



## Christianity, Money, and Social Responsibility: Part 2

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Intro:

In the first part of this lecture, we examined the role of money in both the church and in the economy. We also presented the two different types of economic systems (free markets and controlled markets). Finally, we examined the scriptures for insights on the words “money” and “riches,” the context of the historical Jesus (born into poverty, to an impoverished class of persons, etc.). We concluded that the essence of the gospel was NOT a diatribe against money, but rather a condemnation of arrogance and utter disregard for the poor.

In Part 2, we will examine what Christians should do in response to the poor.

1. That Jesus and the biblical authors were concerned about the poor is self-evident. The word “poor” appears 153 times through the OT and NT.

Of course, the use of the word “poor” here has a dual meaning, including both economic and spiritual poverty.

As we discussed last time, Jesus was less concerned about the fact that we may be rich, than he was about how we used or felt about our riches. The gospel indictments of the rich were not aimed at those who simply were rich, but rather those who were rich in an arrogant way.

2. Three of the gospels tell us this one simple statement:

The poor of shall always have among you (MT26:11,MK14:7,JN12:8)

What was the intent of this statement? Does it mean that we will always have economically poor, or spiritually poor, or both?

From an economic sense, there is much truth in the statement, especially in free societies in which economic disparity is allowed to exist because it reflects a difference in motivation and utilization of resources.

From a spiritual sense, the statement implies that we will always have the downtrodden among us, for whatever reason they are downtrodden.

Let us look at some simple economic facts:

- a. In the US, the top 20% of income earners have 50% of the spending power. This leaves the remaining 80% of the people to divide the other half of the spending power. This is certainly a very inequitable situation, but is allowed to exist
- b. Poverty is relative. The poorest people in the US are undeniably better off than people in less-fortunate nations.
- c. Generally speaking, industrialized nations are better off than non-industrialized nations. Furthermore, the evolution from agrarian to industrialized has occurred the fastest in those societies that are free to choose their destinies.
- d. The rapid development of technological innovation in developed countries (and the diffusion of those innovations in those countries) has created a huge technology gap between nations.
- e. There is a growing gap between the haves and the have nots in the US, as well. This has been brought about in large part by the advent of the Information Age. Starting in the 1970s, it started becoming more and more critical for people to have a college education. Today, the lifetime difference between a high school and college education is about \$1 million, with an even larger gap for those who go on to pursue professional and graduate degrees. This has created a large group of “relatively poor” people in the US, people who often feel disenfranchised.
- f. In some nations, poverty is perpetuated by poor economic decision making and planning. The ruling elite keeps the lion’s share for themselves, while the masses struggle to survive. Fortunately, we are seeing many countries begin to embrace capitalism and free markets, like Russia, Germany, Poland, and China.
- g. Sometimes cultural and social strictures combine to keep a country poor. For example, in China, with 1.2 billion people, is always on the verge of collapsing under its own weight. Because of poor economic planning, it forced its people to remain agrarian in much of the country. This caused people to have larger families, in order to maintain their small farms. But now the country has imposed

reproductive restraints, with only one child per family legally allowed (the new \$850 marriage license deposit will try to help enforce this). And how have the people responded? By abandoning their little girls, because the culture has always favored boys (to leave the family legacy, as well as for farm hands).

h. The population growth rate between countries shows staggering differences. In modern, industrialized nations, the growth rate is between one and two percent. In fact, were it not for improved infant mortality rates, increased life expectancies, and immigration from third-world countries, nations like the US would actually experience a population decline. Many European nations are not statistically replacing themselves. In the US, we are almost doing so, with 1.8 children per married couple. But other countries are growing at rates of greater than 10-percent, even as much as 18-20 percent, which means that their populations will double in 4-7 years (tell about the Rule of 72 here). As it turns out, it is often the poorest countries with the highest growth rate, virtually assuring their continued poverty.

**Critical Question #1: So, are we to voluntarily engage in income redistribution to the poor? Or, worse yet, should we lobby for mandatory redistribution? Are we to install safety nets at every turn?**

For an interesting perspective on economics, read P.J. O'Rourke's book, *Eat the Rich*. In it he discusses how redistributing money from the most efficient to the least efficient is a very poor use of capital. In other words, taking money from Bill Gates and giving it to someone wandering along I-40 with a "Will Work For Food" sign would be a poor choice, one that would be less efficient for the society than just letting Bill keep all his money.

Recall from last week the definition given for poverty: the inefficient use of resources. By this definition, the poor are poor simply because they do not utilize their resources as effectively as others (remember, Bill Gates was actually a Harvard drop-out, but developed the right product at the right time), and are also lacking in ingenuity, risk-taking, and overall resourcefulness.

Of course, the "invisible hand" of the free market that Adam Smith proclaimed in 18<sup>th</sup> century America may sometimes give a stinging slap to the face.

Furthermore, this assessment can be cold and impersonal.

3. What about our ostentatious lifestyles? Ron Sider's book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, is a scathing indictment of the frivolous lifestyle adopted by the American church.

Sider criticizes the American church on all counts: lavish buildings, “fat” ministerial staffs, property and other assets held by churches, and also personal lifestyles, consumption, and possessions.

Sider draws heavily upon a biblical interpretation that “poor” refers more to economics than spirit.

He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord (PROV 19:17)

I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the afflicted, and executes justice for the needy (PS 140:12)

But mostly Sider just condemns Americans for being successful, and then goes on to blame Marketers for everything:

“The ever more affluent standard of living is the god of 20<sup>th</sup> century America, and the adman is its prophet.”

He criticizes us for being the “affluent minority,” with just 6% of the world’s population.

He goes on:

“Constant, seductive advertising helps to create this destructive delusion. Advertisers regularly con us into believing that we genuinely need one luxury after another. We are convinced that we must keep up with or even go one better than our neighbors. So we buy another dress, sports jacket, or sports car, and thereby force up the standard of living.”

In other words, we should feel guilty for all the neat things we buy: the new outfit, the new car, the new computer, more CDs than we could possibly listen to, anything that does not have just basic, utilitarian benefit to us not exceeding our basic need.

Huh? By raising the bar a little bit each time, are we not making things better for everyone?

He goes on to condemn us for importing food and other items from countries that are starving. In essence, he is criticizing the act of making other peoples our “economic slaves.” We consume far more of the world’s output than our percentage of population would indicate. But, Sider fails to point out that we are far and away the most productive nation in the world, too.

**Critical Question #2: Should we then live lives of austerity and shun consumption because others cannot consume like us?**

4. At this point, we have looked at two widely different views on economic disparity. Is there a way to reconcile the differences?

The first view, the economic one, says that inequality results from poor utilization of resources, not exploitation. In other words, we make our own destinies, and have no one to blame but ourselves for our poverty.

The second view blames the rich, and tries to make them feel guilty for even being rich, much less consuming like one who is rich.

So what is the responsibility of the Christian? Is he/she to maintain a callous attitude, one that says, "Hey, you made your bed, now lie in it?"

Or should the Christian eschew all the trappings of modern society and give all of their surplus to those less fortunate?

This is a very tough question to answer, quite obviously. There are elements of truth in both arguments. Yes, we American Christians do indeed live enchanted lives with many of the world's latest, greatest gadgets at our fingertips, clothing enough for a small tribe, and transportation that allows us to always arrive in style.

But, we are also the product of our own ingenuity. We have these possessions not because we exploited someone in the process, but rather exploited our OWN abilities and resources. In other words, we were resourceful, and we prospered.

Still, we cannot deny the parable of the sheep and the goats found in Matthew 25. In this parable, Jesus foretells reward for those who clothe the naked, feed the hungry, visit the prisoners, etc.

These are pretty strong marching orders. In fact, this imperative implies a certain amount of doing on behalf of the believer, more than just espousing the Christian faith.

It means much more than practicing "bumper sticker Christianity," with our cars proudly festooned with ichthuses and WWJD stickers. Rather, we should be more concerned with "Why aren't we doing what Jesus did?" In doing so, we wouldn't need a fish on our bumper so others would know our affiliation. Instead, our actions would speak louder than any bumper sticker.

But do we give to everyone because they are poor? Do we become a safety net for the poor, only to reinforce their poverty by carrying them every time they lack?

Or can we combine Christian charity with economic reality, and lend a helping hand by showing people how they, too, can prosper?

The old saying is worth repeating:

Give a man a fish, he eats for a day.

Teach a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime.

The key for Christian giving to the poor is careful discernment between those who lack for their own fault, or for reasons not their own. For the former, it is important that we not subsidize someone's poor decision making, for we all have a responsibility to ourselves.

For the latter, it is our responsibility to lend a hand and help carry the load until they are able to carry it themselves.

There is a popular story in Christianity called "Footprints" in which a person and Jesus are walking in the sand along a beach. For a long time, there are two sets of footprints, but then there is only one set, at a particularly rough time in the life of this person. The person asks Jesus, "why did you abandon me at my time of need?"

Jesus responded: "I didn't abandon you. It was then that I carried you."

That is the approach we should take to our Christian responsibility. It is OK to carry for a while, but in the long run, there needs to be two sets of footprints in the sand...ours and theirs.

If it means not consuming another dress, sports jacket, or sports car, then perhaps that's what is needed to be counted among the sheep rather than the goats. Perhaps that is what is needed to be able to get through the eye of the needle.

And we won't need an ichthus on our bumper to announce our arrival.