

Wealth: a Blessing, a Temptation or a Sacrament?

Hardly anyone wants to be poor; most would like to be rich. Wealth brings power, standing in the community, increased leisure, and freedom from worry—so it is thought. Not surprisingly in the richest part of the world many Christians are preaching a “prosperity gospel”—that faithfulness to Jesus will lead to personal wealth. Tragically, this distorted message is now taking root in some of the poorest countries of the world. Is wealth a sign of God’s blessing? Is money the main measure of wealth? Does the Bible endorse wealth, promote it or exclude it? How are we to respond in spirit and action? Our souls hang on our answers to these questions.

Wealth as Power

Principalities and powers form an invisible background to our life in this world. One of those powers is money. *Mammon*, as it is sometimes called, comes from an Aramaic word *amen*, which means firmness or stability. It is not surprising that a common English term is “the almighty dollar.”

As an alternative god, mammon inspires devotion, induces guilt, claims to give us security, and seems to be omnipresent—a godlike thing (Foster, 28). It is invested with spiritual power that can enslave us, replacing single-minded love for God and neighbour with buying-selling relationships in which even the soul can be bought (Rev 18:11–13).

We hear two voices of Scripture: one blessing the rich, the other cursing; one declaring that wealth is a sign of God’s redemptive love to make us flourish on earth, the other declaring that “wicked mammon” (Lk 16:9), usually gained at the expense of the poor, is an alternative god. We need to look at each of these in turn.

Wealth as Blessing

The idea that wealth is a sign of God’s blessing (Deut 30:9; Prov 22:4) is illustrated by the lives of Abraham, Job, and Solomon. In contrast to those who praised the Lord because they were rich (Zech 11:5) but were soon to be judged, it is noteworthy that each of these exemplars depended on God rather than their wealth (Gen 13:8–18; Job 1:21). The wise person in the Proverbs is essentially a better-off person with servants—



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August 2001—VOCATIO • 11

equivalent to our modern household machines—neither fabulously wealthy nor living in grinding poverty. Some wealth is a good thing; too much or too little would be alienating from God (Prov 30:9). So the wise person prays, “give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread” (30:8).

The “prosperity gospel” now being preached world-wide is not satisfied with a comfortable existence or merely praying for our daily bread. We can critique it on at least three grounds. First, it encourages perverted motives: focusing upon profitability. Second, it misinterprets God’s deepest concerns for us: material well-being rather than total well-being. Third, it misinterprets God’s promises to Israel as immediately applicable to Christians without being fulfilled and transfigured in Christ (compare 1 Tim 6:3–10). Nevertheless, the Old Testament clearly presents wealth as a means of God’s grace.

Wealth as Temptation

Even the Old Testament warns that the pursuit of wealth for its own sake is vain and harmful leading to self-destructive autonomy (Prov 30:8; 23:4–5; 28:20; Ps 49:6–7; Prov 30:8–9; Hos 12:8). Wealth is an *illusionary* security and will not satisfy (Eccl 5:10; Ps 49:6–7).

Instead of becoming stewards of wealth for the benefit of the poor (Prov 31:5,8,9), we are tempted to use what wealth we have to dominate others (Amos 2:6)—a subject taken up by John Chrysostom in his sermons on Luke 16. Just as the brothers of Joseph enjoyed their fine meal and did not “grieve over the ruin of Joseph” (Amos 6:6; Gen 37:25), very few wealthy people have been able to resist becoming desensitized to the poor.

Wealth as Sacrament

The Old Testament affirms that God is the true owner, proprietor and giver of wealth (Prov 3:16; 1 Sam 2:7–8; Eccl 5:19; Hos 2:8). We are merely stewards (Prov 3:9).

But the fact that God gives wealth, indiscriminately it seems, produces what Jacques Ellul calls “the scandal of wealth.” God sometimes gives wealth to the wicked (Ps 73:12–13; Ps 62:10; Job 21:7–21). Why would God do this if wealth were a sign of being blessed? Contrary to the common argument that wealth is the result of “our hard-earned labour” or “our faithfulness,” the Old Testament takes a more sacramental view.

Wealth is a free gift of God, a sign of God’s grace given generously and without merit. Further, wealth points to the final consummation when our wealth will be taken into the Holy City (Isa 60:3; Rev 21:24–26—see Ellul, 66).

Wealth in the New Testament

When we turn to the New Testament we discover that “Jesus Christ strips wealth of the sacramental character that we have recognized in the Old Testament” (Lk 6:30; 12:33; Mt 6:24; Ellul, 70). The rich fool trusts in his barns and investments and is not ready to meet God, nor is known by God. The rich already have their comfort (Lk 6:24); they have nothing to look forward to. The rich young man must give everything away and follow Jesus. True wealth is not the accumulation of houses, farms, jewels and money but something more.

Though these passages seem to argue for an anti-wealth New Testament ethic, it is not that simple. Jesus affirmed the extravagant and wasteful display of love when the woman poured perfume on his head: “She has done a beautiful thing to me” (Mk 14:1–11). And Jesus himself accepted the generous financial support of women with means (Lk 8:4). How are we to resolve this tension?

Heavenly Wealth

Unquestionably many of Jesus’ negative statements about the rich and the wealthy are addressed to the spiritual malady fed by material abundance. “Be on your guard

against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Lk 12:15; cf Jas 5:1-6). As an alternative god, wealth must be repudiated, if necessary by giving it all away (compare Lk 16:13). Ultimate security and blessing cannot be found in the accumulation of things (compare Mt 6:19).

At this point Scripture now gives us a harmonious, though disturbing, single message. Possessions are solely and simply a matter of stewardship, not ownership, and this life's assets are to be used with a heavenly orientation. What are these heavenly treasures and how do they relate to everyday wealth, or the lack of it?

We gain an important paradigmatic perspective on this question from the Old Testament. There the inheritance received by Israel through the promise was a three-fold blessing: the presence of God ("I will be with you"), the people ("you will be my people; I will be your God"), and a place to belong ("the land will be yours"). What we are given "in Christ" more than fulfills the promises made to Abraham and his descendants. God is with us in an empowering way through the Spirit. In Christ we experience peoplehood, a new family with hundreds of brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, children and lands (Mt 19:29; Mk 10:29-30). The promise of a place is fulfilled doubly: first in true fellowship here on earth through a full sharing of life with other believers, and, second, in the place which Christ has prepared for us (Jn 14:2) in the new heaven and new earth, the city of God (Heb 11:13-16). Presence, peoplehood, and a place—these are true wealth for the Christian. Money in the bank, ownership certificates of bonds, and title deeds to properties are only an optional extra to this wealth. But, still, what are we to do with the temporal wealth God has entrusted to us?

Stewards of Wealth

Stewardship is much more than giving

money to the church or to charities. It is caring for God's creation, managing God's household, bringing God's justice. Old Testament social legislation pointed to the coming (and present) kingdom of God by principles that were economically gracious: the provision for the gleaning of the poor by not harvesting everything one could (Ruth); the provision of the Sabbath for the land and for indebted people; the cancellation of debts with Israelites and resident aliens in the seventh year—thus stressing neighbour love (Deut 15:1-6); the command to lend without interest to one's neighbour (Deut 15:7-11); the release of Israelite slaves on the seventh year (Deut 15:12-18); the provision of Jubilee by which the hopelessly indebted could start again (Lev 25); the command that kings and leaders must not enrich themselves by that leadership but should live simply as brother-leaders (Deut 17:16-20).

While these commands are not to be slavishly followed under the circumstances of the New Covenant, they reflect a minimum standard for economic life for people "in Christ." Christian stewardship cares for the earth, releases debts, empowers the poor, brings dignity to the marginalized and equalizes opportunity. But there is also direct giving.

Probably no other single factor indicates our true spirituality more than what we do with the wealth we have, and in which spirit we share it. Christian giving is marked by hilarity (Lk 6:38; 2 Cor 9:7) that takes us beyond a calculated tithe and reflects the generosity of God. The Lord might well ask in this area as in others, "What more do you do than the pagans who know not God? And why?"

First, we are to invest primarily in people, especially the poor. The only treasure we can take from this life to the next is the relationships we have made through Jesus (Lk 16:9). The treasures in heaven are relationships that have been formed through the gracious use of money, the

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Continued on page 16...

August 2001—VOCATIO • 13

Continued from page 13...

investment of the things of this life in a world without end, often in the context of everyday work.

Second, we are to give away wisely and carefully what we can. It was John Wesley who advised: "Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can." But the giving must take us beyond merely relieving the symptoms of people's distress through giving alms. Almsgiving may be a perversion of giving because, as Ellul (112) shows, it binds the recipient in an obligatory relationship, demands gratitude and does not usually address the reasons behind the person's poverty. So individuals and churches should invest in people and causes that grapple with the systemic powers that hold people in bondage to a cycle of poverty. There may be no greater area of discernment needed for the Christian in everyday life than to decide when, where, and how to give money away.

Third, some form of voluntary impoverishment is required of all followers of Jesus. It is not sufficient to say, as many do, "The rich young ruler (Mt 19:16-30) was a special case." We are all in need of profaning the false god of mammon and relativizing wealth in this life as something less than full treasure in heaven. There are several dimensions of voluntary impoverishment. We start by relinquishing ownership to God. We practise continuous thanksgiving, which is the only way to become content whatever our circumstances (Phil 4:12-13). We should pay our taxes with a generous heart, knowing that some of this is being used to provide services and care for the poor and disadvantaged. We should give directly to the poor with no strings attached as personally as possible (Lk 16:9; Stevens, 159-165). We should give to God's global work (2 Cor 8-9). Finally we should be ready, if so commanded by Christ, to sell all.

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16 • VOCATIO—August 2001

Throughout the New Testament, writers emphasized the interiority of giving: freedom from manipulation and covetousness, motivated by true love for God and neighbour. As Jacques Ellul notes, "Ultimately, we follow what we have loved most intensely either into eternity or into death" (Matt 6:21; Ellul, 83). ☩

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