

Look Closer: Is It a Sin to Be Rich?

Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” This surprised the disciples, and since then people have wondered if poverty is required to get into heaven.



One of the books of the Heavenly Doctrines for the New Church teaches that

as far as heaven is concerned, people who differentiate between the rich and the poor do not understand the Word. At heart, the Word is spiritual...so if people take the Word only in its literal meaning and not in some spiritual meaning they go astray...regarding the rich and the poor.

Heaven and Hell 357

This activity explores the spiritual dimension of riches and poverty.

Materials Needed for Each Student

- *Focus Questions* (see next page)
- pen or pencil
- *Rich and Poor in Heaven* (see following pages)

Introduction

Introduce the topic by distributing the *Focus Questions* and pencils or pens. Invite students to circle all of the answers they think are correct in each section. When everyone has finished, have students share their answers and discuss in pairs or with the whole class.

Activity

One of the chapters in the book *Heaven and Hell* is titled “*The Rich and the Poor in Heaven*.” The two pages *Rich and Poor in Heaven* are a shortened version of this chapter. Distribute these pages and read them as a group.

Discussion

Discuss the questions at the bottom of the *Rich and Poor in Heaven* pages. Finish by taking another look at the *Focus Questions*. Ask the students if they would change any of their answers based on their reading and discussions.

Is It a Sin to Be Rich?

Focus Questions

Circle any answers you think are correct.

1. People have a better chance of getting into heaven if they are
 - a. very wealthy.
 - b. wealthy.
 - c. reasonably well provided for.
 - d. poor.
 - e. poverty stricken.
 - f. none of the above.
2. A person's wealth is an indication of
 - a. his or her spiritual success.
 - b. his or her personal usefulness.
 - c. how much he or she cares about worldly things.
 - d. how much money he or she has.
3. In heaven
 - a. everyone is poor.
 - b. some people are rich.
 - c. there is no money.
 - d. everyone has as many resources as they need.
4. People who are wealthy
 - a. can help the world.
 - b. should give away their money if they want to go to heaven.
 - c. may enjoy a luxurious lifestyle and still go to heaven.
 - d. may be useful in different ways than poor people.
5. Poor people
 - a. may be resentful and have a hard time getting into heaven.
 - b. trust in God more easily.
 - c. need to lead useful lives to go to heaven.
 - d. cannot be as useful as rich people.
6. In heaven, people are wealthy because they
 - a. are spiritually successful.
 - b. have practiced their ideals more than others.
 - c. know more true ideas.
 - d. lead lives of useful service.



RICH AND POOR IN HEAVEN

CAN BOTH RICH AND POOR PEOPLE GO TO HEAVEN?

Out of a great deal of conversation and living with angels, I have been granted sure knowledge that rich people enter heaven just as easily as poor people do, and that no one is shut out of heaven for having abundant possessions or accepted into heaven because of poverty. There are both rich and poor people there (*Heaven and Hell* 357).

The reason people believe that it is easy for the poor and hard for the rich is that the Word is misunderstood when it talks about the rich and the poor. In the spiritual meaning of the Word, “the rich” means people who are amply supplied with understandings of what is true and good, that is, people in the church where the Word is. “The poor” means people who lack these understandings but who long for them, or people outside the church, where the Word is not found (see *Heaven and Hell* 365).

IS IT OK TO ENJOY WEALTH?

It is all right to acquire wealth as long as it is not done fraudulently. It is all right to eat and drink with elegance, as long as we do not invest our lives in such things. It is all right to be housed as graciously, to chat with others like ourselves, to go to games, to consult about worldly affairs. There is no need to walk around looking pious with a sad, tearful face and a bowed head. We can be happy and cheerful. There is no need to give to the poor except as the spirit moves us. In short, we can live to all appearances just like worldly people. This is no obstacle to our acceptance into heaven as long as we keep God in mind and act honestly and fairly toward our neighbors (see *Heaven and Hell* 358).

SHOULD PEOPLE REJECT THE WORLD AND A COMFORTABLE LIFE?

I have talked with some people after their death who, during their earthly lives, had renounced the world and devoted themselves to a solitary life, devoutly meditating by withdrawing their thoughts from worldly matters. They believed that this was the way to heaven. In the other life, though, they are gloomy in spirit. They avoid others who are not like themselves and they resent the fact that they are not happier than others. They believe they deserve it and do not care about other people, and they avoid the responsibilities of thoughtful behavior that are the means to union with heaven. They covet heaven; but when they are brought up to where angels are, they cause anxieties that upset the happiness of the angels. So they leave and go to lonely places where they lead the same kind of life they had led in the world (see *Heaven and Hell* 360).

WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE WHO ARE RICH AND FAMOUS?

Many people who devoted their energies to business and trade in the world, and who became rich, are in heaven. There are not so many, though, who made a name for themselves and became rich in public office. This is because they were led into love for themselves and the world by the profits and the positions they were given. This in turn led them to deflect their thoughts and affections from heaven and toward themselves; for when we love ourselves and the world and focus on ourselves and the world exclusively, we move away from heaven (see *Heaven and Hell* 360).

WHAT IS HEAVENLY WEALTH LIKE?

In heaven, rich people there live more splendidly than others. Some of them live in palaces in which everything gleams like gold and silver. They have everything they need for a useful life. However, they do not set their hearts on such things but on their useful activities.... The quality of the useful functions they served in the world determines their wealth, their pleasure, and their happiness. Good and useful activities include providing the necessities of life for oneself and one's own, wanting ample resources for the sake of one's country and one's neighbor, whom a rich person can benefit in far more ways than a poor person can. [These activities are useful also] because they lead the mind away from an idle life, which is destructive, since in that kind of life our thoughts turn to evil because of our inborn evil nature (*Heaven and Hell* 361).

WHAT HAPPENS TO PEOPLE WHO ARE RICH, BUT REJECT RELIGION?

After death, rich people who do not believe in the Divine and reject heaven and the church from their minds are in hell, where they find filth and wretchedness and want. When wealth is loved for its own sake, it turns into things like these, and not only the wealth itself but also what it is used for—the pampered living, indulgence in pleasures, the wider and freer dedication to amorality, the self-exaltation over people they belittle. Because these riches have nothing spiritual in them, only earthly qualities, they turn to filth (see *Heaven and Hell* 362).

IS BEING POOR AN ADVANTAGE FOR GETTING INTO HEAVEN?

Poor people do not get into heaven because of their poverty but because of their lives. There is no special mercy for the one any more than for the other. People who have lived well are accepted; people who have lived badly are rejected. Poverty can actually lead people away from heaven just as much as wealth can. There are many poor people who are not content with their lot, who covet much more, and who believe that wealth is a blessing; so when they do not get what they want, they are enraged and harbor evil thoughts about divine providence. They envy other people their assets, and given the chance would just as soon cheat them. It is different, though, for poor people who are content with their lot, are conscientious and careful in their work, prefer work to idleness, behave honestly and reliably, and lead Christian lives (see *Heaven and Hell* 364).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways might being wealthy or poor have an impact on a person's eternal life?
2. Does having wealth give someone the potential to be a more useful person?
3. Is enjoying nice clothing, a beautiful house and lovely possessions wrong?
4. Explain the relationship between useful activities and riches in heaven.
5. Why is being "content with our lot" important?
6. Is it harder for people who are rich or people who are famous to get into heaven?
7. What barriers might prevent poor people from getting into heaven?
8. Take a fresh look at the *Focus Questions* page. Are there any questions you might answer differently after completing this activity?