



Study Questions

1. Do most Christians you know think that their faith in Christ has anything to do with their economic relationships with others in the worldwide body of Christ? How does the Bible challenge their assumptions?
2. What are the basic implications of the jubilee and the sabbatical release of debts for today?
3. What would be the best words to describe the economic sharing occurring in the earliest church at Jerusalem?
4. What are the implications of Paul's intercontinental offering for the global church today?
5. What does the Bible tell us about economic justice in society?

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Thinking Biblically About Property and Possessions

In the house of the righteous there is much treasure. (Prov. 15:6)

Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. (Prov. 23:4 NIV)



Tell me what you think about money," Billy Graham says, "and I can tell you what you think about God."¹ What is our attitude about money telling the world about our belief in God? Are we in agreement with God on the subject? Do we even know what God says about it? What does God say about real estate? The poor? The rich? Does money matter to God?

Private Property

The Ten Commandments sanction private property implicitly and explicitly.² God forbids stealing, indeed even coveting the house, land, or animals of one's neighbors (Ex. 20:15, 17; Deut. 5:19, 21; also Deut. 27:17; Prov. 22:28). Jesus commanded his followers to give to the poor and to loan money even when there was no reasonable hope of repayment (Matt. 6:2-4; 5:42; Luke 6:34-35). The ability to make loans depends on the possession of property and money, so Jesus must have assumed such were legitimate. His disciple Simon Peter owned a house that Jesus visited frequently (Mark 1:29); in fact, those who owned houses had an opportunity to provide hospitality to God's servants (Luke 10:5-7).

Not even the dramatic economic sharing in the first Jerusalem church led

to a rejection of private ownership (see chapter 4). Throughout biblical revelation the legitimacy of private property is constantly affirmed.³

Absolute Rights

But the right of private property is not absolute. From the perspective of biblical revelation, property owners are not free to seek their own profit without regard for the needs of their neighbors.

Some modern folk disagree. They think that the right of private ownership is absolute, and they argue that Adam Smith proves them right. Smith published a book in 1776 that has profoundly shaped Western society in the past two centuries.⁴ Smith argued that an invisible hand would guarantee the good of all if each person would pursue his or her own economic self-interest in the context of a competitive society. Supply and demand for goods and services were to be the sole, or at least primary, determinants of prices and wages. If the law of supply and demand reigns, and if all seek their own advantage within a competitive, nonmonopolistic economy, the good of society will be served. Adam Smith might not agree fully, but modern advocates of pure *laissez-faire* economics conclude that owners of land and capital therefore have not only the right but also the obligation to seek as much profit as possible, and they reject virtually all government intervention in the economy as a violation of the absolute right of private property.

Such a viewpoint may be attractive to the economically successful. Indeed, *laissez-faire* economics has been espoused by some as the Christian economics.⁵ In reality, however, it is, to a substantial degree, a product of the Enlightenment.⁶ It reflects a modern, secularized perspective rather than the biblical truth that God is Lord even of economics. That is not to say that socialist economies are better than market economies. A basic market framework plus the right kind of private and governmental activity to empower the poor is the best alternative known today (see chapters 8 and 11). But that is very different from a pure *laissez-faire* or libertarian approach that rejects almost all government intervention in the economy.

The pure *laissez-faire* and the pagan Roman attitude toward private property parallel each other. Carl F. H. Henry, former editor of *Christianity Today*, contrasts the biblical and Roman understandings: "The Roman or

Justinian view derives ownership from natural right; it defines ownership as the individual's unconditional and exclusive power over property. It implies an owner's right to use property as he pleases . . . irrespective of the will of others." Henry admits that this pagan view "still remains the silent presupposition of much of the free world's common practice today."⁷

Absolute Owner

According to biblical faith, Yahweh is Lord of all things. He is the sovereign Lord of history. Economics is not a neutral, secular sphere independent of his Lordship. Economic activity, like every other area of life, is to be subject to God's will and revelation.

How does the biblical view that Yahweh is Lord of all of life require a modification of the common belief that the right of private property is absolute and inviolable? The Bible insists that God alone has an absolute right to property. Furthermore, it teaches that this Absolute Owner places significant limitations on how his people are to acquire and use his property.

The psalmist summarized the biblical view of Yahweh's absolute ownership: "The earth is the LORD's and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1). "Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine," God informed Job (Job 41:11; see also Ps. 50:12; Deut. 26:10; Ex. 19:5). It is precisely because absolute ownership of the land rested with Yahweh rather than the Israelite farmers that God could command the return of the land every fiftieth year: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (Lev. 25:23).

People Principle

As absolute owner, God places limitations on the acquisition and use of property. According to the Old Testament, "the right to property was in principle subordinated to the obligation to care for the weaker members of society."⁸ That is the clear implication of the legislation on the jubilee, the sabbatical year, gleaning, and interest (as discussed in chapter 4). Property owners did not have the right to harvest everything in their fields. They were to leave some for the poor. When an Israelite farmer purchased land, he really only bought the use of the land until the year of jubilee (Lev.

25:15-17). Indeed, even the right to use the land for the intervening years was not absolute. If a relative of the seller appeared, the purchaser had to sell the land back promptly. Or if the seller recovered financial solvency, he had the right to buy back his land immediately (vv. 25-28). The purchaser's right of ownership was subordinate to the original owner's right to possess his ancestral land.

God wants all people to have access to the productive resources to be able to earn a living. Justice for everyone, particularly the disadvantaged, takes precedence over the rights of the person able to pay the market price for land. Thus, the rights of the poor and disadvantaged to possess the means to earn a decent living take precedence over the rights of the more prosperous to make a profit.

At the same time, biblical principles by no means support a communist economic system. Biblical principles point in the direction of decentralized private ownership that allows families to control their economic destinies. As stewards of the land and other economic resources that belong ultimately to God, they have the responsibility and privilege of earning their own way and sharing generously with others. This kind of decentralized economic system empowers all people to be coworkers with God. It also protects everyone against centralized economic power that might threaten freedom and promote totalitarianism (as when the state owns the means of production or when small groups of elites control huge multinational corporations).

The Old Testament attitude toward property stems from the high view of persons held in Israel. Old Testament scholars have pointed out that Israel, unlike other ancient civilizations such as Babylon, Assyria, and Egypt, considered all citizens equal before the law. In other societies, social status (royal official, poor man, priest) determined how a person's offense was judged and punished. In Israel all citizens were equal before the law. This high view of persons made property less important.

Whereas in neighboring states property offenses such as theft or robbery were frequently punished with death, this was not the case under God's law. The life of even the most degraded person is worth more than the most valuable possession.⁹

The case of slaves illustrates the respect for persons. All other ancient civilizations viewed slaves as mere property. Owners were free to treat slaves according to their whims. But in Israel the slave was a person, not a piece of

property. Specific laws guaranteed certain rights to slaves (Ex. 21:20, 26-28; Deut. 23:15-16). Walter Eichrodt says, "The fact that, in accordance with God's order, the life of every individual, even of the poorest, is of greater value than all material things—this fact represents an insurmountable stumbling block to all economic developments which make profits for the few out of human misery."¹⁰

The Danger of Riches

An abundance of possessions can easily lead us to forget that God is the source of all good. We trust in ourselves and our wealth rather than in the Almighty. When we focus on ourselves, we forget not only God but also the people he created. In our self-absorption, we are fooled by the pleasure of possessing.

Most Christians in the Northern Hemisphere simply do not believe Jesus' teaching about the deadly danger of possessions. Jesus warned that possessions are highly dangerous—so dangerous, in fact, that it is extremely difficult for a rich person to be a Christian at all: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:25 NRSV). Christians in the United States live in one of the richest societies in the history of the world, surrounded by a billion desperately needy neighbors and another two billion who are poor. We are far more interested in whether the economy grows than in whether the lot of the poor improves. We insist on more and more, and reason that if Jesus was so un-American that he considered riches dangerous, then we must ignore or reinterpret his message.

Forgetting God

But he said it all the same. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the terrible warning: "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" (Luke 18:24; Matt. 19:23; Mark 10:23). The context of this saying shows why possessions are dangerous. Jesus spoke these troubling words to his disciples immediately after the rich young man had decided to cling to his wealth rather than follow Jesus (Luke 18:18-23). Riches are dangerous because their seductive power frequently persuades us to reject Jesus and his kingdom.

The sixth chapter of 1 Timothy reinforces Jesus' teaching. Christians should be content with the necessities of food and clothing (v. 8). Why? "Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains" (vv. 9-10 NRSV).

A desire for riches prompts some people to do almost anything for the sake of economic success. The result, Scripture warns, is anguish now and damnation later.

That economic success tempts people to forget God was already a biblical theme in the Old Testament. Before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, God warned them about the danger of riches.

Take heed lest you forget the LORD your God . . . lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God . . . Beware lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth." (Deut. 8:11-14, 17)

Fighting Wars

Not only do possessions tempt us to forsake God, but the pursuit of wealth often results in war and neglect of the poor. "What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? . . . You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war" (James 4:1-2). A quick glance through world history confirms this tragic truth.

Forgetting the Poor

Instead of fostering more compassion toward the poor, riches often harden the hearts of the wealthy. Scripture is full of instances in which rich persons are unconcerned about the poor at their doorstep (Isa. 5:8-10; Amos 6:4-7;

Luke 16:19-31; James 5:1-5). Dom Helder Câmara, a Brazilian archbishop, who devoted his life to seeking justice for the poor, makes the point forcefully: "I used to think, when I was a child, that Christ might have been exaggerating when he warned about the dangers of wealth. Today I know better. I know how very hard it is to be rich and still keep the milk of human kindness. Money has a dangerous way of putting scales on one's eyes, a dangerous way of freezing people's hands, eyes, lips, and hearts."¹¹

Possessions are dangerous because they often encourage unconcern for the poor, because they lead to strife and war, and because they seduce people into forsaking God. Even more, they put people in the never-ending loop of covetousness.

Coveting Without End

The use of the word *covetousness* (which occurs nineteen times in the New Testament) reflects the biblical understanding of the dangers of riches. The Greek word *pleonexia* (translated "covetousness" or "greed") means "striving for material possessions."¹²

Jesus' Parable of the Rich Fool vividly portrays the nature of covetousness. When a man came running to Jesus for help in obtaining his share of a family inheritance, Jesus refused to consider the case. Perceiving the real problem, Jesus instead warned of the danger of covetousness. "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed [*pleonexia*]; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15 NRSV). Knowing that the man was obsessed with material things, Jesus told him a story about a rich fool.

The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God. (Luke 12:16-21 NRSV)

The rich fool is the epitome of the covetous person. He has a greedy compulsion to acquire more and more possessions, even though he does not need them. And his phenomenal success at piling up more and more property and wealth leads to the blasphemous conclusion that material possessions can satisfy all his needs. From the divine perspective, this attitude is sheer madness. He is a raving fool.

One cannot read the Parable of the Rich Fool without thinking of our own society. We madly multiply sophisticated gadgets, bigger houses, fancier cars, and fashionable clothes—not because such things truly enrich our lives but because we are driven by an obsession for more and more. Covetousness, a striving for more and more material possessions, has become a cardinal vice of modern civilization.

The New Testament has a great deal to say about covetousness. In its essence, it is idolatry. Scripture teaches that greedy persons must be expelled from the church. Certainly no covetous person will inherit the kingdom. Giving people over to their covetousness is divine punishment for sin. In Romans 1, Paul indicates that God sometimes punishes sin by letting sinners experience the ever more destructive consequences of their continuing rebellion against God. "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, . . . murder, strife, deceit" (Rom. 1:28-29). Covetousness is one of the sins with which God punishes our rebellion. The Parable of the Rich Fool suggests how the punishment works. Since we are made for communion with the Creator, we cannot obtain genuine fulfillment when we seek it primarily in material possessions. Hence we seek ever more frantically and desperately for more houses and bigger barns. Eventually we worship our possessions. As Paul indicates, covetousness becomes idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5).

Christians today are not at all surprised that Paul urged the Corinthians to excommunicate a church member living with his father's wife (1 Cor. 5:1-5). But we quietly overlook the fact that Paul, in the same paragraph, also urged them not to associate or even eat meals with those who claim to be Christians but are guilty of greed.

Are we not guilty of greed when we demand an ever-higher standard of living while neglecting millions of children who are starving to death each year? Is it not time for the church to begin applying church discipline to

those guilty of this sin?²³ Would it not be more biblical to apply church discipline to people whose greedy acquisitiveness has led to "financial success" than to elect them to the board of elders?

Such action may be the last means we have of communicating the biblical warning that greedy persons will not inherit the kingdom. "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, nor the greedy [the covetous], nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9-10 NIV). Covetousness is just as sinful as idolatry and adultery.

Another unambiguous statement about covetousness, or greed, appears in Ephesians: "Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ" (5:5 NRSV). These biblical passages should drive us all to our knees. I am afraid that I have been repeatedly and sinfully covetous. The same is true of the vast majority of the Christians who read this book.

Possessions lead to a multitude of sins, including idolatry. Christians today desperately need to turn away from their covetous civilization's grasping materialism.

The Ring and the Beloved

Yes, possessions are dangerous. But they are not innately evil.²⁴ Biblical revelation begins with creation. And created things, God said, are good (Gen. 1).

Biblical faith knows nothing of the ascetic notion that forsaking food, possessions, or sex is inherently virtuous. To be sure, these created goods are, as St. Augustine said, only rings from our Beloved. They are not the Beloved himself. Sometimes particular circumstances—such as an urgent mission or the needs of the poor—may require their renunciation. But these things are part of God's good creation. Like the ring given by the beloved, they are signs of God's love. If we treasure them as good tokens of his affection, instead of mistaking them for the Beloved himself, they are marvelous gifts that enrich our lives.

God's provision for Israel's use of the tithe symbolizes the scriptural perspective (Deut. 14:22-27). Every third year the tithe was given to the poor. In

the other years, however, the people were to go to the place of worship and have a fantastic feast. They were to have a great big, joyful celebration! "Before the LORD your God, in the place which he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstlings of your herd and flock" (v. 23). Those who lived far from the place of worship could sell the tithe of their produce and take the money with them. Listen to God's directions for the party: "Spend the money for whatever you desire, oxen, or sheep, or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves; and you shall eat there before the LORD your God and rejoice" (v. 26). God wants his people to celebrate the glorious goodness of creation.

Jesus' example fits in perfectly with the Old Testament view. Certainly he said a great deal about the danger of possessions. But he was not an ascetic. He was happy to join in marriage celebrations and even contribute the beverage (John 2:1-11). He dined with the prosperous. Apparently he was sufficiently fond of feasts and celebrations that his enemies could spread the false rumor that he was a glutton and a drunkard (Matt. 11:19). Christian asceticism has a long history, but Jesus' life undermines its basic assumptions.

A short passage in 1 Timothy succinctly summarizes the biblical view: "In the latter days people will forbid marriage and advocate abstinence from foods. But this is misguided, 'for everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving'" (4:4).

The biblical teaching on the goodness of creation does not contradict the other biblical themes. God's people must practice self-denial to aid the poor and share the gospel. But we must maintain a biblical balance. It is not because food, clothes, wealth, and property are inherently evil that Christians today must lower their standard of living. It is because others are starving. Creation is good. But the one who gave us this gorgeous token of affection has asked us to share it with our sisters and brothers.

Righteousness and Riches

If we respect God and people, understand the dangers of riches, and delight in the goodness of creation, will prosperity follow? Does our obedience guarantee it? Is it true that "in the house of the righteous there is much treasure" (Prov. 15:6)? Is the reverse also true? Are riches a sure sign of righteousness?

Biblical Balance

The Bible certainly does not romanticize poverty. It is a curse (2 Sam. 3:29; Ps. 109:8-11). Sometimes it is the result of sin, but not always. A fundamental point of the book of Job is that poverty and suffering are not always due to disobedience. In fact, they can be redemptive (Isa. 53). Even so, poverty and suffering are not inherently good. They are tragic distortions of God's good creation.

Prosperity and wealth, on the other hand, are good and desirable. God repeatedly promised his people Israel that obedience would bring abundant prosperity in a land flowing with milk and honey (Deut. 6:1-3). "All these blessings shall come upon you . . . if you obey the voice of the LORD your God . . . And the LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your body, and in the fruit of your cattle, and in the fruit of your ground" (Deut. 28:2, 11; see also 7:12-15). That God frequently rewards obedience with material abundance is a clear teaching of Scripture.

But the threat of a curse always accompanied the promise of blessing (Deut. 6:14-15; 8:11-20; 28:15-68). One of God's most frequent commands to his people was to feed the hungry and to seek justice for the poor (see chapters 3-4). For repeatedly ignoring this command, Israel experienced God's curse. Many rich people in the days of Amos and Isaiah were rich, not because of divine blessing, but because of sinful oppression of the poor. God consequently destroyed the nation.

More biblical texts warn of God's punishment of those who neglect or oppress the poor than tell us that material abundance results from obedience.¹⁵ The two statements, however, are not contradictory. Both are true. It is the biblical balance that we need.

The Bible does teach that God rewards obedience with prosperity. But it denies the converse. It is a heresy, particularly common in rich nations, to think that wealth and prosperity are always a sure sign of righteousness. They may be the result of sin and oppression, as in the case of Israel (see chapter 3). The crucial test is whether the prosperous are obeying God's command to bring justice to the oppressed.¹⁶ If they are not, they are living in damnable disobedience to God. On biblical grounds, therefore, one can be sure that prosperity in the context of injustice results from oppression rather than obedience and that it is not a sign of righteousness.

The connection between righteousness, prosperity, and concern for the

poor is explicitly taught in Scripture. The picture of the good wife in Proverbs 31 provides one beautiful illustration. This woman is a diligent businessperson who buys fields and engages in trade (vv. 14, 16, 18). She is a righteous woman who fears the Lord (v. 30). Her obedience and diligence clearly bring prosperity. But material possessions do not harden her heart against the poor: "She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy" (v. 20). Psalm 112 is equally explicit: "Happy are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments. . . . Wealth and riches are in their houses, . . . they are gracious, merciful, and righteous. It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice. . . . They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor" (vv. 1, 3-5, 9 NRSV).

The righteous person shares generously with the poor. She works to establish justice for the oppressed. That kind of life is a sign that one's prosperity results from obedience rather than oppression.

God wills prosperity with justice. As John V. Taylor has pointed out so beautifully, the biblical norm for material possessions is "sufficiency."⁷⁷ Proverbs 30:8-9 is a marvelous summary: "Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, 'Who is the LORD?' or lest I be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God."

Rich Christians must be careful not to distort the biblical teaching that God sometimes rewards obedience with material abundance. Wealthy persons who make Christmas baskets and give them to relief agencies have not satisfied God's demand. God wills justice for the poor, not occasional charity. And justice means things like the jubilee and the sabbatical remission of debts. It means economic structures that guarantee all people access to the productive resources needed to earn a decent living. Prosperity without that kind of biblical concern for justice unambiguously signifies disobedience.

Pious Poor

The Old Testament teaches that material possessions sometimes result from divine blessing. But is this view compatible with Jesus' saying: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20)? Does Jesus consider poverty itself a virtue? Furthermore, how can one reconcile the Lucan ver-

sion of this beatitude with Matthew's version: "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3)?

The development of the idea of the "pious poor" in the centuries just prior to Christ helps answer these questions. Already in the Psalms the poor were often identified as the special objects of God's favor and protection precisely because they were oppressed by the wicked rich (9:18; 10:1-2).¹⁸ When Greece and then Rome conquered Palestine, they forced Hellenistic culture and values on the Jews. Those who remained faithful to Yahweh often suffered financially. Thus the term *poor* came to be used to describe faithful Jews.

It was virtually equivalent to pious, God fearing and godly, and reflects a situation where the rich were mainly those who had sold out to the incoming culture and had allowed their religious devotion to become corrupted by the new ways. If the poor were the pious, the faithful and largely oppressed, the rich were the powerful, ungodly, worldly, even apostate.¹⁹

In such a setting the righteous are often poor and hungry, not just "in spirit" but materially. Matthew has not "spiritualized" Jesus' words. He has simply captured another aspect of Jesus' original meaning. Jesus was talking about those faithful persons who so hungered for righteousness that they sacrificed even their material prosperity when that became necessary. Jesus did not mean that poverty and hunger are desirable in themselves. But in a sinful world where, frequently, success and prosperity are possible only if one transgresses God's law, poverty and hunger are indeed a blessing. The kingdom is for precisely such people.

Jesus' comment in Mark 10:29-30 adds further clarification. He promised that those who forsake all for the kingdom will receive a hundred-fold even in this life. He even included houses and lands, part of the good creation intended for our enjoyment. In the same sentence, however, he also promised persecution. Sometimes—perhaps most of the time—the wicked, powerful, and rich will persecute those who dare to follow Jesus' teaching without compromise. Hunger and poverty sometimes result. In such a time poor and hungry disciples are indeed blessed.

In our day some who have dared to preach and live what the Bible teaches

about the poor and possessions have experienced terrible persecution. Christians in Latin America have experienced torture, some even death, because they identified with the poor.

Carefree Living

Most of us, however, face far more subtle pressures. Society's prevailing materialism mocks those who try to follow Jesus' carefree attitude toward possessions. Imagine the social disapproval that would descend upon anyone who suggested that Jesus' words should guide the advertising business or even church construction.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. (Luke 12:22-31 NRSV; see also 2 Cor. 9:8-11)

Jesus' words are anathema both to Marxists and to certain kinds of capitalists: to Marxists because they worship mammon by claiming that economic forces are the ultimate causal factors in history; to some capitalists because they worship mammon by idolizing economic efficiency and success as the highest goods.²⁰ Indeed, at another level, Jesus' words are anathema to the ordinary, comfortable Christian. In fact, I must confess that I cannot read them without an underlying sense of uneasiness. The beauty and appeal

of Luke 12:22-31 always overwhelm me. But the passage also reminds me that I have not, in spite of continuing struggle and effort, attained the kind of carefree attitude Jesus depicts.

The Secret

What is the secret of such carefree living? First, many people cling to their possessions instead of sharing them because they are worried about the future. But is not such an attitude finally unbelief? If we really believe that God is who Jesus said he is, then we can begin to live without anxiety for the future. Jesus taught us that God is our loving Father. That is why we can call him *abba*, a tender, intimate word like *papa* (Mark 14:36). If we really believe that the almighty Creator and Sustainer of the cosmos is our loving *papa*, then we can begin to cast aside anxiety about earthly possessions.

Second, such carefree living presupposes an unconditional commitment to Jesus as Lord. We must genuinely want to seek first the kingdom of heaven. Jesus was blunt. We cannot serve God and possessions. "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24). Mammon is not some mysterious pagan God. The word *mammon* is simply the Aramaic word for wealth or property.²¹ Like the rich young ruler and Zacchaeus, we must decide between Jesus and riches. Like the merchant in Jesus' parable, we must decide between the kingdom of heaven and our affluent life: "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45-46; see also v. 44). Either Jesus and his kingdom matter so much that we are ready to sacrifice everything else, including our possessions, or we are not serious about Jesus.

Its Sacrifice

If Jesus is truly Lord and if we trust in a loving heavenly Father, then we can courageously live without anxiety about possessions. That kind of carefree unconcern for possessions, however, is not merely an inner spiritual attitude. It involves action. Immediately following the moving statement about the

carefree life of the ravens and lilies, Jesus says, "Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail . . . For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:33-34).

If there are poor people who need assistance, Jesus' carefree disciple will help—even if that means selling possessions. People are vastly more important than property. The "laying up [of] treasure in heaven" is accomplished by helping others. "In Jewish literature, the good deeds of a religious person are often described as treasures stored up in heaven."²² One stores up treasure in heaven by doing righteousness on earth. And aiding the poor is one of the most basic acts of righteousness. Jesus does not mean that we earn salvation by assisting the needy. But he does mean to urge his followers—out of gratitude for God's forgiving grace—to be so unconcerned with property that they gladly sell it to aid the poor and oppressed. Such activity is an integral part of living with joyful unconcern for possessions.

But a difficult question remains. Did Jesus mean that we should sell *all* our possessions? How literally should we understand what he said in Luke 6:30: "Give to every one who begs from you, and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again"?

Jesus sometimes engaged in typical Jewish hyperbole to make a point. He hardly meant in Luke 14:26 that one must actively hate father and mother in order to be his disciple. But we have become so familiar with Jesus' words, so accustomed to compromising their call to unconditional commitment and radical discipleship, that we weaken his real intent. What 99 percent of North Americans need to hear 99 percent of the time is this: "Give to every one who begs from you," and "sell your possessions." It is certainly true that Jesus' followers continued to own some private property. But Jesus clearly taught that the kind of substantial sharing he desired would involve selling possessions. His first followers at Jerusalem took him seriously. If rich Christians today want to experience Jesus' carefree outlook on property and possessions, they will need to do the same.

Other parts of the New Testament continue the same theme. Bishops must not be lovers of money (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7). Deacons likewise dare not be "greedy for gain" (1 Tim. 3:8). In many churches today, "success" in business is one of the chief criteria for selection to the church board. Is that

not a blatant reversal of biblical teaching on the importance of possessions? Even those who are rich should be careful not to set their hope in "uncertain riches." Instead, they should trust in God and share generously (1 Tim. 6:17-18). "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never fail you nor forsake you'" (Heb. 13:5). Our future is secure not because of our possessions but because it rests in the hands of a loving, omnipotent Father. If we truly trust in him and are unconditionally submitted to his Lordship, we can confidently imitate Jesus' carefree unconcern for property and possessions.

In a consumer society that increasingly measures a person's worth and importance by the amount of his or her material possessions, biblical Christians will reject materialism without falling into asceticism. They will delight in the splendor of the material world but not forget that things cannot ultimately satisfy. They will enjoy the good earth and celebrate its abundance without neglecting sacrificial sharing with the needy. They will distinguish between necessities and luxuries. They will enjoy possessions while recognizing their seductive danger. When forced to choose between Jesus and possessions, they will gladly forsake the ring for the Beloved.



Study Questions

1. How does the biblical perspective on private property challenge modern ideas?
2. What are the dangers of possessions? Why is this part of biblical truth especially difficult for modern folk to grasp?
3. What is the biblical connection between righteousness and riches? How is this truth perverted today?
4. How would you change your life if you were truly to implement Jesus' teaching about carefree living?
5. How does St. Augustine's image of the ring and the Beloved summarize the proper attitude toward possessions?