

Communion

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[0 : 00] We all love a rags to riches tale. Whether it's just a good made-up yarn like Slumdog Millionaire, I'm sure many of you have seen the film of the boy from the slums of India who won, who wants to be a millionaire and became a millionaire from rags to riches. It's a tale that we are drawn to, we warm to, and even more so if the story is a true story.

Just as a matter of, I suppose, curiosity, I typed in rags to riches on a Google search, and what struck me as quite revealing was how many of the top hits for that phrase also included words like inspiring and inspirational. So, there were things like ten inspiring rags to riches tales, or ten women, inspirational women who went from rags to riches, things like that. So, this idea of going from rags to riches carries with it in our mind, in our thinking, the idea of this being inspiring for us. We are, so it seems, inspired by such endeavor and ultimately success, because rags to riches only is rags to riches if there are riches, if there is an outcome, if there is success. This morning we will be remembering and celebrating a journey in the opposite direction, from riches to rags. A journey that properly understood is indeed inspirational, but so much more than inspirational. Let's read the words of the Apostle Paul as we find them in 2 Corinthians 8 and verse 9. We were thinking about this occasion and the teaching of Paul on this occasion last week, but our focus was on words that we find in chapter 9, though we did make reference to this verse. But this morning I want us to think exclusively or very particularly on this verse that we find in 2 Corinthians chapter 8. And we read there, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.

A story then, not of rags to riches, but of riches to rags. Why would we want to celebrate and remember the downward spiral, if we can call it that, from riches to rags, of the one named by Paul as our Lord Jesus Christ? Perhaps the best way of answering that question is to spend a few moments shadowing on that journey. That journey as it is in its essence described for us by Paul.

Jesus Christ, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor. Let's think, first of all, of the riches of our Lord Jesus Christ. What can we say about the riches of our Lord Jesus Christ? To what does Paul refer when he speaks of His riches? Just how rich are we talking here?

That's another fascinating subject for us, isn't it? We're drawn to know how rich people are. Just how rich are the super rich, the oligarchs and the billionaires, and people eagerly await the publication of the annual Forbes 100 list. Who's at the top? Who's moved? Who's into the top ten? Who are they? How much do they earn? How much do they own? We're titillated by tales of how much Bill Gates.

[4 : 35] Bill Gates, he's lost it. He's down. I don't know if he's still in the top ten. I think so. But, you know, he's moving down the list. Or a Carlos Slim, who I think is meant to be the wealthiest now.

Or a Gareth Bale and his fabulous weekly salary. Indeed, people do calculations, don't they? How much do these people earn per second? And you stand back and say, wow, in a second. Get your calculator out and work out how much they earn per second. Well, what about our Lord Jesus Christ? Paul speaks of the one who was rich. How rich? How rich? The simplest, very short, but I think the best answer we can give, as rich as rich as God. John Calvin, the theologian of the Reformation, puts it succinctly while speaking of this verse. And he puts it succinctly and also introduces an explanatory note when he says this, he was rich because he was God. Paul here in this verse is speaking of the riches of our Lord's pre-existent glory as the eternal Son of God. And as we ponder on that, and really it's a subject that's difficult for us to ponder on, to imagine. It's almost beyond our capacity to imagine. But as we endeavor to do so, we can perhaps distinguish between three aspects of these riches that Paul speaks of belonged to Jesus. We can speak of the reality, the recognition, and the enjoyment. Let me just explain what I mean by these three ways of considering this matter of how our Lord Jesus Christ was rich.

The reality. The Son of God, as God, was rich beyond all measure, rich in glory and majesty and power and dominion. As it has been put, He possessed Jesus, the eternal Son of God. He possessed all the majesty of deity, performed all its functions, and enjoyed all its prerogatives. This is the reality, if we can use that word, the reality of His riches. The eternal and necessary reality given His identity, given who He is.

It must be so that He enjoyed these riches. But we can maybe distinguish between the reality and what we have described, or the word we're using, the recognition.

Before He became poor, not only was He rich beyond all measure, but He was recognized as such by the heavenly host. To see Him was to see Him. To see Him was to see one unmistakably and awe-inspiringly rich.

[7 : 58] The angels bowed down before Him in recognition of His glorious riches, to use biblical language. And had the windows of heaven been opened for mere mortals like us to witness the eternal Son of God in the riches of His preexistent glory. Such witnesses could not have but bowed down in awestruck wonder, if they had even been able to witness such splendor. The reality of His riches, but also the recognition of them. And I think we can also speak of the enjoyment, the enjoyment of these riches. We know even in our own lives, or as we observe perhaps the lives of others, it's one thing to be rich.

It's another thing to enjoy your wealth, to enjoy your riches. But I think we can speak of our Lord in His preexistent glory as enjoying His riches, enjoying the worship of the angels, enjoying the performance of His functions and the exercise of His prerogatives as the eternal Son of God.

And perhaps supremely in this matter of enjoyment, enjoying rich, uninterrupted, and perfect fellowship with His Father, the riches of our Lord Jesus Christ. But as we follow this journey from riches to rags, we don't only have to make reference to the riches of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we also have to speak of the becoming of the becoming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though He was rich, says Paul, yet for your sakes He became poor. Even before we proceed to think about His poverty, we need to pause just for a moment and concentrate on this astonishing verb that is introduced into this picture that is being painted.

The Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, He became poor. This word, arguably, no doubt other words could compete for this title, but arguably the most astonishing in Scripture and echoing the same word that we find in the passage that we read in John's Gospel in chapter 1 and verse 14. The Word became flesh.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, though He was rich, became poor. And I say astonishing because the Word introduces the impossible into the realm of the actual. The immutable, unchanging God became something He had not been.

[11 : 02] In the prophet Malachi, in chapter 3, we have the words of God Himself recorded for us as He declares, I, the Lord, do not change. And yet, in becoming, there is change. There is real change, not just seeming or apparent change. But we need to tread carefully. And we will try to do so as we move and consider the matter of the poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ that Paul speaks of. But though we must tread carefully, it is also true that we must not be so careful as to ignore this astonishing reality, the eternal Son of God, the Creator of the universe, became. He became flesh. He became poor.

Before we move on to think of the poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ, as we think of this matter of Him becoming at all, under this heading, we can also say this, that behind this becoming, there lies a decision of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord decided to become poor. He decided freely and voluntarily and lovingly and sacrificially under no external compulsion. He decided to become poor.

Poverty did not overtake Him. When we think of poverty in our experience or in the experience of others, we think of how poverty overtakes somebody. You know, I was just seeing a report of refugees from Syria. I think it was in one of the neighboring countries, I think in Lebanon. And they were interviewing a man who evidently back home in Homs in Syria was very wealthy. And yet, poverty had overtaken Him from enjoying great wealth in His home city, the political situation, the violence, the internal warfare. Poverty had overtaken Him. It was an unwelcome intruder in His life experience. But in the case of our Lord Jesus Christ, He decided to become poor. Poverty did not overtake Him. Poverty did not enslave Him. Poverty did not surprise Him. Our Lord decided in eternity to become poor.

But of what poverty are we speaking? Though rich, He became poor. What can we say of this poverty that Paul refers to? Paul is very clear in the language he uses, our Lord became poor. But how are we to understand this poverty of which he speaks? And I think we need to consider this from two angles, what it does not mean and what it does mean. And when we think of what it does not mean, we're really introducing, I hope, this care in understanding what it is that is being said. What does it not mean? What does Paul not mean when he declares that our Lord Jesus Christ became poor? Well, this may sound rather intriguing, but what he is not saying is that Jesus ceased to be rich. Now, from our perspective, you're either one or the other. Is that not the way it is? You're either rich or poor. You can be rich and become poor. You can be poor and become rich, but you can't be both at the same time. And because that's true in our experience, we instinctively assume that if our Lord became poor, He ceased to be rich. But that is not the case. Paul, using the language of riches and poverty, is describing the incarnation, the once and for all the word of God, the eternal Son of God, who became flesh. Even the tense that he employs in this, our text in 2 Corinthians, implies a once and for all event. He became poor. He became that which he was not.

The Word became flesh. The Word became poor. But did the Word cease to be rich? Well, what did we say about the riches of our Lord before becoming poor? We quoted John Calvin, he was rich because he was God.

[15 : 51] And if that is true, as it surely is, then if we believe that the incarnate Word was truly God, as well as truly man, as we surely do, then it must remain true that as the incarnate Son of God, He was still and remained rich because He was God. Maybe we can think about this a little more by introducing the categories, if that's the right word that we spoke of when we described different aspects of the riches of Jesus.

We spoke of the reality and the recognition and the enjoyment. Maybe we can think about these words again. If we think of the reality of the riches of our Lord Jesus Christ, the reality remains unchanged when He became poor, when He took on flesh, when He became a man. The reality of His riches as the Son of God remains unchanged. He remains God and necessarily He remains rich. But what of the recognition? We spoke of how before He became poor, before He became poor, He was recognized by the heavenly host as gloriously rich.

When we think of the recognition, well that is, is it not, a different matter? He's no longer recognized as God. As we read in John chapter 1, He came to His own, but He was not recognized. He was not received by His own.

He was truly God, but He was not recognized as God. He voluntarily gave up that recognition that was His own.

Recognized surely and ever by His Father, but by those who He came to save, not recognized. What of the the enjoyment of the riches that were His? Well, here too, there is a voluntary giving up in significant measure of the enjoyment and even to a point the exercise of divine prerogatives. Not the possession of divine prerogatives, but the exercise of them. If we use the language of riches to rags, we might say that He did not lose the rich garbs of His divinity. They remained very much in His possession, but He chose to wear the poor rags of His earthly existence as He became flesh. To speak of our Lord becoming poor does not mean that He ceased to be rich. That He ceased even for an instant to be God or even to divest Himself of His divine functions and prerogatives. That did not happen. And we need to be clear on this, and we need to be in a measure on guard against error in this matter which very easily can creep in. And that error can be clothed very attractively and tunefully. Let me just give you one example, and I'm not into heresy hunting beyond what is healthy for safeguarding the health of the church, but let me just give you one example that will be familiar to you. Think of the popular hymn by Charles Wesley. Let me just read the first verse and then jump to the third. And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood? Died

[19 : 40] He for me who caused His pain, for me who Him to death pursued? Amazing love, how can it be that thou, my God, should die for me? So far, so good. But then we move on to the third verse. What does it say? He left His Father's throne above. That's true. So free, so infinite His grace, indeed, emptied Himself of all but love. But did He? Did He empty Himself of all but love? No. He didn't empty Himself of all but love.

He remained the God of the universe. He remained the eternal Son of God. He did not empty Himself of all but love. That's what it doesn't mean when we speak of Jesus becoming poor. But what does it mean?

Now, we've read something about the matter of the recognition of His riches, of the enjoyment of His riches, but the heart of the matter with regard to the poverty of our Lord concerns what He became.

He became flesh. He became obedient unto death. The poverty is not about what He lost, but about what He gained. Though that sounds incongruous, that His poverty concerns what He gained. He gained poverty. For those of you who were brought up with the shorter cacticism, you're familiar with the language of Christ's humiliation and exaltation. Now, the language of humiliation is probably not the most helpful or clear today because the word humiliation has evolved in its meaning, though it derives from the biblical language that we've read in Philippians that speaks of Christ humbling Himself.

It's from there that we have this language of Christ's humiliation. As I say, we could maybe choose a more helpful word. But the language of the catechism is describing the very truth that Paul speaks of in our text. Our Lord Jesus Christ became poor. Let's just remind ourselves or familiarize ourselves, if that's the case, with that particular question in our catechism. Wherein did Christ's humiliation consist? And what we have in the answer is really a description of this poverty that Paul is speaking of. And how does the catechism answer that question? Christ's humiliation consisted in His being born, and that in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God and the cursed death of the cross, and being buried and continuing under the power of death death for a time. Now, we haven't the time to explore each of the aspects of Christ's humiliation, to use the language of the catechism, or of Christ's poverty, to use the language of our text, as it's outlined for us in that answer. But we can hone in on what is, I think indisputably, the most abject and grinding poverty of our Lord, and that is His death in our place.

[23 : 07] Paul uses the very language of Jesus humbling Himself in the passage that we read in Philippians, as He identifies the very lowest point of Christ's poverty. He humbled Himself and became obedient to death.

Even death on a cross. Rejection, ridicule, persecution, betrayal, and suffering, all culminating in the agony of Gethsemane and the solitude and the abandonment of the cross. It is this poverty, abject and grinding and desperate, that we remember and give thanks for today at the Lord's table.

He was rich, He became poor. But we can't conclude without considering one further matter, and that is the motivation and purpose of our Lord Jesus Christ in becoming poor. You see, all that has been said thus far demands this big question. Why? Why? Why would the one who was rich become poor? That's simply not the direction that we choose to go in. We would choose to go in the other direction. So why did Jesus choose to go in this direction from riches to rags? What possessed him? Well, Paul answers this question simply and eloquently and indeed repeatedly, even in this short verse. In a word, the answer to the question is grace. Grace possessed him.

Grace that is rich, grace that is directed, grace that is purposeful. We read, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is grace that is the motivating factor. It is grace that underpins this movement from riches to rags. Grace that is directed to the likes of us. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sakes. This grace directed to God's people for you God's people for your sake. For your sake he became poor. But grace that is purposeful so that through his poverty you might become rich. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ directed to us and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that through our Lord Jesus Christ that through our Lord Jesus Christ and through our Lord Jesus Christ. And that through our Lord Jesus Christ, we are going to be rich.

Riches that are spiritual. Riches that are eternal. Let's just think of some of the language that Paul uses to speak of the riches that are the riches that are the possession of the believer. In his first letter to the Corinthians. And in chapter 1 he begins with this language, I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him, in Christ, you have been enriched in every way. And he goes on in that introduction to the letter to say to the believers in Corinth, you do not lack any spiritual gift.

[26 : 50] You have been enriched in every way. Think of how he begins this letter to the Ephesians. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Then he goes on to speak of how we've been chosen and predestined and adopted and redeemed and forgiven. And then he speaks in this beautiful language of the riches of God's grace that he has lavished on us. The riches of God's grace lavished on us. It is of these riches that Paul is speaking when he identifies the purpose of Jesus identifies the purpose of Jesus becoming poor so that you through his poverty might become rich.

We enjoy these riches, the riches of God's grace lavished on us through his poverty, by and through the death of Jesus in our place that today we will remember. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Praise indeed.

Riches to rags. Yes, indeed. Thank God that we can identify this movement of the eternal Son of God from riches to rags.

But of course that's not the end of the story. As we pick up on the reading that we read in Philippians chapter 2, what does Paul go on to say from verse 9? And with this we close.

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Let us pray.