

## **A Christian View of Possessions**

As I have visited different countries around the world and interacted with Christians at a local level I have been amazed at the staggering differences between lifestyles of members of the Body of Christ. I have cringed as I have watched Christian broadcasts in which speakers have appealed to viewers to send their tithes and gifts to “the program”, rather than their local churches and missions, citing unparalleled (but untested) opportunities to be involved in God’s work. I have shared simple meals with people who have not known where their next food supplies were coming. I have been challenged in my own life, as I have seen the assets of friends appreciate beyond their dreams and others lose everything, either because of poor management or adverse circumstances. And I have asked God to help me have a Biblical view of possessions.

Former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke tells the story of his first visit to India. Raised in a Christian home (his father was a Congregational minister), Hawke participated in a youth conference in Cottyam in Kerala State when he was in just twenty-three years of age. Whilst there, at a stage in his life when he was seriously weighing up what he really believed about God, the Bible, Christianity and the world around him, he had an experience that convinced him many Christians were insulated and did not care about the needs of the poor and the oppressed. During the event, he was shocked at the economic gap between the Christian community and other Indians. He wrote, “There were those comfortable Christians up the road singing about bringing Christ to the world, and the world to Christ, and here was the world. And to the Christians they seemed to be totally irrelevant as the Christians were irrelevant to them”. The encounter impressed him negatively about the capacity of the church in action to make a difference, so he simply gave up being a Christian.

### *Possessions, people and Christ*

Amid the debates about globalization, the WTO and trade imbalances, we need to be realistic. Grinding poverty exists. So does fabulous wealth. Can the two coexist? In the Christian community?

Some years ago I lived and worked in Lima, Peru. I became involved in the leadership of an evangelical church in the city and got to know many of the members well. One of the couples was Eduardo and Sulima. Eduardo was from Argentina, his wife was from the north of Peru. He was a successful architect and had business investments that had paid off handsomely. He and Sulima lived in a mansion one of the more affluent suburbs of Lima. They had three maids, a gardener and a chauffeur. I was privileged to visit with them on many occasions. What made Eduardo and Sulima different to most people I knew was that their wealth was conspicuous. At meals we would eat with gold cutlery. Not gold-plated, but the real thing. Only the finest china was used. Their clothes matched the latest Latin American fashions. Eduardo was involved in the leadership team in the church and had great influence in the community.

Javier and Maria, on the other hand, did not own gold. They were too poorly skilled to work as domestic servants. Their house was built on a parcel of ground that did not belong to them. It was constructed of broken down cardboard boxes. Their only electricity came from a single line attached to an illegal source in the unpaved street and there were limits to the number of lights and appliances that could work at any one time. It rarely rains in Lima, so the house did not often leak. However, influenza, tuberculosis and water-borne diseases were a constant problem and the rate of infant mortality was high. Like many squatters in the “barrio”, they had moved from the countryside to find work in the capital. Javier’s employment as a day-labourer, in an over-supplied labour market, did not offer him much in the way of remuneration. Every day he would return to the house covered in grease and sit down to a bowl of “choclo” (maize). Occasionally there was a piece of chicken or a hot “caldo” (stew). Maria did not have running water, but she polished the plates and cutlery with care at the end of the meal. We would sit in the “lounge” on the other side of the same room and talk. Javier and Maria were occasionally helped financially by members of the church, including Eduardo.

These true accounts reflect differences between two families in the same congregation, with the wealth of one being shared with the poverty of another. This scenario is atypical in terms of economic and social divisions in poor nations around the world, but it is a good example of what can happen where believers pursue a higher agenda instead of greed.

### *Jesus and materialism*

Is there a Christian view of possessions? Affluence and spiritual complacency often go together. I do not want to suggest that possessions are wrong in and of themselves, but a materialistic spirit (even when disguised as a cult of “prosperity”) is contrary to the Spirit of Christ. The mark of true discipleship is whether things or people, self or Christ are most important to us.

Jesus was tempted with possessions. One day, Luke tells us, the devil took him up onto a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms in the world. From a unique vantage point he saw the untold wealth and unparalleled power that would be his (note that Jesus never questioned Satan’s capacity to give it to him), if only he would bow down and worship him (Luke 4:6-7). That was the price of an acquisitive spirit.

Jesus said, “A man’s life does not consist of the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15). Wealth often brings vanity and false security. The writer to the Hebrews exhorted Christians to be content with what they had (Hebrews 13:5). Jesus warned us that God and mammon (money, material goods) cannot be joint rulers in our lives. We have to choose one of the other (Matthew 6:24).

Jesus counseled us to be careful of the power of possessions. In the Parable of the Sower, he warned against the “cares of this world”, the desire for possessions that can choke the growth of effect of God’s word in our hearts.

Jesus said that riches are “deceitful”; they can beguile us (Matthew 13:22.). He said, “Beware of covetousness”, of always needing “more”, desiring things that are not rightfully ours or within our legitimate reach (Luke 12:15). He said that it is hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:23). According to Jesus, God knows our every need and will look after us. He will meet our needs – not our greeds.

Our human desires for “more” and our patterns of consumption can never reliably be indicative of God’s blessing and provision in our lives. Think of the pitfalls of excess.

First, on an individual level, materialism should never be a hindrance to the work of God. This can occur if we are so much in debt that we are not free to respond to His call on our lives. Consumerism comes at a personal cost. My parents used to say that “money does not grow on trees” (unless you are in the logging or paper industries). Debt can have a stranglehold over our lives. The unbridled pursuit of “things” can take up our time and dominate our thinking and emotions, making it impossible for us to say “yes” to His call. Possessions can steal our attention and close our eyes and hearts to God’s voice. Wealth can bring vanity, pride, self-sufficiency, smugness and ill-informed independence from God.

Second, overt materialism can damper the effectiveness of our Christian witness. People often say, “All the church wants is my money”. In a sense, this is just a stereotype. They usually don’t make such assertions about the local casino, movie theatre, amusement centre or holiday venue, but they do believe some Christians are keen to get hold of their assets. Conspicuous consumption on the part of the institutional church makes it hard for people on the outside to believe in Jesus. Someone has wisely said that non-Christians, “do not care how much you know until they know how much you care”.

The world is deaf to church sold out to materialism. It has little appeal to the poor. We will find it hard to speak of a God who loved the world so much that he gave sacrificially, if we cannot act out of the same spirit. Most Christians know John 3:16 by heart:

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life:*

Few Christians are familiar with its corollary in 1 John 3:16:

*“This is how we know the love of God, because he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives the brothers.”*

### *Choosing Biblical values*

There are lessons we must learn and put into practice if we truly want possessions to occupy a Biblical place in our lives.

The first lesson is that we are disciples of Christ. Our attitude should match his example (Philippians 2:5). “Though he was rich he became poor for our sakes” (2 Corinthians 8:9). The Body of Christ functions when members work together for the common good. The early disciples put this into practice effectively. cf Acts 2:44, 32, 34. We speak of generosity, but our giving is small by comparison.

The second lesson is that “enough” is enough. God has given us “richly, all things to enjoy” (1 Timothy 6:17). Let’s enjoy them without allowing them to dominate our thinking. The Scripture says that we should not trust in “uncertain riches”. It challenges us to be “rich in good works, generous and ready to share” (1 Timothy 6:18). We never really “own” anything. God owns everything. We brought nothing into the world and we will take nothing away with us (Job 1:21.).

When I first saw the funerary elements found in the tomb of Tutankhamen (1350-1327BC) and displayed in the Egyptian Museum, I was stunned by the amount of gold involved and impressed by the workmanship, but I also noted the emptiness of the human shell that once commanded such riches. We are not “owners” but stewards of God’s resources. We should always be happy to give something away. Our prayer should be that we have sufficient to do so.

The third lesson is that we should put God’s will and Kingdom ahead of everything else. The pursuit of possessions should not preclude us from surrendering to, and pursuing, God’s will and call. Sacrifice is always costly. But we should not confuse wealth and possessions with who we are. We cannot afford to confuse wealth with dignity or self-worth. Possessions do not define us or prove our intrinsic worth in God’s sight, even if they do help create a pecking order in the society in which we live. Over-emphasis on possessions implies that we are fearful that God is unable to take care of us. Happiness as Christians is not measured by the abundance of possessions, but abundance of the heart.

Fourth, we need to learn the true value of money and assets. Several times a week my mailbox is stuffed with catalogues featuring the latest sound systems, huge wide screen televisions, labour saving devices, houses, holiday deals and heaps of relatively useless trivia. The advertising industry thrives by making acquisition and greed titillating top priorities. What we rarely do is make a serious attempt to evaluate what we have and the use to which we put it. The Bible reminds us that, “these things perish with the using” (Colossians 2:22.). Riches diminish with inflation. A friend in Belgrade gave me two bank notes that continue to remind me of the fleeting value of money. Issued at the time of the Balkans conflict in the 1990s one has a face value of 1 billion Lira, that’s one with nine zeros. The other is fifty billion lira. Sounds a lot. Today they are worthless.

It has been my melancholy duty to help a number of families settle estates after the deaths of loved ones. One thing that has always struck me is that possessions that were of great value to the deceased are often no longer worth anything. They are out of date, useless accoutrements, excess to need; silly things that were once prized. The value of what we keep or give away is only in the present.

A friend whose church benefited from a bequest from an old lady remarked to me that it was easy for her to give away her money when she was dead; he wished she had been prepared to do so while she was alive. Not that such bequests are wrong or meaningless, they are just too late for the giver to be part of the gift.

There are occasions on which God calls people to elective poverty. Some religious orders are established along the lines of voluntary poverty. If that is the chosen way, with the purpose of knowing and glorifying God, it is to be commended. However, a vow of poverty on one person's part should never be a basis for legalism or the grounds on which we deem somebody to be particularly "spiritual". A false sense of poverty is not a Christian virtue. Non-Christians spot phonies or hypocrites a mile away.

### *How much do we need?*

Are we afraid to risk our possessions? Should we give up our worldly securities, sell everything we have, give it all away and go into poverty, in order to contribute to a just and responsible society? Definitely not. Before we cite the story of the rich young ruler, whom Jesus challenged to divest himself of his wealth, we need to remember Jesus did not call him to "follow poverty" but to follow Him. That was the issue. The young man was ruled by riches and self-righteousness, not God. I am not suggesting that we necessarily adopt a theology of poverty; however, we should recognise the seductive magnetism of possessions and be prepared to commit to simple lifestyles if God calls us to do so. Our preparedness to change will be limited if we do not reevaluate the place of possessions in our priorities.

We also need to recognise the dimension of need in the world. Poverty and excessive wealth are related to power and powerlessness. What we can do individually is limited. If we gave away everything we own we would only be scratching the surface. Even if we did so with love (without which it would be a waste of time and effort, cf 1 Corinthians 13:3), we would always have the poor with us (Matthew 26:11). The need will always outstrip our capacity to give.

How much is too much, or too little. Each of our circumstances is different and the Holy Spirit will challenge us in different ways with respect to our material views and assets. We need to be prepared to listen, if we hope to make a lasting difference in our world.