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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

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**Ecclesiastes Revisited - Wealth**

**Ecclesiastes 2:4-9**

**Prayer:** *Father God, I thank you for the grace, I thank you for the goodness, I thank you for all the blessings that you've given to us and continue to give to us. Lord, this morning as we again open up your word, I pray that you would give us the grace, the strength, the insight and the wisdom to hear what you're saying and to again make it a permanent part of our lives. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we have been spending the summer studying Solomon. And again, this is a man who had more wisdom, more wealth, more power than any other man who's ever lived. And we've watched as he's embraced laughter and wine and folly, amusement and sex all under one heading and that heading was "pleasure." But he didn't stop there. He went on to examine work itself as a way of finding meaning in life and he experienced these things as he put it -- quote -- "with his eyes wide open." We've seen as we've examined them that each of them failed to deliver on what they had promised. As Solomon put it, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the

wind.

And so this morning we're going to take another look at yet another area that Solomon examined, albeit inadvertently it's prominently a part of the description of his life that we read each week, and this is *Ecclesiastes 2:4-9* which basically sums it up. This is Solomon's words. He said: *I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the children of man. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.*

And one of the core areas, areas that consumed Solomon's life that we haven't yet looked at was this idea of the accumulation of wealth. As Solomon put it, he said: *I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces.* And 1 Kings describes just what a

treasure this was, how vast it was. This is 1 Kings description. It says: *Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt. They brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life. Solomon's provision for one day was thirty cors (190 bushels) of fine flour and sixty cors of meal, (380 bushels), ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, a hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fattened fowl. For he had dominion over all the region west of the Euphrates from Tiphseh to Gaza, over all the kings west of the Euphrates. And he had peace on all sides around him. And Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon. Solomon also had 40,000 stalls of horses for his chariots, and 12,000 horsemen. And those officers supplied provisions for King Solomon, and for all who came to King Solomon's table, each one in his month. They let nothing be lacking.*

So we all know that Solomon led a life in which absolutely nothing was lacking and we also know that he hated it. He said: *And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and all I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be*

*gained under the sun.*

You've got to understand, Solomon is a gift from God to us. The gift that God gave us through Solomon was a firsthand report from a man who got to experience everything under the sun to the maximum that any human being could ever experience. I mean God took one of us and he gave him extraordinary wisdom and basically everything that human existence has ever craved for, and along with all of these apparent goodies, God gave that man a unique ability to analyze and scrutinize what he had been given so he could inform us. We don't need to wonder what it would be like to be the wisest, most powerful and wealthiest man who ever lived. We don't need to guess what it must be like to be able to obtain virtually anything I've ever wanted, from great building projects, to fame and fortune and all pleasures that human flesh can experience because Solomon experienced it all, and he took extensive notes. And he told us all was vanity and striving after wind and there's nothing to be gained under the sun.

Now today that's a hard sell. I mean try to tell folks that wealth like sex and power and fame is way, way oversold and that it doesn't deliver but a fraction of what it's claimed for it. Solomon's giving us a firsthand account. You know, we read about wealthy people being unhappy, we even hear of some of them taking

their own lives but most of us think that most of our problems would just go away if we were lucky enough to be one of the winners of life's lottery. And I once had someone ask me if it was morally wrong to buy lottery tickets and I told him personally I would never buy a lottery ticket because I was afraid of what might happen. He said, "You mean you're afraid you would be addicted to buying lottery tickets?" I said, "No, I'm much more afraid of what would happen if I would ever win." And I don't think folks ever think that through. So what happens is when you're struggling to pay the bills and you don't know if you can make ends meet, then something like winning the lottery becomes the ultimate dream. Just walk with me through what would could happen to the average person if he or she wins the lottery. Right off the bat, first thing, what about your friends? I mean from the day it became known that you are now a multimillionaire, you would never know again if somebody was befriending you because of you or because of your money. So you would first lose the ability to trust people. But the friends that you already have, you might want to share in your largess, again but how much? Say I give all of my friends ten thousand bucks, how do you know they didn't expect 20,000 or 50,000 or more? When do you tell those who are hitting you up repeatedly that you're no longer a bank. Not only have old friends and acquaintances now come out of the woodwork but they all have expectations. And so you've lost any potential new friends and

you've probably strained to the max the old ones that you have.

But what about your home? Well, now -- you're a multimillionaire now. You can't live in your old funky neighborhood so you move to a fancier place where everyone sees you as nouveau riche. They see you as some more schlubb who won the lottery and they want nothing to do with you. See, you have all this money but you've lost all of your old friends, you've also lost the possibility of getting any real new ones and now you've really lost your location and your home.

What about your job? Well, you've got so much money now you don't need to work. So of course you quit your job, and that's when you discover the boredom of inactivity. So just think of all of these things and just fast forward, it's six months later after you've won the lottery, you're sitting by yourself in your brand new mc mansion, you're bored to tears, you're watching Oprah on your wide screen TV and that's your scenario. That's why I won't buy a lottery ticket.

And you know, I wish I could say this is just a bad dream that you've invented but for a lot of people that becomes a real possibility. I mean there's been so many disasters associated with people winning the lottery that if you just Google "lottery

disasters," you'll find dozens and dozens of cases where people found that just getting a huge check was an absolute curse rather than a blessing. They learn firsthand that wealth is not at all what it's cracked up to be. Like everything else that Solomon tried, he too found out that wealth just does not deliver on what it promises. In fact he found the exact opposite was true. This is what he said in *Ecclesiastes 5:10*, he said: *He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.*

Just consider, consider what the wisest man who has ever lived, what he said. Consider that he was also one of the wealthiest men who's ever lived. He said the very people who make money their goal in life are the ones who will never be satisfied by it. *He who loves money will not be satisfied with money.* And the reason that money has such a powerful pull in so many is because it's the classic carrot on a stick, satisfaction always lies just outside our reach. We think if I could only make x-amount, then I'd be satisfied, some way or somehow we manage to make that amount, we quickly find that it's not enough, the goals have shifted. Instead of questioning the whole process of accumulating wealth, we just take a natural assumption that we've got to accumulate more of it, then we'll be satisfied, but you know that never happens. I mean how many people do you know who would genuinely say to more wealth,

no thanks, I've got enough.

Well the Lord Jesus Christ spoke extensively about wealth and the dangers of accumulating it, and he's the source of all wealth. So this morning I'd like to do three things. I want to first define wealth and then I want to describe the dangers of accumulating it, and finally I want to defend the delights of genuine wealth.

So first let's define what we mean by the term "wealth." And again that's not really an easy thing to do. I mean you look at somebody like Solomon, for Solomon wealth amounted to accumulating silver and gold and horses and chariots. For us it might be stocks, bonds, cash and real estate, but that's just a type of wealth. There are many other sources of wealth that people pour their hearts, their souls, their minds and strengths into accumulating that don't appear to be nearly as crass as gold and silver but they're nonetheless a form of wealth. You see, a person who pours all of his resources into physical health and strength is seeking to accumulate something temporary, something earthly, and it's just like somebody who's seeking silver and gold. So is someone whose greatest desire is to build a name for himself or herself. I mean they may not be seeking silver or gold, they might even be living incredibly modest lives, but if their passion is their reputation, they may be pouring all of their resources into raising



trophy kids that will make them look good. The point is wealth can mean many different things to people, and because it means different things to different people, it also means that greed is not limited to the wealthy or to those who are only seeking to accumulate wealth.

So how do we define this term "wealth"? Well, I'd say it's anything either temporary or eternal that you place value in. For Solomon it was gold, horses and chariots. For you and me it can be just about anything. I mean we all heard the phrase "one man's trash is another man's treasure," and our task as believers is to determine what is real trash and what is real treasure. So how do we do that? Well first we have to honestly assess what our real treasures are. Jesus said in *Matthew 6: For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* Tim Keller pointed out a practical way to get at what Jesus was getting at. He said whatever you have no problem spending your money on, that's really where your treasure is. He says the book that really gives insight to where our treasure is is our checkbook. If you pour your money into your house, your cars and your property, that's where your treasure is. That's wealth for you. If you pour it into stocks and bonds to accumulate more wealth, that's where your treasure is. Keller pointed out that a person may live frugally and instead of spending, pour all his money into the bank into saving for the

future, then that person's treasure will be the security that those things represent. And the problem with any and all of those approaches to wealth is that they're really no different than Solomon's approach, they're all open-ended systems that promise satisfaction but deliver anything but. And what's worse, the more you feed them, the more the appetite for them grows. As Solomon puts it: *He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.* In Solomon's day there was this vast difference between those who were wealthy and those who were poor, but these days in our culture those lines have become so blurred that for all practical purposes any of us in North America are rightfully regarded by the rest of the world as wealthy.

A *Heritage Foundation* article said: "The Census Bureau reported last fall that 43 million Americans, one in seven of us, were poor. But what is poverty in America? The most recent government data show more than half of the families defined as poor by the Census Bureau now have a computer in the home. More than three of every four poor families have air conditioning, almost two-thirds have cable or satellite television, and 92 percent have microwaves. How poor are America's poor? The typical poor family has at least two color TVs, a VCR and a DVD player. A third have a wide screen, plasma or LCD TV. And the typical poor family with

children has a video game system such as Xbox or PlayStation."

All the money that Solomon had couldn't have purchased what the average poor family in America already has. I mean this is not to disparage the poor, rather it is to suggest that every single one of us in North America is by world standards wealthy. The problem is our wealth and our desire to accumulate comes to us in a way that is heavily disguised. Consider what Jesus in *Luke 12* said. He said this, he said: *"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."*

So why do you suppose Jesus said, *"watch out"*? Why do you suppose he said, *"be on your guard against all kinds of greed?"* Well, it's because the dangers of wealth don't come announcing themselves in advance. And this is point two, the dangers of wealth, they need to be described. The reason is simple. First, it's because there really is all different kinds of greed. And that is greed and covetousness are sins that appear in countless different disguises, most of which, unlike other sins are socially acceptable in our culture. When Gordon Gekko in the movie *Wall Street* says, "Greed is good," he's speaking from an entire culture that really does need greed to function. I mean the reason why capitalism is such a superb economic system is because it mirrors our own fallen

natures. It works because it understands how human beings work. Adam Smith described the invisible hand that moves in capitalism as enlightened self-interest, which is a nice way of describing greed. Don't get me wrong, I believe capitalism is the best system on earth because it allows human freedom to prosper and it produces more wealth than any other system but it's not without its flaws. I mean for supply and demand to function as the driving force in our economy, there has to be someone or something constantly stirring up the demand because that's what fuels our economy. When folks speak up about the sins that they're struggling with, you often hear about lust or lying or laziness or anger but you almost never hear someone desperately trying to overcome the sin of greed. Part of the reason for that is that our culture doesn't recognize greed as something sinful, as a bad thing. So *"watch out," "be on your guard"* are warnings that Jesus gives us about something we have a hard time perceiving as a spiritual threat.

And greed particularly in our culture is one of the hardest things to see. It's not polite to put it that way but greed is what fuels our economy. We don't use the word "greed," we use the word "demand" but a great deal of demand is produced by a sophisticated system advertising that's inherently designed to create artificial demand. And that's demand designed to make us feel that if we don't have this or that thing we will somehow be less fulfilled,

less prepared, less beautiful, less desirable. It took a Michael Jordan to produce a demand for \$150 sneakers. It takes a Tim Cook to create a demand for iPads and iPhones. And these are folks who are able to create a demand where none really existed before, and that's not necessarily a bad thing but it's not necessarily a good thing. You see, desire for goods and services is a good thing when it keeps the economy going but it's a bad thing when it makes a virtue out of greed and covetousness and our culture tends to do just that.

I mean I've heard folks say if you ever really want to get a handle on where a particular culture is in the 21st century, just look at their advertising. One perfect example is cars. There was a time when car manufacturers advertised how their cars were made and how they performed, and a good car was a car that was built to last, a car that performed well. And if you look at your average commercial for a car now there's almost no reference whatsoever to the engineering or the design or the manufacture. Instead we are told how this car will make us feel, how it will make us look, how others will see us if we own it. That's manufactured demand, and it's manufactured demand that's by design. I mean we are fish swimming in an ocean of manufactured desire that's so ubiquitous, it's so ever present we don't even notice it, and because we don't notice it, it can easily become the source of wealth we wind up

pursuing like Solomon pursued his wealth, and we all know how that worked out. Again he says: *He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.*

So Jesus warned us to be vigilant in seeking to identify the wealth that we go after because it's incredibly easy to lose sight of what is genuine wealth and get caught up in the pursuit of false or empty wealth. Listen to what Jesus said in *Matthew 6:19*. He said: *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal."*

Well so then what is real wealth? What is genuine treasure? Well we've defined wealth as anything either temporary or eternal that you place value in, and we describe the dangers of accumulating this wealth as twofold: First this wealth masquerades as different things to different folks, and it often inserts itself as a false god or idol that we actually wind up worshiping. And secondly this wealth never satisfies. Once again: *He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.*

And so finally we need to defend the delights of what genuine wealth is. Now in *Luke 16*, it says of Jesus: *And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."' "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."*

Well you know Jesus had a very short, a very succinct two-word description of those who pursue the wrong kind of wealth. He said, *"You fool."* That's an incredibly valuable insight from God himself. I said in the beginning of this message that God gave us Solomon as a gift. And Solomon's this person with tremendous wisdom and insight who got to experience what most of us will never experience and that is wealth and power and wisdom greater than any other human being. And when he tells us that money can't satisfy, we'd be wise to listen because we know Solomon's wisdom has been there, it's done that. But when Jesus speaks, well we encounter a

completely different level of wisdom, we encounter something eternal. Jesus knows earth but he also knows heaven, and he certainly knows wealth. I mean he left heaven itself and he entered into the world of space and time to seek out and rescue his sheep who were lost. And he not only sought and found us, he laid down his perfect life as payment in full for my sin. He knows time and he knows eternity. I mean he's the only one that's fully experienced them both and it's he who describes most of us as foolish. I mean we were the sons of Adam's rebellion who wanted nothing to do with the God who created us. *Ephesians 2* says: *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.*

You see, we were created by God with the greatest privilege a creature would ever have, we are to bear the very image of God. I mean we were designed as his image bearers to glorify God by being the stewards of his creation, and somehow we've managed to turn that dream into the American dream which basically says he who dies with the most toys wins. I have a t-shirt that I actually wore until it fell apart because I loved what it claimed. It said on



the side: "He who dies with the most toys," and on the back it just said, "still dies." I mean, that's a fact that should put everything into perspective but it seldom does.

I mean I was once visiting a friend of man who happened to be fabulously wealthy. This is a fellow with millions and millions dollars in many estates, he had the best of everything. And on top of that he was a really great guy, a guy I met in college. He was humble, he was self-effacing, he was generous. And so I told my friend, "I'd love to share the gospel with you," and he laid out to me how well his life had gone, suggesting he didn't really need Christ, he had in fact lived the American dream. I pointed out to him the one thing the American dream could never address. I said, you still have to die, and then what? I mean if you're here for a hundred years of absolute earthly success, what is that compared to the hundreds of trillions of eons that make for eternity? That's why Jesus called the rich man a fool. Just like Solomon, he saw full barns as his reason for living. And just like Solomon feared with his wealth, someone else was going to get to enjoy it. His foolishness had blinded him into thinking that this was the life that mattered.

Peggy Noonan is a columnist and she wrote a column in *Fortune* magazine in the early 90's that captures just why Jesus would say

that. This is what she says. She wrote: "I think we have lost the old knowledge that happiness is overrated—that, in a way, life is overrated. We have lost, somehow, a sense of mystery—about us, our purpose, our meaning, our role. Our ancestors believed in two worlds, and understood this to be the solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short one. We are the first generations of man that actually expected to find happiness here on earth, and our search for it has caused much-unhappiness."

You see, Jesus knew that even the best of lives compared to eternity were solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. That's why he came to rescue us. And then he went on to say in the very next verse of *Ephesians 2*, he said: *Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.* You see, from the moment that God reaches into your life and by grace he opens up your eyes and your heart and your mind, from that moment everything changes and by God's grace the foolish become wise.

Listen to what he says in *Titus 3:3*. He says: *At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our*

*Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.*

You see what makes the difference between being foolish and being wise, between being wealthy and understanding what true wealth is, it's what Peggy Noonan was speaking about. I mean she said our ancestors believed in two worlds. God says of Jesus in 2 Corinthians: *And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!* You see, if you really buy the notion that we are occupying a world that is merely temporary, it should change everything about what's truly important and what is truly worthy of the term "wealth." I mean you'll understand that while we occupy this temporary world we're only being trained, prepared and disciplined for the real one. As one pastor put it, "Life on earth is preparation for the next. This is the warm-up, this is the dress rehearsal, this is the first lap around the track before the real race begins. God wants us to practice on earth what we're going to do forever in eternity." Part of that practice

is learning how to accumulate real wealth in the real kingdom instead of the temporary illusion of wealth that this kingdom craves. And again Jesus made that clear in *Matthew 6*. He said: *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

Okay. So how do we do that? Well, the simplest way is to learn how to practice radical generosity. I mean we've already defined the term "wealth" as anything that's either temporary or eternal that you place value in. For Solomon it was gold, horses and chariots. For children of the kingdom it's anything that advances the kingdom. That becomes the real wealth that we want to acquire. And we know that we've gotten there when we see the things of the kingdom as our own personal treasure. You know, if I see my giving as an expense rather than as an investment, I will never get the joy that God intended it to be. Just think about it. If someone had a real gold mine and they were paying a hundred-to-one on their investment and you knew it was absolute guaranteed certainty backed by Fort Knox itself, you wouldn't invest a dollar or two, I mean you'd run out and grab every dollar you could find and you'd be thrilled at the prospect of investing it. You wouldn't see your

giving as painful because you knew you were going to get a huge return. That's exactly how God sees it. He says: *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field."* I mean this man sold everything because he knew this investment is ironclad, he couldn't wait to invest. That's how a believer gives.

And so if you're thinking, okay, well, how much, how much is enough? Well if you're thinking that, you're still thinking expense instead of investment. When you think like an investor, you'd be happy to scrape every single penny you have because you know you can't lose. You begin to accumulate the wealth that never fails, you begin to store up for yourself treasures in heaven. You see the tide merely as a starting point and you're happy to give everything you can. You see a rise in disposable income not as an opportunity to rise in social status. That's just how the rich fool thought. I instead you see it as a privilege that God has given you to increase your investment in the kingdom. Understand, this is not about our church and our church finances, we're doing fine. God calls each of us to support the church but I'm talking about the whole kingdom of God here. I'm talking about the church and missionaries and para church organizations and organizations like CPH and *Voice of the Martyrs* and *International Justice*

*Mission*, they're all a vital part of the kingdom of God.

You know, Pastor Papaf was just here and he asked us for three things: He asked us for used laptops, some used tablets and backpacks. Frankly, I was very disappointed with what we came up with. We came up with one used laptop and a half dozen or so backpacks and I know that Joanna worked mightily to try to get people to fork up. I also know that the other church Centerpoint really kicked our butts when it came being generous in that area. We're usually very good at this. We weren't so hot at this one, I can tell you. But I can also tell you that Pastor Papaf is looking for a transport van and we have an opportunity to step up there. That's a very important thing that we can do.

I mean each of us is a steward of the resources that God has given us and, you know, God created the entire universe and everything in it including this planet, so he doesn't need our money. He's not up in heaven working on his donor base. He knows that nothing even the tiniest gift set aside for a kingdom, whether it's a widow's two pennies or a cup of cold water is not going to go without notice. Jesus said, *"If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."*

And so as believers we all have a choice. We can accumulate wealth without reward like Solomon did, and we'll find out just as he did: *He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.* We can build bigger barns here on earth just like the foolish rich man did. All he wound up doing was delivering his wealth to his successor, making himself worthy of the name that Jesus gave him, "you fool." Or we can follow in the footsteps of countless kingdom citizens who saw giving not as an obligation but an opportunity, an investment opportunity, if you will.

You know, Jim Elliot was one such person. Probably most of you know he was a missionary to the Auca Indians. He wound up giving his life at the end of a spear to bring them the gospel. At age 28 he was killed in the jungles of Ecuador by the very people he had come to serve. He was a gifted athlete, speaker and leader of men and some folks saw his death as an incredibly foolish waste. He would have vehemently disagreed. But he's perhaps most famous for his quote about the ultimate value of real wealth. It was Jim Elliot who said, "He is no fool who gives up that which he cannot keep, to gain that which he cannot loose." Understand those words and you will know who is a fool and who isn't, and you'll know all you need to know about wealth. Let's pray.

*Father, I thank you for your gifts, I thank you for the incredible wealth that you've given to us. Spiritually, physically and every other way, Lord, we are incredibly wealthy. We praise you and thank you for it. I pray you would give us an understanding of what real wealth is and a heart and desire to invest it in the kingdom. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*