riches.

On one occasion Jesus derided certain of the Pharisees for their covetousness and greed, saying: “I will liken you unto the rich man. For there was a certain rich man, who was clothed in purple, and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, who was laid at his gate, full of sores” (Joseph Smith Translation, **Luke 16:23–24**). In the parable, the rich man and Lazarus (not the same Lazarus who was raised from the dead) then both die, with Lazarus being carried into heaven and the rich man to hell. In his torment the rich man pleaded with Father Abraham for even the smallest relief from his suffering. The Savior then quoted what Abraham would say to all those who trust in money instead of God: “Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And ... there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us” (**Luke 16:25–26**). It is truly impossible for those who trust in riches to be saved.

### **Spending Riches**

Just as the Savior taught principles that apply to the getting and accumulating of money, he also gave counsel concerning managing and spending it. The Lord clearly stated that wealth in and of itself is not bad. Money is a tool with which a person does good or evil. Those who love Christ and are converted to His gospel will use any surplus wealth to help others and to build up the kingdom of God. Furthermore, how a person chooses to spend his money is often an indication of the attitude in which he or she obtained it.

Jesus taught that we are to manage our money in ways that enable us to meet our financial obligations to God and others, including those who govern our societies.

As He preached in the temple during the week just prior to His Crucifixion, certain Pharisees and Herodians asked Him, “Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?” Jesus perceived the wicked intent of their question and replied, “Shew me the tribute money.” When a Roman penny was brought, He asked, “Whose is this image and superscription?” When they answered that it was Caesar’s, Jesus gave one of His greatest sermons on the spending of riches: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (see **Matt. 22:17–21**).

The Lord also expects us to perform our financial duties to Him and others in an honest manner. This means an honest day’s work for our daily wages. It means being truthful with ourselves and all those we work with and for. It means that we treat people who

work for us fairly in every instance. And it means we are honest in the payment of our taxes.

We must also be honest with the Lord, for a man can rob God (see **Mal. 3:8**). Are we honest with our tithes, fast offerings, and the other financial responsibilities of our membership in His restored Church? Meeting these financial obligations is a requirement for all those who desire to enter the temples of God.

### **“All That She Had”**

One of the most humbling and powerful stories from the life of the Savior is that of the widow’s mite. Jesus’ words on this occasion leave us with much to ponder as we measure our generosity against that of a “certain poor widow.”

While Jesus sat teaching in the outer court of the temple, He noticed a lone, destitute woman as she approached one of the 13 trumpet-shaped receptacles provided for the voluntary deposit of contributions by worshipers. It was Passover time, and the temple court was crowded with people from all walks of life. Just ahead of her had been several rich people who had thrown large amounts of money into the basins. As the woman approached, Jesus discerned the hearts of those in the line and called to His disciples. He pointed to the woman and said, “This poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury” (**Mark 12:43**). But she had only given two mites, the smallest coins then in circulation in Palestine! Jesus then explained the mystery: “For all the rich did cast in of their abundance; but she, notwithstanding her want did cast in all that she had, yea, even all her living” (Joseph Smith Translation, **Mark 12:44**).

It is not the amount of money that we donate to the Church or others that matters to the Lord. Rather it is whether we give of our abundance or of our living. We should give until it is a sacrifice to give.

To the individuals and families of the Church who struggle with finding enough money to pay their obligations, I say: Take care of your financial duties to God, nation, and others first. This may mean that you will have to postpone the acquisition of some of the comforts and conveniences of life you greatly desire. Casting in all that you have will mean that you must “seek ... first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (**Matt. 6:33**).

To those who have in abundance, even more than you need, I say: Find happiness in the relationships and service you share with God, family, and others. Resist the feeling of constantly needing things just to entertain yourself and occupy your time. We have the scriptures and books of all kinds available. Conversation and service are a better use of time than watching television. Casting in all that you have will be so much more rewarding than the alternative of personal gratification.

### **The Test of Riches**

Our time on earth is a proving ground “to see if [we] will do all things whatsoever the Lord [our] God shall command [us]” (**Abr. 3:25**). Whether we are rich or poor, the proper attitude toward and management of material blessings is something we should strive to achieve. Concerning this test, the Lord said: “He that is faithful in that which is least [he who uses riches wisely] is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon [riches], who will commit to your trust the true riches?” (**Luke 16:10–11**).

For many of us, riches bring some of our greatest opportunities in life. As we strive to follow the Savior, may we ever remember His saying in the Sermon on the Mount: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (**Matt. 6:21**).

*Gospel topics: Jesus Christ, New Testament, honesty, sacrifice, wealth*

*More on this topic:* Brent L. Top, “**Thou Shalt Not Covet,**” *Ensign*, Dec. 1994, 22–26; Jack M. Lyon, “**How Many Loaves Have Ye?**” *Ensign*, Dec. 1989, 36–38; Rex D. Pinegar, “**Become Rich toward God,**” *Ensign*, Jan. 1974, 32–34.

[illustration] *Christ and the Tribute Money*, by Gustave Doré

[illustration] Illustration by Cary Henrie

[illustration] *The Widow’s Mite*, by James Christensen

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