



### Study Guide

#### *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers*

#### **Chapter 2 – “A Solid Drop of Gold: Wealth and Poverty”**

By Chris Hall

The Church Fathers are unrelenting in their concern for the poor and the responsibility of the rich in the church to care for those in poverty. Review the questions I ask on p. 60. I think they are important for you to ponder as you read through the chapter.

- How are apprentices of Christ to live economically wise, kind, grace-filled lives?
- How would Christ have us respond to our prosperity – or our poverty?
- What of the daily choices we make as to how we spend our money, how much we save, how much we give?
- What are our specific responsibilities to the poor, the millions who begin each day longing for a piece of bread?
- What of the gap that continues to grow between rich and poor?
- What of the issue of private ownership of property?

Who are the image-bearers in your neighborhood who are invisible, the people we don't see *because we have become habituated to the presence of the poor among us*? Or do we live in a neighborhood where we never see the poor, i.e., wealthy suburbs that shield us from the poor?

Peter Brown reminds us that in “Antioch and Constantinople, the rich were urged by a preacher such as John Chrysostom to look over the edge of a social precipice into a swirling and anonymous crowd of beggars, buffoons, and homeless immigrants gathered around them in a great city” (p. 61).

I find Brown's choice of the word anonymous to be significant. The poor in the ancient Roman world—roughly 75 to 90% of the Roman population—were unseen, anonymous, unimportant. The church fathers desperately wanted the church to be a community that saw, recognized, and honored the poor.

As I noted in this chapter, ancient Christians were not always successful in overcoming the cultural patterns of their time (p. 63). How successful are we in dealing with our own cultural patterns in dealing with our wealth?

Wealthy Christian patrons were willing to help the poor and strongly moved against the Roman cultural grain by doing so. Yet often—too often—wealthy Roman Christians desired to be recognized and honored for their contributions.

Again, Peter Brown helps us to discern these cultural patterns: “Christian women from the aristocracy could load a church with silk veils and altar coverings made from textiles from her private wardrobe. A noble woman could finance the foundation of an entire basilica from the sale of her jewelry alone.” Yet she wanted to be recognized for doing so. “the names of those who brought donations would be read aloud to the acclamations of the congregation.” We are here far from the discipline of



hiddenness, where we do good for others in a hidden fashion, and purposely desire not to be recognized by others for doing so.

Christians of later generations were also concerned about issues of wealth and poverty. Ignatius of Loyola comes to mind in the 1500's AD. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius describes two strategies: that of Lucifer and that of Jesus.

Lucifer (Satan), Ignatius writes, attempts to “isolate and enslave” image-bearers by tempting them to covetousness. We covet things that will make us rich. Then, because we have some thing or things, we find ourselves “pursuing and basking in the honor and esteem of this world.” In turn, the deference we receive from others *because of what we possess*—not because of our character—fuels “the false sense of personal identity and value in which a blinding pride has its roots.” Riches (“this is mine”), leads to honor-seeking (“look at me”), and the false SELF ends up at the center of our lives (pride). Ignatius believed that these three stages inevitably lead to all sins.

Jesus' strategy, on the other hand, is “to try to help and free people, not enslave and oppress them.” He does so by first attracting us to a spiritual poverty based on his own example (“he emptied himself, becoming human”). Some image-bearers, Ignatius believed, will also be called to “actual poverty,” a poverty in which they experience what all poor people experience: a lack of power, the contempt of the world, and so on.

Ignatius' insights reflect those of the church fathers. You may want to ponder carefully the three words with which I end this chapter. They sum up well the chapter as a whole:

- **Moderation:** moderation is the opposite of self-indulgence. The self-indulgent person wants too much of a good thing, whether this be money, clothes, food, books (!), and the like. The person practicing moderation *enjoys good things, but always proportionately*. For example, as my all my friends know, I love donuts. What I have learned, though, is that I don't have to have a donut every day. One donut, perhaps to celebrate the Lord's resurrection on Sunday, is fine. In fact, *moderation increases pleasure, rather than decreasing it*. When we indulge in something to the fullest extent possible, whether we're dealing with food or other pleasures, we end up less satisfied rather than more.
- **Proportion:** Chrysostom exhorts his congregation to enjoy the gifts given to them by God “in due proportion,” always remembering that *they are stewards of their possessions, not owners*. “If we have ‘sustenance for our life,’ sufficient prosperity ‘to overcome the weakness of our bodies,’ we should rest satisfied” (p. 90). *What would due proportion look like in your life?*
- **Discretion:** people who exercise discretion in their life with God *understand why they have been given their wealth* and act accordingly. *Are you experiencing specific situations where the Lord is calling you to act with discretion?*

**For Further Study**

Here are three books that assisted me as I wrote this chapter. They will help you to continue to expand your understanding of ancient Christian perspectives on wealth and poverty. The challenge you will face—as do I on a daily basis—is *taking the wisdom of the past and applying it to the present*. Prayerfully consider concrete steps you might take in your modern context to more closely mirror the wisdom of Jesus and these ancient coaches—the church fathers.

1. Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012)
2. Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012)
3. Susan R. Holman, ed., *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008)