

CHRISTIANS – FLEE FROM IDOLATRY

Most Christians today think of idolatry as something that is committed by people who worship idols – images of someone or something other than God – and that it was confined to God’s people in the Old Testament. But idolatry is prevalent among God’s people still, albeit in more subtle forms, one of which is covetousness (CP Lu 12:16-21). This is called the parable of the rich fool. What Jesus is teaching here is that the acquisition of wealth and material possessions for the sake of it is covetousness (CP V 13-15). Covetousness is futile and self-defeating, for the end of it is death. *Abundance* in V 15 means more than is needed, surplus to needs. The fate of the rich man in the parable generalises the fate of all who are more concerned with wealth and material possessions than the things of God. Covetousness is idolatry, and no idolater can inherit the Kingdom of God (CP Eph 5:5; Col 3:1-6). This is a grim warning for Christians against making wealth and material possessions the focus of this life at the expense of their souls in the next life (CP Mk 8:36).

This does not mean that Christians are not to labour for their own and their family’s needs – they are obligated by scripture to provide for their family (CP Pr 13:11 and Ecc 5:18-20 with 1Ti 5:8). Christians must not confuse working to meet family needs with covetousness. Covetousness is the greed for material things and the desire to have more. Many Christians, who would never consider themselves to be materialistic in the strict sense of the word, nevertheless live as though material things are extremely important. Yet in the parable of the rich fool, Jesus teaches that the desire for wealth and material possessions directly conflicts with God’s purpose for His children, and that the selfish amassing of wealth and material possessions by Christians indicate that they no longer see life from the vantage point of eternity. Their goal and their fulfilment is no longer in God, but in themselves and their possessions. It may not start out that way, but that is how it will end up. We have God’s word for it (CP De 31:20; 32:12-18; Hos 8:14; 13:6). *Jeshurun* in De 32:15 is a symbolic name for Israel. Because of their wealth and success the Israelites had become self-sufficient, thinking that they no longer needed God. Likewise, when Christians have an abundance of blessings they are also tempted to feel self-sufficient and that they no longer need to seek God and His help. History has repeatedly shown that in time of ease and plenty God’s people are most prone to forget Him and stop seeking His face (CP Pr 20:21; 28:16, 20-22).

Riches and possessions are only temporary. They should not be the object of a Christian’s life. The desire for them cause Christians to sin, and just as the Old Testament children of God forsook Him after they acquired wealth and material possessions, so too according to scripture will New Testament Christians (CP 1Ti 6:9-12). Paul’s perspective on the pursuit of wealth is that it debases the mind, destroys Godly traits, and makes Christians selfish, proud and avaricious, which all lead to eternal damnation. *Perdition* in V 9 refers to the state after death wherein exclusion from salvation is a realised fact, wherein man, instead of becoming what he might have been in God is lost and ruined forever. In this context perdition is the final destiny of Christians who

determine to be rich, because this desire for wealth is not a passing thing but the result of a process of reasoning. The word *will* in V 9, from the Greek word **boulomai**, refers to a desire that comes from the reasoning faculties, not from the emotions. *Coveted* in V 10 is **orego**, which means to stretch one’s self out in order to grasp something, to reach after, to desire.

Erred in V 10 also means seduced. Those that coveted after wealth were seduced from the faith. Paul’s warning to Timothy in V 11 to *flee these things* applies to Christians today whose ambition is to have more money than that which satisfies their everyday needs (CP Psalms 37:16; Pr 15:16; 30:7-9; Ecc 5:10-17; 6:9; Jer 45:5; Ro 12:16; Php 4:11-13; 1Ti 6:6-8; He 13:5-6). Those scriptures all teach the same thing : Godliness with sufficient material blessings to meet their everyday need should make Christians content with life. Money and the abundance of material possessions do not give life meaning and thus cannot bring real happiness. Ecc 5:10-17 teaches that in general, an honest working person can sleep more peacefully after working all day, than those who accumulate earthly riches. The fear of the wealthy is that something will happen to cause them to lose everything. But even if they do not lose anything they can take nothing with them when they die. It is sad that so many Christians work so hard for an abundance of earthly possessions instead of working to lay up treasures in Heaven (CP 1Ti 6:18-20). The word *conversation* in He 13:5 means manner or way of life. Christians’ way of life has to be without the desire for more than that which will satisfy their everyday needs. That is what Jesus meant in Lu 12:15 when He said “... *a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth*” (CP Psalms 39:4-7).

This teaches that God has given every Christian a certain life span in which their faithfulness toward Him will be tested and determined. How they spend that span of life will determine their destination in Eternity. They can spend it chasing wealth and material possessions for their own self-gratification, or they can spend it doing the work of God’s word (CP Psalms 49:1-20). Whilst this is a call to all mankind, Christians need to know what it is saying to them. It stresses both the futility of trusting in earthly riches and the transitory nature of all that the world has to offer. Anyone at all whose life consists in an abundance of material possessions or in worldly pleasures or fame, rather than seeking after God and His kingdom, will be eternally damned (CP 1Jn 2:15-17). Only those totally consecrated to the service of God and completely yielded to the authority of Jesus will be redeemed from the grave (CP Ecc 2:18-23). This teaches that any human pursuit in which God is not central is futile.

The rich fool in Lu 12:16-21 gave no thought to the things of God. He mistook the purpose of life, imagining it consisted in the abundance of possessions rather than it being a channel of blessings for others of God’s children in need. Scriptures teach that the primary purpose for Christians even getting a job is to help others in need (CP Eph 4:28). Jesus equates Christians’ treatment of others in need with their treatment of Himself (CP Pr 19:17; 21:13; 22:8 with

Mt 25:31-46). The Christian walk is not only a spiritual walk, it must also serve the needs of others, especially other Christians (CP Ga 6:9-10; Jas 2:13-17; 1Jn 3:16-19). What Christians do for other Christians proves their consecration to the service of God and confirms their love for God and for each other. This is the acid test of Christianity by which Christians know whether they are following the example of God's love to others. If they are not willing to give of their material things to others in need, then they certainly would not lay down their lives for them like God expects of them, and like Jesus Himself did. 1Jn 3:16 is the exact counterpart of Jn 3:16 (CP Jn 3:16).

All the scriptures studied thus far very clearly warn Christians against making wealth and material possessions the object of life, and they are but few of many scriptures in God's word that teach this (CP Mt 6:19-21, 24). Here Jesus equates the desire for wealth with serving *mammon*. Mammon refers to earthly riches. Jesus sees in the desire for earthly riches a self-centred covetousness; a life-goal totally opposed to God, which claims Christians' hearts, and therefore estranges them from God. Jesus solemnly warns Christians that they cannot be faithful to God and also covet wealth. While no Christian would say that money is God, many are guilty of worshipping it. It needs to be restated: covetousness is idolatry, and behind every idol are demons, and although Christians pursuing wealth would not worship idols per se, they are in reality worshipping the demonic forces behind idolatry (CP 1Cor 10:1-7, 14-22). Jesus' statement that Christians cannot serve God and mammon in Mt 6:24, is essentially the same as Paul's admonition here that Christians cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils.

The majority of Christians see 1Cor 10:14-22 as merely referring to food sacrificed to idols and idolatrous feasts, but there is much more meaning to it than that. Paul is teaching here that although an idol is nothing in the world, it does represent something that is not the true God. An idol is not only an image of something, it is also a representation, whether corporeal or imaginary, or some other thing. Idolatry can involve professing allegiance to God and His word while at the same time giving equal or greater allegiance to someone or something else. Christians must learn to distinguish between the things of God and that which is of the devil. They must not compromise themselves with the things the world loves, because everything esteemed by the world is abomination in God's sight – everything the world loves, God hates (CP Lu 16:13-15). The core teaching here is that Christians cannot derive pleasure from things the world loves at the expense of doing God's work, and please God (CP Jas 4:4-5).

Christians must ever be alert to the danger of being seduced from their allegiance to God by the allurements of earthly riches and material possessions. They must guard against any preoccupation at all with material things lest they become more important to them than the things of God (CP Mt 13:3-9, 22). This is called the parable of the sower and the seed. It perfectly describes what the end is for Christians caught up in the pursuit of wealth, and the

deceitfulness of riches. The teaching in this parable centres on the soils, not the sower or the seed. The soils represent those who receive God's word and how they respond to it. The term *deceitfulness of riches* means that wealth gives a false impression, whether by appearance, statement or influence, a false sense of security. *Choke* means figuratively to overpower. The false sense of security emanating from earthly riches overpowers the word of God in Christians and prevents them bearing fruit for the Kingdom. They have been seduced by their wealth from continuing in the things of God. This is the same teaching as in 1Ti 6:10 where Christians were also seduced by their wealth away from God.

Christians succumbing to wealth and material possessions are yielding to forces in opposition to the nature of the word of God which they have received for their salvation. This was made clear in 1Cor 10:14-22. Christians cannot have both salvation and covet earthly things. They cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils; they cannot serve God and mammon (CP Rev 3:14-20). This is called the letter to the church at Laodicea. It is one of seven letters to seven churches Jesus addresses in Rev 2 and 3, and while these churches actually existed at the time of John's revelation, they are also representative of all churches since then. The letters have an ongoing application for all generations since then too – they are for the admonition of both the corporate church and for every Christian individually. In their self-sufficient prosperity and worldliness the Laodicean Christians have excluded Jesus from fellowship with Him. They see themselves as rich, increased with goods and needing nothing. They do not know that in reality they are poor, blind, wretched, miserable and naked. Jesus counsels them not to lay up treasure for themselves on earth but to store it up for themselves in Heaven. He then issues an invitation for anyone who will repent to be restored to fellowship with Him, otherwise they will be rejected. This is a warning for every Christian against being lured by money and possessions away from God (CP Job 31:13-28).

What Job says here should be the testimony of every Christian, because one day, like Job, they will all have to give an account to God for everything they lavish on themselves and withhold from others in need (CP Lu 16:19-25). This narrative above all else teaches that Christians cannot profess reverence for God while at the same time living only for the fulfilment of their own self-gratifying desires. The rich man went to hell because his life was consumed with self-centred living, not caring about others of God's children worse off than himself. In his self-indulgent lifestyle the rich man violated God's two greatest commandments (CP Mt 22:34-40). As we learned earlier in Ga 6:9-10, Jas 2:13-17 and 1Jn 3:16-19, it is only Christians' love for their brothers and sisters in Christ that proves their love for God. But they honestly cannot say that they love them unless they are prepared to give of their material possessions to them.

One of the best illustrations in scripture of how God's children can get caught up in self-centred living and forfeit God's blessings is found in the Old Testament book of Haggai the prophet (CP Hag 1:2-11). God's

children in Haggai's time had forfeited His blessing because of their apathy toward the things of God. They were preoccupied building luxury houses for themselves while God's house – the temple – lay in ruins. They needed to be reminded of their obligation to God, so God used Haggai to rebuke them. God's purpose was to motivate them to reorder their lives and priorities so they could resume building His house. Christians today have the same obligation to build God's house, and God's rebuke to His children then, extends to Christians today. Many are so busy pursuing their own self-interests that they too are neglecting to build God's house. For the Old Testament Jews, building God's house meant rebuilding the temple – His earthly house. For Christians today, building God's house means building His spiritual house – the church – by winning souls to Christ and advancing God's Kingdom in the earth (CP Eph 5:15-17; Col 4:5).

Winning souls to Christ and advancing God's Kingdom in the earth must be the first priority of every professing Christian. It is not an option for Christians, but a command (CP 28:19-20; Mk 16:15-16; Ac 1:6-8; 10:42-45). God's rebuke to the Jews in

Hag 1:2-5 for their lack of concern with building His house while building their own luxury houses, is for the admonition of New Testament Christians also. This is a warning to Christians today against self-centred living, ignoring their responsibility to advance God's Kingdom in the earth (CP Hag 1:12-15). The correlation between the Jews' commitment to the work of God and the enjoyment of His blessings, extends to Christians today too. The consummate blessing for them is eternal life, which they will forfeit if they live self-centred lives, ignoring their responsibility to do the work of God's word (CP Mt 7:21-27; Lu 6:46-49; Ro 2:13; Jas 1:22-25; Rev 1:3). Christians must turn from selfish ambitions and personal agendas to focus on God's Kingdom (CP Lu 12:22-32). Jesus is not teaching here that Christians cannot make provision for their physical and financial needs to be met, but that there are to be no life-style excesses in so doing in closing this study, it should be noted that it is not inherently sinful to follow sports, engage in physical fitness etc or to have personal possessions such as cars, homes, boats etc, however, if Christians' love for any of the above begins to take precedence over their love for God and devotion to Him, then it can become an idol. (for related teachings on this subject see author's studies on *Christians and Wealth* in his book **Foundational Truths of the Christian Faith** and *Haggai – The Significance of His Messages for Today* in his book **Advanced Studies in the Christian Faith (Volume 1)**).