

# The Wealth of Christians

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The question of how much wealth a Christian may have, or how much wealth a Christian should have, has plagued the church for centuries. There are those who cite such texts as Proverbs 10:4 (he becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand: but the hand of the diligent maketh rich) and Jesus' parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14- 30) to question the morals of those who are not as well off as they. Perhaps the most famous illustration of this ideology can be seen in the works of Max Weber (1864-1920), a famous German sociologist/economist. Weber looked at two comparable cities, one predominately Roman Catholic and the other Protestant, and noted that the Protestant city was more prosperous. He explained this by saying that, due to a strong work ethic based on religious beliefs, the Protestant people were able to make more money. In addition, since Protestants frowned upon ostentatious consumption, their wealth was generally invested, creating more capital. In this way, wealth tacitly became a means of measuring one's piety. There are also those who cite such texts as Matthew 19:23-24 (a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven...It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God) to condemn riches and wealth, for they are obstacles to the entrance of heaven.

Any person old enough to read this must form an opinion about wealth; it is impossible not to do so. Even if you decide to live in the top of a tree for your entire life, you have still formed an opinion about what your relationship to wealth should be. Thus, I think that this subject is pertinent and relevant to us all. Before the question of the wealth of Christians is addressed, I would like to diverge for just a little to talk about economic systems. There is a point at the end, and I hope that you will bear with me.

Almost all economic systems can be divided into one of two groups—socialism or capitalism—or some combination of these two groups. Socialism advocates that efforts should be made to divide the wealth among the citizens. (Do not confuse socialism with communism or Marxism. Karl Marx (1818-1883) called for socialism, but he thought that this would be possible only through a revolution. Marx also saw religion, primarily Judaism and Christianity, as being tools of the rich and powerful to hold the poor and weak in subjection. This is why many Marxist countries today are atheistic, and missionaries are not welcome.) When I think of socialism, I imagine a world where there are no people so rich that they can not even spend all of their money in a lifetime, walking superciliously past people who have not eaten a good meal for months. I imagine a world where all people are equal and no one looks condescendingly on another. I imagine a world where everyone joins hands to get the work done and no one exploits another in this effort. This imagination is not impossible—it has been done. The early church practiced socialism (Acts 4:32-37) and it seemed to work quite well for a while. The writer of Acts tells us that not only did no one lack any physical necessities, but also that the hearts and souls of the believers were of one accord. Most of you practice a form of socialism in your family lives. The wife/mother does not punch in before she starts to cook breakfast, or sign a yearly contract for wages. The father does not keep a cash register on the counter so that all the children can pay for their meals. Rather, the family seeks to help each other, and in so doing every one benefits.

The other type of economic system is capitalism, and for the most part that is what most of us practice. Pure capitalism has individual people owning everything, and no attempt is made to distribute the wealth artificially. Capitalism is based on self-interest, or if you want a “fancy” word, utilitarianism. I call it greed. Capitalism has the philosophy of each man for himself. Take yourself as an example. Why do you work? You will probably answer that you work to support yourself and/or your family. If your employer were to take away your check, you would no longer work for him. You work for yourself, and for the benefits you derive from your labor; you do not work for your boss because he is a nice guy. This can be well illustrated in wage negotiations—each side is attempting to

get what is best for him—the employer wants low wages while the employee wants high wages. I dislike the concept of capitalism because it is based on the concept of “What is best for me?” I dislike the concept, but it works. Adam Smith (1723-1790), the father of modern economics, stated that individuals seeking their own self-interest ultimately help not only themselves, but also the society in general. For example, a business man who is trying to make money by expanding his plant creates jobs for people in the community. The idea of how well self-interest works can also be seen in your family. Suppose the son is supposed to mow the lawn. The mother may ask the son to mow the lawn, but he will find excuses until winter why he can not do it. If the mother were to say, however, that she would pay him twenty dollars to mow the lawn, he would probably be outside in a few minutes. As well as capitalism works, socialism does not, especially in large groups. Since there is often little personal gain as an incentive in socialism, few people take the initiative to promote common good, and indolence permeates the community.

This brings us back to our original question of the wealth of Christians. I find interesting the question of whether or not Christians could practice socialism. As I noted before, the early church did it, and it seemed to work for a while. In order for socialism to work, however, Christians would need to put the problems, needs, and concerns of other Christians equal to or before their own. Whether or not this is possible is a difficult question, and I shall leave the question for you to answer. Even if this were the case, socialism in Christian circles would require great sacrifices. Our economic world today is complex, and goods are traded all around the world. Isolated patches of socialism would require that capitalistic ventures be made with the outside world or that outside goods be foregone altogether. The first alternative would erode the principle with which we started, i.e., living in a socialistic society, while the second is hardly plausible. So in the end, we end up right where we are right now—doing the best we can in a capitalistic world.

What we must be aware of is that greed can easily overcome us, and that we can so easily focus attention on ourselves and the things which we can obtain. I think Jesus was referring to this when he said that a rich man shall hardly enter the kingdom of heaven. Yet we must not assume that all those who have wealth obtained it for their own selfish end. Many wealthy people are doing the best they can with their talents and opportunities God has given them; they are using their talents well. Nor are poor people necessarily slothful; poverty is a veritable obstacle to overcome. The potential for the problem lies not in the wealth, but rather in the motive. Neither God nor I care one bit how rich or how poor you are (Proverbs 11:4). What matters is that you believe that Christ died to save you from your sins, and that you live a life of gratitude which reflects that, hoping, watching, and praying for the time when you shall enter the kingdom where lies the true wealth of Christians.

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