

John Wesley On Wealth

John Wesley, well acquainted with the need for and rigors of radical discipleship, understood conflict theology as the very context of Scripture. A spiritually military mindset Wesley continually demonstrated in a variety of ways. Up to and including his strategy regarding the handling of worldly wealth. A Charles White notes:

- Wesley felt that the Christian should not merely tithe but give away all extra income once the family and creditors were taken care of. He believed that with increasing income, what should rise is not the Christian's standard of living but the standard of giving.
- John Wesley's teaching on money offered simple, practical guidelines for every believer. His first rule about money was Gain all you can. Despite its potential for misuse, money in itself is something good. There is no end to the good it can do: "In the hands of (God's) children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked. It gives to the traveler and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of a husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless. We may be a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain. It may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame: yea, a lifter up from the gates of death!" Wesley added that in gaining all they can, Christians must be careful not to damage their own souls, minds, or bodies, or the souls, minds or bodies of anyone else. He thus prohibited gaining money through industries that pollute the environment or endanger workers.
- Wesley's second rule for the right use of money was Save all you can. He urged his hearers not to spend money merely to gratify the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eye, or the pride of life. He cried out against expensive food, fancy clothes, and elegant furniture: "Despise delicacy and variety and be content with what plain nature requires." Wesley had two reasons for telling Christians to buy only necessities. The obvious one was so they would not waste money. The second was so they would not increase their desires. The old preacher wisely pointed out that when people spend money on things they do not really need, they begin to want more

things they do not need. Instead of satisfying their desires, they only increase them.

- Wesley's third rule was Give all you can. One's giving should begin with the tithe. He told the one who does not tithe, "Thou dost undoubtedly set thy heart upon thy gold" and warned, "It will 'eat thy flesh as fire!'" But one's giving should not end at the tithe. All of the Christian's money belongs to God, not just the first tenth. Believers must use 100 percent of their income as God directs.
- And how has God directed Christians to use their incomes? Wesley listed four scriptural principles: 1) Provide things needful for yourself and your family (I Tim. 5:8). The believer should make sure the family has "a sufficiency of plain, wholesome food to eat, and clean raiment to put on" as well as a place to live and enough to live on if something were to happen to the breadwinner. 2) "Having food and raiment, let us be therewith content" (I Tim. 6:8) . "Whoever has sufficient food to eat, and raiment to put on, with a place to lay his head, and something over, is rich," he said. 3) "Provide things honest in the sight of all men" (Rom. 12:17) as well as to "Owe no man anything" (Rom. 13:8). Wesley said the next claim on a Christian's money is the creditors'. He adds that those who are in business for themselves need to have adequate tools, stock, or capital for the carrying on of that business. 4) "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). After the Christian has provided for the family, the creditors, and the business, the next obligation is to use any money that is left to meet the needs of others.
- In giving these four biblical principles, Wesley recognized some situations were not clear-cut. He accordingly offered four questions to help his hearers decide how to spend money: 1) In spending this money, am I acting like I own it, or am I acting like the Lord's trustee? 2) What Scripture requires me to spend this money this way? 3) Can I offer up this purchase as a sacrifice to the Lord? 4) Will God reward me for this expenditure at the resurrection of the just?

In 1744 Wesley wrote, "When I die if I leave behind me ten pounds...you and all mankind can bear witness against me, that I have lived and died a thief and a robber." When he died in 1791, the only money mentioned in

his will was the miscellaneous coins to be found in his pockets and dresser drawers.

Wesley's generosity seems almost negligent in light of today's Christian stewardship programs. Yet isn't it interesting that to find a Scripture on saving money for the future, such as investing in a retirement 401(k) plan, one need cite the Old Testament. The New Testament is without a single such verse!

This vastly different mindset from the commingling of the love of money (things) and God (as we imagine Him), a hallmark of modern Christianity, would go a long way to explaining many problematic Scriptures including the intricacies of Christ's conversation with the Rich Young Ruler who appeared to batting a thousand until Jesus' final fast ball. If what was being offered was some form of apostleship (i.e.. "follow Me") it may be Christ the Suffering Servant is using the passage to highlight the incompatibility of inordinate worldly vs Kingdom wisdom and wealth.

Might this be an attempt to direct those who would speak for God to escape the trap of manipulating Scripture for the purpose of financial gain? Sadly, this very scenario has all but crippled the fractured belief system of billions, introducing a variety of Christs and partial gospels. These in turn have twisted Churchianity's doctrines every which way but loose, just as Peter warned millennia ago:

- "But there were also lying prophets among the people then, just as there will be lying religious teachers among you. They'll smuggle in destructive divisions, pitting you against each other—biting the hand of the One who gave them a chance to have their lives back! They've put themselves on a fast downhill slide to destruction, but not before they recruit a crowd of mixed-up followers who can't tell right from wrong. They give the way of truth a bad name. They're only out for themselves. They'll say anything, anything, that sounds good to exploit you." 2 Peter 2:1-2 MSG
- "Their specialty is greed, and they're experts at it. Dead souls! They've left the main road and are directionless, having taken the way of Balaam, son of Beor, the prophet who turned profiteer, a connoisseur of evil. But Balaam was stopped in his wayward tracks: A dumb animal spoke in a human voice and prevented the prophet's

craziness. There's nothing to these people—they're dried-up fountains, storm-scattered clouds, headed for a black hole in hell. They are loudmouths, full of hot air, but still they're dangerous. Men and women who have recently escaped from a deviant life are most susceptible to their brand of seduction. They promise these newcomers freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption, for if they're addicted to corruption—and they are—they're enslaved." 2 Peter 2:14-19 MSG

Few today would think themselves worthy of such a scathing rebuke. Yet even if that were true, clearly there's a principal in play. One exemplified and reinforced by Jesus and His disciples having no place to lay their heads. By Peter's honest confession "*Silver and gold have I none but such as I have I give to you*" occasioning the first of many miracles recorded in the Book of Acts. By Paul's model of contentment in all circumstances, directing Christians to be thankful to be fed and clothed and to consider all else including shelter optional. And perhaps most convincingly by his inconceivable patience in affliction:

- "Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying." 2 Corinthians 11:23-31 NIV

To such as we, Paul the walking scar and apostle of grace, directs “follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” Considering his resume, little wonder Paul could say:

- “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Galatians 2:20 NIV
- “So if you’re serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don’t shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ —that’s where the action is. See things from his perspective. Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your real life—even though invisible to spectators—is with Christ in God. He is your life. When Christ (your real life, remember) shows up again on this earth, you’ll show up, too—the real you, the glorious you. Meanwhile, be content with obscurity, like Christ. And that means killing off everything connected with that way of death: sexual promiscuity, impurity, lust, doing whatever you feel like whenever you feel like it, and grabbing whatever attracts your fancy. That’s a life shaped by things and feelings instead of by God. It’s because of this kind of thing that God is about to explode in anger. It wasn’t long ago that you were doing all that stuff and not knowing any better. But you know better now, so make sure it’s all gone for good: bad temper, irritability, meanness, profanity, dirty talk.” Colossians 3:1-8 MSG
- “God’s Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what’s coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance! We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we’re certainly going to go through the good times with him! That’s why I don’t think there’s any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what’s coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens.” Romans 8:16-21 MSG