

Loving Money

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“You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. For people will become lovers of themselves, lovers of money . . . lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. . . Avoid them!” (II Timothy 3:1–5).

“Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. But as for you, man of God, shun all this. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness” (I Timothy 6:9-11).

“When they had prayed the place in which they were gathered was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership (Greek, *idios*) of any possessions but everything they owned was held in common (Greek, *koinos, koinonia* = fellowship, community). With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:31-34).

“And he said to them ‘take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, What should I do for I have no place to store my crops? Then he said, I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry! But God said to him: ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God” (Luke 12:15-21).

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth . . . but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. . . . No one can serve two masters . . . You cannot serve God and wealth (Greek, *mammon*)” (Matthew 6:19-24)

“Stewardism” . . . Not Capitalism or Socialism!

A lot of our right wing Christian friends are freaking out about “socialism” today. They are apoplectic about any further government intrusion into the American health care debacle. Such inflammatory rhetoric would gain a lot more credibility if it was accompanied by declining to accept Medicare, Social Security, and unemployment insurance (as much or more “socialistic” government programs as anything currently being considered by Washington; and how about that socialistic National Highway System and National Park System! And those socialistic rules insisting on clean drinking water and auto safety!).

Too bad about all this nonsense and ignorance because actually socialism (in its more accurate meaning) is not a Christian option (Christians cannot in good conscience be part of an appeal to a centralized state to own and operate our overall economy).

But what about capitalism? Is this a Christian alternative? We have to be careful about our definitions and usage here. If by “capitalism” we are referring to a more-or-less free market that allows for individual and community initiative and entrepreneurship, private ownership, and one which demands personal responsibility . . . these are generally good things and Christians, coming out of our kingdom value system can say “Amen.” But if we mean by “capitalism” an unfettered pursuit of self-interest, a reliance on impersonal market mechanisms (the “invisible hand”) to produce justice and a goodness, and a

privileging of financial profits over people . . . no way. If we ever get sucked or deceived into thinking that the “love of money” is going to solve our problems, we are fools indeed.

Did you know that Jesus had more to say about money, property, and wealth than about heaven and hell or any other topic except for the kingdom of God and healing (“health care”)? How familiar are you with this teaching? Are you in business? How does your time invested in studying Jesus and Scripture on the subject of business, leadership, finance, loans, competition, corporate culture, etc. compare with the time you invested in understanding these topics from the point of view of your business school professors, and from Michael Porter, Milton Friedman, the *Wall Street Journal*, Lou Dobbs, and *Freakonomics* (just to list a few nonbiblical sources)? My guess is that at best it is a 1:100 ratio.

Not good enough for the followers of Jesus Christ! Joining the world’s throngs lobbying for varieties of socialism . . . or capitalism . . . either one . . . is a tragic betrayal of our discipleship and our Lord. He had important insights to give us. When we ignore them and when Jesus’ values and insights are not central to our perspective and our management career . . . well, you know how to finish this sentence.

Christians are not socialists and they are not capitalists. Christians are stewards of what belongs to God. Not the socialist state and not the market, not the collective and not individuals . . . but God is the owner of everything. Christians are God’s stewards who should manage God’s property in God’s way for God’s purposes. Period. “Stewardism” is our economic philosophy . . . not capitalism, not socialism.

Providers . . . not Consumers

Do you remember St. Paul’s famous passage? “Let him that stole, steal no more! But rather let him labor with his hands that he might have something to share with those in need” (Ephesians 4:28). Thieving and stealing is totally unacceptable in a Christian view. So is sloth, laziness, and irresponsibility. Totally unacceptable.

But the alternative to theft is not hoarding and lavishing everything on almighty Me! Thieves and self-serving hoarders are both missing the mark big time. The Christian perspective is to work in order to provide for others, not just in order to consume for myself. Of course we must provide for our own needs and for our families. But we are not at all done yet. We are called to be stewards of what belongs to God, using our creativity and energy to help others with our products and services.

A great business begins by figuring out what its motivating and unifying mission and purpose will be. If that purpose is to invent or build good and beautiful things and provide great services to people or if it is to help people solve their problems, get free and get healthy . . . the business can honor God and be a positive for all of its stakeholders. We hope that the business is so good and so valued that its customers happily pay and the company does well financially. But if the company and its leaders take their eye off the product and service ball and focus on the money that is exchanging hands, the quality of the product and service will suffer, all the stakeholders will suffer, and eventually the money will go away. The love of money is no way to run a great business.

Expecting the love of money to solve a national health care crisis . . . or world hunger . . . or a corrupt and crude entertainment world . . . or an environmental crisis . . . is a fool’s dream. It will never happen. Expecting Caesar to solve it (love of the state? Love of bureaucracy?) will not get the job done either. Here is the answer: Love the Lord your God . . . and Love your neighbor as yourself.” This is not Gill’s radical opinion out of left field. It is Jesus’ opinion out of kingdom central.

Lovers of God and Neighbor . . . not Lovers of Money

Did you know that some of Jesus’ followers and observers criticized and questioned him for hanging out with the rich? His first miracle was to make some fine wine at a big wedding feast (he could, theoretically, have gone instead to make sandwiches at Peoples’ Park; he did that at other times). Abraham, David, Solomon, Ruth, Esther, Joseph of Arimathea . . . some of the great biblical stalwarts were very wealthy. This column is NOT a criticism of being wealthy or making lots of money. And it is in no way an invitation

to sit in judgment on other people or give in to envy, jealousy, or covetousness. Let's never go there! The problem is not having wealth --- but loving wealth so that it becomes your god, your object of awe and sacrifice. It is not having wealth --- but gaining wealth by means of oppressing or exploiting the poor. It is not about having wealth --- but clutching and hoarding wealth when true stewardship calls the strong to be generous in helping out the weak.

Here is the challenge: the media loudmouths want to draw Christians into their perverted, inflammatory half-truths and lies and propaganda. They want to play on your fear and the weaknesses in your education. They want to polarize you into "socialist" or "capitalist." As followers of Jesus Christ we must summon the courage to say a resolute "No" and go our own way, the Third Way, the Lord's way in our economic and business views and practices. Let's concentrate on being good stewards.