

Jesus and Wealth

As a student of the Bible, I have found that most Christian biblical scholars are loath to contrast the message of the Old Testament to that of the New Testament. They object especially when sweeping contrasts are made between the OT's so-called God of wrath and the NT's so-called God of love. After all, Christianity insists on but one God, who is the God of both Testaments. Ample evidence exists for a God of love in the OT, and there is likewise evidence for a God of wrath in the NT. The difference is perhaps only a matter of emphasis.

The NT is distinctive, of course, in its witness to Jesus the Christ, heralded as the Son of God, the newly revealed source of divine salvation. For Christians, Jesus ushers in a new historical era, one that transcends the need for cultic sacrifice (the Lord's Supper becomes the symbolic—and for some traditions, substantial—substitute). But the ethical teaching remains much the same.

In fact, however, there is a great difference between the two Testaments on one matter in particular. That matter is wealth. In the OT, wealth is a sign of God's blessing. Those who are chosen and/or faithful will prosper. Witness Abraham, Jacob, David, and Job. In the book of Job, one of the latest in the OT, the question of prosperity is problematized, but in the end, Job's fortunes are restored. The recent best-seller, The Prayer of Jabez, based on an OT character's prayer, epitomizes this assumption that faithfulness brings prosperity—thus, prosperity is indicative of divine favor.

In Jesus' teaching, however, wealth is hardly blessing. In Luke, he says, "Woe to you who are rich!" He says it is harder for a rich man to make it into heaven than for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle! People of wealth are constantly being warned. A rich young man is told to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. The successful farmer is portrayed as a fool for planning to store his wealth. "Do not lay up treasures on earth," says Jesus. He never says that the rich are inherently evil, or less virtuous than the poor. But there is one thing they have in common that makes them subject to warning and judgment: they are rich! If Jesus is who Christians say he is, then he must be right about this.

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