

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

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Labor Not to Be Rich

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Dear Radio Friends,

Last week we looked together at the important subject of work. We saw that God has given us the calling in this world to use our time and talents in diligent labor. We looked at the example of a sluggard, a lazy person who, though he has work to do and has ability and time to do that work, refuses to do that work, or else does it merely out of compulsion or necessity.

From Proverbs 6 we also looked at the example of the ant. Solomon says to the sluggard, "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise." We have only to look at an ant for a couple of minutes to see that it is an industrious, a self-motivated, a cooperative, and a persevering creature. And God's design for man is that he, like the ant, work diligently and use his time and talents in order, through that, to have the needs of his earthly life met. God expects from us diligence in our work.

With those words, we looked at one of the main dangers with regard to work. And that is that we be lazy. Today, we are going to look at another danger. And that danger is that we work for the wrong reason and with the wrong purpose. We want to look together at Proverbs 23:4, 5. There God's Word says to us: "Labour not to be rich: cease from thine own wisdom. Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven."

The text describes for us a materialistic man, a man of the world who ignores God in his labor, who lives for the things, for the stuff, of this world. It is sobering to think of such a man, who sees ultimate reality in earthly things. How tragic. This shows us something of the depravity of the human heart. Jesus says in Luke 12: A man's life consists not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. Jesus' words, together with the words of the text, "Labour not to be rich," point out to us what the goal and the purpose of our work should not be.

To begin with, we should understand what the text does not say. The text does not say that it is wrong for us to labor or to work. The Bible, instead, lays before us a very clear calling: that we should work and we should labor in this world. The text does not say, either, that it is wrong for us to be rich or to have riches. In I Timothy 6 the Holy Spirit tells us that God gives us all things richly to enjoy. The text is not, either, saying that it is wrong for us to labor for money or wages. We need to be stewards of the talents and the time that God has given us, and that means that we must use them in such a way that through them we do gain and we do increase in earthly goods. God has ordained that through our earthly labor the necessities of our life are met.

But this is what the text is saying. It is wrong to work with the goal of becoming wealthy. God made man to work. But God did not make man to be rich.

The text envisions for us a working man. He is dedicated. He is laboring hard. He has a purpose in his work. And you come to him with a question: "Why are you working? What is the purpose of your labor?" And his answer (and maybe he would not say it) is this: "I labor to be

rich.”

This is a good question to ask yourself. Why do you work? What goal or purpose do you have in your work? The Scriptures are telling us here that if our answer is: “I labor to be rich, I want to be wealthy,” then that is the wrong reason to work. That is the evaluation of Solomon and the Holy Spirit. It is wrong for us to work in order to get rich.

What is the meaning of rich? The text does not mean “wealthy” in the sense of some who are extremely wealthy. To understand what it means, we should understand what the Bible means by poor or poverty. To be poor in the Scriptures is to have less than the necessities of life. And so to be rich is to have more than the necessities of life. Proverbs 21:17 describes riches that way: “He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man: he that loveth wine and oil shall not be rich.” It speaks of riches in terms of pleasure and wine and oil—luxuries in our life. To be rich is to have above the necessities of life. And so the idea of the text is that we should not work for pleasures and for luxuries.

Now this may be rather surprising and startling and convicting to us. It goes against the grain of our culture, which tells us that we can get ahead. All we have to do is work. Just work, and we will succeed. The text before us says, No, you should not work in order to succeed; you should not work in order to be rich.

Now this raises questions in our mind, real questions. A business man will say, “But I’m in business. Shouldn’t I want to do well in my business?” A working man will say, “But shouldn’t I be doing my best in the workplace in order to get promotions and to advance myself in the workplace? Is this wrong?” Someone in college may say, “But shouldn’t I be getting an education so that I can aim at getting a secure income?”

To answer these questions, we should look at the rest of the text and compare what the passage here says with the rest of Scripture. The text is getting at an attitude that the working man will have. The rest of the text makes that plain. This is about the heart as we work. The question is: Are we laboring for ourselves, or are we laboring for the Lord? The rest of the text makes that plain. In verse 4, the last part, Solomon says: “cease from thine own wisdom.” One’s own wisdom is a wisdom that ignores the reality of God. In our work we must not ignore the reality of God.

In verse 5, Solomon says: “Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not?” He is talking about things, things of the earth that are called elsewhere in the Scriptures “vain and empty.” And so the text is getting at our attitude, our heart, and our purpose when we work. It is wrong to labor and to work with our eyes fixed only on earthly things. The text is targeting our desires: are we covetous, are we greedy, are we seeking pleasure as we work?

The rest of the Scriptures have much to say about this. In I Timothy 6:9 and 10 the apostle Paul says, “But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare.” When he says “they that will be rich,” he means those who desire to be rich—this is the desire of their life. And so he goes on to say in verse 10: “The love of money is the root of all evil.” There are people who make haste to be rich (Prov. 28:20). And this is what Solomon is addressing when he says “labor not to be rich.”

Now, as we understand the text that way, we have to be careful that we do examine ourselves in the light of this word of God. Maybe you have riches, and maybe you are working towards

financial security. And at first you are convicted by this word that says “labor not to be rich.” But now you look at I Timothy 6 and you say, “But I don’t love money. I don’t desire to be rich.” Here is where we need to be very careful. We can easily dismiss this passage as not applying to us. Nobody else knows what your motive is but you. And so you easily dismiss the word of God.

Instead we need to face the questions: Am I greedy? Am I covetous? For me, does everything come down to money, to pleasure, and to luxury? How will we know that about ourselves? Well, you need to examine your thoughts: Do I labor to be rich?

I am guilty of this when thoughts of money consume my day. I am guilty of this when the success of others makes me jealous and when I am upset that they have and I do not. I am guilty of this when I define success by what I have and not by who I am in Jesus Christ. I am guilty of this when, in my pursuit of money, my family or other spiritual priorities are neglected. I am guilty of this when I live in fear of losing my money. I am guilty of this when I find it difficult and painful to let go of my money—to be generous and to give to others. Those are the kinds of questions that we need to ask ourselves as we examine ourselves in the light of this word of God: Do I love money and do I work for money?

No, it is not wrong for us to work. It is not wrong for us to increase our capital. God expects that of us. He has given us gifts and time and talent. And He tells us to work. But the point is that, with our increase, we are not to honor ourselves and indulge ourselves, but first we are to honor the Lord. It is the desire to have things in disconnect from the Lord that is wrong. The love of things is the sin here. The motivation of covetousness and greed is the sin here. And it is not only the wealthy that are guilty of this sin. Every one of us can be guilty of this sin.

Now, there are two reasons that we should not labor to be rich. The first reason is the vanity of riches themselves. Riches and material things are empty in themselves. The text makes that plain when it says in verse 5, “Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not?” This describes the things of this world. They are like a mirage. They are merely an illusion. Perhaps we should think of a very thirsty person in the desert. He thinks that he sees an oasis off in the distance: palm trees and a lake. And he wants to get there. So he makes every effort to get there. When finally he gets there, there is nothing there. Sometimes we drive down the road in the heat of the summer and see a shimmering in the distance. And it looks like water. But when we come upon it, there is nothing there. That is how we should think of riches and earthly things. They are always disappointing. They will never live up to the expectations that we might have for them.

In Ecclesiastes 5:10 Solomon says, “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase.” Even the world that we live in will tell us that. Riches in themselves are empty. They do not ultimately satisfy or make one happy. A rich person is not necessarily a happy person. If one increases in the quantity of things that one has in life, there is not corresponding increase in the quality of life.

This is important for the Christian as he lives and as he strives to be content in this world. My contentment as a Christian is not determined by what I have or do not have. My contentment is an attitude of faith in which the child of God looks to God as the sovereign giver and withholder of things. And the Christian, with that attitude, is able to learn as the apostle Paul to be content in whatever state he finds himself.

The text goes on in verse 5, speaking of the vanity of riches, to say that “riches certainly make

themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven.” Maybe your children, or maybe you as a child, found a bird that had fallen from the nest. And you put it in a box and cared for it and you named it, fed it, and loved it. And your mother said, “When the wings of that bird are strong, you’ll have to let it go.” And you said, “But, Mom, can’t we keep it?” Then one day, a week or two later, you came to the box and the little bird was gone. That is what riches are like. They are like a bird that grows wings and flies away. They are like an eagle that disappears far off into the sky.

Riches are not certain. In fact, it is more certain, according to the text, that we will lose our riches than keep them. They are transitory. They are temporary. They are not secure. They fade away. The things that money can buy get old. Jesus spoke of treasure on earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt and where thieves break through and steal.

How true to life that is. A person’s life-savings can be lost in a week. A person’s assets can all lose their value in an instant. We have only to look at the current economic situation and occurrences in the last months in our own country. People have lost so much of their capital.

The text is telling us that we should not build our life around riches and possessions. We should not make that the goal of our life, because those things will certainly fade away and disappear.

But if that is true from an earthly point of view, how much more true that is from an eternal point of view. In the end, riches cannot be depended upon for life here. And in the end they do us no good here in this life. But that is even more true with regard to our spiritual life. In Proverbs 11:4: “Riches profit not in the day of wrath.” In verse 28, “He that trusteth in his riches shall fall: but the righteous shall flourish as a branch.” You remember the parable that Jesus told of the rich fool. God said to him, “Tonight thy soul shall be required at thy hand; and then whose shall these things be?”

A second reason that we should not labor to be rich is the peril of riches and especially the spiritual danger of setting our heart upon them. It is not only that we will be disappointed with our riches and our possessions when they do not satisfy us. But there is a spiritual danger. The apostle points to this in I Timothy 6 when he says, “The love of money is the root of all evil.” It is very easy to think of examples in the Scriptures where this is the case. Think of the rich man and Lazarus in Jesus’ parable. Because of his riches, he despised the poor and brought peril to his own soul. Think of Judas’ love for money that led him to betray Jesus. Think of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, who, because they loved the things of this earth and wanted money for themselves, lied to the Holy Spirit and lost their lives.

The love of money leads to all kinds of fighting and division in families. A funeral will bring this out. A funeral sometimes will bring out the best in someone, but at other times the worst. You see families that strive over money. The beloved parents die, and the children become savages. It is very ugly. Sorrow in loss and hope and comfort take a back seat to greed and covetousness. This happens in marriages too. People will marry for money. People will divorce for money. The love of money leads to other sins.

And the love of money also creates spiritual barriers for us. You remember the words of Jesus: “How hardly shall the rich man enter into the kingdom of heaven.” We must not labor to be rich. The love of money is the root of all evil.

When we are rich and when we love our riches, then the danger is that we forget God and we think that it is by our might and by our strength that we gain these things, and we become fools with regard to God.

What is the alternative for the Christian if he should not labor to be rich? Well, it is not that he quits working. It is not that he squanders away the wealth that God has given him so that he becomes poor, as though there is some virtue in poverty. No, we are called to keep on working. We are called to keep on using our talents and our material wealth in a way that honors God.

The Bible makes plain that one reason that God gives us gain through our labor is that we may be generous and give to others. In Ephesians 4:28 the apostle Paul says, "Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth." In I Timothy 6, when the apostle is warning against those who love money, he says in verse 18 that those who are rich should "do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate." God often gives wealth and gain to some so that they may be generous in good works and in giving to others.

The second thing that we should remember with regard to our work is that we should work for eternal things. In Isaiah 55 there is a question to those who thirst and who are hungry: "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not?" Jesus says, "Labor not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto eternal life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed." We must live by faith in a material world. God gives us material things, but we must use them in the service of His name.

Maybe this is a good way to think about it. God gives us possessions and God gives us riches as a tool, and as a test. He gives them as a tool to use in the service of His name. We must use all that we have to honor the Lord (Prov. 3: "Honor the Lord with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase).

Then, also, our riches are a test. They are a test of our faith and of our spirituality. How do we receive them? How do we use them? Why do we work for them? We must not let our riches and our increase stand in the way and hinder our spiritual growth and our spiritual responsibilities. The things that God gives to us must not stand between us and him. But we should use all things to honor Him. This is what the text means when it says, "Labor not to be rich."

Let us pray.

Lord, we thank Thee that through our work we do receive increase. We pray for faith so that we may live as pilgrims and strangers in this earth, using all that we have to the glory of Thy name. And keep us, especially, from the sins of heart with regard to these things: covetousness and greed and envy. Give us contentment in our work and contentment with what Thou dost give us through it. For Jesus' sake we pray, Amen.