

Retirement, Money and the Reign of God

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Retirement, money and the Reign of God—bet you haven't read about that combination lately. I hope this essay gets you thinking about it, and I hope we see more written about it. As a financial planner and disciple, I have been forced to grapple with these subjects through my retirement planning work with clients over the past fifteen years.

Most relatively affluent North Americans will at some point “retire.” I count myself in that group. But what is the purpose of retirement in our society? Should retirement for a Christian be approached and lived out differently than for other relatively affluent North Americans? Many articles in this book share the perspective that standing with and acting to support the poor and oppressed is at the heart of what it means to participate in the Reign of God.

I think our gut instinct tells us that retirement for Christians who share this perspective should be different, but we are not sure exactly what that “difference” might look like. And it certainly will look different from one Christian to the next.

Reminding ourselves that retirement, as known today, is only a couple generations old is a good place to begin. Social Security, instituted in the 1930s, and the longer life expectancies of the latter twentieth century, mark the beginning of retirement as we know it. We should not consider its current practice as a norm that cannot be questioned. That is especially true for Christians struggling with our affluence in light of the growing economic gap between rich and poor.

Retirement without working is a sign of extreme privilege. Longer average retirements require larger sums of money. Being able to live on savings, pensions and Social Security for as many as 20 or 30 years is unprecedented in modern history. But achieving that state of privilege is a major focus throughout our work life. “How much will I need?” or “When can I retire?” is one of the most frequent questions new clients ask.

We worry about retiring but most of us feel we have a right to retire. We deserve it. We earned it. It is a part of the American Dream. We do not see it as a privilege of the few, but as a right for the masses. And while its attainment may be possible for a majority of North Americans, it is still a reality only for the privileged of our world. Retirement without working is indeed a sign of extreme privilege.

Maybe we should begin questioning the assumption that “retirement is a right,” and ask, “When *should* I aim to retire, not when *can* I retire?” Our culture says we should retire as young as possible—as soon as we can. The younger one retires from working for pay, the more successful that person has been. I have had financial planning clients express a sense of failure because they are not sure when or if they will be able to retire. But to retire young requires the accumulation of significant

assets, which requires saving a significant portion of our life's earnings for retirement. In other cases, it might mean that most of an inheritance will have to go towards retirement. Can we as Christians do that when we consider the world's needs? I argue that we should begin with the assumption that we will work for pay as long as is reasonably possible. This assumption contrasts with our culture's assumption that we will stop working for pay as soon as possible.

Of course, many circumstances affect when we retire. A therapist will probably have a better chance to work into their 70s than a construction worker or a plumber. Other people may have health problems that dictate retirement. Some people retire early in order to do justice work or work that heals our Earth. But the reality is that if I can and do work later (even part-time) instead of retiring early, I will have to save much less money. And I will have much more to share with a hurting world.

Besides retiring early, what other values or characteristics are part of the classic American retirement? In my experience as a financial planner, travel and leisure are highly prized goals of retirement. After retiring from a stressful job, these are understandable goals. But they can be an example of conspicuous consumption as surely as big houses, big cars and fancy clothes are.

Our culture entices us to believe that continuous leisure and recreational travel are keys to an enjoyable and well-earned retirement. The retirement culture and industry tells us, "You earned your money and saved. If you can afford it, you should do it." But the Reign of God calls us to consider what is "enough."

Questions about "enough" earlier in life may have focused on the size of our house, the kind of car we drove, or the college we could afford for our children. In retirement, the focus of consumption often changes to leisure and travel, but the need to listen to the spirit inherent in the vision of the Reign of God is not diminished. While we cannot control some of the costs of retirement, like healthcare, we can significantly control other costs, such as housing. How willing are we to downsize our house and free up assets that can be used for retirement or the poor? Many of us, as we approach retirement, live in much bigger houses than we need. The kids are grown up and gone. But ties to a neighborhood, sentimentality and memories often make it hard to move. Staying in a house can be another act of perpetuating our privilege, our affluence. The answers are not clear cut, but struggling with how to live as affluent Christians in a world of need must not be avoided.

Another part of retirement planning that begs for reflection is to whom we will leave assets at our death? Most of my clients will leave everything to their children, grandchildren and extended family. Some wish they could leave money to organizations that represent their gospel values, but sincere love for their children

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and extended family and fear of the unknown future most often result in everything going to the kids. Could it be, however, that the financial and other investments we have made in our children—raising them, educating them and caring for them—are enough? Do the needs of the children of the world, the “big” family of God, have some claim on the financial assets God has entrusted to us as stewards at the end of our lives? Even if we would then leave less to the children of our personal extended family—our “small” family of God? I cannot answer that question for anyone else, but I believe we have to begin asking that if the Reign of God is as important to us as many of us say it is.

Perhaps there is a “middle way” in this situation. What if, first of all, we invested at least some of our financial assets in community investments—financial institutions that serve poor people and poor communities? Second, we would leave verbal or written instructions that these investments continue to be used in poor communities even after our deaths. But we would also leave instructions to children and family that if a “significant need” (defined as narrowly or broadly as we desired) would arise, the money could be used with our blessing. A “significant need” could be an especially large healthcare or educational cost. The purchase of a second home, however, might not be seen as a “significant need.” Definitions and details would differ from family to family and situation to situation.

The original investment would remain in institutions that serve the poor, though the actual institution might change. Subsequent generations could add to the pot of community investments, creating a family legacy for the poor that would still remain available to family members if significant needs should arise.

In the end, decisions prior to and during retirement for those who hope for the coming Reign of God cannot be handed over without question to our affluent culture’s financial services industry. We have to begin the process of reflecting critically, theologically and biblically on retirement, money and the Reign of God.

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