



Christianity, Money, and Social Responsibility: Part 1

By R. Nicholas Gerlich

Intro:

Money is perhaps one of the most controversial subject matters in society, not just today, but throughout history as well.

In Christian circles, critics allege that we have become too materialistic (Ron Sider), and that we place too much emphasis both on personal possessions and church buildings.

Social critics also contend that our materialism has ruined society. Groups such as Adbusters would rather we live in a society without Marketing or any emphasis on consumption.

When Christmas is on the horizon, money is raised to a level of prominence. We show our love for people by buying them gifts, rather than doing something or showing kindness to them.

The purpose of these two lectures is to examine the role of money, both in society and in the church (Part 1), and then to explore what social responsibilities Christians and the church have (Part 2). Our goal is not so much to learn about how to make more money, but rather to better understand money.

I. What is Money?

It is a medium of exchange. It was not used until late in biblical times, but its precursors still functioned much the same way. Money, or its predecessors, usually an object traded in-kind for some other object, represented economic value.

Price is the total of money or goods that must be exchanged for another good or service. It represents an agreement between both parties that the price is fair, and that both parties are getting a fair deal (this is in theory, and may not always be the case).

Until recently, money was backed by something of value, such as gold or silver. The gold standard in the US meant that every dollar was backed by gold. Today, however, money is issued by fiat, meaning that it has value because the government says so. It has the promise of the US Treasury, but there is not necessarily gold backing it (or anything else).

Money is mentioned many times in the Bible. There are 69 references in the OT, and 25 references in the NT.

Society also mentions money many times. For example:

Cliche: A fool and his money are soon parted.

Song: Pink Floyd's "Money," Tommy James' "Mony Mony," Dire Straits' "Money For Nothing," and many more.

Bumper Stickers: He who dies with the most toys, wins.

Some selected passages from the Bible:

2 Kings 12:4 Money was used to rebuild a temple

Numbers 3:49 "redemption money," a tax on the number of Israelites exceeding the number of Levites. $273 \times 5 = 1365$ shekels.

Deut 14:25-26 exchanging tithe for silver, "...to be used to buy cattle, sheep, wine, or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice."

Matt 21:12 My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers (in reference to the buyers and sellers in the temple).

I Timothy 6:10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith, and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Mark 10:23 How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God

Mark 10:25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

In secular society, money is equally controversial as the latter four scriptures. Worries over money are frequently cited as inducing stress within and between persons. And not just the abundance (or lack thereof) of money, but also the use of it.

II. What is a Christian to do?

Take a vow of poverty?
Give it all away? (Mark 10:21)

We shall see later in the lecture...

III. It is easy to be critical of fiscal policy as well as personal spending habits. For example, Ron Sider's "Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger" attacks Christian materialism, and says that we should instead be redistributing our surplus incomes to those with less than we.

It is also easy to attack highly visible people within Christianity, such as Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, as well as Jimmy Swaggart. Their ostentatious lifestyle, attained at the expense of their followers, draws much criticism from within and without Xty.

Furthermore, Adbusters even has a "Buy Nothing Day" the day after Thanksgiving, to try to get people to buy less. They also teach people how to practice civil disobedience by defacing billboards and other marketing efforts.

IV. Background on Economic Systems:

Free, in which markets are allowed to function, and the interaction of supply and demand determines prices, and also distributes and discriminates between people.

Regulated, such as socialism, social democracies, and communism, in which there is some or absolute control over the markets by the ruling elite, and the market is not allowed to perform as it should.

Regulated economies are most likely to be found in less developed countries (LDCs), whereas free markets are primarily the calling card of modern, industrialized societies.

Still, there does not exist a perfectly free market system anywhere, because there is too much pressure from within to try to redistribute money.

V. What about NT times?

The collective was used, and was indeed very appropriate for the time. But, remember that Israel was an agrarian economy at the time, even semi-nomadic. Pooling resources often meant that the group could live better than anyone alone. Thus, for that time period, a collective was very effective.

But is it appropriate today? Some Christian groups still think so, such as JPUSA. Other fringe groups in the 70s also practice a communal lifestyle, such as the Family of God, as well as the Peoples Temple (i.e., Jonestown).

But the people that these groups usually attract are often the disenfranchised who have little or no economic worth to begin with, and thus the collective appears to them as a way to improve their lot in life.

VI. Which system is best?

Socialism regulates or even prohibits the private accumulation of wealth, which resides instead with the ruling elite (still a 2-tier system). As Marx said, "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his need." The goal is to minimize disparities between people, and to maximize eco-equality.

But, it reduces everyone to a least common denominator, and encourages mediocrity by penalizing ingenuity, inventiveness, resourcefulness, and risk-taking.

Socialism also contends that capitalists exploit the proletariat by making them their economic slaves.

Capitalism, in its purest form (not totally practiced in the US), allows for the private formation of capital (wealth). It allows for disparities, and rewards inventiveness, ingenuity, resourcefulness, and risk-taking.

It does not guarantee rewards simply for hard work, but rather forces us to interact with the market. The onus is upon us to have the right product or skill at the right time and in the right place.

E.G. Bill Gates is worth \$52 billion. I'm not.
Professors are paid market value by their profession
Computer gurus make far more money than accountants
But school teachers are still treated as equals (a real rarity in our country)

Capitalism believes that "exploitation" of the proletariat is not bad, but rather the economic utilization of available resources.

In the US, we practice a regulated form of capitalism, actually "corporate capitalism," in which corporations have risen to control much of the economy. Witness the attention paid to the DJIA each day.

There is some redistribution of wealth in the US, but our tax rates are lower than most other nations. There are some safety nets in place, but for the most part, we must make our own way. Ingenuity is rewarded by the marketplace.

Other controls in our society include the prohibition of LT monopolies (unless sanctioned by the government). For example: Microsoft, AT&T, and Standard Oil.

VII. The question remains: which is appropriate for the church today? Which is best for society at large? What would Jesus have wanted?

The Answer:

That capitalism allows for greater wealth to be created is without question. It is far more effective than socialism.

But, there are some apparent inconsistencies between the teachings of Jesus, and what we know to be economic truth.

- A. Prosperity was the very thing that Jesus warned against
- B. Property: Jesus said to sell everything, and give the proceeds to the poor.
- C. Competitive and individualistic aspects of the market v. the sense of community in the church.
- D. Jesus lived the life of a poor man, born to humble beginnings, a member of an exploited proletariat.

Does this then mean that capitalism and its attendant focus on money is wrong? What did Jesus REALLY teach?

A. The parables of the talents, the pounds, and the unjust steward deal with these:

- proper management of resources
- private ownership is assumed
- resourcefulness is rewarded

Jesus promised that for all who sought the kingdom of God, "all these things (material) shall be added unto you"

So, do we read what we want from the Bible, and believe what we want to believe?

Do we accept the parts about private ownership, private profit, and inequality, yet forget the warnings to the wealthy?

Or do we accept the indictment of the prosperous, yet ignore his teachings on property and stewardship?

The answer is: NEITHER!

We should remember the following:

- a. Jesus viewed man's principal problem as being spiritual, not political or financial
- b. Jesus was more concerned with principles than policies
- c. Jesus was NOT an economist. He did not examine the causes of inequality in his society, did not consider whether wealth was the result of resourcefulness or exploitation, whether rural or urban living dictated poverty or wealth, or whether communal living was the ideal.

No, Jesus was NOT an economist, nor a financier. Yet, he often spoke of money, but in the context of **personal spiritual destiny rather than economic reform!!** ("Blessed are the poor" refers to poor in spirit)

Several principles emerge from his teaching:

1. Nothing wrong with wealth
2. Nothing particularly virtuous about poverty.
3. Ownership of material possessions is not a sin.
4. Jesus never hinted that work, commerce, banking, or investing are wrong.
5. Jesus stressed responsibility for our resources.
6. Jesus preached against the arrogance that often attends wealth, and discussed rewarding (a la the sheep and the goats) those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, entertained strangers, and visited shut-ins and prisoners.

This is the essence of the gospel. It is not a diatribe against money; rather it is a condemnation of arrogance and disregard for the poor.

And that is what we shall examine in Part 2 of this lecture.