

# RED LETTER

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## CHALLENGE "GIVING"

We all have stuff. We see it, want it, buy it, display it, insure it, and compare it with other people's stuff. We talk about whether other people have too much stuff. But we buy their stuff at garage sales when we can. That way we grow our own pile of stuff. We imagine that if our pile gets big enough, we would feel successful or secure.

For all of us, our lives usually something like this. You get a house, then you have to get stuff to put in it. You keep getting more stuff, and soon you need a bigger house. Comedian George Carlin, said, A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it.

Did you know there are 52,000 storage facilities in the world, and 46,000 of those self-storage facilities are in our country? They offer over a Billion (with a b) sq feet for people to store their stuff. In the 1960's, this industry did not even exist. We now spend \$12 billion a year just to pay someone to store our extra stuff! This is larger than the music industry.

Some people have a gift for acquiring stuff. This is the Hearst Castle in California. This is one house! William Randolph Hearst was a "stuffaholic." He built a house of 72,000 sq feet to put his stuff in. He had 265,000 acres for his stuff. He collected stuff for 88 years. Then you know what he did? He died. That was shortsighted. Now people go through Hearst's house by the thousands. They all say the same thing: "He sure had a lot of stuff."

People go thru life, get stuff, and then they die, leaving all their stuff behind. What happens to it? The kids, go over to their deceased parent's house. They pick through their parent's old stuff like vultures, deciding which stuff they want to take to their houses. Now it becomes their stuff. Then they die – and some new vultures come to pick thru their stuff to decide what they will take to their own houses. On and on it goes. Families are split apart because of stuff.

Husbands and wives argue more about stuff than any other single issue.

Jesus 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.”***

Matthew 6:19-20

Let's say you spend a week at Motel 6. How likely would it be that you would take all your money and spend it decorating your motel room? How probable is it that you would clean out your bank account to purchase van Goghs or paintings of Elvis on velvet (or whatever it is that you like) to hang on the Motel walls?

Not very likely, right? You wouldn't even be tempted. Because the motel room is NOT HOME. You're only going to be there a little while. It would be foolish to waste the treasure of your one and only life on a TEMPORARY residence.

Wise people are clear on what lasts and what doesn't. So Jesus says it is wise to store up treasure in what's eternal. What's eternal is God and people.

This life is Motel . Your “room” – your house – and furniture and clothes and all you own – all of it will last the equivalent of a few seconds compared to the eternity that will be occupied by your soul. It's not bad to stay in a motel and enjoy it while you're there. Motel 6 can do for a night. But Jesus says, don't store up treasure in a Motel. it's not home. You're only going to be here a little while.

If you're a parent, you know how silly it is when a 3-year-old demands that you get out of “their bedroom.” Little children don't earn *any* of their stuff. They may sleep in that bedroom, but it is in *your* home. EVERYTHING is provided for them. It is all GIVEN from someone much larger and wiser than them. They don't even generally take very good care of it.

Nevertheless, little children get extremely attached to their stuff. If someone tries to take something, that item suddenly becomes their FAVORITE stuff. Three-year-olds can be so deluded, can't they? But it's not just little children, is it?

Let's consider these statements from God, in the Bible: What do these say about everything that you say belongs to you?

***"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.."***

Psalm 24:1

***"Remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth."*** Deuteronomy 8: 7-8

***"The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the Lord Almighty."*** Haggai 2:8

If you've been around church for a while, you've probably heard this question about tithing. ***"Do I have to tithe on the net or the gross income?"*** "Do I take God's portion out of the SMALLER amount? After Uncle Sam has taken his share? Or do I give to God based on the larger – pre-tax amount? I try not to answer the question when I'm asked because the whole question is kind of goofy and misses the point. The question really is asking: How little can I give to God and yet keep God from getting mad at me?

The question is like going to you mom on Mothers' Day and asking, "Mom, what the least amount of money I can spend on you without you severing our relationship?" When the motive behind the gift is love, then the question doesn't even get asked, does it? Giving is to be motivated by love from your heart.

King David once gave lavishly to God, and said: ***"But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this?"*** 1 Chronicles 29:14 He's saying that ANYTHING he gives, is all a gift from God in the first place. David wanted to use his stuff as a gift back to God to build GOD's kingdom, not David's own kingdom. Why? Because he *wanted to* – out of love!

The first Christians got this straight. They used their stuff to build God's not their own, kingdom. One of the most amazing statements about the early church is that ***"there were no needed persons among them."*** If they had stuff, they shared it. There had never been a community like this.

God guided Paul to write in the Bible: ***"Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction."*** 1 Timothy 6:9 Not having stuff can lead you into a trap – into envy, and jealousy, and stealing. But, ironically, the

other side is true too. Getting more stuff doesn't lead to freedom. Getting more stuff can be its own trap. Here's what some of the wealthiest people of their day said:

***“The care of \$200 million is enough to kill anyone.  
There is no pleasure in it.”***

W. H. Vanderbilt

***“I am the most miserable man on earth.”***

J. J. Astor

***“I have made millions,  
But they have brought me no happiness.”***

John D. Rockefeller

***“Millionaires seldom smile.”***

Andrew Carnegie

***“I was happier when doing a mechanic's job.”***

Henry Ford

Stuff can't buy you love. And it can't buy you happiness. In fact, owning it may make you miserable because now you got to insure it, paint it, invest it, and use it. That can be an awful heavy weight, instead of freedom.

And **Stuff cannot make you SECURE**. This is where God's teaching parts most radically from conventional wisdom of the world.

Paul said: ***“We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.”*** 1 Timothy 6:7

Job said: ***“Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart.”***  
Job 1: 21 You never see a hearse pulling a U-haul of stuff along to the cemetery. We come into the world without a penny or a pocket to put it in. And we are all going out the same way. In between, we get some tuff to put on our bodies and some stuff in our pockets, but none of it is really ours. We borrow it for a while. Then one day, we will hand it all back in.

My desire to have money to provide for my future discourages me from giving. Each dollar I give away is no longer available to protect me, so I'm discouraged from giving it to others. But when I give, I am showing that my security rests someplace other than in my checkbook balance. My security is in **GOD**. So, giving is an act that shows my confidence in God. He'll come thru. He'll provide all I really need. I'm always secure as long as I have Jesus.

So Jesus teaches us that instead of using stuff to build my own kingdom and advance my own agenda, I can actually use stuff to **become RICH TOWARD GOD**. The stuff I call "mine," I can use here and now to make a difference for all eternity!

When we give casually, we receive casual joy. When giving requires effort, thought, and creativity, we get immense joy.

In the Old Testament, David was once offered everything he needed to give his offering to God. David turned that offer down. He said, "**Shall I give to the Lord that which costs me nothing?**" What he's really saying is that there is satisfaction in giving sacrificially. That satisfaction comes from love – giving is putting love for God into action.

I like how the video a moment ago, so clearly shows us that we give because Jesus means the world to us. He's the most valuable, the most precious thing going on in our lives! Jesus is treasure. And He's trust worthy. He's worthy of you placing your trust in Him.

It doesn't matter if you have a LOT of stuff, or a little stuff – being rich toward God is available to everyone.

Being rich toward God is to have riches that are found in a personal relationship with God. These riches are: · Forgiveness for all wrongs in the past; · PEACE in your heart and mind; · HOPE; knowing that God is *FOR* you. · PURPOSE -- God gives you meaning for living each day. · LOVE -- real LOVE for other people, and · GRATITUDE – to enjoy the beauty God has created around you.

If that weren't enough – you have heaven to come. Jesus doesn't just last a little while. A relationship with Him isn't a room at

Motel 6. The blessings He gives, and being with Him – lasts forever, and ever, and ever. Jesus is yours forever. Your relationship with God brings *REAL* riches.

You don't have to acquire these riches. Or work a life time to get them. They are offered to you free. Where having stuff doesn't set you free, but chains you down in worrying about it, guarding it, and using it, Jesus sets you free! Free from the burden of more work and worry.

God gave His best to make that possible. He, Himself, came in Jesus. Jesus is God who became a human like us. And He became the prisoner in chains, and died a criminal's death – a death we each one deserve – in order to trade places with you, so that you can be free. Forgiven. He loves you so much that His life PAID to remove your wrongs and sins – to give you and all people, complete forgiveness.

And being forgiven, God comes to live in your heart. He takes control of your life. He brings to you His riches of peace, contentment. That's freedom. Freedom that stuff can never bring you.

The beauty of this is that You can be rich today. It doesn't take years to work, and accumulate, and build wealth. These riches are offered free, because they are already fully paid for by Jesus. You can be rich today. Just accept this wealth – accept this relationship with God – trust that God DOES love you, and He IS *for* you. Accept His forgiveness for the sin of materialism, and know that heaven ahead is just waiting for you. And no one can take heaven away from you. You will be content, being with Jesus, thinking only selfless, pure thoughts. You will be forever secure.

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf says that there are two kinds of richness in life. There is "richness of having." and "richness of being." Richness of having is an external circumstance. Richness of being is an inner experience. We usually focus on richness of having. We say things like: ***"If only I could have my dream house .... If***

***only I could have a higher salary .... When I have a better car....  
When I have enough money for the ultimate vacation....”***

We go after the treasure of having. but what we really need is the treasure of being. What we really need is to be grateful, joyful, content, free from anxiety, and generous.

We can acquire the treasure of having by long hours, shrewd investments, and a lot of luck. But it is possible to HAVE a barn full of money, and a boatload of talent, and movie star looks and still BE poor. We still aren't content, happy, free, or secure.

On the other hand, you can HAVE very little and yet BE rich in your soul. A rich soul experiences life differently. A rich soul experiences gratitude for what has been received, rather than resentment for what it hasn't.

A rich soul faces the future with hope, rather than anxiety.

Richness, you see, is always available. Because of God's love to you, and your love back to Him, you can always be compassionate, generous, grateful, and joyful. It is the treasure of being – being rich toward God.

AMEN.