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#98 Is it ok to be wealthy and go on nice holidays?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

How should Christians handle personal wealth in a way that honours God? Is it wrong to take time for myself and even go on nice holidays? And find out what Tom thinks about the failed European Super League!

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Transcript

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello and welcome to the final show of the year, just in Briley, bringing you the program where I sit down with renowned New Testament scholar, NT Wright. We've been doing this on a more or less weekly basis during the course of 2021, and it's great to know how many new listeners have joined us for the journey.

The program's brought to you in partnership with NT Wright Online and SBCK, Tom's UK Publisher. I'm Premier's Theology and Apologetics Editor. Today's show, believe it or not, 98, number 98, so not long till we hit the big 100 in a couple of weeks time in 2022.

Today on the show, questions on our responsibilities as Christians, how should we handle wealth and poverty? What about the amount of time we give to ourselves? Should we spend on things like holidays? You'll find about Tom's thoughts on football and the proposed European Super League that got abandoned among accusations agreed by the clubs behind it. So, look out for all of that in a moment. Lovely to hear people getting in touch with the show.

Sue wrote in recently to say, "I'm so thankful for the opportunity to gain clarity from Tom Wright's careful explanations, his warm encouragement and exaltation. I think of NT Wright as Christendom's "Bate Hovind, a man with a brilliant mind who has ridden

countless symphonies yet congenately and patiently, explain the how and why of the notes working together. Thanks for all you both contribute to listeners through this podcast.

For a lovely message to end the year with, thank you very much Sue. And if you do enjoy the podcast and have enjoyed it during 2021, why not? Rate and Review as it helps others to discover the show. And if you want to support the show with an end of year gift and help others discover more of Tom's thought and theology into 2022, you can do that from the links with today's show.

We've got some big plans as well for 2022 that I'll tell you about towards the end of today's programme. As ever, you can find more from the show via our webpage, at www.tattestr.com.

[Music] Welcome back to today's show and we're tackling some really practical sorts of questions today on how as Christians we should handle wealth, resources, our own time and that sort of thing.

People often, I think, Tom, feel somewhat guilty, you know, they feel, well, I should always be, you know, working for the kingdom or solving, you know, well poverty or whatever. And maybe feel guilty, you know, when they sit down and watch some TV or even go on holiday or something like that. And these are the practical kind of considerations, aren't they, that people often find as to how to live out their faith in the real world.

Let's start with Ed, who begins with a sporting analogy. You were probably aware of the furore over the European Super League. Do you remember this, Tom? Yes.

The accusations of greed from some of the top clubs who said we're all going to band together and make something super profitable. And Ed says here, the European Super League concept that originally had the support of Arsenal, Manchester United, Liverpool, Chelsea and Tottenham caused a huge public backlash. And while I'm interested to know your thoughts on the Super League, I don't think that question has ever come up on the podcast, I'd also like to know what your thoughts are around mega churches and their place in our global witness to the world, as opposed to smaller community congregations.

And also the prosperity gospel and the idea of church leaders having a great deal of material wealth. So in brief, how should Christians, whether in sport, business church, or other areas of society, handle wealth and poverty in a way that honours God? Well, let's first of all ask what you made of that furore over the Super League, Tom. I mean, the sporting world has transformed, in the course of my lifetime, into an extremely profitable money making business, particularly of course through television, that when I was young, many sports, including rugby union, were completely amateur, and if somebody

was paid even a little bit as a back-hander and then it came out, they would be banned.

And likewise athletics, when I was young, the Olympic Games was entirely amateur. And I remember what happened when rugby union went professional, was that a lot of people in the organisation of the game were making a lot of money through television rights and so on, while the players were getting precisely nothing, except maybe travel expenses and so on. So they all had to have other careers, etc., etc.

And the players just said, "This is ridiculous. We're carving ourselves up and keeping fit and crunching into each other for nothing." And you guys sitting back there smoking your cigars and getting rich on it, and that's just not right. Now, I understand that argument, but then of course as soon as you go there, then it's, "Ah, well, now we can have a better league and a super league and more of this and more of that." Until now, the game is completely different from what it was in the days of my youth.

Now, speaking as a lifelong Newcastle United supporter, who has just recently been both delighted and shocked by a mega takeover by some apparently rather dodgy sources, i.e., Saudi Arabian businessmen, then this raises all sorts of questions which hires a Newcastle supporter or to be worried about. I am a bit worried about it. But I think most of us in Britain just reckon that funny things have happened with the premiership over the last world since the premiership was invented, which is what 20 years or so ago.

And we don't like it, but it's the way it is. And actually, of course, the world has run on greed so much and for so much time that I think the only thing to be said about that is that governments need to look more closely at how appropriately to tax people who seem to be paying themselves or hauling in absurd and outrageous sums of money, so that as we all know in recent years, the rich have got richer and the poor have got poorer, both within first world countries and as between first and third world. Now, I remember it's not that long ago when I heard somebody talking about surplus income and I remember thinking, "I wonder what that is?" Because somebody who had worked partly in the church and partly in the academy, my wife and I never had any surplus income.

The only way we could have all the days was having free ones if I was asked to do some lectures somewhere and then they said, "Bring the family and stay on for a week" or something. That was how we did our family vacations. For much of mine and Maggie's life, we haven't actually even had to face the sorts of decisions that people have to face when they do have somewhat more income from their job or whatever than they actually need for their ordinary living expenses and their ordinary family expenses.

So I'm not very experienced in this, nor have I had the job of advising or pastorally counseling people who do have a lot of money. I have known some very wealthy people in the course of my work and sometimes I've been wonderfully impressed with the way that they have handled that money and have been careful to channel it into all sorts of

good directions, as well as providing for their family and giving family and friends large and fun parties and that sort of thing, which seems to me exactly what in the Bible you regularly have. The beasts which say, "God is good, let's celebrate His goodness to us" because when we are overwhelmed by a sense of world poverty and all the rest of it, it's possible to shrink back in and think that everything about this world is rather sort of dangerous and that we mustn't enjoy it at all and we must apologize for spending money even on a good holiday or a nice meal or whatever, even if it's only once in a while and for a special occasion.

"Oh, should I really be doing this?" And I think the answer is you prayerfully have to think through what is right in your circumstances. You have to be sure that money is not driving you but that you are handling it and that the money that God has given you by whatever means, whether it's inherited or through a job or through a windfall, you know, suddenly somebody gives money to somebody in the church because they like what they're doing, whatever. If that is so, well, think prayerfully about how best to use that.

When I was in Montreal, the cathedral discovered that by developing the land underneath the cathedral into an amazing shopping precinct and by building on another bit of land which they had right by the cathedral, they were going to make a lot of money and to my delight, the first question which was asked in synod was we're going to give a third of this away, where is it going to? That was exactly the right decision and I don't remember how they figured that out but that was a great instinct and said, "Oh, good, we've got all this money." The sense was God is blessing us, we need to be blessing other people, how can we best do that and then how can we resource the work of the church, et cetera, et cetera. So I think it's a very difficult thing. On the one hand, we must at all costs avoid the greed is good mentality because greed is a form of idolatry.

Paul says so in Ephesians, covetousness and so on and we're constantly told, beware of covetousness, beware of the love of money and so on. And you ought to send shivers down our spines when we have a sense of people actually loving money in the sense of, "Wow, I've got this money now, I can make some more and more and more." No, if you've got enough, and there is a nervousness about that because people have just escaped real poverty really are nervous about giving too much away in case there might not be enough to feed the family next week or whatever it may be. So we do have to come to a place of, as it were, reconciliation before God with, yes, we need to do this, but when it comes to things like holidays, of course, some people go in for ridiculous, lavish, great, highly expensive things.

Most of us, I think, realize that particularly in family contexts, we need a break, we need to be refreshed. In the ancient world and up until really early modern world, people would do that by taking one day a week very seriously as a time of real rest and by having seasons as well. And the idea of overwork is a very, mostly, not entirely, but

mostly a very modern thing of people needing to be six days at least in the office and maybe more and maybe working 12 or 14 hours a day or you're not really up for it.

There is a dangerous culture of that. So I'm just walking around. Yes, well, but in many ways you've already helped to help address one of the questions here, Robin Blue Mountains, Australia, who feels a bit guilty about spending money on holidays and had asked, you know, we went on a long way to trip to the UK in France just before COVID struck and it was wonderful, but I did feel a twinge of guilt.

It took us more than a year to save up for it and we were the only ones who benefited from it. But, you know, should people who are devoted to serving Jesus spend money on things like holidays, I can't imagine the disciples ever had the chance to jet off for a nice beach side escape for a couple of weeks. But then, as you've just said, I think, I think, healthily, or maybe helps to address those concerns about prayerfully considering and that we are made to simply be human doings, but there is a place for rest and relaxation.

Yes, yes, of course. And as I say, the modern world puts pressures on us, the like of which our forebears never knew, and the disciples, I'm sure, would never have dreamt of working a 14-hour day in their ordinary day jobs, whether it was fishing or whatever it was, they would have a much more balanced rhythm to their lives. And it's when, only when, really, you get then the Roman Empire with its civil service.

Empars do this to people. Empars say, "We want to expand. We've got to do this, so you're going to have to go and do this, and you're going to have to go and do that." But ordinary people in the ancient world, ordinary people in the Middle Ages in the early modern period would have had a much more reflective and what's the word I'm looking for, a rhythmic cycle to their lives.

And there were the great holidays always, whether it was Christmas or whether it was all Saints Day, which, and I'm recording this just after all, Saints Day, these were public holidays. And people were down tools. They might go to church.

They might have a celebratory meal. And these would be looked forward to at times of rejoicing and time to pause and celebrate the goodness of God. And when you look at the Old Testament and its regulations of the feasts, as well as the fasts, then there are whole seasons, whole weeks of feasting, of going to Jerusalem and having a great party, and all the family is there and why not.

And if somebody had said, "Oh, dear, should we be spending this money?" The answer is yes. We have worked for the previous, however long, and we are going to celebrate the presence of God and his redeeming love for his people and why not. And perhaps if when we're planning a holiday, we actually did it in that mindset.

This is a way of showing our appreciation to the good God who is giving us all this richly

to enjoy. And that sense of the earth is the lords and the fullness thereof. Psalm 24 verse 1, Paul quotes that at the end of 1 Corinthians 10, when he's been talking about what you're allowed to eat and not eat.

And there's that sense of God's lavish bounty. And yes, there is a time for fasting. Yes, there is a time for giving stuff away.

I mean, William Wilberforce, the great reformer, the abolisher of the slave trade. He died quite a poor man because whatever he could, he gave away. That's a wonderful example.

I suspect he was probably well off enough that he could give away a lot and be reduced, but still have enough. I don't think he was actually begging for his living. But there are examples like that which should rock us back a bit.

It isn't a matter of the one who dies with the most money in the bank is the one who wins. No, no, no. Generosity is one count.

God's generosity to us are generosity to the world around. And maybe if you are in the fortunate position of having that kind of spending money, then why not think of someone else who might enjoy a holiday as well who you could bless with it. Exactly.

Yes. I feel like we didn't quite finish off Ed's question though. And that was, when it came to that European Super League, he was sort of comparing it to the way that mega churches exist in comparison to smaller community congregations.

And the fact that the leaders of some of these mega churches can, at least on the face of it, look quite materially well off and so on. So do you think there's a connection there? Should we be concerned that Christians who effectively do, you know, get quite rich from Christian ministry? Yes. Yes.

And clearly that is not something which is, to put it mildly, envisaged in the New Testament. If you look at 2 Corinthians and Paul's self-portrait of his own life as an apostle, obviously not everyone was traveling around and getting shipwrecked and beaten up in the way that Paul was. But he's saying this is the pattern of Christ.

And it seems to me that's the default mode for Christian ministers to expect to be in difficult and awkward positions and to find things being uncomfortable, et cetera. Because if you're taking forward the gospel of the kingdom, you should expect some sort of opposition. I think part of the problem here is the whole culture of the, as you named it before, the prosperity gospel, which seems to me a radical perversion of the message of Deuteronomy.

And often it goes back to that, that if you give stuff to God, then God will richly bless you, et cetera, et cetera. And we have to remember that Deuteronomy sits there in

Scripture alongside the book of Job, alongside Psalm 73, alongside Psalm 88, 44, et cetera, which are saying the rich, the prosperous, the proud, the arrogant, they're getting away with it. And here are my suffering and what's this all about.

In other words, the specific promises to Israel in Deuteronomy about if you obey, you will eat the fat of the land, but if you refuse and rebel, you'll be cast out. Well, fair enough, if in modern America or modern anywhere else, if you follow the way of God, if you work hard, if you keep your promises, if you're faithful to your spouse, if you are doing all that you should do, it may well be that actually people will trust you, people will come to your business, people will regard you as a good neighbor, and that you may quote unquote prosper in terms of things will go well with you financially and so on. It may not.

Things may go horribly wrong. There may be a war, there may be an earthquake, there may be a pandemic. All sorts of things may go badly wrong.

And that doesn't mean that you've misbehaved. It just means that the world is darker than a simplistic reading of Deuteronomy would make out. And certainly, of course, we in Britain have to be careful here because it's easy to knock American mega churches and say, "Oh, it's all just big business and they're all just show men and show women." And we don't like that sort of thing because we British like small drafty churches with only 25 as a people on a Sunday morning.

And I want to say, if God does a new thing and 10,000 people want to come and worship on a Sunday morning, hallelujah, that's amazing. But there are attendant risks, one of which is both the pride and the greed of those in positions of leadership. And we all know there are scandals, both financial scandal scandals and sexual scandals, not to say that there aren't financial and sexual scandals in small churches as well because there are.

So it's not just a problem there. But we have to revive a sense of the people who are handling sacred things, the Word of God and the sacchar of the Christians, you're just like the rest of us. And that is almost the worst thing that could be said of us.

And people ought to be saying, "Wow, that's a different way of doing stuff. How does that work?" And the answer is because of Jesus. That's what we always ought to be aiming at.

Thank you so much, John, for addressing these questions. There was one more from Doug in Kentucky, but I think you've actually addressed it quite well. His question was sort of generally about the idea of taking me time, recharging.

His father was a pastor. Even with a small congregation that was taxing and stressful. But there's always that question, "Well, are we supposed to be denying ourselves following Christ taking up our crosses?" Does that mean we work every hour of the day in that sense? It's a difficult one for me to answer because my family and friends would

probably say I'm a workaholic.

Actually, I'm not. I was bemoaning the fact this morning that my golf clubs have been sitting in the back room here for two years. And since we left Scotland, I haven't had them out once.

I think there is a proper rhythm, a proper balance. At the same time, I react strongly against people who use the thing of needing me time as an excuse for only doing sort of five hours a day work or whatever. That just won't do.

We are called to use the gifts we've been given in God's service and find the right balance in doing that. That will vary from time to time according to family responsibilities, etc. And actually a small congregation.

If you only have 30 or 40 regular church members, you could probably get to know all of them very well. And that would be time consuming. If you have 4,000 members in your congregation, you know perfectly well you can't get to know them all.

So maybe that would take the heat off and you'd have to appoint other leaders to help you with that. So it's a constant struggle about our personalities, about the particular situation, about our family needs, about the different seasons and rhythms of life. And we've just got to be wise about it.

Prayerfully wise is the only way to go. So often the answer to many of these pastoral questions isn't it? It is. Thank you very much, Tom.

I hope you get some rest and relaxation today at some point. But it's been great spending a little time with you again on Today's Show. And we'll see you next time.

[Music] Thanks for listening today to our end of year's show. And we've much more to bring you in 2022. We'll be launching Premier Unbelievable as a wider theology and apologetics ministry.

Including Ask NT Right, but also our other programs, the CS Lewis Podcast with Alice McGrath, The Unbelievable Show. And many more resources that we're planning to launch, including an Ask NT Right Anything YouTube channel. We'll also have a new website to tell you about as well.

Lots of exciting plans. If you want to join us and help us in making these plans a reality and reach more people with thinking thoughtful Christian content that reaches both skeptics and Christians, then do support us if you can. An end of year gift would be most welcome to help others to discover Tom's thought and theology.

The links for that are with today's show. For now, thank you very much for being with us in 2021. I wish you a happy new year and I'll see you in 2022.

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