

So, What Does Jesus Say about Wealth Concentration and Inequality?

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In recent years, the tendency for wealth to concentrate in the hands of the powerful few has come under scrutiny, prompting concern about growing inequality from political and religious leaders, most notably Pope Francis. While excessive wealth concentration is likely lead to greater social ills and unrest, how to rein in growing inequality is a more difficult question. Should we move away from capitalism and the market system? Develop a more socialist model? Reform capitalism from inside to benefit people more equitably?

For Christians, a good place to start is by looking at what Jesus had to say about these issues. So, where to look for clues? Jesus teaches through parables that often paint pictures by describing economic activities, but his teaching is aimed at a spiritual reality which has an accounting system and currency often in opposition to forces in the physical world. In drawing illustrations from the world of economic production, investment, and taxes, Jesus appears to view economic activities neutrally except when they present barriers or opportunities to fulfill the two greatest commandments: loving God with all one's heart and treating other people equally as oneself.

In the "real" world of the marketplace, not much has changed since he preached. People today continue competing to acquire wealth, power, and social status. But Jesus teaches that all are equal in the eyes of God. This may seem obvious today in a world that has been has been reshaped by this teaching, but 2,000 years ago his assertion was a profound advance in a time when heads of households held property rights over people in their families and slavery was a normal part of the economic woodwork. Jesus taught that people most

connected to God will see their intrinsic value on a par with those of lower social rank.

Ties to material objects can make connection to God and others particularly difficult for the wealthy. In the Book of Luke, Jesus offers a series of lessons dealing with wealth and stewardship. After attacking religious leaders for requiring tithing while “neglecting justice and the love of God,” he calls on people to give up all their possessions, implying that tithing is insufficient. Later, Jesus’ message is more nuanced when he discusses how the wealthy should use their possessions to achieve God’s purposes on Earth, but without the spirit of ownership.

In many ways, Jesus appears to be more concerned about problems stemming from wealth concentration than about inequality, per se. The primary problem with wealth, and the power it brings, is that it easily becomes an object of worship, thus blocking out one’s relationship with God. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 19, 24). The instinct to hoard is a spiritual handicap impeding a person’s own development.

The second problem with wealth is a practical one. In Jesus’ panoramic view, wealth needs to be shifted to those in need. Excessive hoarding of resources results in more misery, poverty, and disease than there should be for one’s neighbors. Defenders of capitalism can find some comfort in this perspective. In the commercial marketplace, for example, monopolies and oligopolies are manifestations of hoarding. Higher prices resulting from restrained competition soak up resources, denying consumers full value for their money and causing a net loss for the society. Likewise, uninvested profits result in less future production. And so on. In purely operational terms, a competitive economy can create greater abundance of resources. An economy largely composed of government-sanctioned or uncontrolled monopolies and oligopolies yields far less.

The problem with capitalism lies in distributing wealth to those with greatest need. Jesus teaches that people who control the flows of capital and amass

wealth are responsible for making sure that resources reach them. “Everyone to whom much is given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.” (Luke 12, 48.)

Jesus makes a special point to condemn the commercialization and corruption of the religious leaders his day. Religious monopolies, like those Jesus constantly attacked, have a special place in hell. Not only do they collect money that could be better used, they also fail in their core purpose of helping to connect human beings with God. They fail both in the competitive marketplace and in the spiritual one. That the religious establishment was able to orchestrate Jesus’ execution is evidence of the political power supporting its privileged position. Religious leaders play a special role in society and must meet the highest standards, Jesus reminds us. So, when wealthy and politically powerful religious institutions continue injuring children -- the epitome of the helpless in Jesus’ examples -- by neglecting to correct the causes of systemic sexual abuse, they arguably reach new depths of depravity.

Given the two great commandments – loving God and following the Golden Rule – reducing inequality appears to be simple. Let’s just take everyone’s money, put it in one big collection plate, and divide it into equal shares. If it were only that simple. One of the main stumbling blocks to the Marxist approach is that while Jesus describes people as equal in the eyes of God based on their wealth, he also calls for them to strive as hard as possible to be faithful and do good works to connect with God and one another. In a moral sense, he calls on people to be unequal – to strive to do better! This call for spiritual watchfulness and attainment is embodied in a series of parables in the Book of Matthew as Jesus prepares his disciples in a private conversation for his imminent sacrifice and for the final judgment.

When people starting from different places in life with different resources are asked to apply effort, the resulting moral inequality, like economic inequality, is inevitable. In Matthew, Jesus uses several references to work and investment to prepare his conclave for what is to come. “Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives.” (Matthew 24, 46) (To put this in context, the

modern reader can substitute the words “worker” and “employer” for “slave” and “master.”)

Jesus then relates two linked parables to describe the Kingdom of Heaven. In the first, he presents a mental experiment in which five bridesmaids prepare for the arrival of a bridegroom by making sure they have oil in their lamps, while five others who are unprepared end up being locked out of the banquet when the groom unexpectedly arrives at midnight and they are pulled away to refuel their lamps at the last minute. “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” (Matthew 25, 13)

He immediately piggybacks to another illustration: “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability.” In the commercial world from which this example is drawn, inequality of ability and resources is natural and to be expected. Jesus does not decry this material inequality, but rather uses it as a teaching tool. The slaves’ assignments are only a beginning point. One is judged not where one starts, but by the return on investment. And what happens as a result? Increased inequality! The servants beginning with more resources, and those who pay attention and apply themselves, are rewarded with more responsibility – even more resources to invest. In contrast, the worker who refuses to try and hoards his talent is condemned.

Jesus moves on to describe how effort will be judged – how the “goats and sheep” will be separated. Switching from comparison to contrast, he flips over the conventional accounting system. In the spiritual realm, God’s yardstick measures the degree to which a person helps others in need – or passes them by. Restating fundamental teachings from the Sermon on the Mount, he says:

“Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you

welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” (Matthew, 25, 34)

And, yes, governments, like individuals, face the same moral challenge and judgment. This echoes the indictment of the great Old Testament prophets against the declining Kingdoms of Israel and Judah evidenced by failure to meet the needs of the poor and ability to hold their lands.

So, what does Jesus teach about inequality and wealth concentration? First, inequality exists naturally as part of the physical world. He uses the economics of the physical world to help illustrate challenges in the spiritual world. In both spheres, people begin with unequal resources, exercise free will, and end up in unequal positions, sometimes more unequal than before. Wealth tends to concentrate. Christians also are called to use their resources to meet the needs of everyone, not just themselves. The greater the economic imbalance, the greater the responsibility to correct it.

In the eyes of God, Jesus teaches that all people have equal standing in terms of moral potential. Though equal before God, Jesus portrays people are unequal in resources and talents, and unequal in outcomes. People will be judged with equanimity based on their attentiveness and effort in using the resources and talents they are given. This means that people need to exercise free will and make decisions. The moral drama plays out in the workings of each human being's conscience. It also plays out collectively through elections and actions taken by political leaders.

In the economy of the Spirit, connectivity to God (the first commandment) is judged by how we treat others and meet the needs of the most vulnerable. God is not presented as a central governing power who dictates equality of outcomes. Rather, a picture emerges of intersecting spheres – one physical and one spiritual – operating under systems of parallel, but reversed, assets and liabilities. Where these universes touch is in how people care for one another.

A principal criticism of government-imposed wealth redistribution is that it can undermine the incentive to do better. If a person can survive without working,

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why bother? There is evidence that Jesus is aware of this issue. He performs miracles and healings to demonstrate the power of God. But he is sometimes reluctant to do this and does not want people to experience these miracles as a sort of magic. When giving sight to a blind man, he says: "...your faith has made you well," thereby stressing that the man played an active role in his own healing. When faced with the need to feed thousands of people gathered on a hillside, Jesus didn't ask God to open the heavens and drop tons of food to earth. He gathered all his disciples had. He blessed the five loaves of bread and two fish and asked his disciples distribute the food to the crowd. Somehow everyone ate and there were 12 baskets of leftovers. We are left to wonder how this happened. Perhaps the initial sharing of the leaders was emulated by people in the crowd, who, in turn, shared what they had brought on their journey with their neighbors. (Matthew 14, 15-21)

In contrast to the hoarding religious establishment, Jesus points to a poor woman giving two copper coins to the synagogue treasury, while the wealthy conspicuously donated much more. Mark 12, 44) Her charity is extremely unequal in comparison. But much, it turns out, depends on how the comparison is drawn. In Jesus' accounting, charity is measured by comparing a person's *capacity* to give with what she gives: "This poor widow put in more than all others...For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." If the rich gave in proportion to the poor woman, far more resources would be put to better use.