



## DID GOD REALLY SAY...CHRISTIANS WILL BE RICH AND SUCCESSFUL? MATTHEW 5:33-37

PASTOR COLIN RIEKE ~ JULY 20, 2014

***<sup>34</sup> Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. <sup>36</sup> What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? <sup>37</sup> Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? <sup>38</sup> If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."***



Grace, mercy and peace are yours through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

Every year for the past 32 years, Forbes magazine has published their Forbes 400. Every September, the Forbes 400 lists the richest 400 Americans by net worth. Last year, Bill Gates topped the list for the 20<sup>th</sup> year in a row with a net worth of \$72 billion. The first list in 1982 had only 13 billionaires on it. This year, you needed at least a billion to get on the list. Now maybe someday you might have hope to be on that list, but if you're like most of us, we would just be content to have enough to get by comfortably, a couple million would be adequate.

Whether we like it or not, wealth is a driving factor in how successful we feel. In a consumer driven economy like America, wealth and success are king. If you don't have it or don't want it, something must be wrong with you. So many people even go into debt in order to portray the aura of wealth, or they go into debt to buy things they don't need, to impress people they don't like. But how does wealth and the pursuit of wealth balance with what God's Word says?

It is a balancing act. Like a gymnast on a balance beam, we don't want to fall off on the one side of going against what the Bible says, and we don't want to fall over on the other side of going beyond what the Bible says when it comes to wealth and success. That's why this question before us this morning is so important. DID GOD REALLY SAY CHRISTIANS WILL BE RICH AND SUCCESSFUL? To answer this question we must turn to where we know God speaks, in the Bible, his Word.

1. The answer denies reason
2. The answer denies self

(1)

So, DID GOD REALLY SAY CHRISTIANS WILL BE RICH AND SUCCESSFUL? We can look around and see there are Christians who are very wealthy and very generous with that wealth. We can look around and see there are Christians who are dirt poor and are still very generous. But one thing to remember is that being rich or poor is not a reflection of your faith. The Bible gives examples of rich people who were spiritual scoundrels (many of the Pharisees), and of rich people who were mature and generous Christians (Cornelius). The Bible also gives examples of poor people who were spiritual scoundrels, and

poor people who were mature and generous. So being rich or poor is not a reflection on your Christian faith. What is a reflection on your Christian faith is what Jesus says here in our gospel.

Jesus explained very clearly in the verses leading up to our gospel this morning what would be awaiting him – his cross. And now he would explain to Christians what it means to follow Jesus. **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”** These words of Jesus describe exactly what it means to be a disciple. Being a disciple of Christ doesn’t mean being rich or poor, it means denying self, it means cross-bearing, it means following what he says. How does this line up with the Christian desire to be RICH AND SUCCESSFUL?

Quite simply, there’s nothing wrong with a Christian’s desire to be rich and successful, as long as it is balanced with God’s Word, not against it. Jesus explains this when he elaborates on what it means for a Christian to follow Jesus. **“What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”** All the wealth in the world is not worth a soul. All the wealth in the world is not worth trading heaven away for. And so when we wish that we were on the Forbes 400 list, we must realize what this wealth can have and what it cannot.

This is an important point to realize, where true wealth is found, and where it isn’t. It’s even more important to realize how it relates to our faith. A natural thought which is ingrained in every person and every Christian in the whole world is if things are going well, then you must be doing something right. Apply that to wealth and success – when you are rich and successful, you must be doing something right. And while it’s true that if you are good at your job, or have been wise with your investments, a natural result would be wealth and success. But it doesn’t equate as naturally for our faith. Once again, a natural thought might be that if things are going well, if you’re rich and successful, then God must be happy with you, you must be doing something right. On the flip side, it can be easy to assume that when things aren’t going so well for you, then something must be wrong, God must not be happy with you.

You can find this type of reasoning in branches of Christianity. Some more obvious than others. Some will come out and say, “God wants you to be happy and successful, that’s what he promises Christians. If you’re not happy and successful, then you must be doing something wrong.” Sometimes we might even find this reasoning in ourselves – either self-righteously thinking I must be a good Christian because I have all my ducks lined up in a row, or despairingly thinking I must be a bad Christian because I don’t have my ducks lined up in a row. When in fact, being a Christian has nothing to do with how rich or how poor we are. That’s because being a Christian has everything to do with Christ, and has nothing to do with you proving it.

When Jesus says, **“Whoever wants to be my disciples must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me,”** he is saying this is the consequence of being a Christian, not the way you can prove it to yourself. We don’t have to look for crosses. We don’t have to give all our money away. We don’t have to look to be a martyr to prove to ourselves and others how good of a follower of Christ I am. Our crosses come naturally. And yet this following Jesus, is difficult, even for a Christian to do. It is difficult because Jesus says, **“Deny yourself and take up your cross.”** Those are two things that our sinful nature does not like to do.

This answer denies our reason. To deny yourself means to give up what you think is good, to give up the sinful habits you enjoy, to give up what you like to do, and instead do what God wants you to do.

Denying isn't fun, denying isn't natural, denying isn't reasonable. Our sinful nature reflects on the American culture of doing what you want when you want with no one to tell you 'no.' Denying ourselves means denying anything that gets in the way of our walk with God. Denying ourselves isn't so much doing something to please God, but doing something that isn't going to harm us.

**"Taking up our cross,"** denies our reason also. Perhaps you are familiar with these verses of Jesus, perhaps not so much. When Jesus says **"Take up our cross,"** he is talking about pain and suffering, the opposite end of the spectrum of rich and successful. But not just any pain and suffering, the pain and suffering we go through because we are a Christian. Only a Christian can take up his cross. That cross can take the form of outright persecution of a Christian's faith. Or it could be more subtle, such as resisting the urge to look at that one website, resisting the temptation to say 'I'm too busy to go to church and hear about what God did for me.'

**"Taking up our cross"** is exactly what Peter was talking about in our second lesson for this morning. He said, **"Don't be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you as though something strange were happening to you, but rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ."** This is why Jesus' disciples rejoiced when they were punished by the Pharisees for proclaiming the gospel. Now, we may or may not have the opportunity to outright suffer punishment for our faith, but we will all take up our cross. Our crosses will vary throughout our life, but they are the same crosses other Christians before us have taken up, for there is nothing new under the sun.

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The only cross that is unique is the cross of Christ. It is this cross which is all important to remember. It is this cross we must never forget. "But pastor, how could we possibly forget it, you talk about it every Sunday!" It is important because it's something you need to hear every Sunday, it's something that gives you comfort and strength every Sunday. Because when Jesus says, **"Deny yourself,"** he's talking about more than just giving up things that you would rather be doing and follow him. He's talking about denying everything there is about you, so that the only thing left to focus on is him and his cross.

Jesus said, **"Whoever wants to save his life will lose it."** It's human nature to want to save our own skin, even at the expense of others sometimes. Yet when we do this, when we focus on ourselves, even a little bit, we lose sight of Christ. It's like Peter when he walked out to Jesus on the water, when he took his eyes off of Jesus, just a little bit, he began to sink. We sink into the spiritual depths when we do not deny ourselves. Denying our very selves is crucial. We must deny our very selves for Christ to have anything to do with us. Because in and of ourselves we are utterly sinful, with nothing good living within us. Nothing we could say or do in ourselves is of any value to God. This is something that must be believed rather than felt. So any time we cling to ourselves, our own works, our own reasoning, our own thinking, just the littlest bit, we sink.

And yet our very nature wants to do the very thing that sinks us. It wants *me* to control my life, not God. It wants *me* to enjoy what I want, it wants *me* to have some say in how I get to heaven, if there indeed is a place. I want to think I'm a good person because I'm rich. I want to think I'm a good Christian because I've given up my earthly possessions, because I've given up my life to Christ. Our very nature wants to draw the focus back to me, even when we say it's all about God. But God is the only one who can

lead me to deny myself, the only one who has the power to make me believe, to make me not sink, to get me to heaven through his Son.

So, DID GOD REALLY SAY CHRISTIANS WILL BE RICH AND SUCCESSFUL? He certainly does not guarantee Christians will be rich and successful, but he also doesn't leave us with nothing. For those looking for riches and success by hanging on the coattails of Jesus will be sorely disappointed. For just as Jesus took up his cross, so a believer takes up his own. Jesus says the riches of this world are not the riches we are to be seeking after. And a Christian doesn't need riches to validate their faith, just like a Christian doesn't need a lack of riches to validate their faith. God has given us the richest blessing of heaven through his Son. A Christian needs nothing else. Amen.