

Jesus, Wealth, and Social Justice

Mark 10:17-22

¹⁷ Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸ So Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, *that is*, God. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Do not defraud,' 'Honor your father and your mother.' " ²⁰ And he answered and said to Him, "Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth." ²¹ Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me." ²² But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."

The words 'wealth' and 'social justice' are widely used today, in confusing ways, but Jesus had clear teaching on wealth and justice that can form the core of how we walk as Christians. I started with a well-known parable on wealth in the Bible. Keep it in mind, as we are going to return to that text. Two goals of our time this morning:

The first and primary goal is to begin to understand the biblical (and historical) context of economics at time of Christ. This is critical to how we, as Christians, should respond to the modern concept of 'social justice'. If we don't know the context of Christ's statements on wealth and justice, we are going to have a hard time applying them to our context.

The second goal is simply good practical reminders of how we live our lives amongst the manifold blessings that God has given us. A theology of wealth. Especially for those of us who live and work in the United States. Given Jesus' very direct statements about the dangers of wealth and how we treat the poor, we need to take it seriously.

Views of Wealth

When it comes to wealth there are two very opposite ditches that Christians can often fall into:

Ditch #1: you have a "health and wealth", prosperity gospel that emphasizes that God wants us all to have great wealth and that is the normative goal for faithful people. As Doug Wilson has pointed out, there is an element of truth here. A lot of bible verses talk about God's blessings on his people (Leviticus 20:24, Proverbs 3:9-10).

Ditch #2: the idea that poverty is holier than wealth. Our contemporary version of this ditch is social justice claims on wealth. Those with wealth (power), coupled with the wrong group identities (skin color, gender, etc.) are oppressors, by definition. Oppression is not based on a Christian concept of man as a fallen creature, redeemed through Christ, but simply on conflicts over resources. It's not a heart issue or a sin issue (V.Baucham). It's a power issue. There is also an element of truth here. God is always just and does not honor oppressors. The language is very familiar to us, but the definitions (justice and oppressors) are different.

Historical Context of Galilee and Judah/Judea (J.Bowyer)

The Gospels are filled with references to two prominent regions: Galilee and Judea (or Judah). The northern region of Galilee, where Christ was born, and the southern region of Judea, where he was crucified. Galilee was very distinct from Judea. It tended to be more decentralized and had a lower tax burden. You might think of it as more "frontier" in the American sense. Galilee tended to be tied to "built" wealth and generated enterprise, whereas Judea tended to be political based, extraction/taxed wealth that tended to operate in more hierarchical ways. Wealth existed in both spots, but it often came through different means.

Why this is important for context of the rich, young ruler is that virtually every single confrontation Jesus had regarding wealth was in or near Judea and Jerusalem. It almost never comes up when in Galilee. When Jesus explicitly teaches on wealth, he focuses on the Judean system, and that says something. There is an unjust way to get it and use it. The temple system had found a variety of ways to generate wealth that were blatant violations of the law of Moses, including the **Prosbol**, in which debt that should be forgiven (Deut.15:9) was sold to the temple to allow creditors to extract the full amount.

Covenant Blessings

Doug Wilson uses the concept of “Deuteronomic Blessing” to describe the connection between physical wealth and our covenant with God. The blessing is relational. Wealth is a vertical relationship (God to man), not a horizontal relationship (man to man). The latter is a social justice struggle for dominance in resources, and a recipe for envy. The former is how Jesus would have viewed any form of wealth (Dt 8:18, Prov 10:22, Prov 13:21-22). Every blessing of God can become a curse when it leaves the context of covenant with God. (Prov 23:4-5). Wealth is fleeting and when it becomes the end goal, it becomes your Master, your covenant head. Scripture teaches it is always a relative goal that is subservient to wisdom and holiness. (Prov 8:10-11, Prov 16:8).

Rich, Young Ruler

I want to focus on two of the adjectives we spend less time on than the rich part: ‘young’ and ‘ruler’. This is one of the particular insights that Jerry Bowyer provides. In the account in Luke we learn the man is a ruler (likely Sanhedrin). Given his age and wealth, probably someone who inherited his position and standing from his father. This young man would be immersed right in the Judean/temple system. In Mark, Jesus recounts the Law by telling him, amongst other things, “Do not defraud”. This command is not in the Decalogue per se, but is perhaps implying the kind of defrauding that much of the Jerusalem system was built around. (James 5:4)

The text says that Jesus loved him and I believe He provided a genuine remedy. Jesus tells him to, essentially, transfer his wealth from the literal temple bank here on earth to the one that is going to last. His money was his last idol. Gouge out the eye, cut off the hand, give up father/mother/brother/sister, sell everything you have. Kill the idol. The man is not an oppressor based on some unbiblical concept of equity or class distinction. He was a slave to sin. He needed to remember Mosaic truth (which defines equality and oppression and mercy and justice).

Summary and Application

Jesus loved the Law and came to fulfill it. He knew what oppression was, what injustice was, and what love of wealth can do to a man’s soul. He did not operate from the secular definition of power balances between group identities that defined oppressor and oppressed. His definitions were from Moses. He defined economic justice according to Leviticus and not according to current academia. It always comes back to the Gospel (who is your God and how are you saved). Some final points on wealth and social justice to help keep God’s definitions at the forefront of our thinking.

- 1) Be thankful for every gift that God gives, and everything you have is a gift. Thankfulness is an envy and coveting killer. You can’t be filled with thanksgiving and filled with covetous envy at the same time. Social justice as a raw power struggle over resources never breeds thankfulness or redemption; it always leads to bitterness and envy.
- 2) Trust Jesus when he says God will care for you and provide for your needs (Matt 10:29). We are to seek out ways to do good with wealth and build our treasures in heaven (1 Timothy 6:17-19). You may have 5 talents, 2 talents, or 1 talent (Matthew 25:14-29). Doesn’t matter. What does matter is serving the Master from whom this wealth is given and to whom it will return. God gives in his good providence and we serve with whatever He gives.
- 3) Remember the poor (Deut 15:7-8). Don’t let the social justice redefinition of oppression ruin what is a real command. Love to give, according to God’s law. Hate oppression and fraud, biblically defined, and flee from it.

Jerry Bowyer, *“The Maker Versus the Takers: What Jesus really said about Social Justice and Economics.”* 2020.

Voddie Baucham, *“Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe.”* 2021.