

Would Jesus Occupy?

Many writers have portrayed Jesus of Nazareth as a friend of free market capitalism. The idea persists that, because he championed the individual, Jesus surely desired that all people have freedom and opportunity to fulfill themselves by pursuing their dreams, mastering their physical and social environments, and thereby reaping the rewards to which they are entitled.

But here's the problem: As New Testament scholars recognize, if there is any single action by which Jesus sealed his fate, it was driving the money-changers out of the temple. This same Jesus taught that riches are a hazard, so great that it's easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus also warned against the accumulation of riches, and pronounced it impossible to serve both God and wealth.

Note, it's not just holding wealth, but its very acquisition, that Jesus found hazardous. He also taught his disciples to pray, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Try to base a free market capitalist economics textbook on that!

So, should we discount what Jesus had to say about money and wealth? If so, we'll have to throw out much of his teaching. Rather, I think that Christians, and anyone else who regards Jesus highly, must consider the likelihood that our current political economy is profoundly flawed.

First of all, there's that disparity of wealth that keeps growing. Taxing the devil out of the rich could help bring down the deficits, but its greatest benefit might be to save their souls and to make democracy functional again. The fraction of 1% who are filthy rich are not the only problem, of course. Anybody who buys a lottery ticket hoping to strike it rich has fallen prey to a perverted notion of the good life.

We also must learn to live within our means, but current austerity measures are perversely punishing the victims. The economic ship of state is listing, and it's not Wall Street but the poor and the struggling middle class who should be bailed out, with employment, educational and health services, and other needed supports.

Admittedly, God is in the details, for which space here does not allow. But it seems likely that Jesus would sympathize with today's Occupy movement. It is unmistakably clear that economic policies informed by his teaching would look very different from ours today.

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