

UNIT 3B: PASTORAL AND ASCETICAL THEOLOGY

76: Almsgiving and Stewardship

A recurrent theme in the New Testament and especially in our Lord's own teaching and practice is the godly use of money and other possessions. A simple list will suffice:

Ref	Text	Teaching
1	Matthew 5:3	"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
2	Matthew 6:19-21	" ... Lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven ... "
3	Matthew 6:24	You cannot serve God and Mammon.
4	Matthew 10:8-10	Disciples travel light ... giving as they are given unto by others.
5	Matthew 19:16-30	The rich young ruler; "camel through the eye of a needle"
6	Matthew 25:14-30	The Parable of the Talents
7	Matthew 25:37-40	The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats
8	Mark 11:15-17	The driving out of the money changers from the Temple
9	Luke 6:38	"Give and it will be given unto you ..."
10	Luke 12:13-15	"Life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."
11	Luke 12:16-21	The rich man and his barns
12	Luke 12:22-34	The ravens, the lilies and God's provision for our needs
13	Luke 16:1-13	The Parable of the Unjust Steward
14	Luke 16:19-31	Dives and Lazarus
15	Luke 21:1-4	The widow's coins
16	Acts 4:32-37	Life in common in the Apostolic Church
17	Acts 5:1-10	The judgement on Ananias and Sapphira
18	Acts 20:34-35	"It is more blessed to give than to receive."
19	1 Corinthians 16:2	Weekly Sabbath giving
20	2 Corinthians 8 & 9	Principles of Christian Giving: gospel based (8:9) thankful, joyful, freely, sacrificial, generous, trustingly, regularly, proportionately
21	1 Timothy 6:7-10	The love of money, the root of all evil
22	1 Timothy 6:17-19	Christian generosity
23	Hebrews 13:5	Be content with what you have.
24	James 5:1-6	The injustice of the oppression of the poor
25	1 John 3:17-18	Giving to a brother in need in the love of God
26	Revelation 3:17-18	Material and Spiritual riches

The Old Testament Background

Clearly, the godly use of money and possessions is a central concern in the teaching of Christ and in the Life of the Church. Characteristically, our Lord deepens and extends the received tradition of the Torah in respect of money and other possessions in the light of the incoming Kingdom of God and this has profound implications for the personal and the common life of his followers. To understand how this worked out in practice we must first survey the Old Testament teaching and practice that informed this new Christian Way.

The ancient Israelites firmly believed that "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord" (Leviticus 27:30). In fact, "if there were two ways Israel was most obviously distinct in its ancient Mediterranean world, one would be monotheism. They worshiped one God. The other is they put voluntary limits on their wealth. They lived in deliberate generosity."¹

The attitude of the Law towards private property and wealth had exhibited a necessary sort of ambiguity. Possessions were at one and the same time both a blessing and a threat. They were a blessing to the righteous who made good use of them, acknowledging before God: "all things come from you and of your own have we given you" (1 Chronicles 29:14). As such, private property was legitimised and protected by the Decalogue in the injunctions not to steal or to covet anything belonging to one's neighbour (Exodus 20:15, 17). St Augustine reminded us that what we seek in this life is oneness with God, not property:

Do not covet your neighbour's property. 'The Lord's is the earth and its fullness' (Psalm 24:1 [LXX 23:1]). What haven't you acquired if you have got hold of God? So, don't covet your neighbour's property.... The law said 'You shall not covet' in order that when we find ourselves lying in this diseased

¹ John Ortberg, "Tithing: Law or a Grace?" *Christianity Today* at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2013/spring/tithing-law-or-grace.html> .

state, we might seek the medicine of grace. By that commandment know both in what direction our endeavours should aim as we advance in our present mortal condition and to what a height it is possible to reach in the future immortality. For unless perfection could somewhere be attained, this commandment would never have been given to us.²

As Christians, we are well aware of the limitations of the Law, yet St Augustine clarifies how the Law can lead us to grace, as we come to know ourselves better:

There you are then... You know the law which says, 'You shall not covet.' Covetness surges up in you, which you didn't know. It was there inside, you see, but it wasn't known. You started to make an effort to overcome what was inside, and what was hidden came to light. Proud fellow, through the law you have been made into a transgressor. Acknowledge grace, and become a singer of praise.³

Thus fulfilling the Law not to covet is an important step in acknowledging grace and attaining "a ceaseless openness to the hidden God who now as always waits for us."⁴

Clearly, possessions could be a threat insofar as they became idolatrous substitutions for God. The first ones to suffer from such false worship would be the disadvantaged poor; and so it became necessary for the Law to curb man's greed by making regular provision for his neighbour in poverty:

And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner. (Leviticus 19:10) At the end of every three years you shall bring forth all the tithe of your produce in the same year, and lay it up within your towns: and the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow, who are with your towns, shall

² St Augustine, *Sermon 252A.6* and *On Marriage and Concupiscence 1.32*. Cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament III, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, Joseph T. Lienhard (Ed.), (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 108.

³ *Sermon 26.9*. Cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament III*, p. 108.

⁴ Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 108.

come and eat and be filled; that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

As Clement of Alexandria insisted:

In fact, the principle of tithing crops and flocks was an education in honouring the divine. We are not to be totally absorbed by profit but to share humanely with the neighbour as well.⁵

Additionally, every seven years debts were to be remitted (Deuteronomy 15:1) and every fifty years the land was to be redistributed, since by God's promise it belonged to Him (Leviticus 25:10). St Basil the Great reflected on how the Year of Jubilee arising from the Lord's covenant relationship with Israel offered the possibility of "a new life" and how this possibility remained important for Christians:

Seven weeks of years in ancient times produced the celebrated Jubilee, in which the earth kept the Sabbath [i.e. the land was left fallow], debts were cancelled, slaves were set free and, as it were, a new life was established again, the old one in a certain way attaining its fulfilment in the number seven. These things are figures of this present age which revolves through the seven days and passes us by; an age in which the penalties for the lesser sins are paid according to the loving care of the good Lord, so that we may not be handed over for punishment in the age without end.⁶

This was not an early form of socialism, far from it. Insofar as possessions were held on trust from God, the neighbour was just as much one's own concern as His. The notion of *private* property did not exist as we now know it.

The New Testament Teaching

With the coming of Christ these social obligations were enhanced, precisely because by Divine Love the Kingdom of God was tearing down the distinction between "mine" and "thine" which hitherto had been a necessary consequence of the Fall.

⁵ St Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 2.86.1. Cited in *ACCS OT III*, p. 189.

⁶ *Letter 260*. Cited in *ACCS OT III*, p. 198.

St Paul summarised this relationship between the Law and grace in the following manner: the Law was: “our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24). With the advent of grace, things once impossible now became possible for God. The evidence for this transformation in personal and social relations was there for all to see in the teaching and example of Christ; and by his death and resurrection this persisted in the life of the Church. Across the great diversity of teaching and practice in the New Testament, we may identify the following themes: *(The Biblical references are indexed in the first column of the table - ante, page 1).*

1. The economic life of the disciples and later the apostolic Church was based on the notion of an extended household where personal property existed but not as a private possession. In the Church there was a new creation and a new ‘qahal’ or gathering in which the precepts of the gospel had undermined every kind of acquisitiveness. This is seen in its clearest form in the common life practiced by the apostolic community in Jerusalem (16) and the disastrous consequences of the deception of Ananias and Sapphira (17). The driving out of the money changers from the Temple by our Lord (8) must have been very fresh in the mind of those who knew that the life of the gospel stood in stark contrast to the financial corruption and injustice that surrounded them (24).
2. Our Lord taught that the basic problems arising from money, possessions and wealth had their roots in the heart and its attachments. This is especially clear in the Sermon on the Mount sayings (1, 2, 3) where a detachment from things in general and possessions in particular constitutes that poverty in spirit which is a blessing of the kingdom, (10). It is this love of money which is the root of all evil (21). As the rich young ruler found out to his cost, (5) this is no mere theoretical matter but a life and death decision concerning the following of Christ. Spiritual riches (26) are conferred on those who, either in poverty or wealth, give without reserve - as in the example of the widow who put all she had into the Temple treasury (15).

3. A gospel-based praxis concerning money and possessions operates on two spiritual principles. The first is that God will provide for every kind of need, and there must be trust in that provision (12). Knowing this the second principle follows on: almsgiving is a blessing and provision for all, both for the giver and the receiver. Active ministry should also be sustained in this way (4). The more one gives, the more one receives and this is a freedom in faith that most powerfully transforms our lives (9, 18, 22, 23, 25).
4. Our calling to use what we have in the service of God includes our personal as well as our financial gifts from Him. The talents we have received must not be hidden away in false modesty or fearfulness but rather used to their fullest extent to bless others (6).
5. The practical and spiritual aspects of almsgiving in and through the Church are exhaustively described by St Paul. He only recognises weekly personal giving as both a relief to the poor and a support for the Church's work and Ministry (19). Nowhere does he mention fundraising, raffles, sales of goods or membership subscriptions! There is only one form of Christian giving and that is putting one's hands into one's pockets. This is his doctrine because he understands our Lord's teaching and example concerning the blessings that come from sacrifice: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9) This text is embedded in two chapters that deal exclusively with money so it cannot be spiritualised or rationalised away (20). They describe how a Christian should give and this can be summarised succinctly in these terms: **thankfully, joyfully, willingly, sacrificially, generously, trustingly, regularly and proportionately to our income**. In respect of the last point St. Paul does not teach tithing (10% of our gross income) *explicitly* although in the Tradition of the Church this *does* remain the gold standard for Christian discipleship. By teaching proportionate giving, St Paul assumes a percentage, but, recognising the sacrificial aspect, he does not specify it. Each person must respond to the

divine call according to how God has enlarged his heart. For some, 10% will not be enough.

6. The use of our wealth in the service of God will be included in our **judgement after death** so we must be mindful of our vocation to serve the poor for none of us knows when we shall be called to account. After death it will be too late to amend our lives. We should not be like the rich man who stacked his barns and lived in ease but who then died, mindless and heartless in his greed. We must not harden our hearts against our poor brethren as did the rich man in the case of Lazarus at his gate **(7, 11, 13, 14)**.

The underlying theology and practical necessity of this New Testament teaching has been comprehensively summarised by St Basil the Great:

If, then, we keep in reserve any earthly possessions or perishable wealth, the mind sinks down as into mire and the soul inevitably becomes blind to God and insensible to the desire for the beauties of heaven and the good things laid up for us by promise. These we cannot gain possession of unless a strong and single-minded desire leads us to ask for them and lightens the labour of their attainment. This, then, is renunciation, as our discourse defines it: the severance of the bonds of this material and transient life and freedom from human concerns whereby we render ourselves more fit to set out upon the road leading to God. It is the unhindered impulse toward the possession and enjoyment of inestimable goods.... In short, it is the transference of the human heart to a heavenly order of life.... Also—and this is the chief point—it is the first step toward the likeness of Christ, who being rich, became poor for our sake. Unless we attain to this likeness, it is impossible for us to achieve a way of life in accord with the gospel of Christ....⁷

Ambrosiaster has concisely and clearly explained the theology:

Paul is saying that Christ was made poor because God deigned to be born as man, humbling the power of His might so that He might obtain for men the

⁷ *The Long Rules, 8; cited in Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VII 1-2 Corinthians*, Gerald Bray (Ed.), (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 269-270.

riches of divinity and thus share in the divine nature, as Peter says. He was made man in order to take humanity right into the Godhead. Therefore, Christ was made poor, not for His sake but for ours, but we are made poor for our own benefit.⁸

In brief, the New Testament teaching is that tithing with reflection, sincerity and honesty is important for salvation, since that is the ultimate benefit that God wishes to give us through Christ. Certainly, that was also the model in the Old Testament, where God indicated that for those who tithed he would open “the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows” (Malachi 3:10).

Before and After Constantine

When Christianity became established in the Roman Empire and the Church entered into a partnership with the State, public money became available and a vast building programme of churches began to take place. Inevitably perhaps, something of the local and personal responsibility for Christian giving was lost in the process. It remained for monastics to offer an enduring and transformative witness to older ideals of the common life and holy poverty. Even so, the monks themselves could be divided as to whether or not the Church should hold wealth in terms of lands and property so as to assist the poor. Classically this disagreement came to a head in Russia in the dispute between the Possessors and Non-Possessors—two approaches represented by two great saints; respectively, St. Joseph of Volokolamsk and St. Nilus of Sora. Both were rightly honoured by the Church for teaching complementary truths:

As explained in E-Quip Lecture 26: “St Nilus of Sora is best remembered for championing the ‘non-possessors’ through his firm opposition to monastic land-holdings of any kind and the accumulation of wealth by the Church. Monastic accumulation of tax-exempt properties and economic power was favoured by

⁸ *ACCS NT VII*, p. 269. Ambrosiaster flourished about 366 to 384 and is the “name given by Erasmus to the author of a work once thought to have been composed by Ambrose” p. 317.

another and more prominent school, the ‘possessors’. Their most effective spokesman was St Joseph of Volokolamsk (1439-1515). With the triumph of the ‘possessors’ the Church promoted ambitious programmes of social work across Russia, not least in resettling refugees in outlying provinces.”

So it has been throughout the history of the Church: the undying debate about the Christian use of wealth and how a rich man can be saved rumbles on! The implementation of tithing has often been linked to “Christian stewardship.” It should be noted that:

In the early Church ... it was widely taught that the Christian ought to regard the holding of property as a trust to be administered on behalf of the needy. In subsequent ages exhortations to give alms to the poor were less closely connected with the concept of stewardship, though this [sometimes] continued to have an important role in the distribution of charity by monastic and other ecclesiastical institutions.⁹

In the twentieth century “stewardship theology” began to be applied by many Christian groups in the context of “time, talents, treasure . . . [and as] ‘stewardship of creation’ ... a theological response to environmental issues.”¹⁰

Let us conclude with a synopsis of an illuminating article¹¹ by Jaroslav Pelikan, itself a commentary on an influential work by Clement of Alexandria: *Who is the Rich Man that Shall be Saved?* You will learn about the social justice teaching in the works

⁹ “Stewardship,” in F. L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone (Eds.), *Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Peabody: Mass, 2007), 3rd ed., p. 1,543. This reasonably priced 1,786 paperback edition was originally published in its 3rd edition in hardback as *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. The editors “commissioned the Rt Rev Dr K. T. Ware [now Metropolitan Kallistos] to fill the gaps in the coverage of Eastern Orthodoxy.” None of the articles from hundreds of contributors have been signed. The quality of the articles on Orthodox saints and the early Church is outstanding.

¹⁰ “Stewardship” in Cross & Livingstone, p. 1,543.

¹¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Stewardship of Money in the Early Church: A Close Reading of “Who is the Rich Man that Shall be Saved?”* by Clement of Alexandria in *Good and Faithful Servant: Stewardship in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003, Ch. 1.

of St John Chrysostom, St. Basil the Great and others in forthcoming Lecture 88. However, this lesser known work by Clement is a gem that deserves further study, not least because it comes from a Pre-Constantinian period (d. ca. 215) when the Church was becoming a force to be reckoned with in the Roman world. Although Clement's time falls a century before the persecutions against Christianity end, the economic condition of many Christians had been steadily improving. As Eusebius observes in his Church History: "At Rome many who were highly distinguished for wealth and family turned with all their household and relatives onto their salvation"¹² (5.21.1).

Pelikan observes that Clement understood that the renunciation of wealth in the pursuit of higher ideals was already widely practised by non-Christians.¹³ Christ's teaching, therefore, that it was "easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved" (5, page 1, ante) needed to be understood in the context of the whole gospel (18). Since not everyone had received the call to embrace absolute poverty, it was necessary to understand both the distinctiveness and discrimination of Christ's teaching (12). Clement insisted that these were to be found not merely in obedience to the teaching of Christ in the Gospels but also and supremely in the gift of eternal life in and through the death and resurrection of our Lord.

Clement supported his case with the following exhortations:

For each of us He gave His life, the equivalent for all. From each of us He demands the same in return, for one another. And if we owe our lives to the brethren, and have made such a mutual compact with the Saviour, why should we go on hoarding and shutting up worldly goods, which are beggarly, alien to us, and transitory? (37)

¹² 5.21.1

¹³ The references below are to the chapters in Clement's work, which may be found at: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-richman.html>

The Incarnation constituted a sort of the divine transaction whereby the whole human system of money and property had been turned upside down, not by abolishing it but by a spiritual re-evaluation of its potential. (32, 14) What mattered for Clement was how money was used:

If you use it skilfully, it is skilful; if you are deficient in skill, it is affected by your lack of skill, being itself devoid of blame. Such an instrument is money.

(14)

Clement explained the implications for practical Christian stewardship with reference to the first Beatitude in Matthew 5:3: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” He who is genuinely poor in spirit is the one who:

Holds possessions, and gold, and silver, and houses, as the gifts of God; and ministers from them to the God who gives them for the salvation of men; and knows that he possesses them more for the sake of the brethren than his own; and is superior to the possession of them, not the slave of the thing he possesses; and does not carry them about in his soul, nor bind and circumscribe his life within them, but is ever labouring at some good and divine work, even if he should at some time or another be compelled to lose them, and is able with a cheerful mind to bear their removal equally with their abundance. (16)

As Pelikan observes, this teaching of Clement concerning possessions is a gem of succinctness and spiritual lucidity and it has hardly been bettered in Christian literature since. He wrote at a time when the evangelical life (a life of dedication to Christ) needed to be understood practically as concerning those Christians who might otherwise have been tempted by their wealth to forsake the precepts of the gospel. His message, which is at once balanced, practical and faithful to Christ’s teaching, has a particular relevance in our own time when many Christians think that their money and possessions are of no concern to God or His Church. Clement shows that one can hardly read a chapter of any of the Gospels without this self-deception being exposed. God requires faithfulness from us in every aspect of our lives, not least in the wealth that has been entrusted to us, either small or great.

Epilogue: The Contemporary Search for Justice

The commitment to give 10 per cent of one's income to the Church should be linked to a commitment to social justice. To live with generosity requires giving both to religious organisations and to those in need. This ideal was set out clearly in God's choice of Abraham "so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice" (Genesis 18: 19). This exhortation to righteousness and justice is continued throughout the Old and New Testaments with the Lord's exhortation to the prophet Isaiah, "Preserve justice and do righteousness, for My salvation is about to come and my righteousness to be revealed" (Isaiah 56:1), as well as with St Paul's beautiful exhortation to the Philippians to "think on ... whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, [and] whatsoever things are just ..." (Philippians 4:8).

To attain justice in a local community, a nation, a continent and globally has become increasingly difficult. In *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, Pankaj Mishra reflects on the reality of how we handle our wealth:

The world has never seen a greater accumulation of wealth, or a more extensive escape from material deprivation. The fruits of human creativity—from smartphones to stem-cell reconstructions—continue to grow. But such broad and conventional norms of progress cloak how unequally its opportunities are distributed: for instance, nearly half of the world's income growth between 1988 and 2011 was appropriated by the richest tenth of humanity and, even in rich countries, there is a growing life-expectancy gap between classes.¹⁴

Personal tithing then and a commitment to social justice, both grounded in prayer and faith, fit together well as a saving response to the love of God and the call of our common humanity.

¹⁴ London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2017; p. 324. Mishra suggests that: "The most convincing and influential public intellectual today—Pope Francis—is not an agent of reason and progress. In a piquant irony, he is the moral voice of the Church that was the main adversary of Enlightenment intellectuals as they built the philosophical scaffolding of a universal commercial society." p.327.