

PROSPERITY, POVERTY, AND SHALOM

Prosperity, Poverty, and Shalom: Thoughts on a Theology of Money - Feb 1999

Key question

What is the basic teaching of the Bible on material prosperity and poverty?

Key text

Luke 16:11

“If therefore you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous Mammon, who will entrust the true riches to you?”

(This material is a modification of an essay by Michael Cassidy of African Enterprise)

Introduction

Money, prosperity and poverty come deeply loaded with the complicating factor of race, gender, and class. While marginally less true now, it is still a general reality, that a discussion of money and poverty cannot, at least at this stage, be divorced from other issues.

Which is where the Old Testament notion of Shalom comes in, Shalom being that state of peace where everything and everyone is operating in right relationships under God--i.e. humans to God, spouse to spouse, parents to children, citizens to state and vice versa, people to environment, individuals to their work and money, etc. Where all those realities are in right, God-ordained relationships with each other, there is Shalom. Anyway, let's start out first with ...

A. Debunking Some Myths on Poverty and Prosperity

1. Myth One: The Poor Are Under Judgement

- a. It was generally believed in Jewish culture of the OT that wealth and poverty were a sign of God's blessing (approval) and judgment (disapproval).
- b. Of a whopping 197 references to the word “poor/poverty” in the NIV Bible, not a single verse condemns those who are poor. Less than a dozen verses are warnings that certain actions will lead to poverty. In other words, poverty is not a sin, though how one becomes poor may occasionally involve sin (e.g. laziness and indulgence). In fact, the vast majority of verses about the poor both lament their plight and command compassionate actions towards them. These verses further condemn oppression and exploitation of the poor.

- c. Here and there is a faddish Christian concept of the poor which regards their state as a form of divine judgement and conversely sees prosperity as sure proof of God's blessing. It must be said right out that from a Biblical perspective there is no truth at all in the first concept, and only an element of truth in the second.

2. Myth Two: Prosperity is Never a Sign of God's Blessing

- a. We are not into the excesses of the Prosperity Gospel when we affirm firstly that poverty is a quality of life that is wholly contrary to God's intentions for humanity and therefore unacceptable, and secondly, that prosperity is indeed often but not always celebrated in Scripture as indicative of divine blessing.
- b. The book of Deuteronomy, which fleshes out God's covenant relationship with Israel, is full of teaching reflecting God's intention for all to live an abundant life (Dt.28:9-12). This thinking goes back to Genesis 2, in Eden, where humanity lives in harmonious relationship with God and creation, and consequently experiences the richness of all that creation has to offer.

3. Myth Three: Prosperity is Always a Sign of God's Blessing

- a. Actually, in Scripture we see that far from prosperity always being a sign of blessing, it in fact is all too often the possession, not of the blessed, but of wicked exploiters, who have obtained it at the expense of the poor. The psalmist complained, "I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked ... always carefree, they increase in wealth" (Ps. 73:3 & 12).
- b. Scripture of course also shows that wealth can indeed come by many means, whether hard work, God's blessing, or else exploitation, fraud, and even theft.
- c. There are several warnings directed at the rich suggesting that they are

4. Myth Four: We Can Serve God and Money

- a. Actually, we can't. The Scriptures say wealth can all too quickly become our god. Jesus warned of this when in Matthew 6:24 he said, "you cannot serve both God and Money" (*italics mine*).
- b. Christian writer Richard Foster's personal testimony, in his classic book *Money, Sex and Power*, is that: "The thing I failed to see, and the thing that Jesus saw so clearly, is the way in which mammon makes a bid for our hearts." Wealth can indeed become our god--and often does. This is easy to see when we examine our choices and priorities and find what really controls our lives.

B. Some Realities of Poverty and Wealth in the World in Which We Live

1. A Global View

- a. Firstly, the global perspective. This is necessary because what we experiences is not unique, and global trends help inform us of some basic realities about poverty.
- b. A free market economy (i.e. an economic system in which any person in the private sector is free to participate with minimal government controls on market functions) dominates the global market. It might be inferred from this that one's own economic behavior or habits will decide one's material well-being. But a mitigating factor is that there are power structures in the global economy, ultimately located in the hands of a

few, mainly Western, nations and institutions, which exert huge controls in global economic exchanges that obviously favor themselves.

- c. Most know the “trickle-down” theory in global macro-economics which says the profits gained by the capable and well-placed will inevitably trickle beneficially down to the underprivileged or marginalized. There is little evidence, though, that such a ‘trickle-down’ effect inevitably works. Statistically this is seen in the fact that a fifth of the world’s population receives more than four-fifths of the world's income. According to a World Bank report, just three years ago “1.3 billion people in the developing world still struggle to survive on less than \$1 a day and the number continually increases.” Ouch!
- d. All this underlines that one cause of poverty is found in localized consequences of a globalized free market economy. There is little or nothing a poor person, community or nation is able to do about this.

2. A Historical View

- a. People are often poor because the events of history have brought them to that point. There is no need to elaborate on some of the exploitations and their consequences in colonialism or the fruits of apartheid in South Africa or slavery in America, except to say that a loss of spirit and motivation in certain of our communities right now cannot be so much attributed to laziness as to the near destruction of their social cohesion and structures.
- b. The victims of social injustice, are accordingly in a journey of social, cultural and economic repair that could take generations. This recovery is essential to their social well-being, economic participation and success.

3. A Sociological View--The Spiral of Poverty

- a. The above factors intersect and feed a debilitating spiral of poverty, where the poor, frequently black, person is often trapped in a poverty spiral generally hard for whites to understand.
- b. First of all, economic and political exploitation beget poverty, which spawns in turn more children, more overcrowding, more poor hygiene, more disease and higher infant mortality. Following a consequent lowering of morale and motivation, the spiral continues with population growth exceeding affordable and healthy food, leading to even more poverty, more malnutrition, and yet more infant mortality.
- c. All this causes retarded physical and intellectual growth in young survivors, plus decreased potential for academic and other achievement, and finally in yet more ignorance, the latter feeding both poor work performance and finally unemployment.

In light of all this ...

How do We as Christians Respond to Issues of Wealth and Poverty?

A Christian analysis of this problem gets us nowhere if it is not accompanied by a proactive response. The Kingdom of God is a place in Jesus Christ of solutions, healing, redemption and restoration to a whole and healthy existence, where Shalom has a chance to prevail.

What is key to Shalom, however, is not simply that it comes from God's loving rule but that it exists wherever communities are living in obedience to His rule and therefore reflecting the ways of His Kingdom. Insofar as money is concerned, what does it mean to be in Shalom and obedient to the demands of Jesus Christ?

1. Shalom is possible only in a covenant community of faith in God.

- a. While Christians are to be salt and light in the earth and do good to all people, they are aware that poverty will always be with us in the broader culture.
- b. This is not to say that Christians should not work for social justice and the alleviation of poverty but rather that they are realistic about its full demise in this age outside the Christian community.

2. Shalom Means Everyone Giving, Supplying the Needs of Others and Knowing the Blessings of It.

- a. Few promises in Scripture are more dramatic than that in Malachi 3:10. "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." Here we are literally challenged by God with the principle of giving of our material resources directly to Him and His work without fear of being left in need.
- b. The New Covenant applies this principle in a more radical way by asking believers to share so as to achieve equality of resources. See notes on giving. If believers tithed under the Law, then the "cheerful givers" (2Cor.9:7) of the New Testament will want to make the Old Testament requirement the minimal starting point for giving under Grace. And they will then inherit in blessing the even more remarkable New Testament equivalent of the Malachi 3:10 promise: "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." (2Cor.9:8). And note the thanksgiving of Paul for the Macedonians where even "their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity" (2Cor.8:2) as they gave from "beyond their ability" (v.3).
- c. When it is difficult to summon the will to give, we must ask ourselves the question whether we see our final security residing in Christ or in our finances.
- d. We should also add that giving should not be a matter of careless, thoughtless or directionless handouts. We are called to prayerfully steward the gifts we have received (Matt.25:14-30). The Spirit must then guide and "each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give" (2Cor.9:7).

3. Shalom Means Love Built Into Both Economic and Political Structures

- a. Justice, whether political or economic, is simply love built into structures. This means that in every way available to us, we should be working for an economic system of love and justice which takes seriously that material adequacy and absence of scarcity are basic to human well-being. Love knows this. So does justice. This puts two major challenges before us--how to share the cake more fairly, and how to expand it more vigorously, so that more people might benefit.
- b. Some years ago Prof. James Moulder published an instructive article on this, calling for a shifting of the goalposts in the debate between capitalism and socialism. He noted that

“we cannot have a free enterprise system that doesn’t generate inequality and poverty [and we] cannot have an egalitarian system that isn’t restrictive and frustrating.” Instead, Moulder calls us to a paradigm shift involving three rules:

1. The first says that it is always legitimate to ask how we can increase the productivity and wealth of an organisation or society.
 2. The second says it is always legitimate to ask how we can distribute the profits and wealth of an organisation or society more fairly.
 3. The third says it is never legitimate to ask the first question (the one about productivity and wealth) without asking the second question (the one about distribution and fairness). And the other way round.
- c. Moulder sees rule three as crucial, meaning that, “anyone who wants to increase wealth must tell us how to distribute it more fairly, [while] anyone who wants to distribute wealth more fairly must tell us how to generate it more effectively and efficiently.”

3. Shalom Does Mean a Deep Concern for the Poor

- a. It is clear throughout Scripture that God’s attitude to the poor is identical to His attitude toward other kinds of oppressed groupings. Now although Scripture speaks of the poor in three senses--the economically poor (those with little money), the politically poor (those suffering powerlessly as victims of social injustice) and the spiritually poor (those who are humble, meek and spiritually hungry), it remains so that Jesus spent much of his time with the poor peasants of Galilee, the literal poor, and had a great affinity for all those at the bottom of the heap. Indeed, he himself was one of them, and often had ‘nowhere to lay his head’ (Matt. 8:20). Small wonder then that Jesus, in Matthew 25:44-45, could finish His parable on the sheep and the goats saying, “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, (my brothers) you did not do for me.’”
- b. This concern for the poor and needy is to permeate our social behavior and call forth a compassionate and generous servant attitude towards all who find themselves on the ‘underneath’ side of life, even when it is the result of their own mistakes or in some cases, ineptitude. And even more so when it results from exploitation by the rich and powerful. Indeed the Scriptures abound with intense denunciation of those who exploit the poor. For example, in Ezekiel 22, blazing divine condemnation rests on a catalogue of sins in which extortion (vv.7 & 12) and “unjust gain” (v.13) which “[destroy] lives” (v.27, RSV) are set, as equally serious, alongside murder and idolatry (vv.3-4), “contempt” for parents (v.7), “lewd acts” (v.9), adultery and incest (v.11). My, oh my!

IV. Conclusion

Money, Poverty, Prosperity and Shalom. The issues are massive and complex, often at both a personal micro level and certainly at a macro one. But this could become the issue at many levels of the new millennium. As we said earlier, if one fifth of the world enjoys 85% of its income, and 1.3 billion people in the developing world struggle to survive on less than US\$1.00 a day, then the Christian Church dare not turn its back on this monumental challenge under God.

In the meanwhile, each of us faces our own money and our own Lord. In this regard I leave you with two sound dictates. The first from Wesley: “Make all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.” The second is from John Calvin: “The only right stewardship of money is that which is tested by the rule of love.”