

*For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?... the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.... God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.... That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.*

— 1 Corinthians 1:19-31

## WHERE IS THE WISE?

*E. Jack Chandler Jr.*

**T**HE CITY OF CORINTH, like many cultural and commercial hubs, was an affluent, fast-moving, immoral city. To a Roman citizen, her mention evoked the same sorts of images that New York or San Francisco or Chicago does for a U.S. citizen today. A close neighbor of Athens, Corinth was heavily influenced by humanistic Greek culture.

Three particular attributes — brains, brawn and beauty — defined the Greek social elite. Those who were athletically inclined and those with handsome physiques were revered, but those regarded as the most refined and *sophisticated* possessed the attribute they knew as *sophia* — worldly wisdom. The Greeks were captivated by philosophy and the pursuit of human excellence. Guided by the works of such esteemed thinkers as Plato and Socrates, they held the notion that within the human intellect lay a great reservoir of unused potential — that the human creature was capable of rising high above the classic Christian understanding of the human condition.

The young church at Corinth unfortunately did not escape this *enlightened* Athenian influence. Many of the day's societal ideals — the superiority of intellect and the tolerance of so-called *lifestyle choices*, for instance — had infiltrated the walls of the sanctum and had caused a variety of problems among the members.

When this news reached the Apostle Paul near the end of his three-year residence in Ephesus, he authored the first of his two recorded letters to the Corinthian brethren, calling them to reform their carnal attitudes and practices, and to return to a Christ-centered walk. In this first epistle, he clearly indicates that the philosophical opinions that had crept into the church were directly at odds with the revealed truth of Scripture. He devotes a large portion of two chapters to the careful differentiation between what the Greeks called wisdom and what God calls wisdom — between the simple-mindedness of men (which men think is wisdom) and the wisdom of God (which men think is simple-minded). Through his ironic use of such language as *"the foolishness of preaching," "the foolishness of God"*

and *"the weakness of God,"* Paul shakes his readers into a firm grasp of reality — that human philosophy is starkly different from divine wisdom.

And so the lines are drawn.

### MONEY ACCORDING TO THE WORLD

Like the Greek culture of Paul's day, ours is dominated by opinion. Radio and television talk shows rule the airwaves; newscast and newspaper editorials often are presented and accepted as fact. Everyone, it seems, has a unique perspective on most issues, and diversity of opinion is expressly encouraged.

The world offers a variety of opinions in the realm of finances, and this information is available via every imaginable medium. Library and bookstore shelves overflow with volumes teaching the art of accumulating wealth. Entire periodicals are devoted to creative cash management and tax sheltering techniques. Television *infomercials* enthrall viewers with get-rich-quick schemes. And for the higher-tech consumer, the Internet abounds with wide-ranging advice from managing stock portfolios to amassing great sums of retirement wealth.

One ugly, but universal truth undergirds the entire body of worldly wisdom regarding money matters: *humans are characterized by greed.* World teachings about money reduce to a few simple premises: money is security, riches afford happiness, and affluence gauges success.

***Money is Security.*** The first tenet of financial world-wisdom is that security is found in accumulated wealth. Capitalizing on the understanding that man craves security, conventional secular wisdom declares that money somehow provides a fortress of protection against the

unforeseen, a shelter from the storms and trials of life.

Accordingly, we are bombarded from all sides — *even from Christian sources* — with the message that we must build a reserve of funds sufficient in size to cover every imaginable contingency: loss of income, economic disaster, natural destruction and death. So we focus on investment portfolios. We make big plans for our retirement. We insure as if there were no tomorrow.

And we pursue these aims with urgency.

**Riches Afford Happiness.** A second world-teaching regarding money springs from the popular humanistic delusion that we should learn to love ourselves more — that we deserve to pamper ourselves. We are encouraged to devote more time and resources to selfish ends. Ultimately, this type of thinking leads us to conclude that money can make

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us happy: since *everything is for sale*, and since *money can buy anything* (or so we are led to believe), we come to understand that happiness is as near as a department store transaction.

So we litter our lives with expensive *things* — cars, clothes, gadgets, makeovers — all in an effort to feel good about ourselves, to boost our self-esteem. We address depression and sadness with shopping sprees. And for a while we feel happy.

But this shallow sort of happiness never lasts; life becomes a succession of binges.

**Affluence Gauges Success.** To appear to be unsuccessful to others is considered failure in the eyes of the world. The accumulation of assets, we are taught, gains us positions of esteem and prominence among our neighbors, our peers, our friends. Who we are as individuals, our positions in society, and our inherent worth are largely determined, according to the world, by our bank account balances, the types of cars we drive, the size of our houses, and the fashion statements we wear.

We are conditioned to *keep up with the Joneses* to maintain our outward show of wealth. And even if we have limited resources, the world encourages us to *appear* to be successful by tempting us with easy money. So we incur debt. We buy on credit what we cannot afford — boats, appliances, entertainment, luxurious vacations — because we are concerned with what others see and somehow think that shiny, new things add sparkle to our lives and win us acceptance

among the right sorts of people.

Life becomes nothing more than a façade.

### MONEY ACCORDING TO THE WORD

The world teaches that money is the answer. So we work harder and longer, we insure to the hilt, we hoard our resources — all in an effort to construct a safety net, to purchase happiness, to look successful.

Sadly, those deceived by these world-teachings — those who make wealth their passion and *seek* to become rich — often find themselves in bondage to their lust for more money. The more they accumulate, the more keenly they sense their insecurity, discontent and failure. But conditioned that money is the answer, they ever reach for more.

Were Paul alive today, this tragic truth would hardly surprise him; in fact, some eight years after his first letter to the Corinthians, he issued a warning that to love money leads down the path to certain destruction:

*But they that will be rich fall into temptation  
and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful  
lusts, which drown men in destruction and  
perdition. For the love of money is the root of all  
evil: which while some coveted after, they have  
erred from the faith, and pierced themselves  
through with many sorrows.*

— 1 Timothy 6:9-10

Paul's drowning analogy is interesting. No one out for a relaxing swim dreams that drowning will be his end. But if he loses himself in the sheer pleasure of his pursuit and fails to realize that he is slowly drifting from the relative safety of the shoreline, he soon may find that the currents have carried him beyond his ability to control his own movements. He spins out of control, utterly alone and helpless as he wearily struggles for every breath.

Typically, Paul says, those *in love with* money become lost in their own pursuit of financial independence and begin to drift. They lose interest in spiritual matters and, through their unbalanced attitudes about money, suffer many sorrows: broken relationships, soured investments, worry, despair. They forget that they are very much *dependent* upon God for provision. And eventually, he says, their end is drowning.

The essence of worldly teachings on this subject is clear. And so is the likely end of those who give themselves over to the pursuit of riches.

But what does God's Word say about the matter?

In Romans 12:2, Paul admonishes us to "*be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.*" Or, if you'll permit a loose paraphrase, *Don't be conformed to the world — be conformed instead to the Word!* To every dimension of

our lives we are to apply the Standard, God's Word, and to determine whether our understandings and attitudes and actions are consistent with it. If not, then change is in order, for the credibility of our Christianity is at stake. Every aspect of our beings — how we treat our husbands, how we treat our wives, how we treat our children, other relationships, our jobs, our prayer life — falls within the scope of Romans 12:2. And so does the way we handle our money: each attitude, belief or practice testifies, either positively or negatively, of our professed love for Jesus Christ.

The Bible doctrines regarding money are diametrically opposed to the teachings of the world. Specifically, God's Word indicates that money is *not* our security, happiness *cannot* be purchased, and affluence *does not* gauge success.

**Money is Not Our Security.** What makes the world-view teaching that money buys security so dangerous is that it contains a *shred* of truth. God's Word *does* indeed teach that careful planning, saving, and investing are wise. The world-view, however, is out of balance: it takes these sound principles to an extreme, propagating the notion that we must plan

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Our security in life emanates from but one source: God Himself. There is no lasting security in a job. There is no true security in a mate. Security cannot be found in relationships or in social status. Security does not exist in the government or in political parties. Security is found neither in psychology nor in self-esteem.

And authentic, enduring security is not for sale.

To the contrary, God's Word teaches that to place security in money — to trust in riches — lulls us into a state of *false* security. When we hoard our resources to build a bulky bank account, we begin to feel a sense of satisfaction in our own efforts. And when this attitude matures into one of independence and self-reliance, we stop trusting God.

Solomon offers some penetrating truths in

Proverbs. "*He that trusteth in his riches shall fall,*" he says in 11:28. And in 18:10-11, he writes

*The name of the LORD is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe. The rich man's wealth is his strong city, and as an high wall in his own conceit.*

New Testament teaching in this area is entirely consistent with Solomon's wisdom. The promise of God's provision, for instance, fell from the lips of Jesus in His *Sermon on the Mount* — and it is from such promises of a God who cannot lie that we draw great security:

*Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on.... Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?... And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field...shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?... for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*

— Matthew 6:25-33

The Master's words are beautifully simple, yet they transcend earthly wisdom: don't brood over the essentials of life, for the Father is acutely aware of our needs — and He cherishes and provides for His children. The proper balance, Jesus teaches, is to spend less time seeking material needs and more time in pursuit of the kingdom.

The Apostle Paul echoes the same refrain when he urges his young companion in the ministry with these words in his first letter to Timothy (6:17-19):

*Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.*

Paul's admonition could not possibly be clearer or

more balanced: don't trust in riches, he says, *but in the living God*. And yes, *lay up in store a good foundation* — that is, build a reserve — but stay balanced. *Plan* for the future, but avoid worry. Concentrate less on what you *don't* know and *can't* control (the uncertain future), and more on what you *do* know and what is completely under control — the certainty that Christ has prepared an eternally secure resting place for His children. "*Lay hold on eternal life*," Paul says. Anticipate the day. Relish the thought of an eternity with Him. For this hope — an anchor of the soul, our *security* — truly springs eternal.

God's wisdom rejects the wisdom of this world.

**Happiness Cannot be Purchased.** It was said of Moses in Hebrews 11:25 that he chose "*rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season*." All of us sinners understand full well what the author had in mind by this last phrase: *there is pleasure in sin*. Only when condemnation and guilt arise following an act of disobedience or rebellion does the arrow find its mark. Then the truth hits home: the pleasures associated with sin are at best fleeting, but the consequences live on.

The same truth applies to the deceptive world-principle that *money buys happiness*. Things we buy may temporarily satiate our lust and may even provide some degree of enjoyment, but any happiness thus derived simply does not last. Our toys break, lose their luster, and suffer wear. And what we *thought* would make us happy is replaced by consuming desire for newer toys.

The wise man Solomon, by then aging and world-experienced, recounted in Ecclesiastes how he had spent his life in the observation of man's pursuits. He studied every imaginable undertaking "*under the sun*" — knowledge, women, nature, music, self-discovery, wealth — and could say only that in these pursuits, "*all is vanity and vexation of spirit*." But before he rested his pen, he wrote (12:13), "*Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man*." These words truly are profound, for in them Solomon revealed that he *did* recognize the source of real happiness — the pursuit of God.

True, lasting happiness comes only from fellowship with God. And while our *relationship* with the Father already is sealed, to live in close fellowship with Him is entirely within our grasp: James writes (4:8) that we should "*Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you*." Noah knew this fellowship, for he "*walked with God*" (Genesis 6:9). Abraham was called "*the friend of God*" (James 2:23). David was close to Him — he was described as "*a man after [God's] own heart*" (1 Samuel 13:14). Countless others have experienced this fellowship and have known true happiness.

When we walk with the Savior and hide His Word in our hearts, we have at our disposal the tools necessary to maintain our focus and happiness. And even in the face of unbelievable tragedy and hardship — in those circumstances where no amount of money offers comfort — we can call to remembrance such jewels as Romans 8:18: "*For I reckon that the sufferings of this present world are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us*." What a gloriously happy thought!

The plain teaching of the Bible is that we are not to be consumed with riches. Instead, we are to be consumed with Christ in all that we do — in

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meditations about His character, in prayerful utterances of thanksgiving and praise, in patterning our lives after His great example. The psalmist David beautifully expressed this great truth when he wrote (27:4), "*One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple*."

There is no genuine, abiding happiness apart from a close walk with the Good Shepherd.

God's wisdom scoffs at the wisdom of this world.

**Affluence Does Not Gauge Success.** The world favorably regards those who have amassed substantial material wealth. Because we admire their hard work, determination and vision in the achievement of their dreams, we ascribe them honor, respect and positions of social prominence. Many aspire to this treasured pinnacle of *success*, for money, fame and esteem are attractive to human nature and coveted by the *have-nots*.

Nowhere in His Word does God condemn the possession of riches. We read, in fact, that He blessed many with an abundance of material wealth: Job, David and Solomon, for instance, all were noted in this regard. It is God who sovereignly bestows blessings upon His creation, and wealth certainly is among His gifts. But to accord respect to certain individuals *because of their wealth* is a practice unsupported by —

and incompatible with — the teaching of the Word. Such an attitude bespeaks a covetous spirit and illustrates a primary trapping of the world-view: *preoccupation with the opinions of others.*

James, the brother of Jesus, was no stranger to this human tendency, for he addressed it in his general epistle to the Christian Jews dispersed throughout the Roman Empire:

*My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts? Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?... If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well: But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors. For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.*

— James 2:1-5, 8-10

James here does not search for polite words to soften his point. Nor does he apologize for the truth. He does not indicate that to subscribe to this attitude is unkind or unjust. Instead, he unashamedly and boldly declares that to judge others based on the shell — physical attractiveness, fashionable clothing, expensive cars, skin color, popularity, fame, or wealth — is a sin no matter what your perspective. To give respect to persons is sin. To look down on others is sin. And to *wish to be respected* is sin. Each of these robs God of His glory.

While money does not gauge success, we are taught to measure our lives. But the comparison is not to be made against the lives and material successes of others (2 Corinthians 10:12-13). The Bible calls us to self-evaluation — to take introspective looks at our own lives using God's Word and the life of Christ as the Standards. "But let a man examine himself," Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:28-31, "for if we should judge ourselves, we should not be judged." To become an open book to the scrutiny of God's Word reveals to us our own faults and failings. And when we realize that the beam is in our own eye (to use Jesus' word picture), we should focus on self-correction to the glory of God. "Examine yourselves," Paul would later write in his second letter to the Corinthians (13:5),

*"whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves."*

The psalmist David expressed how this matter of self-examination and cleansing was a private undertaking — one between him and his Lord: "Examine me, O LORD," he prayed in Psalm 26:2, "and prove me; try my reins and my heart." And later he echoed this sentiment: "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24). David desired that the Lord would cleanse him of sinful thoughts and actions, and would fill him with the fullness of God. He was more concerned with how he measured up to God than with how he compared to his contemporaries.

**The Bible teaches that we are not to be consumed with riches; instead, we are to be consumed with Christ in all that we do.**

If money doesn't gauge our success, then what does?

Solomon says in Proverbs that "a good name is rather to be chosen than great riches" (22:1). We should always seek to maintain an upstanding reputation — not for our own sakes, but for Christ's. We should seek to please God in all of our undertakings, that we might be known, as was David, as people after God's heart. We should strive to apply the truth that James taught — to give no respect of persons, for "the LORD seeth not as man seeth, for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). And we should cleanse our hearts before God, to reserve place for Him there, to "sanctify the Lord God in your hearts" (1 Peter 3:15).

Perhaps God's own words best condense the aggregate of these thoughts on measured success. As He prepared Joshua to lead the nation of Israel into the Promised Land, He spoke these encouraging words:

*There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. Be strong and of a good courage: for unto this people shalt thou divide for an inheritance the land, which I sware unto their fathers to give them. Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest. This book of the law shall not depart out of thy*

*mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.*

— Joshua 1:5-8

Good success, He says, is measured in our meditation on and obedience to His Word.

And once again, the pursuit of God spurns worldly wisdom.



God has time and again made foolish the wisdom of this world (1 Corinthians 1:20). Yet we, His foolish children, frequently turn to the world and its vain philosophies. Long ago the prophet Isaiah published a stern admonition against seeking counsel from the world:

*Woe to the rebellious children, saith the LORD, that take counsel, but not of me... That walk to go down into Egypt, and have not asked at my mouth; to strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh, and to trust in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore shall the strength of Pharaoh be your shame, and the trust in the shadow of Egypt your confusion.... Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help... they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the LORD!*

— Isaiah 30:1-3, 31:1

This warning is clear: to turn to the world (Egypt) rather than to the Word will work only to our shame and confusion. Woe befalls those, cautions the prophet, who seek the world for help.

Throughout his writings, the Apostle Paul underscores Isaiah's advice to seek counsel from the Counselor. Over and over he stresses the superiority

of God's wisdom to man's. And in 1 Timothy 6, in the prelude to his famous *love of money* passage, he makes practical application of this theme specifically to monetary matters with some rather pointed advice:

*If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself. But godliness with contentment is great gain.*

— 1 Timothy 6:3-6

Be a careful discerner, Paul says, of all counsel that you receive, and separate yourself from any advice or teaching that smacks of worldly wisdom. The world supposes, after all, that *gain is godliness*. But according to Paul, this notion is counter to truth, for "*godliness with contentment is great gain.*"

We must condition ourselves to apply the ideas we encounter — including those regarding money — against the standard of God's Word. And we must be committed to discounting all man-centered philosophies and opinions and theories as inconsistent with His Word.

What is the foundation of your life? Of your hopes and dreams? Of your finances? Do you give ear to worldly wisdom? Are you enamored of her seductive claims? Or do you try to conform your life to the teachings found in God's Word? Paul's firm conviction — and clear teaching — is that our lives should be founded on the Rock and rooted in the Word, "*That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God*" (1 Corinthians 2:5).



*Fill me, Father, with Thy Spirit.*

*Give me the discernment  
to understand the practical  
truths found in Thy Word,  
and grant me the wisdom and  
conviction to conform every  
area of my life — including my  
finances — to Thy perfect will.  
Amen.*