When should you stop getting more? (16:8)

Better is a little with righteousness than great income with injustice.

THE TEXT (NASB)

Better is a little with righteousness than great income with injustice.

Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues without right. Classic KJV - Proverbs 16:8

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes less is more, when getting more costs more. When should we stop chasing more money? When does our wealth mutate from helpful to harmful? The answer is simple, but rarely obvious: Better to have less with something called righteousness, than much without it.

More wealth is not simply more life. Compulsive wealth is like contaminated candy, first tasting good, but then grinding our tummies. We can stop getting more, when more means less life, less zest, less peace.

How can we get the optimal amount to have the best life possible?

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COMMENTARY

“Righteousness” is mysterious, so we might begin by substituting “good health.” Clearly, it’s better to have little income with good health, than great income with poor health. Without good health, wealth is almost useless, so author-speaker Max Lucado advises, “Choose satisfaction over salary. Better to be happy with little than miserable with much.” But health we can measure. Righteousness?

Righteousness

Most business schools train their students to maximize profit, subject to constraints. This text identifies one constraint: Righteousness. But what is righteousness? If we make asset accumulation our purpose, once we have a little, how do we redirect our energies from pursuing income to pursuing righteousness? Can we? What if we have to pursue righteousness first? But what is righteousness?

The proverb says, righteousness magnifies the benefits of wealth, and injustice cripples wealth; yet riches are visible, and righteousness is not. What’s the measure? How do we know we have it?

The Hebrew word for “righteousness” here, צדקה (ṣeḏā•qāh, pronounced “tse-dah-qah”), is used 157 times in the Bible, first at Genesis 15:6 where God imputes righteousness to Abraham. Abraham trusted God, took God at his word, stayed confident that God always keeps his promises; so “trust in God.” The Hebrew word, ṣeḏā•qāh, is also translated “justice.” Its root indicates conformity to a cosmic ethical or moral standard, the order of the universe, not the tangible world of brute things, but the intangible world of commanding right and wrong.

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Righteousness and Injustice

Two Hebrew words combine to denote “injustice”: “not” or “no,” לא (lô', pronounced “low”), and “justice,” משפט (miš•pāṭ, pronounced “mish-pat”). The “justice” part, used 406 times in the Bible, is a noun from the Hebrew verb, שפט (šā•pāṭ, pronounced “shah-phat”), pointing to the commanding actions of government in conforming things here-and-now to the law always-and-everywhere.

Both positive terms are used together in Genesis 18:19, when God chooses Abraham, “so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.” But how did the very, very wealthy Abraham achieve righteousness? Or why did God give it?

Abraham Got it Right

“He [Abraham] believed the LORD, and He [the LORD] counted it to him [Abraham] as righteousness,” Genesis 15:9. From this, we can conclude that righteousness comes by trusting the LORD, taking the LORD at his word. Those whom God declares righteous are simply those who take God at his word, believe Him to be true, and live accordingly. God imputed righteousness to Abraham because Abraham trusted God. So strange, so simple. God is pleased when people trust in Him, rather than trusting in their own powers. We might also wonder whether people who trust God are rare, otherwise God wouldn’t think so much of it.

A Gift

God imputes—accredits—righteousness on the basis of faith, trust. Righteousness is a gift (Romans 6:23). God knows that all humans are incapable of living up to His standard of perfection, always perfectly. The entire human race was doomed at the start, because of basic human rebellion. So, by putting all mankind on a level playing field, God made righteousness available as a gift to anyone who will humbly receive it (Romans 5:17). But like any gift, it must be accepted, to be used.

Righteousness flows from God, not from our humanity. In contrast, Green Peace’s aim is to restore pristine environmental conditions, the pure air and pure water supposedly as enjoyed by

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the Earth's inhabitants long, long ago. But a Green Earth does not bring human peace. "Natural" jungle peoples have lived lives of constant tribal warfare. Peace comes from the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).

When Wealth Hurts

Some well-meaning, but naive individuals suggest that there should be numerical limits on profits, like a five, twenty, or fifty percent return on investments. This proverb implies that such an intention is useless. The appropriate limits to profit are not about specific numbers, but about the circumstances under which profits are earned. Our assets become liabilities, whenever they decrease our trust in God. Our income becomes loss when we forfeit righteousness in the pursuit of income.

When wealth reduces our faith in God—our righteousness—then we're devoting too much energy in its pursuit. When we trust in wealth, it mutates from healthy to diseased.

OUR CREATOR, REDEEMER, AND FRIEND

Jesus said, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" Mark 8:36.

Gaining control of our world is a step-by-step, incremental process, but in the same way, losing our soul is also step-by-step, incremental. We lose it a little at a time, when we neglect what feeds our souls, by accumulating things that do not. We should stop getting more things, when those things begin to choke life itself, especially choking out the word of God in our lives (Mark 4:19).

Abundant assets DO NOT produce abundant life! And as the third-century pastor Iranaeus said, "The glory of God is man FULLY ALIVE."

APPLICATION

- Memorize the text in your favourite translation and think about it often.
- Don't regret low income, but do regret every lack of righteousness. To find out why study Psalms 37:16-17.
- Don't limit your income but limit the time and effort in pursuit of income.
- Don't borrow money just to make more money.

Which one of these steps, if any, does Jesus want you to take now? Ask Him.

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KEY WORDS

assets, better life (quality), ethics, failure, income, injustice, liability, planning, profit, righteous, success, wisdom, budget

ILLUSTRATION

Who is Prudent Pauline?

Prudent Pauline is a planner. She looks before she leaps, she thinks before she speaks. Her favourite mottos are: “Haste makes waste,” “brains over brawn,” and “don't jump to conclusions.”

When Pauline first heard that famous maxim: “The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step,” she said NO! It begins with a good map. The map must be studied and the best route plotted. Consider road conditions, terrain, rest stops, refuelling, hostile territory, expected weather, travelling companions, clothing, supplies, and many more factors, including (if necessary) a guide.

She has studied the wisdom of Solomon and even helped teach him a thing or two. Solomon wrote these words about 3,000 years ago in honour of Prudent Pauline. “Whatever your hand finds to do (no matter what you are doing) do it with all your might (give it your full ability and energy) for there is no activity or planning or wisdom after you die—it will be too late.” Pauline says, “First comes wisdom, then comes planning (her favourite activity), and then comes activity.”

Pauline makes the time to do tax planning. She does a work plan every day. She uses a day

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timer or planner to assign priorities to her activities. She and Diligent Daniel are an incredible pair. Pauline does all her homework before she starts an activity.

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