

Was Jesus A Socialist? Part 1

On June 16, 1992, London's *Daily Telegraph* reported this astonishingly bold remark by former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev: "Jesus was the first socialist, the first to seek a better life for mankind." [1] Perhaps we should cut Gorbachev some slack here. A man who climbed his way to the top of a stridently atheist empire with a sorry track record on human rights was probably not a Bible scholar. But surely he knew that if socialism is nothing more than the seeking of "a better life for mankind," then Jesus could hardly have been its first advocate; he would, in fact, be just one of several billion of them. You don't have to be a Christian to appreciate the errors in the Gorbachev canard. You can be a person of any faith or no faith at all. You just have to appreciate facts, history, and logic. You can even be a socialist – but one with open eyes – and realize that Jesus wasn't in your camp. Let's first define the term *socialism*, which the Gorbachev comment only obfuscates. Socialism isn't happy thoughts, nebulous fantasies, mere good intentions, or children sharing their Halloween candy with one another. In a modern political, economic, and social context, socialism isn't voluntary like the Girl Scouts. Its central characteristic is the concentration of power to forcibly achieve one or more (or usually *all*) of these purposes: central planning of the economy, government ownership of property, and the redistribution of wealth. No amount of "we do it all for you" or "it's for your own good" or "we're helping people" rhetoric can erase that. What makes socialism socialism is the fact that *you can't opt out*, a point eloquently made here by David Boaz of the Cato Institute: *One difference between libertarianism [a personal choice and liberty-based system] and socialism is that a socialist society can't tolerate groups of people practicing freedom, but a libertarian society can comfortably allow people to choose voluntary socialism. If a group of people – even a very*

large group – wanted to purchase land and own it in common, they would be free to do so. The libertarian legal order would require only that no one be coerced into joining or giving up his property. [2] Government, whether big or small, is the only entity in society that possesses a legal monopoly over the use of force. The more force it initiates against people, the more it subordinates the choices of the ruled to the whims of their rulers – that is, the more *socialist* it becomes. A reader may object to this description by insisting that to “socialize” something is to simply “share” it and “help people” in the process, but that’s baby talk. It’s *how you do it* that defines the system. Do it through the use of force, and it’s socialism. Do it through persuasion, free will, and respect for property rights, and it’s something else entirely. So was Jesus really a socialist? More to the main focus of this essay, did he call for the state to redistribute income to either punish the rich or to help the poor? I first heard “Jesus was a socialist” and “Jesus was a redistributionist” some forty years ago. I was puzzled. *I had always understood Jesus’s message to be that the most important decision a person would make in his earthly lifetime was to accept or reject him as savior.* That decision was clearly to be a very personal one – an individual and voluntary choice. He constantly stressed inner, spiritual renewal as far more critical to well-being than material things. I wondered, “How could the same Jesus advocate the use of force to take stuff from some and give it to others?” I just couldn’t imagine him supporting a fine or a jail sentence for people who don’t want to fork over their money for food-stamp programs. “Wait a minute!” you say. “Didn’t Jesus answer, *Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s* when the Pharisees tried to trick him into denouncing a Roman-imposed tax?” Yes indeed, he did say that. It’s found first in the Gospel of Matthew, 22:15–22, and later in the Gospel of Mark, 12:13–17. But notice that everything depends on just what truly did belong to Caesar and what didn’t, which is actually a rather powerful endorsement of property rights.

Jesus said nothing like “It belongs to Caesar if Caesar simply says it does, no matter how much he wants, how he gets it, or how he chooses to spend it.” The fact is, one can scour the Scriptures with a fine-tooth comb and find nary a word from Jesus that endorses the forcible redistribution of wealth by political authorities. None, period. “But didn’t Jesus say he came to uphold the law?” you ask. Yes, in Matthew 5:17–20 he declares, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”[3] In Luke 24:44, he clarifies this when he says, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” He was not saying, “Whatever laws the government passes, I’m all for.” He was speaking specifically of the Mosaic law (primarily the Ten Commandments) and the prophecies of his own coming. *This is part one of a four-part essay. The full article was originally published by the **Foundation for Economic Education**. The full book can be downloaded here.*