

THE CHRISTIAN & WEALTH

Scripture is not afraid to talk about money. Its treatment of money, however, is not compartmentalized. Instead it is woven into broader based themes found throughout Scripture.

1. God's Sovereignty and Wealth

As the One who is sovereign over all things, God presents himself in Scripture as the one who:

- gives people the ability to produce wealth (Deu 8:17-18; 1 Kgs 3:13; 2 Cor 9:10)
- provides essential material goods (Mat 6:25-31; 2 Cor 9:8)
- controls economic forces (2 Kgs 6:24-7:20)
- is able to miraculously provide (Mat 17:27; Mark 6:32-43)

Although God is ultimately sovereign over all, he often delegates sovereignty over the production and gathering of wealth to people (Gen 1:28). It is within the space of this delegated sovereignty that he calls us to produce and gather wealth in a God-honoring (Mat 25:14-30) and humble manner (Dan 4:28-37).

2. Justice and Wealth

God calls us to be just in our dealings with others; this includes those dealings which involve money. Justice calls for:

- Honest economic transactions between immediate parties.* At the very minimum, justice requires that any attainment of money and wealth by Christians comes about in an honest way. That is, the Christian must insure that trading parties are given honest information about what they are receiving in the transaction. Having differing sets of “weights and measures” so as to present a product or service in a favorable, yet dishonest light is detestable in the sight of God (Deu 25:13-16; Amo 8:5-6).
- Just transactions relative to the community at large.* Beyond being honest about the price and quality of the product exchanged, the Christian must also pursue wealth in a manner that is responsible to the community at large even if individual transactions are completed in a forthright manner. For example, suppose a company manufactures furniture products, and in the process dumps waste materials into a local stream which negatively impact the community's water supply. Although the furniture products themselves might be sold in an honest manner, the manufacturer of the furniture would transfer to the community a portion of the production cost, and would thus be stealing from the community in order to provide the product at a particular price point. This latter behavior is tempting in a free market economy where there is the strong incentive to provide what the market wants at the lowest possible price, but must be avoided.¹
- Refusal to take advantage of the downtrodden.* When individuals are in desperate need of basic material goods such as food, water, and shelter, their desperation can be used as

¹ J. Philip Wogaman, “Who Should Set Social Priorities,” *Readings in Christian Ethics, Vol. 2: Issues and Applications*, David C. Clark & Robert V. Rakestraw, eds. (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 360.

leverage to pay wages incommensurate with their labor or to require the payment of exorbitant prices for the exchanged goods. The Christian is not to take advantage of this desperate condition, and those who do so will experience the displeasure of the Lord (Lev 25:35-38; Deu 24:14-15; Jer 22:13-14, 17; Amo 4:1-2, 5:11, 8:4-7). Included in the refusal to take advantage of the downtrodden must be an unwillingness to irrevocably take the means of economic growth from the poor. That is, the poor must always be given opportunity to better their own economic lot in life by reasonable access to the means of production (Deu 24:6). This was one of the effective purposes of the year of Jubilee², the time in which the poor were to be given back their God-allotted land, despite their circumstances (Lev 25:39-41).

- d. *Purposeful involvement in the destruction of economic injustice.* In addition to personally acting in a just manner towards those with whom one interacts, it is also incumbent upon the Christian to actively pursue the destruction of unjust economic structures or activities. In other words, the Christian is to extend the concept of “love your neighbor” beyond the scope of individual and personal transactions and is to seek the abolition of economic injustice that might exist in the community at large (Jer 5:26-29, 21:11). This might come in the form of votes, judicial proceedings, and legislative action, or in the case of economic injustice overseas, diplomatic pressure.

3. Mercy & Wealth

The idea of justice calls the Christian to protect an even playing field on which individuals are to conduct economic activities. The concept of mercy, however, goes beyond justice and seeks to help individuals who for one reason or another are struggling to succeed on that playing field. In other words mercy says that even if the rich were not responsible for causing any part of global poverty through injustice, they would still be responsible to help those in need.³

Showing mercy takes the form of...

- feeding the hungry
- welcoming the stranger
- and caring for the sick
- all with the view that to do so is akin to serving Jesus himself (Mat 25:34-39)

Mercy...

- is a marker that the love of God is present in the Christian (1 Joh 3:17)
- will one day be met with favor and reward (Isa 58:10; Mat 25:34; Luk 12:33).
- should be both systematic (Deu 26:12-13, 1 Cor 16:2) and in response to immediate needs (Jas 2:14-16),
- should be extended both friend and foe (Pro 25:21)

² Fred Catherwood, “The Christian Case for the Diffusion of Economic Power,” *Transformation* 6, no. 4 (1989): 9.

³ Ronald J. Sider, “Structural Evil and World Hunger,” *Readings in Christian Ethics, Vol. 2: Issues and Applications*, David C. Clark & Robert V. Rakestraw, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 372.

- and administered even to those who live far away (1 Cor 16:3).

In calling the Christian to mercy, however, it should not be concluded that God asks that unqualified preferential treatment be given to the poor (Lev 19:15). While it is true, that Scripture recognizes that poverty sometimes results from oppression and exploitation, it also teaches that there are times when poverty results from misfortunes that have nothing to do with exploitation. These misfortunes include such things as accidents, injuries, and illness for which the Christian should respond in mercy, but the Bible also explains that poverty can result from laziness and sloth⁴ (Pro 6:6-8; 10:4, 13:4; 20:4; 24:30-34; 28:19), which should not be rewarded (2 The 3:10).

4. Moderation & Wealth

Apart from the work of the Spirit, humanity is drawn to extremes. Scripture, however, calls the Christian to moderation. It finds no particular virtue in either riches or poverty, and finds danger in both. As Agur contributed to the Proverbs:

Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
 give me neither poverty nor riches,
 but give me only my daily bread.
 Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
 and say, 'Who is the LORD?'
 Or I may become poor and steal,
 and so dishonor the name of my God. (30:8-9)

The danger of riches is certainly prevalent in the North American context, and as Agur indicated has drawn many to become boastful and proud (2 Tim 3:2; Rev 3:15-18) in the face of God. Such is not surprising, since one “cannot serve both God and Mammon” (Luk 16:13). It is wise of the believer, therefore, to avoid the amassing of wealth (Luk 12:13-21) and its pursuit (1 Tim 6:6-10).

Scripture provides no economic threshold that cannot be eclipsed, but makes certain to impress upon the believer that riches are ultimately unsatisfying and short-lived, and should thus be invested in kingdom values (Ecl 5:10-15; Mat 6:19-21, 1 Tim 6:17-19). The question we must ask, then, is not “Can I afford this?” or “How much is too much?” but “Would God want me to use his money in this way?”⁵

In using moderation as a Scriptural lense for discerning the Christian’s response to wealth, it is also important to note that Scripture...

- does not require the adoption of an ascetic lifestyle
- nor does it require that all individuals give the same amount.
- Rather, Scripture calls each individual to give according to their means (Deu 16:17, Acts 11:29; 2 Cor 8:12). In the end, God’s “desire is not that others might be

⁴ Ronald H. Nash, “Does Capitalism Pass the Moral Test?” *Evangelical Journal* 5 (Spring 1987), 36-37

⁵ Ron Blue, *Generous Living: Finding Contentment through Giving* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 121

relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality...as it is written: 'He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little'" (2 Cor 8:13, 15). This kind of moderation would call the wealthy Christian to give more and would keep the poor from giving to the extent that they do not adequately provide for their families (1 Tim 5:8).

I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusement, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our giving does not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say it is too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot because our commitment to giving excludes them. (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

5. Joyful Generosity of Wealth

Perhaps the most outstanding element of the Christian ethic regarding wealth is not its call to justice, mercy, and moderation, but its insistence that God is only pleased when we act not by compulsion, but in joy. In fact, it is this final emphasis that moves Scripture's instruction on the treatment of wealth by Christians outside the realm of legalism and into the realm of relationship. Considering that economic relations are social relations and involve people dealing with people⁶, the relational aspect of the Christian ethic of wealth should probably not be too surprising.

The penultimate call of Scripture is to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself (Mat 22:37-40). Love, while certainly expressed through appropriate action, falls miserably short if it does not proceed from a willing heart that wants to give. As such, **Scripture repeatedly calls the believer to divest oneself of wealth for the sake of God and others to the degree to which one can do so with a generous, unbegrudging heart** (Deu 15:7,10; 1 Cor 13:3; 2 Cor 8:1-4, 12, 2 Cor 9:7).

At the very center of generous, joyful giving is a grand gratitude towards God. Jesus himself joyfully made himself poor that we who are poor might become rich (2 Cor 8:9; Heb 12:2). Those who have recognized their own poverty and the richness in Christ are able to give not out of drudging duty, but out of overflowing joy (Luke 7:36-47; Luke 19:1-10; Acts 2:42-47; 2 Cor 8:1-4).

⁶ Peter L. Danner, *Getting and Spending: A Primer in Economic Morality* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 3.