

St. John in the Wilderness
✝ Adult Education and Formation ✝

Notes on:
Stewardship

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Christian Stewardship 1. Themes in the New Testament's Treatment of Wealth

Notes by David Monyak. Updated October 29, 2000

Topics

These topics are from chapters 8 and 9 in **Wealth as Peril and Obligation. The New Testament on Possessions.** Sondra Ely Wheeler. William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1995

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- 1.2. Wealth as the fruit of injustice
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1. The Old Testament Tradition

These themes formed part of the moral world of New Testament times

Four themes are seen:

- wealth as an occasion for idolatry
- wealth as the fruit of injustice
- wealth as the blessing on the faithful
- wealth as the reward of labor

1.1. Wealth as an occasion for idolatry

Wealth is often associated with unfaithfulness to God

■ Ezekiel 7:19-20: They shall fling their silver into the streets, their gold shall be treated as unclean. Their silver and gold cannot save them on the day of the wrath of the LORD. They shall not satisfy their hunger or fill their stomachs with it. For it was the stumbling block of their iniquity. From their beautiful ornament, in which they took pride, they made their abominable images, their detestable things; therefore I will make of it an unclean thing to them." (NRSV)

■ Deuteronomy 32:10-18

1.2. Wealth as the fruit of injustice

Injustice and a lack of charity is often associated with the accumulation of wealth

■ Micah 6:10-12: Can I forget the treasures of the wickedness in the house of the wicked, and the scant measure that is accursed? Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights? Your wealthy are full of violence. . ." (NRSV)

■ Isaiah 10:1-3: Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth. . .?" (NRSV)

■ Isaiah 3:14-15: The LORD enters into judgement with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord GOD of hosts. (NRSV)

1.3. Wealth as the blessing on the faithful

All manner of abundance is promised to those loyal to God

■ Leviticus 26:3-5: If you follow by statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land. (NRSV)

■ Leviticus 26:9-10: I will look with favor upon you and make you fruitful and multiply you; and I will maintain my covenant with you. You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make way for the new. (NRSV)

- Deuteronomy 11:13-15: If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today -- loving the LORD your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul -- then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil; and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill. (NRSV)
- Isaiah 54:11-12
- Isaiah 60:9-16
- Jeremiah 33:6-9

Individual prosperity may be a mark of God's favor

- Psalm 25:12-13: Who are they that fear the LORD? He will teach them the way that they should choose. They will abide in prosperity, and their children shall possess the land. (NRSV)
- Psalm 37:2, 18, 20, 25, 28
- Proverbs 10:22; 13:21, 13:25

1.4. Wealth as the reward of labor

Material prosperity is a result of the care and diligence of those who are rich. Spiritual wisdom is allied with practical wisdom that brings wealth

- limited to the Proverbs and the apocryphal book of Sirach
 - Proverbs 8:18-21: Riches and honor are with me, enduring wealth and prosperity. My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver. I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, endowing with wealth those who love me, filling their treasuries (NRSV)
 - Proverbs 10:4: A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich (NRSV)
 - Proverbs 12:11, 24
 - Proverbs 13:4
 - Proverbs 14:23
 - Proverbs 21:5
- this theme disappears in the New Testament

2. Themes in the New Testament Treatment of Wealth

Four themes are seen:

- wealth as a stumbling block
- wealth as a competing object of devotion

- wealth as a symptom of economic injustice
- wealth as a resource for human needs

2.1. Wealth as a Stumbling Block

Wealth can be a practical obstacle to discipleship

2.1.1. Mark 10:17-31

(parallels in Matthew 19:16ff and Luke 18:18-30)

Notes:

- poverty is not held up as primary goal
- discipleship is the primary goal. All that matters is whether one follows
 - wealth is a stumbling block; wealth would have had no importance if the man had followed

2.1.2. Parable of the Sower

(interpretation in Matthew 13:22, Mark 4:18-10, Luke 8:14)

Notes:

- The implanted word is choked by:
 - deceitfulness of wealth (Matthew)
 - the desire for other things (Mark)
 - the riches and pleasures of the world (Luke)

2.2. Wealth as a Competing Object of Devotion

Wealth tempts the possessor with finding alternative grounds for security and self-definition

2.2.1. Luke 12:22-34

Notes:

- emphasis is to have the liberty to give complete and undivided loyalty to God
- poverty may be a means for securing the liberty for loyalty to God, but is not to be sought for itself
 - poverty not a guarantee of moral purity
- other means, examples of achieving this liberty: genuine open-hearted generosity
 - Zacchaeus' offer and Jesus reply in Luke 19:8-9: Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this house, . . ." (NRSV)
 - give alms to all to ask (Matthew 5:42)
 - lend without expecting return (Luke 6:35)

- offer cloak when someone takes our tunic (Matthew 5:40)

2.3. Wealth as a Symptom of Economic Injustice

2.3.1. James 5:1-6

Notes:

- failing to give help, sharing one possessions with those in need is culpable
- It does not matter if you are not the cause of the injustice
- also seen in:
 - Parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-26)
 - Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46)

2.4. Wealth as a Resource for Human Needs

Ownership carries concrete and wide-ranging responsibilities, in particular, the material support of fellow believers

2.4.1. A Responsibility to the Christian Community

Wealth carries a particular responsibility to the Christian Community

- 1 John 3:16-17: We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us -- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother and sister in need and yet refuses to help? (NRSV)
- Acts 2:44-47: All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (NRSV)
- Romans 12:6-8: We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness"

2.4.2. A Universal Duty to Care for the Needy

Wealth carries a universal duty to care for the needy

- Matthew 5:42: Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. (NRSV)
- Luke 6:30: Give to everyone who begs from you, and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. (NRSV)
- Luke 14:12-14: He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (NRSV)
- Romans 12:20: No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink" (NRSV)

2.4.3. Summary Quote, Wealth as a Resource for Human Needs

Galatians 6:10: So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. (NRSV)

3. Summary: The Bible on Wealth

3.1. Old Testament versus New Testament

Three of the themes from the Old Testament carry into the New Testament:

- wealth as an occasion for idolatry --> wealth as a stumbling block to discipleship; wealth as a competing object of devotion
- wealth as the fruit of injustice --> wealth as a symptom of economic injustice
- wealth as the blessing on the faithful --> comes through in very tempered form as wealth as a resource for human needs

The Old Testament theme of wealth as a reward of labor is not present in the New Testament

3.2. Bible and Material Wealth

Bible is not anti-materialistic

- does not advocate a pure asceticism
- no sense that material reality is intrinsically evil

- does not advocate a "mystical" ascent to God by means of withdrawal from bodily reality

Emphasis is on *discipleship*, the totality of commitment to God, to God's word, God's vision and desire for us and for others

It is suspicious of *anything* that may interfere with that commitment. In this regard, material wealth is problematic, because:

- it is a hindrance to heeding the gospel
- it is a temptation to idolatry
- it is often the result or means of social injustice
- the disposition of wealth is a great and difficult moral obligation

4. Asking the Questions

(Wording of questions slightly revised from those in chapter 9 in **Wealth as Peril and Obligation. The New Testament on Possessions.** Sondra Ely Wheeler. William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1995)

4.1. Questions about Liberty (Wealth as a stumbling block)

"It is easier for a camel to do through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25)

- 1. Are we at liberty to hear God's call to us, or are we too encumbered / distracted by the things we own or desire?
- 2. In what ways do increasing numbers of possessions bind us to a particular life (a particular location, occupations, income, etc.)?
- 3. Can we discern our true vocation amid the pressure to sustain our present material lifestyle?
- 4. Could we hear a call to leave all our material possessions behind? Is there anything for which we would give up all that we owned?
- 5. Is it humanly possible to possess without being in the power of what is possessed?

4.2. Questions about Worship (Wealth as temptations to idolatry)

"You cannot serve God and mammon." (Matthew 6:24, Luke 16:13)

- 1. How much does "financial security" figure in our estimates of our own safety? In what do we trust? In what do we place our security?

- 2. What do we hope for and fear most in our lives? How is our answer to these questions bound up in our material lifestyle?
- 3. How much do we as Christians use our "material possessions" to define our status and measure our success or failure in life?
- 4. What do we pursue above all else? What is the basis for our decisions where to work, where to live, what to do with our time?

4.3. Questions about Justice (Wealth as a symptoms of economic injustice)

"Woe to you rich! Begin to weep and cry out for the miseries which are coming upon you!" (James 5:1)

- 1. To what extent is our wealth the product of exploitative labor, management, or marketing practices?
- 2. To what degree does our material prosperity perpetuate unjust structures and institutions?
- 3. Does our means of acquiring wealth contribute to human good? Or the opposite?
- 4. Do we use the social power conferred by wealth unjustly?
- 5. Are we holding idle assets that might help those in dire need?

4.4. Questions about Care (Wealth as a Resource for Human Needs)

"if you have the means of worldly life and see your brother in need, yet close your heart to him, how does the love of God remain in you? Let your love not be in words on the tongue, but in action and in truth" (1 John 3:17)

- 1. Is our love towards other Christians displayed in action, or merely professed in words?
- 2. Can we justify the present allocation of our material resources in the light of the needs of others?
- 3. How do we distinguish between our own needs versus our desires?
- 4. Is our care for material needs of others (including the "selfish and ungrateful, including those who have no "claim" on us) an imitation and sign of God's love for all persons?

Christian Stewardship

Primary Reference

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