

## THE PROBLEM OF WEALTH

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Poverty is a problem. We don't like it. We don't want it for ourselves; we don't wish it on anyone else. As Christians we are concerned for people who are poor, and concerned about poverty as a social condition. When we contemplate the mission of the church - that is, the outreach of the church to the world - we believe that alleviating poverty is an important part of that mission.

What did Jesus say about the problem of poverty?

When I look at the gospels I am surprised by how little Jesus said about the problem of poverty - and how much he had to say about the problem of wealth. Jesus said:

Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God (Lk 6:20)  
But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation (Lk 6:24)

My question is this: If wealth is the real problem, not poverty, how does this effect the way we do mission in the church? I don't have an answer, just a few thoughts. But I think we need to reflect on this, pray about it, and discuss it, that we might develop a better understanding, and perhaps even plans.

A few qualifiers must be stated before we look more deeply into this question.

1. Jesus cared about the poor. Jesus was poor. His mother was poor. His brothers were poor. Most of his disciples were poor. Most of the people with whom Jesus ministered were poor. Of course Jesus cared about the poor and wanted people to help one another.

2. Jesus was powerless to change the political situation that made so many people poor. Perhaps he was influenced by the idea behind the Serenity Prayer:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
The courage to change those I can  
And the wisdom to know the difference.

What Jesus could do was to reshape attitudes, and to create a community that lived by a different standard from the world. We, living in a democracy, have the power to do more. That Jesus did nothing to change the "system" does not mean that we should do nothing.

3. Jesus did not condemn all rich people. Zaccheus was rich (Lk 19:2) and received Jesus' commendation. Other tax collectors, undoubtedly rich, were among his followers.

4. Jesus believed it was in the nature of his followers to care for those less fortunate. In the parable of the last judgment (Mt 25:31-46) some are to be rewarded,

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 clothes  
I was in prison and you visited me.

When these people asked “When” did we do these things? they are told:

just as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren  
you did it to me.

Please note that this is not a commandment. There is no “should” involved. These people did the right thing because it was in their nature to do it. Note also, that this parable is not just about Christians, but “all the nations.” It is about non-Christians who, according to the parable, have shown love to Christ without knowing it, and will be rewarded. Nevertheless, it is to be in our nature to care about the needs of others, not as a commandment learned by rote, but because the Law of God is written on our hearts (Jer. 31:33-34).

5. Jesus was not opposed to enjoying some luxuries in life. He was criticized for not fasting, but rather feasting and drinking. He got a reputation as a “party-animal.” (Lk 5:29-32; 7:34).

Acknowledging all this, what does Jesus say about the problem of wealth?

Three parables in the Gospel of Luke stand out as addressing the problem of wealth. One is found in all three of the synoptic gospels; to another several sayings of Jesus are attached, which are also found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew.

*The Rich Fool* - Luke 12:13-20, with attached sayings 12:21-34.

In this parable a farmer has prospered, has an abundant crop, and asks What shall I do? He concludes that he should build more barns in which to put his crop. He is called a “fool,” because, in an expression of our day, “you can’t take it with you.” The problem is defined as greed and we are admonished to be “rich toward God.” Clearly this is a different kind of wealth, and if we are “rich toward God” we will put our worldly

wealth to better use than hoarding it.

The sayings following this parable are more familiar to us from Matthew's gospel. Do not be anxious about the basic necessities of life. God knows what you need and will provide. The passage concludes,

For where your treasure is,  
there your heart will be also.

Both the parable and the sayings that follow it speak of the need to trust in God. The rich person does not need to hoard out of a concern for future security; the poor person cannot be obsessed by fears of not having enough. Of course both have to work, and both have to plan. But none of us will ever have total security; we can never provide for every eventuality; ultimately we need to trust God.

Also, if wealth is an idol - the "Almighty Dollar" - the poor person can be as obsessed with jealousy and bitterness as the rich person is with the accumulation and protection of that idol. You don't have to be rich to be a devotee of the Almighty Dollar.

*The Rich Man and Lazarus* - Luke 16:19-31.

The poor man sits at the rich man's gate, which implies there is a wall. If there is not a physical wall, there is a wall in the rich man's mind. In the next life there is a chasm between them. This parable is about alienation. The rich man does not know the poor man by name, does not relate to him as a human being, does not truly see him. To the rich man, Lazarus is "other" - something different from him. He does not see a human being at his gate, only a beggar.

In this story the problem of wealth is that it creates a wall - or a chasm. It allows the wealthy to not see some persons - to not see them as human. It destroys any sense of solidarity - of community - that should be there.

*The Rich Ruler* - Luke 18:18-30, also found in Mark 10:17-31 and Matthew 19:16-30.

This rich ruler has lived a good, moral life. He has followed all the commandments. He seems to feel that something is missing. Jesus tells him to give up his wealth and follow Jesus. This the ruler cannot do. He is possessed by his possessions. This is the passage where Jesus said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven.

The problem is attachment - or lack of detachment. The rich man is unwilling to

live free of his possessions. They own him. Jesus' command to "sell all you have," is not meant for everyone. But we all do need to let go - to not let the things of this world run our lives.

There are certainly other scriptures that could be considered in addressing this question. Deuteronomy 8:17-18 emphasizes gratitude and humility and our dependence on God. James 1:17 also speaks of this dependence on God. 1 Timothy 6:10 addresses the disease of acquisitiveness. Perhaps you can identify others?

Back to these three parables from Luke's gospel. So if the problem is wealth, what does this say about the mission of the church? This is what I find in these texts - I invite you to find other lessons.

1. *Solidarity.* We - rich and poor - are one people. We can't "other" people. That is, we can't treat people as so different from us that we no longer treat them as our brothers and sisters. We want to build friendship - to know people by name. We want to work together. We want to build a social and political order that recognizes the needs of all and gives opportunity to each.

2. *Detachment.* We need to address the problem of wealth as a spiritual problem. Having treasures in heaven means attachment to the things of God, which will lead to detachment from the things of the world. Attachment to the things of God will lead us to see the world through the eyes of God, which will make us more compassionate.

3. *Trust in God.* We can be prudent in our planning and still "be not anxious." We need to explore further the boundary between prudent planning and an obsession for security.

So, how do we do it? In the light of what these three scriptures say about the problem of wealth, what form might be taken by the mission of the church?