

The Biblical Roots of American Liberty, Pt. 3: What Did Jesus Teach About Riches and Economics?

This is part three of a three-part essay. Read part one and part two.

Establishing a Moral Order

It is just as obvious that our survival as a community of men, women, and children depends on meeting certain *moral* requirements: a set of rules built into the nature of things which must be obeyed if we are to survive as a society—especially as a social order characterized by personal freedom, private property, and social cooperation under the division of labor.

Moses did not invent the Ten Commandments. Moses intuited certain features of this created world that tell us what we must do to survive as a human community, and he wrote out the code: Don't murder, don't steal, don't assault, don't bear false witness, don't covet. Similar codes may be found in every high culture.

It would be impossible to have any kind of a society where most people are constantly on the prowl for opportunities to murder, assault, lie, and steal. A good society is possible only if most people most of the time do *not* engage in criminal actions. A good society is one where most people most of the time tell the truth, keep their word, fulfill their contracts, don't covet their neighbor's goods, and occasionally lend a helping hand. No society will ever eliminate crime, but any society where more than a tiny fraction of the people exercises criminal tendencies is on the skids. To affirm a

moral order is to say, in effect, that this universe has a deep prejudice against murder, a strong bias in favor of private property, and hates a lie.

The history of humankind in Western civilization was shaped and tempered by biblical ideas and values, and the attitudes inspired by these teachings. There was much backsliding, of course; but in the fullness of time scriptural ideas about freedom, private property, and the work ethic found expression in Western custom, law, government, and the economy—especially in our own nation. We prospered to the degree that we practiced the freedom we professed; we became ever more productive of goods and services. The general level of economic well-being rose to the point where many became rich enough so that biblical statements about the wealthy began to haunt the collective conscience.

The Bible does warn against the false gods of wealth and power, but it legitimizes the normal human desire for a modicum of economic well-being—which is not at all the same as *idolizing* wealth and/or power. As a matter of fact, the Bible gives anyone who seeks it out a general recipe for a free and prosperous commonwealth. It tells us that we are created with the capacity to choose; we are put on an earth which is the Lord's and given stewardship responsibilities over its resources. We are ordered to work, charged with rendering equal justice to all, and to love mercy. A people which puts these ideas into practice is bound to become better off than a people which ignores them. These commands laid the foundation for the economic well-being of Western society.

Western civilization, which used to be called "Christendom," did not prosper at the expense of the relatively poor Third World. This unhappy sector of the globe is poor because it is unproductive; and it is unproductive because its nations lack the institutions of freedom that enabled us to achieve prosperity.

During recent years a small library of books and study guides has poured off the presses of American church organizations (and from secular publishers as well) with titles something like "Rich Christians (or Americans) in a Hungry World." The allegation is that *our* prosperity is the cause of *their* poverty; in other words, the Third World has been made poor by the very same economic procedures—"capitalism"—that have made Western nations prosperous! Therefore—the argument runs—our earnings should be taxed away from us and our goods should be handed over to Third World countries—as a matter of social justice! The false premise is that the wealth we have labored to produce has been gained at *their* expense. Sending them our goods, then, is but to restore to the Third World what rightfully belongs to it! What perverse ignorance of the way the world works!

Nations of the West were founded on biblical principles of justice, freedom, and a work ethic, which led naturally to a rise in the general level of prosperity. Our wealth could not have come from the impoverished Third World where there was a scarcity of goods. We prospered because of our productivity; we became productive because we were freer than any other nation. Freedom in a society enables people to produce more, consume more, enjoy more; and also to give away more—as we have done—to the needy in this land and in lands all over the world. The world has never before witnessed international philanthropy on such a scale.

No one has denied Third World nations access to the philosophical and religious credo which has inspired the American practices that make for economic and Social well-being. Few nations have done more to make the literature of liberty available to all who wish it than American missionaries, educators, philanthropists, and technicians. But there is something in the creeds of Third World countries that hinders acceptance. However, when non-Christian parts of the world decide to emulate Western ideas of economic freedom they

prosper. Look what happened to the economies of Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore when they turned the market economy loose!

Regarding the Poor

Ecclesiastical pronouncements on the economy are fond of the phrase “a preferential option for the poor.” It is invoked as the rationale for governmental redistribution of wealth, that is, for a program of taxing earnings away from those who produce in order to subsidize selected groups and individuals. But it is a fact that reshuffling wealth by programs of tax and subsidy merely enriches some at the expense of others; the nation as a whole becomes poorer. Private enterprise capitalism is, in fact, the answer for anyone who really does have a preferential option for the poor. The free market economy, wherever it has been allowed to function, has elevated more poor people further out of poverty faster than any other system.

Another phrase, repeated like a mantra, is “the poor and oppressed.” There is, of course, a connection between these two words; a person who is oppressed is poorer than he would be otherwise. Oppression is always political; oppression is the result of unjust laws. Correct the injustice by repealing unjust laws; establish political liberty and economic freedom. But even in the resulting free society, where people are *not* oppressed, there will still be some people who are relatively poor because of the limited demand for their services. Teachers and preachers are poor compared to rock musicians because the masses spend millions to have their ears assaulted by amplified sound, in preference to the good advice often available for free!

Ecclesiastical documents announce their concern for “the poor and oppressed,” but the authors of these documents are completely blind to the forms oppression may take in our day. If there are unjust political interventions that deny people

employment, this would seem to be a flagrant case of oppression. There are many such interventions. Minimum wage laws, for instance, deny certain people access to employment, and these people are poorer than they would be otherwise; the entire nation is less well off because some people are not permitted to take a job. The same might be said of the laws that grant monopoly status to certain groups of people gathered as "unions"., Teamsters, and the like. The above-market wage rate they gain for union members results in unemployment for others both union and nonunion. It is not difficult to figure out why this is so. The general principle is that when things begin to cost more we tend to use less of them. So, when labor begins to cost more, fewer workers will be hired.

It would take several pages to list all of the alphabet agencies that regulate, control, and hinder productivity, making the entire nation less prosperous than it need be. Our country suffers under these oppressions, economically and otherwise, but not so severely as the oppressed people of other nations, especially Communist and Third World nations. Churchmen recommend, as a cure for Third World poverty, that we deprive the already over-taxed and hampered productive segment of our people of an even larger portion of their earnings, so as to turn more of our money over to Third World governments. This will further empower the very Third World politicians who are even now oppressing their people, enabling those autocrats to oppress them more efficiently!

The New Testament and the Rich

It is not difficult to rebut the manifestoes issued by various religious organizations. But then we turn to certain New Testament writings and are confronted by what seem to be condemnations of the rich. How, for example, shall we understand Jesus' remark, found in Luke 18:25 and Matthew 19:24: "It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God"?

Jesus' listeners were astonished when they heard these words. Worldly prosperity, many of them assumed, was a mark of God's favor. It seemed to follow that the man whom God favored with riches in this life was thereby guaranteed a spot in heaven in the next.

There is a grain of truth in this distorted popular mentality. Biblical religion holds that man is a created being, with the signature of his Creator written on each person's soul. This inner sacredness implies the ideal of liberty and justice in the relations between person and person. These free people are given dominion over the earth in order to subdue it, working "for the glory of the Creator and the relief of man's estate," as Francis Bacon put it. This is but another way of saying that those who follow the natural order of things—God's order—in ethics and economics will do better for themselves than those who violate this order. The faithful, we read in Job 36:11, if they obey and serve spend their days in prosperity and their years in pleasures."

Perhaps Jesus had something else in mind as well. Palestine had been conquered by Rome. Roman overlords, wielding power and enriching themselves at the expense of the local population, would certainly supply many examples of "a rich man." Furthermore, there were those among the subject people who hired themselves out as publicans to serve the Romans by extorting taxes from their fellow Jews. "Publicans and sinners" is virtually one word in the Gospels!

In nearly every nation known to history, rulers have used their political power to seize the wealth produced by others for the gratification of themselves and their friends. Kings and courtiers in the days of slavery and serfdom consumed much of the wealth produced by farmers, artisans, and craftsmen. Today, politicians in Communist, socialist, and welfarist nations, democratically elected by "the people," share their power with a congeries of special interests, factions, and pressure groups who systematically prey on the economy,

depriving people who do the world's work of over 40 percent of everything they earn.

Many a "rich man" lives on legal plunder, today as well as in times past. Frederic Bastiat's little book, *The Law*, familiarizes us with the procedure. The law is an instrument of justice, intended to secure each individual in his right to his life, his liberty, and his rightful property. Ownership is rightfully claimed as the fruit of honest toil and/or as the result of voluntary exchanges of goods and services. But the law, as Bastiat points out, is perverted from an instrument of justice into a device of plunder when it takes goods from lawful owners by legislative fiat and transfers them to groups of the politically powerful. "Robbery is the first labor saving device," wrote Lewis Mumford, and political plunder is a species of theft. The fact that it is legally sanctioned does not make it morally right; it is a violation of the commandment against theft.

The Israelites had fond memories of King Solomon. "All through his reign," we read in 1 Kings 4:25, "Judah and Israel continued at peace, every man under his own vine and fig tree, from Dan to Beersheba." A nice tribute to individual ownership and economic well-being! The Bible has high praise for honestly earned wealth, and it is exceedingly unlikely that Jesus, in the passage we have been considering, intended anything like a general condemnation of wealth, as such.

At this point someone might raise a legitimate question: "Did not Jesus say, in the Sermon on the Mount, 'Blessed are the poor'?" Well, yes and no. The Sermon on the Mount appears in two of the four Gospels, in Matthew and in Luke. In Luke 6:20 the Beatitude reads: "Blessed are the poor"; but in Matthew 5:3 it is: "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*." There's a discrepancy here; how shall we interpret it?

The Beatitudes were spoken somewhere between 25 and 30 A.D. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke appeared some 50 or 60 years

later. Both authors had access to the Gospel of Mark, to fragments of other writings now lost, and to an oral tradition extending over the generations. We do not have the original manuscripts of the Gospels; what we have are copies of copies, and eventually translations of copies into various languages.

Scholars tell us that the Aramaic original of those two words, “the poor,” is *am ha-aretz*—“people of the land.” The *am ha-aretz*—at this stage in Israel’s history—were outside the tribal system of Jewish society; they did not have the time or inclination to observe the niceties of priestly law, let alone its scribal elaborations. The work of the *am ha-aretz* brought them into contact with Gentiles and Gentile ways of life, which in the eyes of the orthodox was defiling. Their status is like that of the people on the bottom rung of the Hindu caste system—the *Sudras*. Jesus is reminding His hearers that these outcasts are equal in God’s sight to anyone else in Israel, and because of their lowly station in the eyes of society, they may be more open to man’s need of God than the proud people in the ranks above them. The New English Bible provides an interesting slant on this text; it translates “poor in spirit” as “those who know their need of God.”

In short, Jesus is saying that all are equally precious in God’s sight, including the lowly *am ha-aretz*; He is not praising indigence, as such.

Biblical Interpretation

The Bible is full of metaphor and symbolism and allegory. Literal interpretation usually falls short; proper interpretation demands a bit of finesse . . . as in the case of St. Paul’s remark about money.

St. Paul declared that “The love of money is the root of all evil.” (1 Tim. 6:10) The word “money” in this context—scholars tell us—does not mean coins, or bonds, or a bank account. Paul uses the word “money” to symbolize the secular world’s pursuit

of wealth and power. We tend to become infatuated with "the world." It's the infatuation which is evil, for God's kingdom is not wholly of this world. We are the kind of creatures whose ultimate destiny is achieved only in another order of reality: "Here we have no continuing city." (Heb. 13:14) Accept this world with all its joys and delights; live it to the full; but remember—we are pilgrims, not settlers. In today's vernacular, Paul might be telling us: "Have a love affair with this world, but don't marry it!"

We know that there are numerous unlawful ways to get rich, and these deserve condemnation. But prosperity also comes to a man or woman as the fairly earned reward of honest effort and service. The Bible has nothing but praise for wealth thus gained. "Seest thou a man diligent in his business?" said the author of Proverbs (Pr. 22:29). "He shall stand before kings." Economic well-being is everyone's birthright, provided it is the result of honest effort. But we are warned against a false philosophy of material possessions.

This, I think, is the point of Jesus' parable of the rich man whose crops were so good that he had to build bigger barns. (Luke 12:17 if.) This good fortune was the man's excuse for saying, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, be merry."

There is a twofold point to this parable. The first is that nothing in life justifies us in resigning from life; we must never stop growing. It has been well said that we don't *grow* old, we *become* old by not growing. The second point is that a material windfall—like falling heir to a million dollars—may tempt a man into the error of quitting the struggle for the real goals in life. Jesus condemned the man who put his trust in riches, who "layeth up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." He did not condemn material possessions as such; He taught stewardship, which is the responsible ownership and use of rightfully acquired material goods.

Life here is probative; our three score years and ten are a sort of test run. As St. Augustine put it, "We are here schooled for life eternal." And one of the important examination questions concerns our economic use of the planet's scarce resources and the proper management of our material possessions. These are the twin facets of Christian stewardship, and poor performance here will result in dire consequences. Jesus put it very strongly: "If, therefore, you have not been faithful in the use of worldly wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?" (Luke 16:12)

What does it mean to be "faithful in the use of worldly wealth?" What else can it mean except the intelligent and responsible use of the planet's scarce resources to transform them by human effort and ingenuity into the consumable goods we humans require not only for survival, but also as a means for the finer things in life? In practice, this means free market capitalism—the free enterprise system—in the production, exchange, and utilization of our material wealth in the service of our chosen goals.

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The Rev. Edmund A. Opitz (1914-2006) was a Congregationalist minister, a FEE staff member, who for decades championed the cause of a free society and the need to anchor that society in a transcendent morality. A man of wide reading and high culture, Opitz was for many years on the staff of the Foundation for Economic Education in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York. He was one of the few voices in the 1950s through the 1990s calling for an integrated understanding between economic liberty and religious sensibility. He was the founder and coordinator of the Remnant, a fellowship of conservative and libertarian ministers.

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