



"Why I Am Rich"

By Walt Mueller

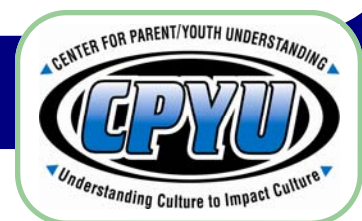
All of us – adults and kids alike – have had the gospel of the American Dream pounded into us from the day we were born. This gospel's creed reads "Get your eyes on yourself! Get rich! Get stuff! Get happy!" I've never consciously believed that the trajectory of all I am and do before the age of 65 should be directed towards the end of a comfortable, self-centered retirement. But even though we know that the gospel of the American Dream has power to destroy and absolutely no power to save, we continue to answer that gospel's altar calls with raised hands and walks forward each and every day. And just in case you think that those of us who call ourselves Christians are immune, think again. I did that earlier this year when a couple of encounters forced me to take a deeper look at my priorities and just how skewed they really are.

One of those encounters involved me and 24 other people, most of them teenagers who were part of a mission team spending a week in the inner-city of Chattanooga. It was our first day there and during orientation one of our hosts, Robert, asked us with an accusatory edge, "How many of you came to Chattanooga to save a black person?" We sat staring at him in nervous and stunned silence. He wouldn't let it go. "HOW MANY OF YOU CAME TO CHATTANOOGA TO SAVE A BLACK PERSON?" he asked again. There wasn't a middle-class suburban Caucasian adult or kid in our group who raised their hand. Before I could protest what I thought were his unfounded accusations of racism ("YOU DON'T KNOW US!" I wanted to shout in response), Robert launched into an explanation of his question that made full sense and rocked my comfortable world. Even as someone who consciously seeks to see the Kingdom come in my life and our world as it is in Heaven, a chink in my nice, neat armor had been exposed. Fully aware of what's common among many of us in the church – kids and adults alike - Robert explained how our week-long mission trips are usually about us and our need to feel good about what we are doing for God in the world. Robert indeed knew us. He went on to explain that our time in Chattanooga should be more about focusing on God, being obedient to His call, humbly serving others as we see injustice, and developing a lifelong commitment to righting those things which are wrong. He explained that painting walls and running Bible Clubs for kids for five short days must be focused on hearing God speak as we learn how to work for lasting-change, true justice, and community development. I learned that mission trips are counter-productive if they serve as band-aids that temporarily cover both the needs of the poor *and* our need to feel like we're doing something for God. . . so that I can retreat back into living the dream until my conscience is pricked again.

The other encounter took place halfway around the globe in Mathare, Nairobi, one of the worst slums in the world. This was the last stop on our tour of Compassion International's work in Rwanda and Kenya. Over the course of our days of exposure to some of the world's deepest poverty, one question continued to haunt me with increased frequency and volume: "God, why have I been given so much?" This time, God shook me up as my wife and I sat with our sponsored Compassion Child, a group of nationals from the church that runs the local Compassion project, and several of my youth ministry friends in a small church that serves as a sanctuary of hope in Mathare. I watched and listened in amazement as the pastor led us in one of their favorite songs. Twelve-year-old Ibrahim – a child who has nothing – smiled joyfully as he sang about serving others for the sake of the Kingdom: *"The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to make someone happy, and bring a little heaven down here."* Then the pastor stood up and answered my question. "Pray for us," he said. "We pray for you. We pray that you who are rich will stay rich so that you can support our work here." With a dose of clarity I had never-before experienced, what I had always known to be true now made more sense to me. I saw myself as one among millions of rich young rulers in the American church who have the potential to obediently follow Jesus and be happy, or to follow the dream and go away sad.

Any of us who are raising or ministering to kids in today's world know that materialism, entitlement, and narcissism are taught and caught at epidemic levels, infecting youth culture and kids both outside and inside the church. It's been happening for several generations. Even those kids (and adults) who profess faith in Christ live by the little three-word creed more often embodied than spoken: "Things bring happiness." They launch from high school practiced and well-versed in pursuing happiness through the accumulation of stuff. Vocations are chosen and pursued not as an act of obedient response to God's calling, but as utilitarian means to selfish ends. They learn to step on and climb over others in hopes of getting an edge. They embrace self-centeredness with reckless abandon and learn how to justify it all through a skewed understanding of God as someone who wants nothing more than to serve them and facilitate their comfortable lives of happiness. And, they believe that giving a little out of their abundance is all they have to do. . . and they can wind up feeling pretty good about themselves.

Some don't even get that far. One sunny Labor Day several years ago, I had the opportunity to go boating with a group of six high schoolers in the clear blue waters off the coast of Miami. We enjoyed the beautiful weather while



swimming and skiing off the back end of a pretty impressive boat that belonged to Dave's father. When it was Dave's turn to ski, I went to the back of the boat to slide him the skis while he dove into the water. When Dave resurfaced, he leaned back and let out a comfortable sigh. "Ahhhh," he said in a mocking and arrogant tone. "I wonder what the poor people are doing today?" Dave was a student in my youth group.

When it comes to integrating their Christian faith into the material and financial parts of their lives, our Christian kids – and many of us - are having difficulty. I'll never forget something Kenneth Kantzer wrote almost 20 years ago that hit the nail on the head: "The most serious problem facing the church today is materialism – materialism not as a philosophical theory, but as a way of life." Two decades have passed and it hasn't gotten any better.

What can we – rich parents and rich leaders of rich kids – do to undo these dangerous and disobedient attitudes? I fully recognize that these are complex, deep-seated problems rooted in our sinful hearts that have taken years to be done. I don't think there are easy answers. But I do believe they are issues that can and must be addressed with a sense of deep urgency. Here are some suggested steps you can enlist to undo what's been done.

Learn as much as you can about the world's need. "Out of sight, out of mind" might be the cliché that best describes one cause of my own personal history of ignorance. During my childhood, poverty was something that flashed-past outside my rolled-up and locked car window as our family would venture from our comfortable and cloistered enclave in the suburbs on trips through inner-city Philly. The slums were never our destination. They were simply a dangerous place to quickly pass through on a direct route somewhere else. The only emotion I remember feeling was relief. . . relief that we were finally out of there and that I lived somewhere else. Helping the kids you know and love break free from their ignorance and cultural captivity can only begin when you've taken deliberate steps to do the same. Books, the Internet, and visits should all be utilized to open your eyes to the world's need.

Get to know God's heart for the poor and desire for justice. Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, couldn't help but start his relief organization after praying his now legendary prayer: "Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God." The Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation reveal what lies at the heart of God. Six little words from Isaiah 61:8 capture the essence of it all: "For I, the Lord, love justice." God's great unfolding drama of redemption is all about righting the wrongs that sin unleashed on the world. Things are not the way they are supposed to be. As God reveals Himself in the Scriptures we can't help but see His heart for the poor and desire for justice. Instead of reading the Scriptures for the sole purpose of understanding what it means to be born again, we must read to understand what it means *to live* as one born again. Immerse yourself in God's word and it will transform you into a person who seeks first the Kingdom. He calls us to meet the world's deep need by being agents of Shalom wherever Shalom has been destroyed.

Do the same with your kids. The sad reality is that most of us have never been challenged to think seriously about the world's need, how God sees the world's great need, and how God calls us to meet that need as His hands and feet. If we have, then the lack of eager and fruitful response in the North American church is evidence that we either weren't paying attention, or it hasn't stuck. Most of our kids are ignorant to the world's need. That ignorance is fueled by a seat on a comfortable couch and a remote in hand that most likely flips away from the news and onto something comedic and mindless. Our role as parents and people in youth ministry is to serve as signposts pointing to the Cross of Christ and what it means to follow Jesus as we take up our own cross. It makes sense then, that as people dedicated to teaching kids how to integrate their faith into *all* of life, that we would consistently talk about the world's need, the idols that grip us the hardest, and about how to follow the One who wants to grip us the most. God's heart for the poor and desire for justice must lie at the heart of our teaching through both word and deed.

Let them know they are rich. . . and what their Heavenly Father has to say about that. Believe it or not, I grew up thinking I was fairly poor. There were numerous reasons for that, the most basic of which was that I always saw myself as having less than those who had more, rather than one who had more than those who had less. When you do that, you place yourself at the bottom of the barrel. You almost can't help but have that happen when you grow up nurtured by commercially-driven materialism. It would be safe to say that's the way it is for all of our kids today. Then I learned where I'd be standing if the world's population was lined up in order from richest down to the poorest. Me, you, and all of our kids would most likely be in the top two percent of the line. We've been fooled and we've been fooling ourselves if we think we're poor. Bottom line is this: I'm rich. Once you've communicated that fact to your kids, spend some time looking at what the Old and New Testaments have to say about the dangers of wealth and the God-given responsibilities of the wealthy. These realities began to hit me hard when I was a college student studying the book of Amos. Thinking I knew what God required of me, I read these words in Amos 5: "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let

justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" What God desires is our understanding that all we've been given is His and that we are to steward it all in ways that bring honor and glory to Him. As we walk our kids through the Scriptures to discover God's will and way for our wealth they will most likely feel some guilt. But their behavior should be driven by a grateful obedience to God that yields freedom and joy.

Be committed to raising Godly children, not royalty. I've worked with parents for years. I am a parent myself. I know full well that in our North American culture our tendency to idolize our kids does great harm. We want them to have, do, and be more than anyone else. We want our family and our kids to be "the Jones's" that everyone else strives to keep up with. We've created a culture of childhood royalty where we treat our children like princes and princesses, a step that creates a lifelong sense of entitlement that's very hard to break. If you're a parent, expose yourself to the world's need, God's heart for the poor, and a knowledge of the cultural pressures that facilitate selfishness, materialism, and narcissism. If we are raising our kids to worship the holy trinity of me, myself, and I, their eyes will never see beyond themselves to the world's need.

Teach them to send. In his wonderful little book, *Don't Waste Your Life*, John Piper reminds young readers that missions isn't only about going, but it is also about sending. This, I believe, was part of the message at the heart of Jesus' encounter with the Rich Young Ruler. Unwilling to be a good steward of all he had been given, he wouldn't part with his earthly possessions by funneling them into service devoted to the advance of God's Kingdom. Our kids need to know that there is nothing wrong with money and wealth. However, much is required from those who are given much. Perhaps the majority of our kids have been gifted by God and uniquely prepared for vocational futures that will not only allow them to represent God through their offering of good work as butchers, bakers, and candle-stick makers, but they will be faced with the option of giving or keeping their great wealth. Now is the time to nurture giving hearts. How can you teach your kids to support global missions and justice through their prayers and giving *today*? Give them opportunities to do both. Adopt missionaries to pray for and support. Have your family and individual kids sponsor a Compassion or World Vision child. Let them know that their money is used by these organizations to "send" nationals who are committed to facilitate the spread of the Gospel and the doing of justice in ways that foster independence rather than dependence. The 19th century Minister and writer Edward Everett Hale reminds us that even if we are just one person supporting one person, the impact individually and collectively can be great. In his story *Ten Times One is Ten* he writes, "I'm only one, but I am one. I can't do everything, but I can do something. What I can do, I ought to do. And what I ought to do, by the grace of God I will do."

Take them and go. Missions trips have become a staple of youth ministry programming. But I'm not sure that we always choose, plan, and implement trips in ways that bring about lasting change for those who are sent *or* for those to whom we go. Still, that's no excuse to stop going. Instead, we should 1) examine our mission trips in great detail to see how to be good stewards of these opportunities, and 2) cut the entitlement-feeding stuff from our programming (expensive winter ski-trips, etc) and funnel our youth ministry time into radical giving. A good place to start is by reading Chap Clark and Kara Powell's book, *Deep Justice in A Broken World*, and the plethora of related resources coming from the Fuller Youth Institute. Be sure that every trip you plan is seen and experienced within God's design for justice. As you do this, their heart for the world will grow, and they just might be more prone to say "yes" to the God who is calling them into a lifetime spent as one sent.

Recently I read Gary Haugen's great book, *Just Courage*. Haugen tells the story of his friend Sean Litton, a lawyer who decided to put Christ's call – to find one's life by losing it – to the test. Litton walked away from his safe, high-paying and secure job to go to work for Haugen's International Justice Mission, addressing sexual trafficking and child sexual assault in the Philippines. Sean took his wife and two kids along. His life was changed.

But Sean almost didn't go. He says there were four things holding him back. There was his comfort that came with his nice house and all the stuff he had accumulated. There was his security and freedom from danger. There was the control he had over the circumstances of his life. And finally, there was the success he was experiencing in his career. But he let go of comfort, security, control, and success. . . and he took the unsafe option by giving up his life and going to the Philippines.

What happened? Sean Litton found his life. In exchange for what he gave up he got back adventure, faith, miracles, and a deep knowledge of Jesus. His faith grew and solidified in ways he could have never imagined.

Let's pray that our kids will break the patterns we've set and live to embrace the calling of Christ, rather than the false gods of comfort, security, control, and success. And, let's do all we can to make that happen.