

“How to Be Rich”
Isaiah 55:1-9

Ben Johnston-Krase
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Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Last weekend, Karla and the girls and I spent a couple nights at a hotel up in Milwaukee. After weeks of colds and flu viruses sweeping through the Johnston-Krase home, this was a welcome changeup in our routine and a sort of mini-vacation for a family that was beginning to add “cabin fever” to its list of February maladies. So up we went, happy to be gone and excited for a TV in the bedroom, little bottles of shampoo, continental breakfasts... Sometimes it doesn’t take much.

This hotel had an indoor pool. Nothing fancy, just a pool and a hot tub. The bonus for us was that parts of the pool were shallow enough for all three of the girls to reach; therefore, they could actually be in the pool without hovering adult supervision, and so Karla and I had a taste of family swimming experiences to come—the ones where we spend most of our time on lounge chairs reading books and working crossword puzzles while our offspring amuse themselves endlessly in the water. It was heavenly, and for two days, we wore a path between our room and that pool.

Now on each trip to and from the swimming pool, we trotted past the hotel’s ballroom, which, on the first afternoon we were there, I could see was packed with people for some kind of event. I was curious, so I read the sign posted outside the ballroom door. It said, “Learn to Be Rich Training Academy.”

Despite the fact that I was grossly underdressed in my damp swimsuit and borrowed hotel towel, I couldn’t help but linger by the ballroom entrance, intrigued to hear what they were saying, and leaving Karla to contend with three squirrely girls arguing over who got to press the button inside the elevator. “Ben, are you coming?” she implored.

Vowing to return later, I tore myself away. “Karla!” I said. “Look! The Learn to Be Rich Training Academy is right here in our hotel!” She rolled her eyes.

Each subsequent trip to the pool was, of course, a chance for us all to swim, but for me it was also an opportunity to eavesdrop on the Learn to Be Rich Training Academy. I bet there were 50 or 60 people filling that room, all listening intently to a speaker dressed in a sharp, slick business suit. Gleaning just a soundbite here and a soundbite there, I wasn't picking up on too many specifics during my slow walks past the ballroom doors, though I was struck by the *feel* of the Learn to Be Rich Training Academy. It was strangely... familiar. People were dressed up, they were all carrying copies of the same book, and the speaker up front taught with passion and seemed to be weaving stories and illustrations into his message. *It was kind of like church!*

During one of their breaks I approached one of the participants. "So, how's the Learn to Be Rich Training Academy going?" I asked.

"Great, he said. Just great. I'm loving it."

"That's great," I said. "So what's it all about?" And no surprises here. He informed me that, through the stock market, real estate investments, smart money management, and the like, they were basically learning to be rich. "Is it working?" I asked.

"I hope so!" he smiled.

The next day the sign changed. It said, "What Rich Dads Tell their Kids about Money." I couldn't help myself. I began to devise a plan for sneaking into the Learn to Be Rich Training Academy, *just to take notes*, I told myself. The truth was that I found the idea of a Learn to Be Rich Training Academy simultaneously intriguing and appalling. Intriguing—to witness a concentrated stream of our society's messages about getting rich and about being rich and about what being rich will do for you. And appalling—to listen to those messages and know that they are laced with empty promises and deception.

Fortunately for me, the Learn to Be Rich Training Academy has a website, and so in the end, I didn't have to go AWOL on the family vacation. Instead, I visited online and read that the Learn to Be Rich Training Academy offers, "a new way of thinking... a way that unleashes the human spirit and elevates the well-being of humanity."

Sounds good, doesn't it? But the very next sentence was, "We want to see you thrive while others simply survive." So much for the well-being of humanity, I thought to myself. They closed their introductory paragraph with this statement: "We believe a financially-intelligent people will be a prosperous people—and a free people."

Thus, I began to daydream, not just of sneaking into the Learn to Be Rich Training Academy, but rather of infiltrating and then sabotaging its broken message. That would have made a nice headline in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*: "Racine pastor disrupts conference in Brookfield hotel by standing on chair in the middle of seminar and reading from the book of Isaiah." That's what I imagined myself doing, by the way—sitting nonchalantly in the crowd and then, at an opportune moment (when the rhetoric about the happiness of being rich got so thick I could barely stand it) jumping up on to my chair with my Bible and reading Isaiah 55: "Ho, everyone

who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have *no* money, come, buy and eat... Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

I don't know what would happen next. The fantasy sort of ends there. Maybe they'd all follow me out to the nearest Presbyterian church where we'd offer a theological detox and reentry program. Or, more likely, best case scenario, I'd be asked to leave quietly and *maybe* the Johnston-Krases wouldn't be looking for another hotel.

I'm struck by the disconnect—the extreme mismatch between Scripture and our culture when it comes to money. And so the next daydream begins. In this fantasy, I, along with maybe a few of you, infiltrate hotel ballrooms everywhere with a new three-day seminar. The title is not unfamiliar. In fact, it's stolen. It's the "Learn to Be Rich Training Academy." What we don't necessarily tell people upfront is that we're offering a more biblical perspective.

For reference, we hold up the people of Israel in the book of Isaiah—a people living in exile, a people longing for freedom and independence, a people who wonder if their best days are long gone. Sound familiar?

At this stage in Isaiah's writing, the exile in Babylon had dragged on for several generations, so the people listening to Isaiah—many of them—had no frame of reference for life outside of the hardship of exile. But the unique thing about Isaiah 55 is that at this stage, the Babylonian empire had begun to crumble! So for Isaiah and his people, the prospect of a return to Jerusalem had become more of a possibility, and so folks were becoming hungrier for their freedom and for a new life back home.

And so for us in this new seminar of ours, learning to be rich begins with an invitation: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

What powerful biblical language—language that turns our most commonly held beliefs about wealth on their heads—language that invites us to imagine life in a more Godly economy where the *best things in life* can be bought with no money.

When you think about it, the role of the Church is to be the "Learn to Be Rich Training Academy" in a world where conventional riches have left us hollow and wanting more. So, friends, welcome to the Learn to Be Rich Training Academy. As we begin, let me give you a quick tour of the facility so that you can see what you're in for...

This is a PULPIT. Here we read and proclaim the Gospel. Now "Gospel" means "Good News" and in our Good News we read and rehearse stories about Jesus reminding us that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God. Here we recall that time Jesus asked the rich young man to sell everything he had and give the money to the poor and then to follow him. Here we recall Isaiah's Economics 101 seminar, in which he invited his people to invest themselves in things that cannot be bought or sold...

This pulpit and the messages we share in this space are especially meaningful when we consider what's being preached from the pulpits out there—the Wall Street pulpits and the get-rich-quick pulpits and the buy-it-now-and-pay-later pulpits *and especially the pulpit of YOU'LL-BE-HAPPY-WHEN*... when you acquire the next asset, when your nest egg is so big, when you finally have enough to never worry again... In *this pulpit*, we are wealthy in reminders of God's rich love and grace, and we are well off when we attempt to align our lives with Christ's way of truth and light.

Over here is the FONT. And here at the font we celebrate BAPTISM, a commodity that cannot be bought or sold—God's resounding declaration that we are God's children and there is *nothing we can do about it*. It is at the font, friends, where we proclaim our *investment in one another*. After all, what do we do as a community *each time one of us is baptized here*? We commit ourselves to that person's journey of faith. We say “Yes, *we* will be the ones to whom this person looks to for examples of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ.” At the font, as we celebrate our belonging to God, we proclaim that we belong also to one another, and that because of that belonging, our lives are necessarily and richly intertwined.

And here in front of us all is the TABLE. At the Communion table, we practice being a community where ALL are welcome and ALL are fed—where access is not granted to some and not others, but where we are all invited to taste and experience the richness of our relationship to God and to each other.

You've noticed that we never get that much to eat here at this table. That used to bother me when I was a kid. I'd come to worship and by the time Communion rolled around, my stomach would be growling and I'd be ready for lunch at Denny's or wherever we were going that day. The tiny piece of bread and half a sip of grape juice seemed like such a tease. I've come to realize, though, that in this Communion meal we proclaim and celebrate our participation in a rich banquet of God's abundance among us, where *every moment* is but a taste of the sacrament of life that unfolds in the mystery and goodness of God's presence.

Standing outside that hotel ballroom, again, in my dripping wet swimsuit, it hit me and I realized something. I have my own Learn to Be Rich Training Academy, and so do you. It's here, where in the midst of word, font, and table, we remind ourselves and each other of the endless riches we have. Glory to God! Amen.