

Dear Friends in Christ

Back in the 19th Century, the great sociologist, Max Weber, pointed out that as capitalism developed, Christianity began to see the accumulation of wealth as a good thing. Indeed, within Calvinism, the accumulation of wealth was a sign—perhaps the only sign—that one was on the right track to inherit salvation. God would sometimes tip his hand to indicate that one was numbered among the elect. So if wealth is a sign of God's (coming) favor, ought not I attempt to become fabulously, fabulously wealthy and greet my peers with champagne hugs and caviar kisses? All that talk in the Bible about the perils of idolatry can now be laid to rest by the practitioners of a modern Christianity that has made its peace with wealth and the obsession with wealth. The patron saint of most television evangelists and far too many regular Christians has become Gordon Gecko: "Greed is good."

Here is the problem. Those meddlesome Apostles, Prophets, and Evangelists wrote stuff down. The Great Tradition has always considered greed to be one of the seven deadly sins.

Jesus said on one occasion, "You cannot serve God and Mammon. You will either hate the one or love the other, or will love the one and hate the other." (Matt. 6:24) Jesus elicits the Great Commandments from a would-be disciple, but after telling the story of the Good Samaritan, he tells him he lacks one thing: "Go, sell all that you have and give the money to the poor and come follow me." Luke tells us the young lawyer goes away very sad because he had many possessions. (Luke 10) James seems to want to blame the rich for a whole host of problems including a rigged legal system (James 2:1-13) and chides Christians for affording the rich special privileges and treatment. Instead, true religion and undefiled before God is to care for the widows and orphans in their affliction. (James 1:27). Then we have a couple of instances in Acts. Ananias and Sapphira are struck dead in Acts 5 for selling their property and then lying about it to the Church so as not to have to give up the wealth. This is a tough one because it appears that the lying is the thing that really gets God's goat. In Samaria, a magician named Simon Magus becomes a Christian when baptized by Philip, but when Peter and John show up, he decides he would like to make a whole bunch more money than he currently is and that the Holy Spirit would be a good way to make that happen. He offers money for the gift of the Spirit which draws a "Drop dead!" from Peter. He quickly asks the apostles to pray for him since Peter's saying, "Drop dead!" sometimes has unfortunate consequences.

Throughout Christian history, greed has been condemned—although often enough rulers have been given a pass. The three vows of those wishing to enter monastic life were poverty, chastity, and obedience. Even those who had wealth were expected to be benefactors of the Church. The area between Greed and Idolatry constitutes a particularly slippery slope. Augustine famously asked if we own all of our stuff or if our stuff owns us. He called the latter situation "concupiscence" and linked it with idolatry. Martin Luther would later come up with a functional definition of God as "that to which we look for all good and that to which we flee in time of trouble." There are a whole lot of people who look to wealth for all good and flee to wealth in time of trouble. Or to put it more concisely, as Jerry Lee Lewis crooned: "There's a whole of idolatry going on." Or was it "shakin'?"

Of course we have been preached at for many decades that it is not whether one is wealthy, but how one uses one's wealth that is important. This makes tremendous sense and puts us in a better position than unmitigated idolatry, but it might be one more step on the primrose path if it causes us to make a false peace with wealth/idolatry. The problem is: it does not seem to square with "Go, sell all that you have and give the money to the poor and come follow me."

If God gives us all that we have and are, whom then should we trust? In whom should we invest? Whom should we serve? We should think and pray about this a whole lot more.

Yours in Christ,

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