

CHAPTER 17

RETIREMENT

In Chapter 14 we discussed owning a home, suggesting that for many Americans it best expresses “the American dream.” If I were asked my opinion of what Americans would consider second in importance in their definition of “the American dream,” I would answer without hesitation, “Retirement!” By that I mean the accumulation of a retirement fund, at some planned age, sufficient to permit one to quit working, and live out his remaining years in ease. Having myself already traversed well beyond the typical “planned age” for retirement, I am at least somewhat of an authority on this area, for I believe I was an average American during my earlier working years. And I confess to you that it was my dream to do just that. To be honest, it was a higher priority in my mind than owning a home.

In any case, I think we can agree that a study of Biblical Economics would surely be incomplete without seeking to answer the question, “What does the Bible say about retirement?” Before we research the Bible on this question, let me pose some questions for you to meditate on ... to prepare your thinking for the study. What is your concept of retirement? Are you looking forward to retirement? Are you making plans for it? What mental pictures come into your mind when you think about retired life? Do you think of a life of total leisure with no work in it? ... perhaps sleeping late every morning, or going to the golf course every day, or sitting out on the creek bank fishing, or traveling, or ...? Are you looking for a “little bit of heaven” this side of the grave?

If these are the kinds of pictures which come into your mind, and are the kinds of things you look forward to after you retire, then the Bible may change your mind completely. It did mine. Frankly, I was rather surprised when I studied this question from the Bible, the reason being that I found nothing in the Bible that supports retirement as it is practiced today in our culture. Possibly I have missed it. I certainly do not have exhaustive knowledge of the Bible, but in over 25 years of study, I have not found a single verse which encourages it, and among

the many experts whom I have studied, not one of them has pointed out any passage which supports retirement as it is generally viewed today.

Some of you reading this may be young, in the early part of your working life. Perhaps you are thinking to yourself, "Retirement is years away for me. I probably don't even need to know this information today." Let me suggest to you that is not the case, and that the time to get straight on this subject is while you're young, so you don't waste half a lifetime on the wrong track. I wish I had known this as a much younger person.

Our objective is to view the concept of retirement from two perspectives: (1) as the world views it, and (2) as the Bible views it.

RETIREMENT DEFINED

Let's begin with the word "retire" itself. In the English dictionary, I found this definition, "To withdraw from office, business or active life." In other words, to bring your vocation, career or life's work to an end at an arbitrary, predetermined age. The most common such age is 65, probably because the founders of the Social Security system selected it as the age for benefits to begin. As far as I know there was nothing scientific involved in the selection of that age, other than the fact the legislators were aware that life expectancy at the time was in the low 70s. If 65 was a good choice at the time, it certainly doesn't make sense now, for life expectancy has increased by 5 to 10 years since.

Over the years since enactment of the law, many businesses, especially the large corporations, have instituted age 65 as a mandatory retirement age to dovetail with the Social Security system. The business world has long debated whether having a mandatory retirement age is a good thing or a bad thing. Apparently, many businesses have concluded that it is a good thing, or that at least the good outweighs the bad. I suppose from a business point of view that might be the case in some situations. But for a believer in Christ to stop functioning at some arbitrary age, an age at which he is still active, healthy, and able to work, is a concept that I find foreign to Scripture. Thus, if you are employed by a business which has a mandatory retirement age, I would suggest that long in advance of reaching that age you begin making plans for

continuing in active service for the Lord. That could include starting a business, if that is your calling, or it could mean taking a salaried job with an employer that doesn't have a mandatory retirement age. The life of a disciple of Jesus Christ may involve one or more job changes, but never retirement as it is viewed in our culture.

A word of balance is in order here. The aging process is the plan of God. He intends for our bodies to wear out and die. Viewed biblically, this is a good thing, not a bad thing. The earthly life is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end. After the body dies, the soul will live on forever, and the earthly life is a preparation for that eternal existence following this life. During this earthly life two things are determined: (1) where we will spend eternity, determined by whether or not we trust Christ as our Savior, and (2) for those who do trust Him, their reward and position in heaven, determined by their deeds in this life. For those who reject Him, their degree of punishment in hell will be determined by their deeds in this life. Clear passages which support this thesis are Romans 2:6-11, 2 Corinthians 5:10, and Revelation 20:11-12.

We are given very little specific information about our lives in eternity, but commanded to keep our hope and focus on the eternal rather than the temporal.

Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things
[Colossians 3:2].

The incentive for obeying this command is the knowledge that we can maximize our reward in eternity. We have the same opportunity for reward as the most gifted believers, as those given long years of life and health and material wealth, by simply making the most of what we are given to work with. That was the message of Chapter 4. Obviously, as the body slows down both mentally and physically, we may become unable to perform certain work. We may have to step down from certain duties, and we should have the wisdom to do that.

Incidentally, the word "retire" appears only one time in the New International Version of the Bible, in Numbers 8:25. It is an instruction to the Levites to retire from the hard manual labor of building the tabernacle, at age fifty. But they did not stop working, they merely

took on lighter work. The very fact that the body is wearing out and will die adds to the incentive to make every moment count. The apostle Paul calls it “redeeming the time,” in Ephesians 5:16. As long as there is life in our bodies, God has some ministry, some witness, some purpose for our being here, and our work is not finished. To withdraw ourselves arbitrarily from service is not His plan.

DID JESUS OR THE APOSTLES COMMAND US NOT TO RETIRE?

But wait. Is there a specific command which forbids retiring? As far as I am aware there is not. Why should there be? New Testament stewardship of all God’s property, including energy, gifts, wealth and years of life, is entirely at the discretion of the individual believer. Clearly Jesus sets the goal as storing treasure in heaven rather than on earth. But we have complete latitude for determining what that will look like. We do this with the understanding that there will be full accountability of our stewardship at the Judgment Seat of Christ. If we want to spend a fourth or half of our lives doing things we enjoy which make no contribution to the kingdom, we have that right, just as we have the right to give as large or as small a percent of our money to the Lord as we choose. But our choices will determine our reward and position in eternity. Never think of things like long life, health, wealth, and intellect in terms of greater blessings. Always think of them in terms of greater accountability. As Jesus put it, “To whom much is given, much is required.”

DOES BUILDING A RETIREMENT FUND VIOLATE SCRIPTURE?

I think, for the most part, we have answered this question in Chapter 15. You might want to review that chapter. We learned that the wise man saves a portion of his income for future needs, but the foolish man spends all his income as he receives it (Proverbs 21:20). The apostle Paul also puts his sanction on saving some of one’s income for future needs, especially the needs of family members for whom we are responsible (1 Timothy 5:8 and 2 Corinthians 12:14-15). But I am not aware of any command of Jesus or the apostles to save specifically for old age. On the contrary, Jesus clearly commands us, “Do not store *for yourselves* treasure on earth.” I interpret this to mean do not store earthly wealth for selfish purposes.

As we concluded in Chapter 15, we have the right and responsibility to draw the line between storing treasure on earth and in heaven, understanding that our choice will determine our reward and position in heaven. It's part of the stewardship latitude given to us in the New Testament. But I would hasten to add, it seems to me there is more risk involved in storing money for old age than storing it for other anticipated needs. Our culture has conditioned us to think in terms of building a retirement fund to secure our financial needs in old age from the time we stop working until the time we die, a concept never mentioned in Scripture as far as I can determine. Yet Jesus clearly tells us that if we make serving Him our priority, He will assume responsibility for meeting all our needs (see Matthew 6:33).

We must decide where to draw the line, and we can draw it anywhere we want to. Rest assured there will be tension as we draw it, and we will not know this side of the grave how well we did it. This logically leads me to simply suggest some ways we may examine ourselves as we make our financial decisions. Here are four tests we could use as we set aside money for old age.

THE HOARDING TEST

When Jesus commanded us not to store wealth on earth *for ourselves*, He was warning against the sin of hoarding. But how do I know when I cross the line between legitimate needs and hoarding? I must examine my heart. Do I love money? Do I want to get rich? These are clearly defined as sins, as we learned in Chapter 5, and, I might add, with frightening consequences (see 1 Timothy 6:9-10). Solomon also warned of the consequences of hoarding.

Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless. As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them? The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep. I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth **hoarded to the harm of its owner** [Ecclesiastes 5:10-13].

In His parable of the rich fool, Jesus also warned of the consequences of hoarding. He told the story of the man who accumulated so much wealth that he felt compelled to tear down his barns and build bigger ones so that he could store even more wealth with the intent of consuming it on his own desires at a future time.

But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself, but is not rich toward God [Luke 12:20-21].

Hoarding flows naturally from the love of wealth, or the love of accumulating wealth. The person who hoards does so with a view toward consuming his hoard sometime later on his own selfish desires rather than meeting his true needs. The Christian who hoards is storing wealth on earth that should be stored in heaven. The hoarder’s plans for future consumption most often never take place at all. It is a perverse truth, I think, that a committed hoarder really never intends to consume the wealth, but thinks he can continually amass wealth indefinitely. He never truly thinks he will use the money, but wants more and more just in case. And note Jesus’ final statement in this parable. He’s letting us know that the person with hoarded wealth is not more *blessed*. He is more *accountable*!

I cannot read these passages without being terrified. Every time I do, I am motivated to re-commit to a goal of storing treasure in heaven rather than on earth.

THE INACTIVITY TEST

If you are accumulating money to fund your needs during a *planned* period of inactivity at some selected age in the future, during which period you would quit working and live off of what you have accumulated, even though you are still active and able to work, I believe you risk violating Jesus’ command to not store for yourself treasure on earth. This is retirement as the world views it, a concept I cannot find in Scripture. It is based on an unscriptural premise, the idea that God intends for us to live a portion of our lives inactively, or in recreation for our own enjoyment.

Of course, because the New Testament gives us latitude to determine our stewardship, we may choose this worldly approach to retirement. But let us never forget that God determines our standard of living on earth, and not for a part of our earthly life, but for all of it, including old age. If we serve Him faithfully (“seek first His kingdom ...”), He takes full responsibility for meeting our needs, including old age (Matthew 6:33). I’m not saying having some wealth in old age is a sin, in and of itself. I’m saying that if God doesn’t intend for me to have a retirement fund, it won’t be there no matter what I do. The moth, rust, and thieves (such as inflation, bankruptcy, unfunded pension plans) can take it away. If I fail the inactivity test, my old age could well end in despair.

THE CALAMITY TEST

Some of us are attempting to secure our future against total calamity, and to do it with money. Fear of the future has become so common in our culture today that even some Christians have been trapped into squirreling away large sums of money without any real plan for the future use of it. This is a violation of Jesus’ clear command.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear ...
[Matthew 6:25].

As we learned in Chapter 15, this is a conditional promise that if our life goal is storing treasure in heaven, we have no reason to worry about our needs. Jesus taught us that financial security comes from having the right goal in life, not from having wealth. He made it clear that there is no security in having earthly wealth if the goal is wrong. If you want to know where to place your fear, the One to fear is the Lord of Hosts. He wants you to fear Him so much that there is no calamity that could possibly compare to fear of Him.

THE STEWARDSHIP TEST

This is a very simple test. If I am setting aside money for old age at the expense of giving God a good offering today, that is, at the expense of giving God a good increase on His estate, I am running the risk of disobeying His command to not store for myself treasure on earth. That’s the reason we suggested this rule to memorize: **Never**

concentrate on storing wealth on earth apart from concentrating on storing wealth in heaven. Never let the two separate in your mind.

Having examined our hearts using these four tests, the question then arises, how should we determine the amount we should set aside for old age? No one can answer this question for you. What I can say on the authority of Jesus' promise is, if we are faithful stewards of all the wealth He has entrusted to us, and if our goal is increasing God's estate, not our own, we will arrive at old age with just the right amount for our needs. And we don't even need to know today what that amount is.

A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

I am ashamed to admit to you that when I was a young businessman I used to dream of retiring. I was obsessed with the idea, and I had a goal of accumulating a certain amount of money by a certain age, so that I could live out the rest of my life in ease. I won't tell you what that age or amount was, because I scrapped the whole plan many years ago. I came to realize that it was an unscriptural goal. I got a new goal after studying this subject in the 1980s. That goal is to do the best job managing whatever God entrusts to me, to give Him a good return on it every year as long as I live, and let Him decide what amount to give me and when to give it to me. I have no set goal for earthly treasure, and no intention of retiring. I want to remain active and productive as long as God is pleased to allow it.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The concept of retirement as practiced in our culture is not supported by the Bible. The scriptural concept of retirement is death of the body, therefore a planned withdrawal from active life at some predetermined age does not square with Scripture. There are a few bumper stickers that present good theology. I saw one which said, "A Christian's retirement benefits are out of this world." How true, because Christians do not retire in this world. They retire in the next world! There they get their retirement benefits. Service continues in eternity. The work will be a pleasure then.

I wonder how many Christians retire here on earth, begin drawing their retirement benefits, only to die in a few months or years and get a cut in retirement pay? I wonder how many of us would be better off storing more in heaven while on earth? Heaven is where we will receive our real retirement benefits. I also wonder how many well-meaning believers have lost the joy of the Christian life because of retirement.

We can concentrate on storing treasure in heaven by examining our hearts using the four tests, and following the stewardship principles we have studied in this book, arriving at old age with just the right amount of money. Isn't it logical that if God is the only one who knows how long we will live, and what our needs in old age will be, that He is the One to decide whether we should have any accumulated savings in old age, and how much?

