

The Cost of Riches

By Elder Lynn G. Robbins

Of the Seventy



When we selfishly seek after wealth, we put our families and our spiritual health at risk.

In early Church history, members were constantly on the move—from New York to Ohio to Missouri and then to Nauvoo and beyond. Building new homes was a frequent chore. Many of the homes were modest by today's standards, sometimes measuring just 12 feet by 12 feet (3.6 m). However, when Mary Richards moved into her new log cabin at Winter Quarters after spending the winter in a tent, she remarked, "Our little house seemed to me almost like a palace."¹ Interesting how grateful her attitude was, even when she had so very little.

Today Mary Richards's cabin would be dwarfed by most homes. It seems that while the average home has increased in size, the average family has decreased in size; and while homes have more time-saving devices, the average family spends less time together. Affluence is up, but happiness is down, as indicated by rising divorce rates. Why isn't more money buying greater happiness?

What Is Sufficient?

In his book *How Much Is Enough?* Alan Thein Durning says that in the 1990s, people were "on average four-and-a-half times richer than their great-grandparents were at the turn of the century, but they [were] not four-and-a-half times happier."² The authors of the book *Your Money or Your Life* suggest that fulfillment seems to increase during the initial stages of spending, when one is buying necessities and some nice things, but begins to decrease with excess spending.³ If that is true, one of life's most fundamental questions should be, "What is sufficient for our family to be happy?" Our success will depend not only on answering the question "What do we need to be happy?" but also on answering the question "What *don't* we need to be happy?"

Because the natural man's perceived needs are forever expanding, "sufficient" is

forever elusive, and his time is increasingly devoted to money and the things of this world. Take the extreme case of Prince Jefri Bolkiah, brother of the Sultan of Brunei, for example. The prince squandered \$15 billion by building marinas, palaces, and apartment complexes and purchasing luxury hotels, aircraft, thousands of cars, and so on. His panicked brother finally had to cut the purse strings and limit him to a *monthly* allowance of \$300,000.⁴ For the natural man, there is never enough money.

Along with obeying the law of tithing and avoiding unnecessary debt, one of the most oft-repeated financial principles taught by the prophets is to live within our means, regardless of our income. If Satan can tempt us to overpurchase, we risk not only becoming a time slave to unnecessary debt but also being “time-consumed” with too many things of this world. The result is less time for the Lord and for our family.

More Money Equals Less Time

Juliet B. Schor, who teaches economics at Harvard University, says that due to improvements in productivity, Americans could work 22-hour workweeks if they were satisfied with a 1948 standard of living. While we are certainly grateful for the progress made since 1948, that would give many of us at least 18 extra hours per week!⁵

In the book *Your Money or Your Life*, the authors convincingly illustrate how everything we buy consumes a part of our life—hence the title of their book.⁶ Applying simple math to an hourly wage, for example, can illustrate how upgrading to a bigger home (or an unnecessary home equity loan on an existing home) could cost an extra 5 or 10 years of life to purchase, depending on its cost. And if not 10 years of the father’s life, then perhaps 10 years of the mother’s life as a second wage earner. When we spend beyond what is sufficient, the trade-off is less time.

It has been said that a rich man doesn’t own his things; rather, his things begin to own him. “A thatched roof once covered free men; under marble and gold dwells slavery.”⁷ In his book *Clutter’s Last Stand*, Don Aslett gives us additional insight into this self-imposed slavery. Each item we accumulate, he says, “stifles us and robs us of freedom because it requires so much of our time to tend.” He writes further: “We have to pay for it, keep track of it, protect it, clean it, store it, insure it, and worry about it. ... Later we have to move it, hide it, apologize for it, argue over it. ... But these things are valuable, you say? What about the value of the life and time to store, to clean, to insure, to transport, to protect—what does that cost? More than money.”⁸

Being Content

One antonym for *greed*, and perhaps the antidote to it, is *contentment*. The Apostle Paul stated, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content" (Philip. 4:11). Contentment and gratitude are essential if one is to be truly happy.

The ability to be content was one of Benjamin Franklin's greatest traits. It had a profound impact on his life and upon the new nation he helped to found. Author Catherine Drinker Bowen writes of Franklin: "He was forty-two when he retired. ... Had Franklin stayed in business there is little doubt he could have amassed a fortune ... the kind of estate built up in America by royal governors. ... Once assured of a competence, he showed no desire for increasing it; Franklin never changed his simple style of living and seemed to have no ambition for outward show."⁹

For Franklin, "outward show" was dangerous. He said: "*The eyes of other people are the eyes that ruin us. If all but myself were blind, I should want neither fine clothes, fine houses, nor fine furniture.*"¹⁰ He knew time is the one thing that is purchased by not spending money. With more time, he was available to help establish a free land where the gospel could be restored (see D&C 101:80).

President Brigham Young (1801–77) also understood the value of spending his time on that which is most important. After gaining a testimony of the restored gospel, "he gave away many of his possessions and reduced his business." This downsizing gave Brigham Young a gift of time that he could devote to building the kingdom. "He served a series of missions. He held meetings and baptized in the countryside surrounding Mendon. He also traveled into upper New York and Ontario, Canada, to preach the gospel and bear witness that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God."¹¹

Of course, the Savior Himself is the greatest example of proper prioritizing. With few possessions to distract Him, He focused all of His time and effort on His mission. The Lord doesn't expect us to seek out poverty, but His counsel is direct: "Thou shalt lay aside the things of this world, and seek for the things of a better" (D&C 25:10) and "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (Luke 12:15).

Putting the Family First

Benjamin Franklin said, "When you have bought one fine thing you must buy ten more, that your appearance may be all of a piece; ... 'tis easier to suppress the first desire than to satisfy all that follow it."¹² This is especially true with today's tendency to purchase the biggest home possible, which requires not just 10 more "fine things" but hundreds to fill it. Families with barely affordable mortgage payments often turn to credit cards or a second wage earner to pay for these fine things. Too often the result is ever-increasing debt, manifest by

record numbers of people filing for bankruptcy.

The pioneers had to discern what their true needs were. As they hurriedly left Nauvoo, they took with them essentials such as food, clothing, blankets, cooking utensils, and perhaps a few extras that weren't life sustaining but were nevertheless precious, such as a favorite rocking chair. They tearfully left other keepsakes behind.

The trek that lay before the pioneers was not easy, but with faith they began their westward march. Then they came to the slopes of the Rocky Mountains. The trail that was manageable before seemed almost insurmountable now. Many had to lighten their load and again face the difficult process of choosing what to leave behind. Subsequent travelers migrating west on the same trail would come across tools, chairs, and other valuables left to decay and rust on the plains at the foot of the Rockies.

The Saints who had to make these sacrifices must have made many longing backward glances as they continued their journey. Yet while they left many cherished items behind, they didn't leave behind their most precious asset: their children. That would have been unthinkable.

Now, some 150 years later, we are facing different challenges but a similar choice. Tragically, this time it isn't furniture and fineries that are being left behind but our children. Believing that possessions and "personal fulfillment" are paramount, many parents are leaving the primary care of their children to day-care centers. Some, such as single parents, may have no choice, but others do. The Savior tells us:

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, ...

"But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal" (3 Ne. 13:19-20). Surely we should consider our family to be among our greatest treasures.

In "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," we learn that "the family is central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children."¹³ Since the family is central, then the most important work we do, according to President Harold B. Lee (1899-1973), is "within the walls of [our] own home."¹⁴ Note the word *within*. Parents earn money outside the home to make a *living*, but they spend time inside the home to make a *life*.

The cycle of affluence leading to pride is depicted numerous times in the Book of Mormon. The Lord warns us, "The riches of the earth are mine to give; but beware of pride, lest ye become as the Nephites of old" (D&C 38:39). We would be wise to avoid the Nephites' mistakes by being wary of "outward show,"

learning what is sufficient for our true happiness, and discovering how to be content. I believe these principles are deserving of our sincere pondering and prayer.

Let's Talk about It

1. Invite family members to describe what they think the life of a happy, successful person is like. Show some money and discuss how much money it takes for a person to be happy and successful. Read and discuss the section "Being Content."
2. Display a paper with the following equations: More Money = Less Time; More Money \neq More Happiness. Ask family members what they think the equations mean. Read and discuss what Elder Robbins said about money, time, and happiness.

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Notes

1. Quoted in William W. Slaughter, "The Strength of Sacrifice," *Ensign*, Apr. 1997, 38.
2. (1992), 23.
3. Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin (1992).
4. See Seth Mydans, "Gluttony Is Undoing of Brunei," *Deseret News*, 17 Aug. 2001.
5. *The Overworked American* (1991).
6. Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin (1992).
7. Seneca, quoted in John de Graaf and others, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* (2001), 125.
8. (1984), 5, 4, 46.
9. *The Most Dangerous Man in America* (1974), 59.
10. Quoted in Andrew M. Allison and others, *The Real Benjamin Franklin* (1987), 364.
11. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Melchizedek Priesthood and Relief Society course of study, 1997), 3.
12. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, Poor Richard's Almanac, and Other*

Papers (n.d.), 227.

13. *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 102.

14. In Conference Report, Apr. 1973, 130; or *Ensign*, July 1973, 98.

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