



Immediate Gratification vs. Deferred Gratification

One of the greatest challenges for all of us is the tension between immediate gratification and deferred gratification. Over the past few generations there has been a substantial shift from a mindset of deferred gratification to almost an obsession with immediate gratification. There are a number of factors that have contributed to this shift in focus; one of the most notable is the advent of easy credit.

In previous generations, families would scrimp and save in order to make a major purchase, but now with easy credit, people can get it now and pay for it later (with a healthy premium known as interest). The media has also contributed greatly to this immediate gratification thinking, with its never ending enticements claiming that you will never be really happy until you buy this product.

Research confirms that savings among Americans is as low as it has ever been, primarily because after paying for all that has been bought on credit there is little, if anything, left over for saving for the future (deferred gratification).

This scenario is all too common among ordinary people, but is there also an inordinate emphasis on the “here and now” as opposed to the future in the lives of wealthy believers? I think the answer is, “yes.” For people of wealth it is not a new phenomenon. Immediate gratification among the rich has been around for centuries.

One of the best examples of this struggle between immediate gratification and deferred gratification can

be seen when a rich, young man approaches Jesus about what is necessary to get to Heaven.

“A ruler questioned Him, saying, ‘Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’ And he said, ‘All these things I have kept from my youth.’ When Jesus heard this, He said to him, ‘One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’” But when he had heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.” (Luke 18:18-23)

If I were to ask what Jesus is calling for this rich, young ruler to do, virtually everyone would say he is to sell all his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor and follow Jesus – completely skipping over a major point in what He told the young man. Look at the statement again. “One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”

Do you see what we always seem to leave out “and you shall have treasure in heaven.” Jesus is not asking this rich young ruler to go and sell all his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor and never see or enjoy them again. Jesus is telling him to trade the temporary immediate gratification of his treasures for the deferred gratification of his treasures for all of eternity. He wasn’t asking him to give up anything, He was just calling for him to send it on ahead to be enjoyed later, forever. He was calling this young man to trade immediate gratification for deferred gratification.

The blessings of deferred gratification should not be new to us as Jesus teaches us this same principle in His Sermon on the Mount. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

When we give while we are “on this side of the grass,” we may be reducing our earthly net worth, but we are simultaneously increasing our eternal net worth – “you will have treasures in Heaven.” These heavenly treasures, whatever exactly they are, will not fluctuate with the rise and fall of the stock market or the economy. They will not be vulnerable to rising or falling interest rates or inflation. We will not need to worry about getting ripped off or making a bad investment choice and maybe losing it all. These heavenly investments that you have sent on ahead are

guaranteed by the Creator of the universe – the One who is in control of all things.

Do those of us who are wealthy find ourselves more like the rich, young ruler with an extreme affection for things than we might like to admit? Are we hesitant to sacrificially give today, because of what it might cost us today in reduced current circumstances, financial capacity or earthly security? Do we walk away from opportunities that Jesus sets before us because we are not willing to send some of the earthly wealth that He has entrusted to us on ahead for our future enjoyment?

If we really believed that what we gave was perishable and temporary and would come back to us later and be imperishable and eternally ours, who in their right mind would not gladly trade temporary, immediate gratification for eternal, deferred gratification?

If we want to learn to live by faith, we need to learn to give by faith. How much have you deposited into your heavenly investment account to date? It will be waiting for you!

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