

The Covenant Pulpit



*Riches to Rags:
The Story of Christmas*

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"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich."

--II Corinthians 8:9

Introduction: Rags to Riches?

Everybody loves a good "rags to riches" story, and there are few that outmatch the life of Chris Gardner. Mr. Gardner is the owner and CEO of Gardner Rich LLC, an institutional brokerage firm, which has offices in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. He is a successful entrepreneur, an avid motivational speaker, and a passionate philanthropist. But life was not always so posh for Mr. Gardner.

Gardner's childhood was marked by poverty, domestic violence, alcoholism, sexual abuse, and family illiteracy. Although we was always hard working and tenacious, a series of adverse circumstances in the early 1980's left Gardner homeless in San Francisco and the sole guardian of his toddler son. Unwilling to give up Chris Jr. or his dreams of success, Gardner climbed the financial industry ladder from the very bottom.

Without any connections, an MBA, or even a college degree, He began to apply for training programs at brokerage firms. Gardner eventually earned a spot at Dean Witter Reynolds and began learning his new trade, while he and Chris Jr. lived on next to nothing. Next he went on to Bear Stearns & Co. from 1983 to 1987 where he became a top earner. In 1987 Gardner founded his own brokerage firm, Gardner Rich, in Chicago from his home with just \$10,000 and traded in his rags for riches.

Gardner tells his "rags to riches" story in his autobiography, *The Pursuit of Happyness*, a New York Times and Washington Post #1 bestseller that has been translated into fourteen languages. "*The Pursuit of Happyness*" has also been made into a film starring Will Smith, who received Golden Globe, Screen Actors Guild, and Academy Award nominations for his performance. *The Pursuit of Happyness* is the #2 all-time domestic grossing drama.¹

Stories like Chris Gardner's are heart-warming and hope-inducing. You can't beat a good "rags to riches" story ..., except with a "riches to rags" story. We all know stories of people giving their all to enrich themselves, but what about someone who willingly left it all in order to enrich others? Now that would be a compelling story.

¹ Adapted from Chris Gardner's biography on www.chrisgardnermedia.com

In the passage before us, the Apostle Paul tells us that the life of Jesus Christ was exactly that: a “riches to rags” story. The true meaning of Christmas is found in this simple truth:

Jesus experienced the poverty of earth to give us the riches of heaven.

The meaning of Christmas has become increasingly distorted and clouded. The culture has emptied it of its biblical and Christian meaning in an attempt to make it a one-size-fits-all holiday. So today the meaning of Christmas is up for grabs.

In the 2004 animated Christmas movie, *The Polar Express*, a young boy jaded about the meaning of Christmas boards a magical train bound for the North Pole. The boy is filled with doubts, and so the train ride becomes a journey in search of the meaning of Christmas. When the boy finally comes face to face with Santa Claus at the Christmas Eve celebration he receives this astounding wisdom: “*The spirit of Christmas is inside you!*” Wow! It’s all so clear now!

After returning home, the train conductor, pleased with the boy’s renewed faith in “the spirit of Christmas,” gives his own piece of post-modern wisdom: “*When it comes to trains, it doesn’t matter so much where the train is going. What matters is getting on!*” Obviously he is talking about more than trains. In other words, the message of the movie is two-fold: (1) The meaning of Christmas is to be found inside you, by what you think, feel, dream, or imagine, regardless of what has happened in history or what anyone else thinks, feels, or experiences; and (2) *that* you believe is more important than *what* you believe.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. The meaning of Christmas is not found “inside you” or by whatever you make of it. I don’t know about you, but when I board a train, an airplane, or a boat I am deeply interested in exactly where it is headed! The same goes with truth claims and spiritual journeys. The Bible is clear that the meaning of Christmas is found in the historical story of Christmas, in the “riches to rags” story of the birth of Jesus.

The verse before us may seem like an unusual place to find the story of Christmas. It is really a parenthetical comment in the middle of a larger discussion about the necessity of being generous toward the needy; but the Apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit makes one of the most concise and profound statements in all of scripture about the real heart of Christianity. It is the authoritative version of the Christmas story in the compactness of a movie trailer. There are really two subplots to the story: The story of Jesus’ birth and

the story of our salvation. Together they reveal the real meaning of Christmas: *Jesus experienced the poverty of earth to give us the riches of heaven.*

His Story: Riches to Rags

The Apostle Paul begins by telling us the story of Jesus with the brevity of a text message: "...*he who was rich became poor.*" There are five things implied in this statement that we must understand if we are to get the story of Christmas. The first two speak of his wealth, and the last three of his "becoming poor." So what does it mean that Jesus was rich?

First, *Jesus was God*. Paul is not speaking primarily of financial wealth or material possessions. The true wealth that Jesus possessed was his divinity. As John 1:1 says, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" Jesus' wealth is something he had before his birth. He existed before his birth on Christmas day. Because he was God he always existed. He had no beginning and he will have no end. He was there when the universe was created and had an active role in it (See Colossians 1:16-17). He had all the power and authority of God. He had all the knowledge, wisdom, and goodness of God. He never grew tired or hungry. He was infinitely perfect, holy, and awesome. He had no limitations, no weaknesses, no imperfections. He ruled over all that existed, and all that existed was his to enjoy. He was fully and eternally God.

Secondly, *Jesus was with God*. The wealth he enjoyed was the intimacy he shared with God the Father. He enjoyed pure love, unhindered friendship, and meaningful cooperation. The mystery of it all is that Jesus was God, and yet he was *with* God, John tells us in John 1:1. Jesus was fully God, and yet he was not the Father. They were equally God, sharing the same substance, but they were distinct persons. And from all eternity the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit enjoyed an uninterrupted bliss of perfect love and joy. They enjoyed all of the glory of being God and being with God. It was the most satisfying relationship possible. While on earth Jesus longed to be reunited with Father in that paradise of his presence: "*And now Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had before the world existed*" (John 14:5).

Jesus Christ was rich in these two things, that he was God and was with God. We will never know what that was like for Jesus to leave the glory and joy of heaven to experience the poverty of a fallen world. But that is what he did, which brings us to the third part of His story.

Jesus became a man. The story of Christmas is not just about a wealthy man who gave away all his money. That would be impressive enough. The Christmas story is about God becoming a man. As C.S. Lewis has said, "*The Son of God became a man so that men might become the sons of God.*"² Jesus became poor by becoming a man. The tense of the verb used in the original language points to an event that happened at a particular moment in history. That event of course is what theologians call the *Incarnation*, which literally means, "in the flesh." At the Incarnation Jesus put on flesh and was born as a human being. The Bible explains the Incarnation this way, "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14). The "riches to rag" story of Christmas is that the Son of God became a human being. He remained fully God, but he became fully human also.

Jesus, because of his great love for the Father and for you, willingly set aside the privileges and rights of his divinity and surrendered to the limitations of being human. He had to grow and develop and learn (Luke 2:40). He needed food and water and rest. He was limited to one place in a human body and could not be omnipresent as before. The paradox of Jesus' poverty and humility are captured well by this anonymous quote:

"He who is the Bread of Life began his ministry hungering. He who is the Water of Life ended his ministry thirsty. Christ hungered as a man, yet fed the multitudes as God. He was weary, yet He is our rest. He prayed, yet He hears prayers. He was sold for 30 pieces of silver, yet He redeems sinners. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, yet He is the Good Shepherd. He died, and by dying destroyed death."

It is hard for us to comprehend the full meaning of God becoming a man. Jesus voluntarily took a cosmic demotion of epic proportions. Imagine yourself becoming a dog, or even a flea on the back of a dog. Even that fails to explain the extent to which the Son of God descended in redeeming us. As Philip Hughes has noted, "*None was richer than He; none became poorer than He.*"³ And he did it for you!

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: MacMillan Pub. Co., 1943, 1952), p.154.

³ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1962), p. 299.

Fourthly, *Jesus lived to serve*. Not only did Jesus become poor in putting on human flesh, he also experienced firsthand the poverty of earth. He not only became a man, he also became a poor man. He was born to poor, humble parents. His birth was not noticed or recognized, except by some animals, a group of blue collar laborers (shepherds), and three noblemen from a distant country (the magi). His first bed was a manger, a feed trough for animals. His only clothes were what little rags his mother brought with her on the journey.

Recently a woman in our congregation went into labor with her fourth child. Her husband put her in the car and rushed to the hospital. However, the labor progressed so fast that they couldn't make it in time. So they stopped at a local fire station and the baby was delivered in the back of an ambulance with the help of EMT's—Not exactly the arrival mothers and fathers dream of.

Now imagine being Mary and Joseph, having to bring your precious child into the world in a less-than-sanitary barn far away from family. There are no cute little blankets or soft, frilly linens lining an ornate bassinette. So you place him in a dirty feed trough (i.e. manger) that the animal had eaten out of earlier that night. You place a little hay from the floor in the manger to soften it. This is the welcome that the Son of God received when he came into the world. And from the manger to the cross, his life was one of humility and poverty.

Even when his parents took him to the Temple to be circumcised, they could not afford the regular offering and had to opt for the poor man's offering of two small birds (See Luke 2:24; Lev. 12:8). When Jesus began his public ministry things were no different. He said of himself in Luke 9:58, "*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*" He wandered as a homeless man as he preached the kingdom of God and demonstrated the power of God.

His whole life was humble, selfless service. He denied his own comfort to fulfill God's plan of redemption. He gave himself to teach us God's character and ways. He gave his time to welcoming the outcast, the marginalized, the oppressed, and the poor. He poured himself out healing and helping and restoring. He denied himself to live a perfect righteous life. He gave, and gave, and gave. The story of Christmas is that the Father gave us his Son, and the Son gave everything for us. As Mark 10:45 explains, "*For the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.*"

The humble service of Jesus should cause us to see the Christmas story with fresh eyes. The poem *Let the Stable Still Astonish* by Leslie Leyland Fields expresses the “riches to rags” nature of Jesus’ birth well:

*Let the stable still astonish:
Straw-dirt floor, dull eyes,
Dusty flanks of donkeys, oxen:
Crumbling, crooked walls;
No bed to carry that pain,
And then, the child,
Rag-wrapped, laid to cry
In a trough.
Who would have chosen this?
Who would have said: “Yes,
Let the God of the heavens and earth
Be born here in this place?”
Who but the same God
Who stands in the darker, fouler rooms
Of our hearts
And says, “Yes,
Let the God of heaven and earth
Be born here—
In THIS place.*

Jesus experienced the poverty of earth for you. But as the next point shows us, Jesus did more than just humble himself.

Jesus died to save. The Incarnation had an ultimate purpose. It led to the atonement. Jesus Christ impoverished himself as a human in order that he might sacrifice himself as our Savior. A parallel passage in Philippians draws out this point. It tells us that Jesus “*made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Phil 2:7-8). In other words, Christmas is not just about the birth of a man who founded another religion, it is about the Son of God experiencing the poverty of earth to give us the riches of heaven. He died in our place for our sins. Not only did he leave the Father’s side to come to earth, but while on the cross he cried out “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Matt. 27:46). He who was rich “beyond all splendor,” as one old hymn puts it, was betrayed, beaten, rejected, and put to death. “*He bore our sins in his body on the tree...*” (I Peter 2:24). The sinless, perfect Son of God was punished in our

place. It is through his life, his death, and his resurrection that we are enriched. As Paul in the verse before us explains, it is only “*through his poverty*” that we become rich. The greatest gift of Christmas, the one that Paul calls “*God’s inexpressible gift*” (see II Cor. 9:15), is the gift of the Son of God who became the Lamb of God. And that brings us to our story.

Our Story: Rags to Riches

I love watching our children open presents on Christmas morning. The pure, unbridled joy on their faces as they excitedly rip into their gifts brings gladness to a father’s heart. However, I am always puzzled by the fact that after a few weeks, or even days, the “newness” of the gifts wears off and they take them for granted. My girls’ toy box is filled with gifts once cherished and now forgotten. We can do the same thing with the gifts of God, and with *the Gift of God*, Jesus himself.

We need to be reminded of God’s inexpressible gift. In II Corinthians 8:9, Paul is writing to Christians about something they have heard before—the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is why he begins by saying, “*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ...*” Paul knows the Christian’s heart is filled with truths once cherished but now forgotten, or at least taken for granted. And so he brings the Corinthians, and us, back to the foundational story of Christmas and highlights its relevance for the followers of Christ.

The heart of what Paul reminds us of is that *Jesus Christ earned for us all the riches of heaven*. The salvation that we receive through Jesus Christ is described in Scripture as being lavish, overflowing, and abundant. In Ephesians, Paul praises God “*who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*” (Eph. 1:3). And a little later Paul refers to the “*richness of his grace, which he lavished upon us*” (Eph. 1:7-8). The point is this: When Jesus Christ experienced the poverty of earth, he earned for us a wealth of spiritual blessings beyond anything you can imagine! To cover all the heavenly riches that Christ bestows on those who believe in him would take an eternity. Nevertheless, we should remind ourselves of the things that we know to be ours, keeping in mind that it is only through the poverty of Jesus that we own them.

First we have **the gift of truth**. Jesus was the Word of God who came in the flesh and taught us the truth of God. He is the one who inspired the entire Bible, and then he came in the flesh “*full of grace and truth*” (John 1:17) to teach us how to properly interpret it and live it. Those who heard him “*were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority*” (Matt. 7:28-29). And he boldly declared

that he was *“the Way, the Truth, and the Life”* (John 14:6). Then he sent his Spirit of truth to teach us and to give understanding in the spiritual matters. In a world devoid of any solid truth on which to stand, where we are told to board trains regardless of where they are going, we should never lose sight of the gift of truth. If claiming to have found the truth is wrong, then I don't want to be right.

We also have **the gift of forgiveness**. *“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered”* (Psalm 32:1). Because Jesus experienced the poverty of the human condition and suffered the agonies of the crucifixion, you are forgiven! It is finished. Past, present, future sins are washed away. I John 4:10 says, *“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for sins.”* When Jesus cried out *“It is finished!”* just before his death, he was referring to the payment for your sins. We can't pay for sins, only turn from them. All who confess their sins and belong to Christ are forgiven! That leads to our next point.

We have **the gift of righteousness**. Not only are your sins forgiven, but you are declared righteous and accepted in his sight. Romans 5:1 says, *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* In other words, we are “justified” or put right with God, simply by believing in Jesus' perfect life and sacrificial death on our behalf. God credits his death to us as payment for our sins and credits to us his righteousness. Enjoy this gift!

We have **the gift of prayer**. In John 14:13-14 Jesus assured us, *“Whatever you ask in my name, this will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.”* Part of the wealth we enjoy as his followers is the gift of answered prayer.

We also have **the gift of freedom**. *“For freedom Christ has set us free”* (Galatians 5:1). You are free from sin and its consequences. You are being set free from its power. You are free from God's condemnation. You are free from trying to earn God's approval (or anyone's for that matter). You are free to serve God. You are free to love. *“So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed”* (John 8:36).

We have **the gift of the kingdom**. In Luke 12:32 Jesus told his disciples, *“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”* If you are in Christ, the kingdom of God is yours! He reigns over you to bless you and keep you. His righteousness, wisdom, and power overflow to us in peace and blessing. And the kingdom is not available only to the wealthy or powerful or famous or beautiful. *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* (Matt. 5:3). This

kingdom is ours. It cannot be shaken. It will last forever, and in it we will enjoy God's glory and grace.

We have **the gift of the Spirit**. I Corinthians 3:18 says, "*Do you not know that you are God's temple, and that God's Spirit dwells in you?*" Think of it: the Holy Spirit of God lives in you! He is there to equip you, to empower you, to teach you, to purify you, to comfort you, and to witness through you! Who can take this for granted? What a gift! Jesus Christ became poor so that you could receive the promised Holy Spirit simply through faith (see Galatians 3:14).

Last and definitely not least, we have **the gift of eternal life**. John 3:16 is so familiar to many of us that it has lost its punch. "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.*" Because Jesus Christ left the power and wealth of heaven, you get to share it with him forever! We are co-heirs with him and we will be glorified with him (Romans 8:17). He made himself poor, but at his resurrection he was exalted once again to the highest place. And we one day will reign with him! We will live forever because his love for us led him to leave it all for us.

So what does this mean for us as we live by faith in a fallen world? The story of Christmas leaves us with a humbling challenge. ***The example of Christ's love should be the pattern of our lives.*** In the larger context of the passage we are looking at this morning, The Apostle Paul is trying to motivate the Corinthians to give generously, willingly, and cheerfully to a collection for the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. But rather than using guilt, manipulation, or slick fund-raising strategies, he simply reminds them of the "*grace of Jesus Christ.*" It is the Christmas story of the love and kindness of God to which he appeals.

Like the Grinch in Dr. Seuss' classic, our hearts can suffer from being "two sizes too small." However, when we understand that grace of our Lord Jesus Christ our hearts are enlarged, and they begin to beat with love and compassion for others.

I appeal to you this morning on the same basis. Jesus Christ became poor to enrich you. Will you as his follower do the same? In life we always see people climbing to the top, often stepping on and over others to get there. Sometimes we are the one that gets stepped on. Why do we so rarely see someone passing us on the way down? Are you willing to leave it all for others and for Christ? As Paul said, "*I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls*" (II Corinthians 12:15). Are you willing to spend and be spent for others?

The story of Christmas should comfort those of us who are poor, and it should change our view of the poor. Poverty is not a hindrance to

godliness or spiritual blessing. That is the life Jesus Christ teaches us. Those who are poor with Christ are far richer than those who are wealthy without him. Furthermore, the poor are not poor just because they are lazy, or because they are being punished by God. Remember that your Savior, who was rich beyond all comprehension, came as a poor man to poor people. And thankfully for many of us, he did not come only to the poor.

We are not just talking about money either. Yes, God wants you to use your resources to glorify him and to bless others. However, God wants more. He wants all of you—your hands and your feet, your eyes and your ears and your mouth, your knees and your shoulders, your heart and your mind. He wants you! He wants your time, your talent, your experience, your work, and your play. Romans 12:2 states, *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual act of worship.”* He wants you to give and to give and to give, not because you have to, but because you know the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was rich, but he became poor for you. Learn from him.

Finally, *the story of Christmas leaves us with one crucial question.* Paul tells the Corinthian Christians in this verse, *“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ....”* Let me ask you, do you know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ? That is the crucial question you have to answer. If the answer is no, it doesn’t matter how wealthy you may be in earthly power, prestige, talent, or finances. Receive him by faith today. He left everything to seek you and save you. Leave everything to follow him.

Merry Christmas!