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Article

• Some thoughts on material possessions
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Recently in our house group we went through the passages of Acts 2:41-47 and 4:32-35. There we read:

Acts 2:41-47
“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

and Acts 4:32-35
“And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.”

When I first came across these passages I was totally overwhelmed: they had all things in common; they sold their possessions and distributed to everyone as he had need; there was none among them lacking! Having read these passages, I also felt
perplexed and many questions came to my mind: does what we just read mean that we are not to own anything and instead we must put it together into a common fund? If this is God’s will for us why we don’t hear much about this in the church today and moreover why we don’t see these passages lived this way? Is to possess something right or wrong? I asked at that time the brother that was teaching me the Word of God. His answer was that the Word says that those that were possessors of lands and houses (PLURAL) sold them. In other words, those that had just one house or just a piece of land they didn’t necessarily sell it. The Greek language is quite clear on this, as otherwise the Word could very well say “those that were possessors of a land or a house sold them” instead of speaking of lands and house. Still however I didn’t feel fully settled with my questions, though at that time these were not challenging questions to me: I was a student that was more on the receiving side of the equation that on the giving :-)). Nevertheless, these passages really stacked out as a part of a Christian life that it was very difficult to find in our world.

Today I would like to go through what the Word of God says not only about the above two passages of Acts but also about the topic of possessions in general. And let me make clear from the outset that though many times we will be speaking about material possessions I believe what we will see applies to any possessions that God may have put in our trust, as for example talents and time. As the topic is quite big we may need one additional issue to give a more complete picture.

1. Material possessions: Not unscriptural to have

With the time, quite much after my first encounter with Acts 2:41-47 and 4:32-35, I came to realize that the fact that today we don’t see many selling their possessions and putting them in a common stock, is not something unscriptural. Acts 2 and 4 do not tell us that every Christian has to sell his possessions and put the proceedings into a common fund. The position of the apostles on the matter can be seen by reading a little bit further in Acts 5:1-4. There we read:
Acts 5:1-4

“But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, and kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.”

“Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power?” If Ananias had kept his property and didn’t sell it, it would NOT be a sin. Ananias’ sin was not that he own a land but that he brought part of the price to the apostles, presenting it as the whole price. It was lawful to have land and it was lawful to keep the full proceedings from its sale. What it was not lawful however was to present these proceedings to God and the church as the full price of the land. This was a lie to God and this was what Peter condemned. We can infer therefore from this that it is not a sin to own material possessions nor that in the 1st century church everybody had to sell his possessions after he became a Christian.

Also moving further in the New Testament, we can see that in the church of Corinth contributions were taken every week for the needs of the saints (I Corinthians 16:1). The same we also see in Acts 11:27-30 where, due to a famine, contributions were taken and sent to the brothers in Judea. They were not asked to sell their possessions but to give an offering, to make a contribution. In addition the existence of poor shows by itself that they didn’t have everything in common, in a common fund in Jerusalem let’s say, as in this case there would be no need for Paul to ask the Corinthians for a donation: they would have given everything to the common fund anyway.

Moreover, in the Old Testament there are many examples of people that God blessed with material possessions. Abraham, Job, David, Solomon, Jacob are some
examples of people that were indeed owners of much material wealth, which came from God.

From the above therefore we can say that the practice described in Acts 2 and 4, is clearly not a biblical command or something that somebody has to do when he becomes a Christian. Instead it was a voluntary act that the members of the church of Jerusalem did. God does honour ownership and we must not feel condemned that we haven’t sold our house or land and we haven’t put the proceedings into a common stock. The above passages however do convey a message that goes far more than the Jerusalem of that time. God does have a purpose that put these passages there. And I believe one purpose is to shows us the right view towards material possessions. Certainly it is not sin to own material possessions or even to be rich. Otherwise we would have to delete all the rich guys from the Bible and I’m afraid if we did this we would eliminate a large portion of it! God does give blessings also in the financial field. As He says in Malachi 3:10-12 speaking about the tithe:

Malachi 3:10-12
“Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the LORD of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the LORD of hosts. ”

Also in Psalms 112:1-3 we read:
Praise ye the LORD. Blessed is the man that feareth the LORD, that delighteth greatly in his commandments. His seed shall be mighty upon earth: the generation of the upright shall be blessed. Wealth and riches shall be in his house: and his righteousness endureth for ever.
It is not therefore wrong for somebody to have possessions. Going back to Acts however, it does mean that we must have the right attitude towards possessions. What is this attitude? It is the attitude that recognizes that everything belongs to God. That He is the provider and all is His. As Job, the wealthiest man at his time, said when he suddenly lost everything:

Job 1:21
“Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD. ”

It means to recognize that everything belongs to God, and we are nothing else that stewards to Him. As the Living Application Study Bible comments on Acts 4:32:

“None of these Christians [the Christians we saw in Acts 4:32] felt that what they had was their own, and so they were able to give and share, eliminating poverty among them. They would not let a brother or sister suffer when others had plenty. How do you feel about your possessions? We should adopt the attitude that everything we have comes from God and we are only sharing what is already his”

Also as I John asks:

I John 3:17
“But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? ”

and as James repeats:

James 2:15-16
“If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? ”
We can’t say that the love of God dwells in us when a brother or a sister next to us is destitute of daily food and we can help them, yet we “shutted up our bowels of compassion from them”. The Word of God is clear: we are to meet each other’s needs. We are to help each other. Jesus Christ Himself had a bag for the poor! Helping each other, caring for each other’s needs is one of the most important characteristics of being a family. I don’t know about your family but in my family I know that we will never suffer that somebody has a need and we will not help. We stand together with each other. The same has to happen in the spiritual family as well. We are bothers and sisters to each other. Therefore, we MUST NEVER CLOSE OUR BOWELS OF MERCY TO OUR SUFFERING BROTHERS. James uses what we read from James 2:15-16 as an example of faith without works. For in verse 17 says:

James 2:17

“Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.”

To say to somebody God bless you does not help much if we are not willing, to help, though we can.

2. Should we help without any qualification?

Now, having read all the above, does it mean that we are to help everybody without qualification? Does it mean that we are to meet every need that we see in front of us? I believe it doesn’t. Proverbs 3:27 tells us:

Proverbs 3:27

“Withhold no good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of your hand to do”
Indeed there is a command to “withhold no good”. This is a command from God, and it is the same command we also saw in James and in John. We are indeed to do good. We are indeed to share our limited resources with others that have need. But the verse continues adding two qualifications. We are to withhold no good:

I) from those to whom it is due and
II) when it is in the power of our hand to do it.

The first qualification means that not all those that you see as needing help, they really need help. II Thessalonians 3:6-15 gives an example of a case like this one:

II Thessalonians 3:6-15
“Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us. For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread. But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing. And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”

In the church of Thessalonica, there were some brothers that were not willing to work. They were lazy. And laziness does bring poverty (Proverbs 10:4, 24:33-34). The Word of God does not consider these persons as persons to whom “good is due”. Instead it very clear: if you don’t want to work then don’t eat either. The church should
not support but instead it should withdraw from those brothers so that they become ashamed and start a change. Paul himself never asked for support when he was there but he was working hard so that he would not burden anybody. The Word of God is clear: if a person is poor and his poverty is due to laziness then he is not a person to whom support is due. The solution to his poverty is not support but work. It may sound hard but as the Word says in Proverbs 16:26: “He who labours labours for himself, for his mouth craves it from him”. Poverty in this case is not something bad but a stimulant that may help the lazy person to move out of his laziness.

Also a second qualification is “when it is in the power of your hand to do it”. This in turn implies that you cannot cover everything. There are things that you may see, needs that you may feel and yet it is not in your hand to cover them. This qualification is also present in the verse from John we read previously: “But whoso hath this world's good”. As Bill Hybels says concerning this point:

“the book of Proverbs tells us not to condemn ourselves or to slip into despair because we think we are failing a needy world. At such times we must say tenderly but firmly, “It is not in my power to do that.” Then we need to trust God to assign that particular task to someone else.”

Moving further, we can see that apart from the above qualifications, there are also some other priorities that God Himself has set. One such priority is given in I Timothy 5:8:

“But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.”

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1 Bill Hybels, Making Life Work, Intervarsity Press, p.69
What this verse tell us is that first priority have those that are “of our own household”. We do have the responsibility to provide for them first. As Proverbs 6:1-5 say:

Proverbs 6:1-5
“My son, if thou be surety for thy friend, if thou hast stricken thy hand with a stranger, Thou art snared with the words of thy mouth, thou art taken with the words of thy mouth. Do this now, my son, and deliver thyself, when thou art come into the hand of thy friend; go, humble thyself, and make sure thy friend. Give not sleep to thine eyes, nor slumber to thine eyelids. Deliver thyself as a roe from the hand of the hunter, and as a bird from the hand of the fowler.”

As the Life Application Bible comments on this passage:
“These verses are not a plea against generosity, but against overextending one’s financial resources and acting in irresponsible ways that could lead to poverty. It is important to maintain a balance between generosity and good stewardship. God wants to help our friends and the needy, but he does not promise to cover the costs of every unwise commitment we make. It is equally important to act responsibly so that our family does not suffer”

To summarize what we have seen up to now:

God wants us to view our possessions as belonging to Him. He must be free to do whatever He wants with them.

God does call us to be open and to not shut up our bowels of compassion from those that have need among us. The command to do good comes however with some qualifications:

I) do good to those that is due and
II) if it is in our hands.
Finally, family obligations do get priority over any other obligations. We are not expected to help others when our own family is needy, but we do expect to do it when these needs are covered.

3. Possessions: Dangers

I think few topics are more complicated than the topic of possessions. I find the topic of possessions as one that needs very good balance. The Bible is clear that God does bless His children with material possessions. It is also clear that He does want us to be good stewards of everything He has given us including our possessions. After all it is HE that has provided it to us. It belongs to Him. On the other hand the Word of God warns a lot about the dangers coming from loving possessions. Here is how Paul sees the matter, speaking by revelation:

I Timothy 6:6-12

“**But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil;** which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses. ”

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2 Here let me please say again that by possessions I don’t only mean material possessions, but everything that we may have. This may for example be talents or time. Time is a good that has been given to us and we must indeed make the best use of it.
We brought nothing into this world and obviously we can carry nothing out. Food and shelter is actually all that we need, materially speaking. Do you have food and shelter? Millions of people in this same world that you and I live, under this same heaven, do not. They are hungry and homeless. Having food and shelter let us be content. God does give material blessings. We saw such examples in the Bible. But it is He that gives, not we that desire them! If YOU desire to be rich and wealthy then you are already in a temptation. And as James says about temptation:

James 1:13-15
“Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.”

The word “lust” here actually means “desire”. If you desire to be wealthy, it is clear: you are heading towards sin. Desiring to becoming wealthy is a sinful desire that will bring forth deadly fruit in its time. It is not wealth by itself the problem. It is the desire to be wealthy that is the problem. Do you want to be more and more wealthy? Is this your desire? If yes then you err and you need immediately to change. Job was the wealthiest man of the east. But he didn’t love wealth! Here is his witness:

Job 31:19-28
“If I have seen any perish for want of clothing, or any poor without covering; If his loins have not blessed me, and if he were not warmed with the fleece of my sheep; If I have lifted up my hand against the fatherless, when I saw my help in the gate: Then let mine arm fall from my shoulder blade, and mine arm be broken from the bone. For destruction from God was a terror to me, and by reason of his highness I could not endure. If I have made gold my hope, or have said to the fine gold, Thou art my confidence; If I rejoiced because my wealth was great, and because mine hand had gotten much; If I beheld the sun when it shined, or the moon walking in brightness; And my heart hath been secretly enticed, or my mouth hath kissed my
hand: **This also were an iniquity to be punished by the judge: for I should have denied the God that is above.**”

Job was the wealthiest man of the east but his wealth was not his joy! He didn’t put his trust in wealth. And I believe this is the important matter: where our trust is? Job’s trust was in God. Job’s security was not the bank account or the big property, but God. Not the gold, but the Lord. That’s why he reacted the way he did when he lost everything: “God gave it, God took it”, he said. Job, on this matter too, was but a steward of God. This doesn’t mean that he was careless and lazy about his business. He had people working for him. He had a real business, the biggest business of his time. And yet look at his attitude. He was not touched by wealth. It was not his aim. I’m sure his business was very good. Not because of Job’s cunning methods but because God blessed it. But for Job everything was coming from God and belonging to Him. He wouldn’t forgive to himself to rejoice about his possessions, or put his trust in money. We can find out how far we are from him by observing our behavior. What happens when wealth is pouring in? How do we react? Do we rejoice in possessions? How do we react when we lose things? Is financial prosperity, to be wealthy, one of our aims? God does give material blessings, but why should we put out focus on them? Why should we desire to be wealthy? Having food and raiment **BE CONTENT**, says the Word! It is not the blessings our focus but GOD. It is not the bank account our security but the LORD. It is not gold our confidence but Christ!

An opposite example, an example of man that put his trust on money, we find in Luke 12:13-21. There we read:

Luke 12:13-21

“And one of the company said unto him, Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me. And he said unto him, Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you? And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth
plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God. ”

Both the man of the parable and Job were rich men. But this is their only similarity. While Job’s joy was not dependant on his wealth, and his gold was not his confidence, this man here is the exact opposite. He is the picture of a worldly wealthy man. Unfortunately many of us have been grown with worldly standards of success and these standards more often than not, measure success with how much we earn. A job is a good job if it gives you a lot and a bad job if it is not. No word about contentment if we have to eat and we have a roof above us. So this guy here was a “successful” man. The ground brought to him so much that he didn’t know where to put all this. So here is what he decided: “And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry”. It was not the plenty that was bad. The ground brought forth a lot. Wealth came to him. This by itself was not a problem. The problem is what he decided about it and how he faced the whole matter. And the challenge is the same for us: what do we do with wealth? Now you may say, brother I’m only earning enough to live … so this passage is irrelevant to me. Praise the Lord that you have to live! Be content with this. But I believe this parable is not only for the rich men. This guy waked up one day and found himself with a lot. If you are not clear about wealth, if you don’t have clear Biblical values on the matter then, if wealth arrives to you, as it did to this man and also as it did to Job, it might be a snare and a temptation. So the problem with this man was not that he had a lot but his reaction towards this. In everything that he says the word “I” and “my” is preeminent. Where is God in all this? Where is a thanksgiving to God? Where is the recognition that He is the owner of all
this and we are but mere stewards that must not get attached to what He has entrusted
us. It is all His. So he failed to recognize the provider of the good crop. He failed to
give glory to the owner of everything. Instead he considered everything as belonging
to him. This was his first folly. Others followed it too: “I will pull down my barns, and
build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my
soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink,
and be merry”. Plans, plans and more plans. But with what aim? Not to help the poor,
not to treasure to God, not to even help his family and friends. All the planning was
about him. “And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many
years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry”. All his well being was based on
wealth. He rejoiced greatly in it. He now thought, “relax… now I have obtained the
aim: drink eat be merry.” This is the aim of many people: “eat, drink, be merry. Be
problem-free! Make lots of money so that now or afterwards, to be able to eat, drink
and be merry.” Returning to our fellow, one further folly of him is that his planning
was like the planning of a man that was going to live forever here! But in the midst of
this selfish planning God spoke to him saying: “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be
required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he
that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” This guy was a fool.
He put his confidence on wealth thinking that it would make him problem free. In
other words, he did exactly the opposite of what Job did: gold became his confidence.
As Jesus said: “Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not
in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.” A man’s life does not consist of
what he has. And this is what we see with this rich man: the day of his selfish plans for
a happy life trusting on wealth, became a night of pain and death.

Returning to planning, it is not planning itself that is bad but selfish planning as
was the planning of this fellow. As James said in James 4:13-16

"Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue
there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the
morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and
then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that. But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil.”

What James condemns here is not planning. But plans that are based on the “I”. Only God knows the future. We know nothing, not even for the next second. We may well not be alive in the next hour. Who knows? Do you know? Only God knows. The planning of the rich man and the planning of these guys here was nothing more than a vain boasting in their self. “If the Lord will, we shall live and do this and that”. This is the right way to do a plan and to think about the future. It is right to do plans, it is right to do to the best out of whatever God has put in your hand. What is wrong is to trust in what God has put in your hand, to trust in wealth instead of trusting in God. This will indeed bring you to destruction

Proverbs 11:28
“He that trusteth in his riches shall fall”

while Psalms 1:1-2 tell us:
“Happy is the man that….. his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law doth he meditate day and night”

Happiness is not a matter of how big are your possessions but of how close you are to Lord. If you trust in wealth you will fall but if you rejoice in the Word of God you will be happy.

(to be continued)

Tassos Kioulachoglou