

Was Jesus A Socialist? Part 2

This is part two of a four-part essay. You may read part one [here](#). Consider the eighth of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not steal.” Note the period after the word “steal.” This admonition does not read, “You shall not steal unless the other guy has more than you do” or “You shall not steal unless you’re absolutely positive you can spend it better than the guy who earned it.” Nor does it say, “You shall not steal, but it’s OK to hire *someone else*, like a politician, to do it for you.” In case people were still tempted to steal, the tenth commandment is aimed at nipping in the bud one of the principal motives for stealing (and for redistribution): “You shall not covet.” In other words, if it’s not yours, keep your fingers off of it. In Luke 12:13–15, Jesus is confronted with a redistribution request. A man with a grievance approaches him and demands, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Jesus replies thusly: “*Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?* Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (emphasis added). Wow! He could have equalized the wealth between two men with a wave of his hand, but he chose to denounce envy instead. “What about the story of the Good Samaritan? Doesn’t that make a case for government welfare programs or redistribution?” you inquire. The answer is an emphatic “No!” Consider the details of the story, as recorded in Luke 10:29–37: A traveler comes upon a man at the side of a road. The man had been beaten and robbed and left half-dead. What did the traveler do? He helped the man himself, on the spot, with his own resources. He did not say, “Write a letter to the emperor” or “Go see your social worker” and walk on. If he had done that, he would more likely be known today as the “*Good-for-nothing Samaritan*” – if he were remembered at all. The Good Samaritan story makes a case for helping a needy person voluntarily out of love and compassion. There’s no suggestion that the Samaritan “owed”

anything to the man in need or that it was the duty of a distant politician to help out with other people's money. Moreover, Jesus never called for equality of material wealth, let alone the use of political force to accomplish it, even in situations of dire need. In his book, *Biblical Economics*, theologian R. C. Sproul Jr. notes that Jesus "wants the poor to be helped" but not at gunpoint, which is essentially what government force is all about:

I am convinced that political and economic policies involving the forced redistribution of wealth via government intervention are neither right nor safe. Such policies are both unethical and ineffective... On the surface it would seem that socialists are on God's side. Unfortunately, their programs and their means foster greater poverty even though their hearts remain loyal to eliminating poverty. The tragic fallacy that invades socialist thinking is that there is a necessary, causal connection between the wealth of the wealthy and the poverty of the poor. Socialists assume that one man's wealth is based on another man's poverty; therefore, to stop poverty and help the poor man, we must have socialism. [4]

To Sproul's comment I would add this addendum: sometimes a person becomes wealthy wholly or in part because of his political connections. He secures special favors or subsidies from government, or uses government to disable his competitors. No consistently logical thinker who favors liberty and property rights, whether he's Christian or not, supports such practices. They are forms of theft, and their source is political power – the very debilitating thing that progressives and socialists advocate more of. Legitimate wealth is derived voluntarily. It comes from the creation of value and mutually beneficial, voluntary exchange. It does not spring from political power that redistributes in reverse, taking from the poor and giving to the rich. *Economic* entrepreneurs are a boon to society; *political* entrepreneurs

are another animal entirely. We all benefit when a Steve Jobs invents an iPhone; but when the Cowboy Poetry Festival in Nevada gets a federal grant because of Senator Harry Reid, or when Goldman Sachs gets a bailout at taxpayer expense, millions of us get hurt and have to pay for it. What about the reference in the book of Acts to the early Christians selling their worldly goods and sharing communally in the proceeds? That sounds like a progressive utopia. On closer inspection, however, it turns out that those early Christians did not sell everything they had and were not commanded or expected to do so. They continued to meet in their own private homes, for example. In his contributing chapter to the 2014 book *For the Least of These: A Biblical Answer to Poverty*, Art Lindsley of the Institute for Faith, Work, and Economics writes:

Again, in this passage from Acts, there is no mention of the state at all. These early believers contributed their goods freely, without coercion, voluntarily. Elsewhere in Scripture we see that Christians are even instructed to give in just this manner, freely, for “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). There is plenty of indication that private property rights were still in effect. [5]

It may disappoint progressives to learn that Jesus’s words and deeds repeatedly upheld such critically important, capitalist virtues as contract, profit, and private property. For example, consider his parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30; see one of the recommended readings below). Of several men in the story, the one who takes his money and buries it is reprimanded while the one who invests and generates the largest return is applauded and rewarded. Though not central to the story, good lessons in supply and demand, as well as the sanctity of contract, are apparent in Jesus’s parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16). A landowner offers a wage to attract workers for a day of urgent work picking grapes. Near the end of the day, he realizes he has to quickly hire more and to get them, he offers for an

hour of work what he previously had offered to pay the first workers for the whole day. When one of those who worked all day complained, the landowner answered, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" The well-known "Golden Rule" comes from the lips of Jesus himself, in Matthew 7:12. "So in everything, *do to others what you would have them do to you*, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." In Matthew 19:19, Jesus says, "love your neighbor as yourself." Nowhere does he even remotely suggest that we should dislike a neighbor because of his wealth or seek to take that wealth from him. If you don't want your property confiscated (and most people don't), then clearly you're not supposed to confiscate somebody else's. Christian doctrine cautions against greed. So does present-day economist Thomas Sowell: "I have never understood why it is 'greed' to want to keep the money you have earned but *not* greed to want to take somebody else's money." Using the power of government to grab another person's property isn't exactly altruistic. Jesus never even implied that accumulating wealth through peaceful commerce was in any way wrong; he simply implored people to not allow wealth to rule them or corrupt their character. That's why his greatest apostle, Paul, didn't say money was evil in the famous reference in 1 Timothy 6:10. Here's what Paul actually said: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (emphasis added). Indeed, progressives themselves have not selflessly abandoned money, for it is *other people's* money, especially that of "the rich," that they're always clamoring for. In Matthew 19:23, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven." A redistributionist might say, "Eureka! There it is! He doesn't like rich people" and then stretch the remark beyond recognition to justify one rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul

scheme after another. But this admonition is entirely consistent with everything else Jesus says. It's not a call to envy the rich, to take from the rich, or to give "free" cell phones to the poor. It's a call to character. It's an observation that some people let their wealth rule them, rather than the other way around. It's a warning about temptations (which come in many forms, not just material wealth). Haven't we all noticed that among the rich, as is equally true among the poor, you have both good and bad people? Haven't we all seen some rich celebrities corrupted by their fame and fortune, while others among the rich live perfectly upstanding lives? Haven't we all seen some poor people who allow their poverty to demoralize and enervate them, while others among the poor view it as an incentive to improve themselves and their communities? *This is part two of a four-part essay. You may read part one [here](#). The full article was originally published by the **Foundation for Economic Education**. The full book can be downloaded [here](#).*