

Comedienne Joan Rivers who died last year once said something with which many people would agree. "People say that money isn't the key to happiness," said Joan Rivers, "but I always figured if you have enough money, you can have a key made." "I always figured if you have enough money . . ." says Joan Rivers. How much is enough money? That is a good question.

A Hollywood film editor once said, "I had this date the other night with a woman who wanted to walk along the beach. I'm wearing a twelve hundred dollar suit, a seventy five dollar tie, a hundred and fifty dollar shirt, and a pair of two hundred-dollar shoes. It costs me fifteen dollars to clean my suit and six dollars to have my shirt hand washed. "I don't even want to think about what it would cost if I should get a drop of spaghetti sauce on my tie. And this woman wants me to roll up my pants and walk along the beach! All I can think about is how much it's going to cost me if she wants to sit down on the sand. Here's the bottom line that I have to ask myself: Can I afford to wear my own clothes?"

A twelve hundred dollar suit, a seventy five dollar tie, a hundred and fifty dollar shirt, and a pair of two hundred dollar shoes . . . When is enough . . . enough? That, by the way, is from a book titled, *Lives without Balance*. (1)

So you want to buy a little carry-on. You know the size and the quality you want. You go to one store, and the price is, say, \$70; you go to another store, and the price for the same bag is \$65. It's pretty clear which bag you would buy, all things being equal. Because we certainly do not want to spend more than we have to for things we want or need.

This obvious trait is the root of analyzing human nature as fundamentally economic, homo oeconomicus, as some professionals call humankind. This view says there's a part of us that simply calculates what is going to be in our advantage, and we take it. Adam Smith, who wrote about the "invisible hand" of economic laws at work in daily life—the economic rules we follow by instinct—helped modern scholars and governments come to think of economics as an almost invariable set of rules that hold sway in human relations. There's a way we operate—and it's mostly for our own favor. Debates about economics now run through all of modern life; the US Presidential debate essentially revolves around economic theories, as do Europe's issues. What set of rules will get the most money for the most people, without bringing on inflation, or bubbles that eventually crash?

Author and sociology professor Tony Campolo in his book *Everything You've Heard Is Wrong* tells about a young idealistic student he once had in one of his classes named Ralph. During his undergraduate years, Ralph was committed to becoming an advocacy lawyer who would champion the rights of the oppressed and stand up against the exploitation of the poor. Ralph was full of passion for justice and radiated a compassion for the underdog that inspired all who knew him.

By the time he graduated from law school, however, Ralph was deeply in debt. So he took a job with a large firm that specialized in corporate law and did as little pro bono work as possible. The pay was mind boggling, and Ralph convinced himself that he would only stay with the firm for as long as it took him to make enough money to pay

off his school bills. He assured his former professor that the yuppie subculture into which he was jumping would not rub off on him. He was certain that who he was had been so firmly established that the surrounding culture couldn't change him one little bit.

Well, you can imagine the rest of the story. When Tony Campolo met Ralph a few years later he was a transformed person. His idealism was gone. He was on the verge of becoming a partner in the firm, he had a live-in relationship with one of his colleagues, and they had just moved into a "super place up on the East Side." What saddened Campolo most was that the excitement that had once sparkled in Ralph's eyes seemed gone. "Oh," says Campolo, "Ralph still went to church regularly. He had found one of those churches that served, as they say, 'a better class of people.'" (2)

I guess that Ralph discovered that once you get on the treadmill of material success, enough simply is never enough. When is enough . . . enough for you?

A wealthy man came to Jesus to ask what he needed to do "to inherit eternal life."

Evidently, this man was where many of us are. His material needs were being met, but not his spiritual ones. He was not a bad man, just an empty one.

His approach to Jesus, however, was a bit of unbecoming flattery. He addressed Jesus as "Good Teacher." This was a violation of proper Jewish etiquette.

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good--except God alone."

Jesus was probably cautioning this man not to put his ultimate confidence in teachers or powerful people, but only in God. The arm of flesh is frail and will fail, but God remains true.

"You know the commandments," said Jesus. "'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

This man believed that, if he just kept the Mosaic Law, he would have it made spiritually. So, here's his situation: He thought money would make him happy. But it didn't. He thought minding all the rules of his faith would make him happy, but it didn't. All his life he had been taught that if he had enough money and if he was a good guy, that would be enough. But it wasn't.

Mark tells us that Jesus looked at him and loved him. Jesus knew this man was trying to live as his society told him he ought to live. And Jesus appreciated that. And Jesus wanted to give him the key to what he needed. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

"At this," says the Gospel of Mark, "the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth." At least one Bible scholar says that this may be the saddest verse in the Bible. This young man was in the presence of the Master himself. He could have made his life something magnificent. His name would have been called blessed by hundreds of people he might have helped. He could have written one of the Gospels perhaps. His name would be revered even today. But he turned away because he couldn't let go of the good in order to grasp the best. God gives us the freedom to do that, doesn't He? We don't have to accept what God has to give us. "He went away

sad," says the Gospel, "because he had great wealth."

Can you imagine that? We could understand it if we read, "He went away sad in spite of his great wealth." Many people are sad in spite of their great wealth. But it says, "He went away sad because of his great wealth." Is it possible to be sad because you have great wealth?

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

The disciples were even more amazed, says Mark, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?"

That's a good question. If accumulating toys won't bring you happiness and keeping the rules won't buy you salvation, what's it going to take? If we take everything we have and sell it, and give the proceeds to the poor like Jesus was telling this man to do, will that do it? Well, that depends. Is money what's most important in your life? Is it your money that's keeping you from giving your all to God? When Jesus told this man to sell everything he had and give to the poor, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. Jesus was simply telling this man the truth about what came first in this man's life--and that was his money.

What is it that comes first in your life? Let me phrase it another way, what is it that keeps you from doing something great for God? Is it your job? Is it your family? Is it time playing computer games, or watching sports on TV, conversing with your friends on Facebook, or some hobby? Could I look at your Visa statement or your computer log, or your Day planner and discover what really matters to you? Where do you devote your time, your money, your dreams, your energy? Is it the accumulation of ever more wealth, ever more toys? Jesus said, "Where a man's treasure is, there will his heart be also . . ."

Jesus knew where this young man's heart was. He was a nice guy, he kept all the commandments. That may be more than you or I do. Jesus looked at him and loved him, but Jesus knew that God did not come first in this young man's life. Again, what is it that comes first in your life?

In many people's minds Paul Tillich was the twentieth century's most perceptive theologian. Tillich once said that whatever is our ultimate concern in life, that is our God. Among these concerns might be our personal success, or our allegiance to our country, or the quest for scientific truth, or a host of very important concerns. Or, our ultimate concern could be the God of the Bible. All but the latter are forms of idolatry. That is a hard teaching. You mean God must come before my job, my family, my concern for my health, even my allegiance to my country? Yes, nothing in this world can come before God. Let me hasten to add that God rarely asks us to choose, for example, between our family and our faith in God--or our allegiance to our country and our faith in God--or even our job and our faith in God. But it can happen. And when it does, we must choose God.

Leadership guru John Maxwell notes that there are only a handful of important

decisions people need to make in their entire lifetimes. Does that surprise you? It shouldn't. He says that most people complicate life and get bogged down in decision making. He says his goal has always been to make it as simple as possible. He's boiled the big decisions down to twelve things. Once he's made those twelve decisions, all he has to do is manage how he'll follow through on them. He says if you make decisions in those key areas once and for all--and then manage those decisions daily--you can create the kind of tomorrow you desire. "Successful people make right decisions early and manage those decisions daily," says Maxwell. "The people who neglect to make those decisions and to manage them well often look back on their lives with pain and regret--no matter how much talent they possessed or how many opportunities they once had." (3)

Of course, the ultimate decision is what or who will you worship? Once you decide to worship the God revealed to us in Jesus of Nazareth, then all the other important decisions can be made quite readily. If you choose instead to worship an idol--whether wealth or comfort or work or any other temporal god--then life becomes much more complicated and the end result will only be sadness. That is not the message of our culture, but it is Christ's message, even to those of great wealth.

Pastor Ray Stedman puts it this way: "I have been privileged to travel extensively and to speak oftentimes to rather wealthy audiences. I was in Hollywood, Florida . . . on the so-called "gold coast" of Florida. Every morning I taught the Scriptures to a crowd of five hundred or more. These people, I was told, represented well over a billion dollars' worth of accumulated wealth.

"I had the opportunity to talk with many of them individually. I found that most of these, by their own testimony, though they had all the money to buy anything they wanted, had arrived at the place where they were suffering from what someone has so aptly called 'Destination Sickness'--the malady of having everything that you want, but not wanting anything you have, and being sick and empty and lonely and miserable." (4)

The wealthy young man who came to Jesus probably suffered from this malady--Destination Sickness. He had arrived. He thought he had it made. But, in truth, he was a slave to his wealth. Jesus was offering him a lifeline, but he couldn't see it. All he could see was what he would be giving up.

Are you ready to put God first in your life? Are you tired of the emptiness of living life your way and not God's way? Have you discovered that there's not enough money, not enough work, not enough sex, not enough narcotics to ease the pain of an empty and unfulfilled heart? Sir William Beach Thomas said, "To achieve happiness by a succession of pleasures is like trying to keep up a light all night by striking successive matches." Happiness comes not from pleasure but from purpose. The happiest people I know are people who have given their lives completely and unreservedly to God.

The disciples were amazed at Jesus' words about the difficulty of the wealthy entering the kingdom. Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

Then Peter spoke up, "We have left everything to follow you!"

"Truly I tell you," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or

mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age . . . and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

Please do not misunderstand. Jesus does not say that it is impossible for people with money to enter the kingdom. He said, “All things are possible with God.” The only people in danger are those who put their wealth before God. The only people in danger are those who enjoy their wealth while turning a blind eye to the needs of the poor. The only people in danger are those who have no greater purpose in life than the accumulation of more. When is enough . . . enough?

Over the past 15 years, a businessman in New Jersey has anonymously given away more than \$600 million to universities, medical centers, and other beneficiaries. Recently, a legal complication forced him to reveal his identity. He explained his generosity this way, “Nobody can wear two pairs of shoes at one time. I simply decided I had enough money.” That is very rare for a person with great wealth to say: “I decided I had enough money.”

A friend of the donor described him as a man who doesn’t own a house or a car. He flies economy class, wears a \$15 watch but “didn’t want his money to crush him.” (5) Could that happen to you, that your craving for material success could crush you, or your family, or your health, or your relationship with God? The wealthy young man in our scripture turned sadly away from Jesus because he had great wealth. Is your craving for material success taking you from Jesus as well?

1. Steven Carter and Julia Sokol (New York: Willard Books, Random House, Inc, 1991), pp. 125, 194. Cited in God’s Little Lessons for Leaders (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries, 2005), p. 121.

2. (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992), p. 128.

3. John C. Maxwell, Today Matters (New York: Warner Books, 2004), p. 15.

4. <http://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/leviticus/the-true-basis-of-social-concern>.

5. Our Daily Bread. Cited at

http://www.preceptaustin.org/1_timothy_commentaries_2.htm#illustrations.

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