

## *Rich or Poor .... or somewhere **Between** and **Beyond**?*

Around the time of celebrating the birth of a nation called 'America', the 4th of July, I experienced interactions with rich people, poor people and '*somewhere in between*' people. I found *desires* for and *obstacles* against the finding of true peace and happiness to be eerily similar.

~ **Independence Day** ~ Thanks to a friend and his family, the past two years, my wife and I have been invited to join a simple yet epic July 4th 'party by the lake'. The mansion qualities of the house hosting the party easily would cause *my* jaw to drop, yet compared to expansive estates across America and the world it would be pigeon holed as 'puny'. I *suspect* if I asked our gracious and compassionate hosts if they considered themselves 'rich' they would say "hardly". If I polled the attendees of the party similarly, I am confident they would give a different answer. *Rankings* on the ever shifting *scale* called 'keeping up with the joneses' or 'who's who' among the rich and famous are slippery at best to define.

During the party, I made time to play a game with the grandson of the hosts. He struggles with an extremely rare skin condition which makes being outside more painful, while being inside is *barely* better. Listening and groaning while he beat me at a simple card game built trust. Free of generic predictable questions that adults usually ask teens he offered details of his painful condition which baffles the most brilliant doctors money can buy. Later the grandfather thanked me for taking the time. I suspect that the natural love of grandfather for grandson would motivate him to withhold *no expense* to find an answer to the ongoing agony his grandson experiences on a daily basis. Most of the party attendees knew of the situation and fumbled to try to alleviate the discomfort of the bright child by pampering him a bit too much and over praising, just a bit, his obvious intellect. The despair felt thick as fog. The lie regurgitated like a dripping faucet by most media sources repeats an unspoken Golden Rule: "He who has all the gold makes all the rules".

If this supposed rule is true, wouldn't in a heartbeat this grandpa, family and friends gladly give up all their gold to solve the problem causing the pain of this precious boy? With social media and love from many, any and all lengths and treatments have been tried with little success. On an international scale billions have been spent on research seeking to cure a variety of diseases and conditions. Professional athletes graciously raise funds and give time and effort to 'fix' many worthy causes to no avail or at least limited success.

We love the Guinness book of world records telling us of the oldest person alive, yet not living past 150 is a statistical certainty. If medical marvels get us to that level, sooner or later, everyone is going to die. No more living, loving, learning, laughing or any noble sounding hopeful words.

**Rich** people are going to die. **Poor** people are going to die. **Everyone in between** is going to die.

~ **Beating hunger for one more day** ~ *Two days* after the lavish lake party filled with financially impressive people I joined my friend and his church in giving away food outside an inner city mission. I arrived early, sat in my car, and observed those I would soon be interacting with. Even though most of those in the street waiting for the weekly food give away were either sleeping in the shelter or part of the Salvation Army program, they treated each other with the same basic decency and even as comrades not unlike what I had observed at the party by the lake.

I watched a thirty something African American male who based on his attire would not be quickly identified as one needing free food enjoy a cigarette as if he was eating a juicy steak. Later two male employees of the Salvation Army chatted as if they had not a care in the world while puffing on their own life sucking cancer sticks. Average cost \$6.28 per pack; Average reduction in living for men smokers 13.2 years; Women die 14.5 years faster on average due to smoking. Is the over taxation of cigarettes reducing unhealthy behavior in our society as promised by pious politicians?

The van filled with a heartwarming combination of food and smiling church volunteers arrived. Even 'poor' palettes knew to grab the good tasting food first. Cold fried chicken vanished first like a vapor in the wind. Orderly distribution took about 20 minutes. A conversation with a middle aged man newly in town developed. He expressed desire to be established in a home and some part time employment. He did get some disability income. He was gracious and conversed with ease and a smile. I felt the same basic desire in this man. He displayed a desire to be a kind and good person *just as* the people at the opulent party by the lake two days earlier desired.

~ **Is cruising life the closest thing to heaven on earth?** ~ *One day* later, I boarded a massive cruise ship to accompany a client I consider a friend on an Alaskan adventure. This was my second time cruising to Alaska, yet the scenery still took my breath away. The amenities and menu were as to be expected, superb. Throughout the week something said at the 'party at the lake' kept bouncing through my head. While sitting and looking at the beauty of the lake and surroundings and people enjoying the day someone expressed with a sigh of contentment "If this is what heaven is like, I could die today."

I imagine many on the cruise who worked and saved to be able to go to Alaska might say the same thing. Words fall short in describing the beauty inside and outside the small floating village called a ship. Just walking the narrow hallways met by smiling, nodding pros intent on serving, made me feel rich. Selling the 'sizzle' not the steak, is what makes 'sales pitches' work. Trust me, the 'book ends' of these experiences had sizzle oozing out every pore. Nirvana was being experienced in many ways but 'closest' to heaven on earth? Closer, maybe like Minneapolis is *closer* to Alaska than Mars! Always a chasm lies between the *expectation* of a 'bucket list' event and reality.

~ Is winning the **only** thing? ~ Though my friend *loves* bingo, we only thought to play in the last session on the cruise. We purchased the *minimum* number of cards. The observation area on the ship was packed with people lusting after the lure of a chance for *another* shot at 'paradise'. I rarely win games of chance and rarely play them, but I was doing what my friend enjoyed doing and had zero expectation of a positive outcome.

As numbers were announced a hush of anticipation cloaked the eager listeners searching with hope for the right match on their multiple bingo cards. Winning required 'black out' of one of my three cards. From the start I was marking multiple matches and started to think 'I might have a shot at this.' I quickly chided myself for searching for pie in the sky and returned to just having fun.

*Before* the usual groans showing that others were close even started, I needed *three* numbers to win. It is hard to describe the peaceful calm I felt as I waited for my three numbers. I felt I was going to win, but would be close to equally content if I did not. My final three numbers came in the next five called. The cosmic exclamation point: The **last two** numbers came **back to back**. Shocked yet calm, I evenly proclaimed "BINGO". My peaceful countenance continued as they verified the win and the 'losers' exited the area. Some offered congratulations. The game organizer even commented with puzzlement "You don't seem very excited."

For me, the reason I don't get over excited with good news is I have many times experienced bad news soon after. The challenge common to life lies in the inevitable period *after* the sizzle fizzles. Eating too much steak makes one feel like a hibernating bear. Personal periods of attack, letdown, misunderstanding, boredom and even depression will come after *every* 'rich' experience. Rich people, poor people and 'in between' people have all had 'mountain top' occasions but on earth these never get anywhere near to being *constant*. I witnessed many little letdowns of snippy words between families while they were still in the midst of 'the vacation of a lifetime'. I recognized those snippy words because I remember using them myself against my wife on our cruise to 'paradise'.

Friend, are you *sick* of being *let down* by the sizzle that fizzles? There is a *permanent* solution. Heaven, and relationship with the creator of it, is that **solution**. The Apostle Paul had to have been inspired by the loving *creator* of continual celebratory constance when he penned, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has *entered into the heart of man*, the things that God had prepared for those who love Him." Here is how I hear His 'drop the mike' conclusion. "For we know that our Lord Jesus Christ was kind enough to give up all His riches and become poor, so that **you... me... we...** and **everybody** could become eternally **rich** without ever again fearing **letdowns or loss**."

Please, I implore you, before you stop reading and write off these words as yet another religious sounding scare tactic purely for guilt ridden behavior modification, consider that the crossing of the chasm between unspeakable wealth and desperate poverty is being offered simply based upon the right, loving relationship with the only true Savior, Jesus Christ.

~ *Karma cannot* span the chasm ~ Being in India on three unofficial mission trips has shown me first hand the despair of the Karmic philosophy. Sadly, '*civilized*' western society is just as imbedded with this philosophy. My modern cliff notes definition of Karma: "Do good, get good; Do bad, get bad; More good than bad... You're good." Examples of the infiltration of Karma into western civilization fly through my brain at the same time like putting my face up to a fire hose.

A baseball announcer says, "He redeemed himself from that error in the third inning with that home run here in the eighth!" In other words, good evens out the bad. Ever see a baseball player cross themselves and point to the sky after striking out?

Outrage over the latest headline of heinous happenings is greeted with, "There is a special place in *hell* for that \*\*\*\*\* person." In other words, some bad is too evil to be made up for with 'good'.

Santa Claus is clear as a ringing bell. "Be good for goodness sake." In other words, being good enough to cover my bad is *my* job.

I ask someone how I can pray for them and they say, "I am fine, I have my own church." In other words, going to church on Sunday is *not* about a relationship with Jesus, it is about appearances, reputation and social status in the eyes of the upwardly mobile professional crowd.

On cruises, when retirees basking in their golden glory years are asked about their kids they rarely begin with, "My daughter has an eating disorder and is homeless and my son is an addict." In other words, good kids always come from good parenting.

~ **Non-lasting riches: Worse than being poor** ~ Please hear this truth in your heart! On earth accomplishments, assets and accolades, because of the inevitability of death, **do...not...last!!**

Right now I am tapping away on my computer at a table in the 'staging area' for *attempts to satisfy* hunger given a fancy, opulent title for 'put food in mouth here'. The sprawling majesty of the ocean spreads as far as the eye can see is on my left and excited conversations between bites abound on my right. I fear, **not one** of the conversations is about how one thousand years from now, *none of us* will be breathing, laughing, existing in this place called earth. I fear many do not even consider the truth that the stuff, fluff and fizzling sizzle we scratch and claw for with our life's blood like it has a chance to be constant, is as temporary as the thinnest tissue paper against a hurricane.

I love the movie, "What about Bob?" on many levels, but the scene that brings me sorrow contains Bob 'helping' the Psychiatrist's son overcome his fear of death by finding something worse to be worried about. It is a funny bonding moment for the two characters, but on a practical level, so misguided. On our cruise we were *required* to do a safety drill to know where to go and get on a life boat in case our ship sank. During the safety demonstration of the life jacket, now to limit lawsuits labeled 'floatation devices', the announcer would be ridiculed loudly for saying "When you fear drowning in a watery grave miles from home, instead of wearing this floatation device be relieved, at least you're **not** being tortured by an acid drip on your face that will never end!"

In a crisis, staying alive is job one. Death feels a long way off, but *all* are moving towards it like a cruise ship gracefully gliding on the water. Being lulled and seduced into believing everything is just fine based on current circumstances is as easy as drifting *inches* while driving. The end of all beings breathing on earth is coming. Some are moving slow and others fast to this end, but **all** are moving. Many are misguided in thinking that 'the deciding' to wisely follow Jesus, the *permanent* 'life preserver', by receiving forgiveness for all their sins and securing tangible eternal life is the easy end of the matter. Instead learning to wisely live with eternity in mind and be useful now for what truly lasts is an arduous, 'until my last breath' process.

The struggle to make what we do **now** 'count' beyond this life is intense. An insidious and evil plan to discourage all efforts for eternity by our sworn enemy bombards every moment. Enticements to think *only* of the significance of our actions on our current reputation abound. These lies *sound* so logical: "I must have enough to not have to worry about having enough." "I need to have fancy stuff and dress for success." "If I do humble acts of service and only God sees, they are meaningless." "I can't do \_\_\_\_\_ as good as \_\_\_\_\_ so what is the point?" "*If only* I had \_\_\_\_\_ then everything would be just fine." "I say that all the time, yet I am not a nationally renowned speaker!"

Any message that focuses our attention and efforts on an earthly, horizontal plane for satisfaction **is... a... lie!** The entire process of following Jesus is, in every breath, *replacing* earthly lies with eternal, vertical truths. Living in lies is like a starving child eating mud pies in order to live. Jesus offers a different path. Become rich in what matters. Sell out in service to Him. Eternal, vertical riches must be earned with a different, non-earthly kind of labor, labeled "Learning to submit to His will no matter the cost." "Learning to surrender all your desires." and "Learning to never stop".

The movie Schindlers List concludes with a man, who used up much of his wealth to save many Jews from evil extinction, driving past rows of thankful faces attached to lives he saved. Holding up his watch Schindler says "How many more could this have saved?". A rich mindset of service for eternity has a healthy striving for more eternal impact free from the weight of needing earthly recognition. Friend, I urge you to start and keep *re-starting* the process of thinking truly *above and beyond* with how you invest the time, talents and resources of your life.

~ **Being Poor is no Picnic** ~ I have interacted with many poor people in various settings. I can relate personally to *some* aspects of the plight of the poor though never being destitute myself. In

sales my big heart and desire to be as far from poor as possible caused me to set up 'honor' payment plans with longing faces wanting what they could not afford. I 'sold the sizzle' and my numbers looked better, but my financial situation declined when the payment plans were never met. I know the yearning facial expressions of those desiring what eludes them like the wind, entry into the 'affluent buyers club', all too well. In my heart I discovered a resentment of wealthy people co-existing with the scratching and clawing of a wounded wolf to **be** the *same thing* I resented. Though finding my next meal has never been a concern, the constant calculating of how much money I make battles each moment to erode my contentment in Christ and my circumstances.

Poverty is deadly and debilitating. The message that 'money makes a man' slices both ways. Poor man looks at a wealthy man and thinks 'If only I were him, then I would be somebody'. Wealthy man sees the yearning in the poor man and thinks 'Why don't I feel as lucky as that person who wishes they were me thinks I am feeling?'. Even if we could get universal agreement on what rich, successful, beautiful and lucky *looks like*, maybe 10% of the population could ever achieve any level. Valuing *any* life based solely on possessions is slippery ground because fame and fortune are so fickle. Read the full stories of Chris Farley, Robin Williams and Prince.

Poverty is also about way more than **lack** of money. I have personally interacted with millionaires who are poor in empathy and sincerely sacrificing for their kids. Divorce amongst the wealthy is rampant and almost always about money. I have wealthy 'so called' successful passengers in my ride share routinely **act** poor and 'trashy' in their words and lack of manners. People wealthy in beauty often are poor in interpersonal communication. The rich and glamorous are often poor in trusting others because of the valid fear of being used. The poorest of all are those elected to serve who instead use their privilege to deceitfully gain more wealth and power which only breeds more misery because it does not satisfy.

Thankfully our loving creator values, loves and desires relationship with every human that is still breathing. Over the years, with the faithful working continuing in me by my Heavenly Father, I have come to enjoy the tranquility of anonymity while learning to let go of my desire to be 'the greatest'. Steady progress in the mindful middle makes space for the beautiful, sweet and precious presence of God "Completing the work He began in us".

~ **The Mindful Middle of Mediocrity** ~ Math is a great teacher. A whole numbers scale, **1 to 100**, only has **one** #1 and **one** #100. Awards ceremonies filled with pomp and fake fluff make me chuckle when introducers label *everyone*, "The nicest most hardworking person." It is *impossible* to have more than one 'nicest'. Fibbing flattery designed to stroke egos and garner loyalty is simply manipulation in organizations and as common as white on rice.

Jesus was crystal **clear** and fibbing flattery **free** when He said, "If you want to be the greatest, be a servant." Notice He did *not* say, "Be the *greatest* servant." Because as soon as we start the comparing game, we lose our joy and peace.

Friend, you and I will never *remain* the richest or poorest; best or worst; highest or lowest in any category because levels fluctuate by the second. Fear not! That is a good thing. Both extremes are exhausting because they focus on the truly farthest extremes of the bell curve and promote the lie that self effort can attain and maintain those extremes. Spend 5 minutes with anyone and their imperfection will stand out like a pink pimple on a pale face. The mediocre middle is a great *gift* to show us our deep need for a kind of perfection we can never create or maintain ourselves.

Imputed righteousness is the only real righteousness. Imputed is defined as, “Estimated to have a certain cash value although no money has been received.” The value is placed *though no money* has been received. Right Standing in perfect access; Relationship with the only eternally perfect being ever; Intimacy with the most loving and forgiving person of all time are all *placed* into **my** account based solely on my willingness to give up my messy solutions and attempts to fix my life and simply receive, like a child, the value that the Lord Jesus Christ has placed on me.

If the futility of managing your messy quest for perfection has pushed you, humbled you and drawn you to a different way, say “Yes”. You get way more than anything on earth, you get a tremendous ‘ticket’ to a place, far out of this world, where people are so filthy wealthy they walk on streets of gold where *no* sweeping is required and *no* weeping exists.

Processing my ‘good fortune’ of winning a cruise has revealed one picture and one idea which must be explained. *The picture* came waiting for the bingo game to start. A thirty something mom bellied up to the bar twenty feet from where we were sitting. Her body language said, “I know I should not order another drink, but I am on vacation and everyone else is doing it so why not?” In my spirit I perceived a despair in her heart. The dream vacation they worked so hard earn was about over and was not living up to her expectations.

*The idea* which pounds on my heart every day with each breath: Unspeakable **joy** is the result of my trust in the rock solid reality that God’s definition of winning is mountains higher than mine. Isaiah 55:9 says "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

The precise moment I received His ‘beyond my puny understanding’ forgiveness for my messy sins, I received *the highest prize*. All I needed to *pay* to get this prize was to admit that my lowly ‘ways’ have been as useful as spitting in a tornado. When I honestly humbled myself to receive what I could never earn, a perfect relationship with an eternal loving Savior began. Lifeboats on ships must have space for all. Jesus makes a way for *all* to win. Not just win, but conquer; Not just conquer, but be *gloriously victorious* for **all eternity** safe and snuggled up inside His *perfect* life boat which makes the luxury of the Titanic look like a faded dingy patched with old duct tape.

Jesus said “Whosoever will, may come to Me.” If you think you are rich, come; If you think you are poor, come; If you think you are in between, come! If you can still think and breath there is time and room for you to come to the cross. Pray “Jesus, I give up! You got me. Save me. Heal me. Wash my mess. I want to be ‘high’ on you. I surrender my love of money, prestige, pride, perfectionism and pleasure. I desire to love you; serve you; glorify you and praise you above everything and everyone in my life. Help me to keep growing in doing this one step at a time.”

Did God bless me in winning the cruise because He knew I was working on this writing or was it a random event? That question is added to my ever growing list which my loving almighty Father will answer in my first nano second in a place where time is irrelevant. All I can say for sure, is my euphoria in personal times of worship and casting my cares on my creator have easily eclipsed the fleeting experience of ‘winning’ on this earth in any capacity or form.

If you have come to the cross of Christ personally, remember that persisting and finishing is way harder than starting. The lustful value system of this lowly world is daily clawing at us to believe the leprous, lying definition of what ‘true’ winning is.

A quote from James; “The effectual fervent prayers of a ‘right with God’ man avail much”. Pray these prayers daily or make up your own using the truth of God’s Word. Prayer is like the ignition in your car, it starts things up so movement can happen. Prayer, above all, lays up rust free, crime free *treasures* in a place where the **worst** is light years *beyond* the **best** ever experienced on earth.

Pray like a child; pray some more; pray imperfectly; pray some more; pray alone; pray in groups; pray in groans; pray protected by God’s armor; pray for your enemies; pray for your loved ones; pray like your life depends on it, because it does; pray to resist the devil and his lies; pray to submit to God; pray from your heart in honesty; pray; pray; and persist in prayer.

“Jesus, thank you for making a way for me to get to you. Help me keep persisting in my prayers, because I know you value me and my requests.”

“Father, I rebuke in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ the lies that infest me, my family, my culture. I rebuke the lie that money defines me, I rebuke the lie that beauty, fame, status and define me.”

“Abba, daddy, I want to serve you and glorify you in every word, action and attitude.”

“Yahweh, I am sick and tired of believing the lie that \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ can make me richer than you can make me here on earth **and** in heaven.”

“Holy Spirit, indwell me and help me to constantly reset my focus from what **I** think is important to what **you** think is important.”

“Jesus, I give you permission to save me; clean me up; discipline me and use me for your glory.”

“Father, I pray for leaders in our world in every area of influence that they would realize that without your life preserver of forgiveness they are like a gnat tossed in a hurricane.

“Lord, I pray for leaders of your church bride that they would return to their first love and desire serving you in humility more than any position or title.

“Jehovah Jirah, my provider, expose the counterfeit lies of satan wherever they are. Do surgery and slice out all traces of perfectionism, legalism, materialism, selfishness, sensuality, playing the victim, pride, lust, fits of rage, control and resentment that are a cancer on our culture.

“Lord I pray for marriages that you would restore them to be a picture of your love for all mankind.”

“Jesus deliver children of all ages from wishy washy boundaries. Bring security in consistency.”

“Yahweh, help parents to clearly communicate expectations and follow through on lines they have drawn to grow security in their children.

“Savior, encourage me to battle in *your* strength in prayer for every area of my life and those I love.

“Lord Jesus Christ, I have decided to persist in following you, help me to never turn back.” Amen.