

BELIEFS ABOUT WEALTH AND POVERTY

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The subject of wealth and poverty is certainly not new to our age. Many people down through the centuries have wrestled with the apparent inequities of life. The question has often been asked, “Why are some people blessed with wealth, while others cursed with poverty?” The life of the poor is one of hardship and toil. They must rise early and work late simply to earn their daily bread. They do not concern themselves with investments and asset management, but rather with acquiring the necessities of life. They do not see themselves as having unlimited resources of time, talent, and opportunity, but often see themselves as being stuck in their poverty. Sometimes they may see this as fate or chance, but rarely do they see it as a divine blessing. They may feel trapped in their poverty because the wealthy will not allow them to rise above it. As a result, there has often been the problem of envy and strife, where the poor lust after the wealth and status of the rich and yet hate them for it.

The life of the wealthy on the other hand is quite a different matter. Theirs is a life of apparent ease and luxury. They have all the necessities of life and much more. They do not struggle with earning their daily bread, they worry about how to protect their assets. They do not work for money; they work with money. The often-heard cry against the rich is that they have become so by exploiting the poor. As we stand back to observe the conditions of both groups, there seems to be something very wrong, very unjust, and very unfair about such a difference in economic levels. A person might be tempted to ask, “How can such inequality be tolerated?”

Through the years, various systems of government have been implemented to try to alleviate these economic problems. In India a caste system has been established. In such a system, society is broken down into distinct strata based on differences of wealth, inherited rank or privilege, or profession. It is very difficult to move from one strata to the next, and a person will often remain in the caste into which he was born. Here the poor stay poor and the rich stay rich. Another attempt to try to correct the problem has been socialism. Socialism is an attempt to put everyone on an equal playing

field where private enterprise is replaced with the production of goods and services by the state. In this theory of government, there is a collective ownership of property and therefore all people theoretically have an equal say in its allocation. This is an attempt to create a “classless” society where everyone is on equal footing. While this theory sounds good it does not take into account the human drive toward greed and the desire to get ahead. For socialism to work, all its members must cooperate with its guidelines.

In the United States we have maintained a capitalist economy but have used government as a means of taking from the majority, through taxes, and redistributing money to the minority through welfare. The problem here is that the criteria for receiving this social welfare may not be as stringent as it could be. The result is that there are some who benefit from the program who do not need it. It has also been argued that such a welfare program has stymied the incentive for many to provide for their own families. It is much easier to receive from the government, and at times more profitable, than to earn one’s own bread.

All of these are systems or facets of government that have been implemented to try to deal with the wealth and poverty of its citizens, but none has succeeded in eliminating the problem. Wherever one goes there are always rich and there are always poor. And so, no matter what system of economy is operating where we live, there are some biblical truths that speak quite plainly to the subject.

Biblical Examples of Wealth and Poverty

The Bible does not teach that all wealthy people are blessed of God nor that all poor people are cursed by God. Neither does it teach that rich people will go to hell and poor people to heaven. There are Biblical examples of godly people in both categories.

Job was a man of great wealth. Scripture states that, “**this man was the greatest of all the people of the East**” (**Job 1:3b/NKJV** and so throughout). Although Satan accused God of buying Job’s religious devotion, he proved himself through the trials that would follow. As the account unfolds, we find that his faith was genuine irrespective of his economic status. The patriarchs are good examples of saints who were also wealthy. When Abram was in Egypt he acquired “**sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys and camels**” (**Genesis 12:16**). **Genesis 13:2** states that, “**Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold.**” Although his wealth was great, his faith was greater. In the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, eight verses are dedicated to recounting Abraham’s strong faith.

Lazarus was a man of extreme poverty but great faith. He was a beggar full of sores who was laid at the gate of a rich man ‘desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich

man's table. Moreover, "the dogs came and licked his sores" (Luke 16:21). But on the other side of death the scene was reversed, and the rich man was now found begging from Hades and Lazarus was in Abraham's bosom, a place of bliss. The point here is not that wealthy people go to hell and poor people go to heaven. Lazarus was a man of faith, and the rich man was not. Each got his just reward.

Christ Himself was not a man of great means. He grew up in humble circumstances working as a carpenter (Mark 6:3) and was not afraid to tell others about His life of hardship. He said, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). During His ministry He and His disciples were supported by women followers (Luke 8:3), and He needed to work a miracle in order to pay the temple tax (Matthew 17:24-27). He was certainly not one given to riches.

Biblical Teaching About Wealth

1. Wealth can be a result of obedience — In Deuteronomy 27-30, where God's covenant with Israel was being ratified, He pronounced a series of blessings on them if they would be obedient to Him. Some of these blessings were, "The Lord will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand. You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only, and not beneath, if you heed the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, and are careful to observe them" (Deuteronomy 8:12-13). God specifically promised financial blessings if His people would obey. But this does not mean that all wealth is a blessing for obedience.

2. God gives the ability to get wealth — Because many of us are physically and mentally capable of earning a living, we may be drawn to think that our abilities, diligence, and hard work have gotten us wealth. While we must not undermine human effort in the equation of wealth, we must always remember that God gives us the abilities we have to earn a living (Deuteronomy 8:18). The picture of someone in a wheelchair or a hospital bed should be a reminder that God is in control of our abilities and inabilities.

3. Not all wealth is obtained in a godly way — There are good ways and bad ways of gaining wealth. We are commanded to observe the ant (Proverbs 6:6) and imitate its diligence (cf. Proverbs 10:4; 12:24; 21:5). We are commanded to use accuracy and honesty in our business dealings (Proverbs 11:1; 20:10,23; Leviticus 19:36), and to speak truthfully about our goods and services (Proverbs 21:6). Scripture promises that "all hard work brings a profit" (Proverbs 14:23/NIV), so that we can be assured that if

we put forth an honest effort we will be rewarded. But those who lie and cheat just to gain a little bit more are building their financial future on shaky ground. The prophet Amos realized this dishonesty in his fellow countrymen, noticing how they were “skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat” (**Amos 8:5b-6/NIV**). Therefore, he said, The Lord has sworn by the Pride of Jacob: “I will never forget anything they have done” (**Amos 8:7/NIV**).

4. The wealthy are to show consideration to the poor — I have heard of some people who thought that the Golden Rule was, ‘He who has all the gold makes all the rules.’ Sometimes it seems that the wealthy make the rules, but the true Golden Rule is found in **Matthew 7:12**, “Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them.” This principle lies at the heart of the way we are to treat others. The wealthy are to put themselves in the shoes of the poor and treat them as they would want to be treated. **Deuteronomy 15:7-8** states, “If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs.” Job was one who was extremely concerned about the needs of others around him, and he did all he could to help them (**Job 31:16-32**).

5. Wealth is dangerous to faith — When a person grows wealthy, even when he has done so by legitimate means, there is a tendency to forget God. He warned the children of Israel about this when they were preparing to enter the land of Canaan: “Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, lest-when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when you and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied...then you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth’” (**Deuteronomy 8:11-13,17**). Wealth has a way of making us numb to the things of God and other people. Power, prestige, and influence are often associated with wealth, but according to Christ, these things are to be renounced for the sake of the kingdom (**Matthew 20:25-28**).

Jesus also stated that wealth will choke out the Word and make it unfruitful. Although the Word of God may have been sown in a person’s heart and have taken root, “the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (**Mark 4:19**). In fact, Jesus said, “It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (**Matthew 19:23-24**). This seems like a very strange phenomenon. On the one

hand wealth can be a blessing from God for obedience. But on the other hand, it can keep a person from entering the kingdom. Jesus magnified the dangers of wealth when He said, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger” (Luke 6:24-25a). Therefore, wealth can be both a blessing and a curse.

It should also be noted that not only do riches make it difficult to enter the kingdom of heaven, but also the desire to be rich has plunged many into ruin and destruction (1 Timothy 6:9). Scripture says that the lust for wealth is both foolish and harmful and that, the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Timothy 6:10). The writer of Proverbs says, “Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint.” (Proverbs 23:4/NIV). Christians are to be content with where they are and with what they have.

Biblical Teaching About Poverty

1. Poverty can be a consequence of disobedience — Just as wealth can be a blessing for obedience, poverty can be a curse for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). There are also times when poverty can be the result of bad decisions or mismanagement of resources. We can often bear life-long consequences for financial decisions made in haste or with wrong motives. But poverty can also be the result of sheer laziness. Sagging rafters and overgrown fields are often pictured in Scripture as signs of laziness (Proverbs 24:30-34; Ecclesiastes 10:18). But we need to proceed with great caution here because dangerous conclusions are easy to come by. It would be a gross error to conclude that an, or even most, poverty situations are the result of divine judgment or personal negligence. We must remember that God has pre-appointed our times and even the boundaries of our dwellings (Acts 17:26). Therefore, we must accept from His hand the lot we have been assigned.

2. There will always be poor people — In the Old Testament God initiated the practice of cancelling debts every seven years as a means of equalizing wealth among the children of Israel (Leviticus 25:1-7; Deuteronomy 15:1-11). As a result of God’s blessing and the year of cancelling debts, He stated that there were to be no poor among them (Deuteronomy 15:4). But three verses later we read, “If there is among you a poor man of your brethren...you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother” (Deuteronomy 15:7). Although God established an economic system that was to more equally distribute wealth, poverty could still not be prevented. Because of the unexpected difficulties and unplanned events of life, some people would be more affected than others. Jesus Himself stated, “for you have the poor with you always”

(Matthew 26:11). Poverty is a cold reality of life, and while many try to struggle through it, God has a different perspective on it.

3. The poor are blessed — While the rest of the world views the poor as having been given a hard lot, Jesus said, **“Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20b).** Now to prevent this from being pushed out of context we must note that He said those words to His disciples. But did He mean these words only for His disciples? When Jesus returned to the synagogue in His hometown, He stood up to read from the prophet Isaiah, **“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18).** Jesus saw His ministry as specifically directed toward the poor. This was not because the rich did not need His ministry, but more likely because the poor would hear His message. The poor are blessed because like all people they need good news and are often more quickly aware of their need.

4. God is very concerned about just treatment of the poor — Although poverty is a reality of life, Scripture gives numerous accounts of God’s concern for the well-being of the poor. In **Galatians 2:10** the Apostle Paul was encouraged to **“remember the poor.”** James tells us that we prove our faith by caring for the physical needs of the poor **(James 2:14-17).** In the Old Testament, God prescribed that on the seventh year the land be left fallow, **“that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beasts of the field may eat. In like manner you shall do with your vineyard and your olive grove” (Exodus 23:11).** It is also interesting to note that the prescription of the Sabbath day was so that, **“your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female servant and the stranger may be refreshed” (Exodus 23:12).** In both cases the concern for the poor is foremost. This is consistent with **Psalms 41:1** which states, **“Blessed is he who considers the poor; the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble.”** In both the Old and New Testaments, God has demonstrated His concern for the poor and has prescribed that His people share His heart.

5. Wealth is temporal — Many times in Scripture the godly poor are reminded that the wealth of the ungodly is temporal. From our human vantage point, it would seem that God should bless the godly with riches and punish the wicked with poverty. But sometimes the opposite seems to be the case. The Psalmist cried out, **“Rise up, O Judge of the earth; render punishment to the proud Lord, how long will the wicked, how long will the wicked triumph?” (Psalm 94:2-3).** When it seems that God is silent concerning the arrogance of the wicked, the godly poor need to be reassured that He sees and will someday render justice **(Psalm 94:15).** One also needs to be reminded that a man’s riches are only for this life. Again, the Psalmist says, **“Do not be overawed when a man**

grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases; for he will take nothing with him when he dies, his splendor will not descend with him” (Psalm 49:16-17/NIV). Often the godly are tempted to envy the success of the wicked. But it must be remembered that we came into this world with nothing, and it is certain that we can take nothing with us (1 Timothy 6:7). Therefore, a godly life is of greater value than the riches of this world.

These biblical observations about wealth and poverty are certainly not exhaustive. Scripture addresses the subject many times and often at great length. Therefore, we can only try to note some of its major teachings. A final observation to be made is that the Bible does not teach equality. Each of us has talents and abilities to differing degrees. We are not all equally skilled. There are some skills that are in more demand than others, and therefore will receive greater compensation. By this fact alone, some people will have more money than others. Another factor to be noted is that not everyone has an equal opportunity to exercise his skills and abilities. No matter how talented a person may be, if he does not have the opportunity to pursue it, his skills will lie dormant.

The final conclusion of the matter is that God is in control of the events and circumstances of life. He is the One who gives human beings their aptitudes and the opportunities to develop them. He knows the family, neighborhood, country, and time period into which each person would be born, and therefore knows his economic status. The Bible teaches that we are to accept our lot and enjoy the work given us to do (Ecclesiastes 5:18). God allows both wealth and poverty but reminds us that these conditions of life are only temporary. Truly wealthy are those who see this life against the backdrop of eternity and so govern their lives.