

Wealth and the Christian (I)

By Andrew McColl, 25/9/2012

Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold (Gen.13:2).

Many Christians have had difficulty coming to terms with what the Bible says about wealth. We read what Jesus said about the rich man and Lazarus in the scripture (Luke 16:19-31), and think to ourselves, “I don’t want to be like that rich man.”

But we’d better understand: what Jesus was pointing out in this parable, was a) the transience of life, b) the wrong attitude towards the poor man that the rich man held, and c) the accountability of everyone to God. Both the rich man and Lazarus die, and come to judgment. The rich man suffers in hell, and the poor man goes to Abraham’s bosom. Is it because they are rich and poor that they receive these different destinations? No, though Jesus did warn that “...it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mat.19:23).

The Bible specifically says that “Lazarus was... longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man’s table” (Luke 16:20-21). The rich man didn’t lift a finger for the sake of Lazarus. He may have died of hunger.

The word “poor” is used 209 times in the scripture, through 19 Hebrew and Greek words. Clearly, the issue of poverty and our treatment of the poor is of great importance to God.

What the Bible draws our attention to is our attitude towards wealth. Wealth is not intrinsically evil, or good. It is an asset. It can be used wisely and productively for the glory of God, or for evil purposes. Wealthy men and women are not good or evil because of what they possess. Their wealth has nothing to do with being good or evil, though the Bible makes it clear that wealth can become a snare. God warned the children of Israel:

When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God, by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God... (Deut.8:8-14).

The Bible teaches us that we are stewards, “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of servants that one be found trustworthy” (I Cor.4:1-2).

The first step in financial accountability to God, is a tithe on income to the local church. This is essentially what Abraham practiced when he tithed to Melchizedek (Gen.14:17-20). Where did he get this idea to tithe from? We don’t categorically know. The recorded teaching about

the tithe was given by God to Moses hundreds of years later, so we can only assume that the knowledge of tithing was passed on to Abraham, as part of the original law given to Adam.

Tithing is one of the few things that Jesus commended the scribes and Pharisees for (see Mat.23:23). The tithe on income to the local church empowers it in the community, permitting it to employ leaders, and to engage in all sorts of community activities in God's Name, including caring for needy people.

The church has a long and remarkable history of effectiveness in this regard, since the days of the early church (see Acts 6:1-4; Gal.2:10; 6:10). When a church has a number of rich people tithing, or even a good number of middle-class people who tithe, it can become a powerful community institution with great effectiveness.

Wealth and the Christian (II)

By Andrew McColl, 2/10/2012

It is a refusal to view our assets as a trust from God, that God finds particularly heinous. Jesus spoke about another rich man in a parable, who “stored up riches for himself, and is not rich towards God” (Luke 12:21). For this, the Son of God indicted him: “you fool!” (v.20)

Does this imply in any way, that the modern socialist notion of redistribution of the communities’ wealth by governments is legitimate? Never. Socialism is a demonic, counterfeit charity, because it requires the *involuntary* transfer of wealth from one group of people to others. That’s theft.

Judas was critical of Mary’s sacrifice of “...a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard” on Jesus’ behalf (Jn.12:3), claiming that it could have been “given to poor people?” (v.5) But the Bible clearly shows his real motivation: he was a thief, and he used to pilfer the money box (v.6). When socialist governments say, “more should be done for the poor,” they are really saying “more jobs and credit for governments and bureaucrats,” because that is where so much of the socialist’s tax money ultimately finishes up.

Let me give you an example. A month ago the Federal government decided to set up a trial scheme for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The cost would be a \$1 billion. The proportion going to the bureaucrats administering the scheme? \$350 million, or 35%.

Judas’ claim that the money could have been “given to poor people,” was one of the most hypocritical statements in all of human history, but socialists clearly don’t want to leave him alone in his hypocrisy.

Biblical charity is always an individual, a family or a church responsibility. The Bible never legitimises charity being undertaken by government. This is one of the major flaws of our modern western welfare society, which now threatens to bring us down through national bankruptcies. “...even the compassion of the wicked is cruel” (Prov.12:10).

In many places in His Old Testament law, God made it clear to His people who should be the recipients of their welfare: the alien, the orphan and the widow. In Deuteronomy 24:19, He said

When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

In the New Testament, Paul continued this theme. When writing to Timothy about church government, he explained which widows were to be “put on the list” for church welfare in I Timothy 5: 9-16.

This is what God commanded Jeremiah to say to Shallum (or Jehoahaz), Josiah's son: "...did not your father eat and drink and do righteousness and justice? Then it was well with him. He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; then it was well. Is this not what it means to know Me?" Declares the Lord. 'But your eyes and your heart are intent only on your own dishonest gain, and on shedding innocent blood and on practicing oppression and extortion' " (Jer.22:15a-17).

We may think that Sodom was judged for its homosexuality, but there was more to it than that. Later on, God said that "...this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy. Thus they were haughty and committed abominations before Me. Therefore I removed them when I saw it" (Ezek.16:49-50).

Clearly, there is a scriptural parallel between the judgment on Sodom, and the rich man in who ignored Lazarus' plight. The apostle John continues this: "...whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (I Jn. 3:17)

Abraham, Job and Boaz were clearly rich men (Gen.13:2; 24:1; Job 1:3; Ruth 2:1), but they did not view their riches (in various forms such as gold, silver, land, livestock, along with business and social relationships) as assets entirely for themselves, but as stewards of God, and for the service of others (see Gen.14:12-16; Job 29; 31; Ruth 2-4). In fact, one of the descriptions of the righteous man in Psalm 112, is that "he has freely given to the poor..." (v.9).

The serious condemnations of the rich that James makes (see James 5:1-6), are not of rich people in general. James is actually very specific. These rich he said, had deprived their labourers of their wages (v.4), they had led "...a life of wanton pleasure..." (v.5), and they had "condemned and put to death the righteous man..." (v.6).

The Bible contrasts these people with Cornelius, who was "a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually." When he was visited by an angel, the angel said that "your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God" (Acts 10:2, 4).

Conclusion:

Wealth is a great blessing, to be used responsibly. If we are blessed financially, we should rejoice, and if we are not, we should rejoice. And if we view all we have as something which is ours temporarily, held in trust for God to be used in a God-honouring way, we will do ourselves a favour, and honour the God Who gave those things to us.

Wealth and the Christian (III)

By Andrew McColl, 9/10/2012

And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbours, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:12-14).

This passage is one of few in scripture where our Lord teaches a non-discriminatory attitude towards charity. It is discriminatory in that He nominates “the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,” but unlike I Timothy 5:3-16 (which deals specifically with the care of widows), He gives no direction in terms of us making an assessment of the moral or financial position of those people that are the recipients of aid.

Why? Presumably, because this cohort of people are always needy. “The poor,” are simply that, and the addition of the “crippled, lame and blind” really doesn’t alter much.

This isn’t an easy text to deal with in practice. I don’t know many people at all who fall in to the categories that Jesus describes. But that is not the issue. I could go out of my way to find some. That would mean my time and inconvenience. I would have to get them here: to arrange means of transportation for them. We would have to feed them, get them back to their homes, and wash up afterwards. We have not done this, to this point.

Undoubtedly, some Christians have done this on an individual basis, over the centuries. The wealthy Australian businessman, Sidney Myer, put on a massive Christmas dinner for poor people during the Depression, and fed thousands. But there is another way of responding to this requirement, and this community need.

God commanded the Israelites during the time of Malachi, to “bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be *food in My house...*” (Mal.3:10). There is an opportunity for the church to minister to the poor corporately through the tithes, as well as Christians individually helping in this way. This is something that should (like all of the aspects of corporate church) be overseen by the church leadership so that resources are used wisely.

When there is food in the house of God for needy people, and people come and receive it, it brings respect for the church in the community. It shows that we are prepared to care for those who are not church members, and means that the house of God has something to give to others. It also gives us an opportunity to help struggling people with their money management, and even teach things like cooking and living skills.

It becomes a means of evangelism, and it provides an opportunity for a fulfilment of some of the gospel promises:

Now it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all nations will stream to it. And many people will come and say, 'Come, let us go to the mountain of the Lord. To the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.' For the law will go forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem (Isa.2:2-3).