

IS JESUS A SOCIALIST?

What Jesus and the Bible Have to Say About Wealth and Poverty, Generosity and Greed, and Abundance and Scarcity

By Lee Habeeb





"THE MULTIPLICATION OF THE LOAVES AND FISHES"
BY GIOVANNI LANFRANCO, 1620-1625

INTRODUCTION

Christians around the world believe that God's Son walked the earth some 2,000 years ago. Jesus, the Bible teaches us, came to this world—our world—through a miraculous birth from a virgin named Mary, began His ministry when He was about 30 years old, and it ended approximately 3 years later with His crucifixion and death. A few days later, Jesus was resurrected from the dead, having died for all of our sins, past, present, and future.

He would be seen on at least eight occasions after His crucifixion, first by Mary Magdalene at the tomb (Mark 16:9), and last by as many as 500 followers, where He confirmed the completion of His mission on earth, after which His followers witnessed His ascension into heaven.

While He was here on earth—before and after His death—Jesus taught His followers about many things, among them compassion, faith, forgiveness, grace, mercy, and love. His mission on earth spoke to the personal life of mankind, not our political life. In fact, the biggest decision any Christian makes in his life is not, never has, and never will be, in a group. The most personal decision any of us make, accepting Jesus

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as our Lord and Savior, is done by each one of us alone, one person at a time. One heart at a time. One soul at a time.

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus, does not force us to follow Him. We must willingly volunteer for the job. Coercion was not a part of Jesus's teaching; love was the animating force of His ministry. After all, He walked this earth to understand and know us. And for us to know Him. For us to know He loves us so profoundly and unconditionally that He died for all of our sins, past, present, and future. That is a type of love that's hard for us as human beings to comprehend. But one thing is certain. Coercion and force are the opposite of Jesus's brand of love. And yet force and coercion are what drive modern socialist economies; the government compels its citizens living under socialism to help the needy and the poor. It is not done freely. Or voluntarily.

The fact of the matter is, Jesus's teachings had nothing to say about the nature and form that governments should take, but for the fact that we should:

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's” (Mark 12:17 ESV; Matthew 22:21; Luke 20:25).

This was Jesus's way of drawing a distinction between two kingdoms: the kingdom of this world, and the kingdom not of this world—and Jesus is the King of that world.

If Jesus had wanted to rule the earth, He surely could have, and gotten all the accolades and trappings of wealth and power. But in the 33 years Jesus walked the earth, He showed absolutely no desire or inclination to do so. Money and power were not His thing. How do we know? In Satan's final temptation, he took Jesus to a high mountain

and showed Him all of the kingdoms of the world, and all the glory that went with it.

And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me” (Matthew 4:9 ESV).

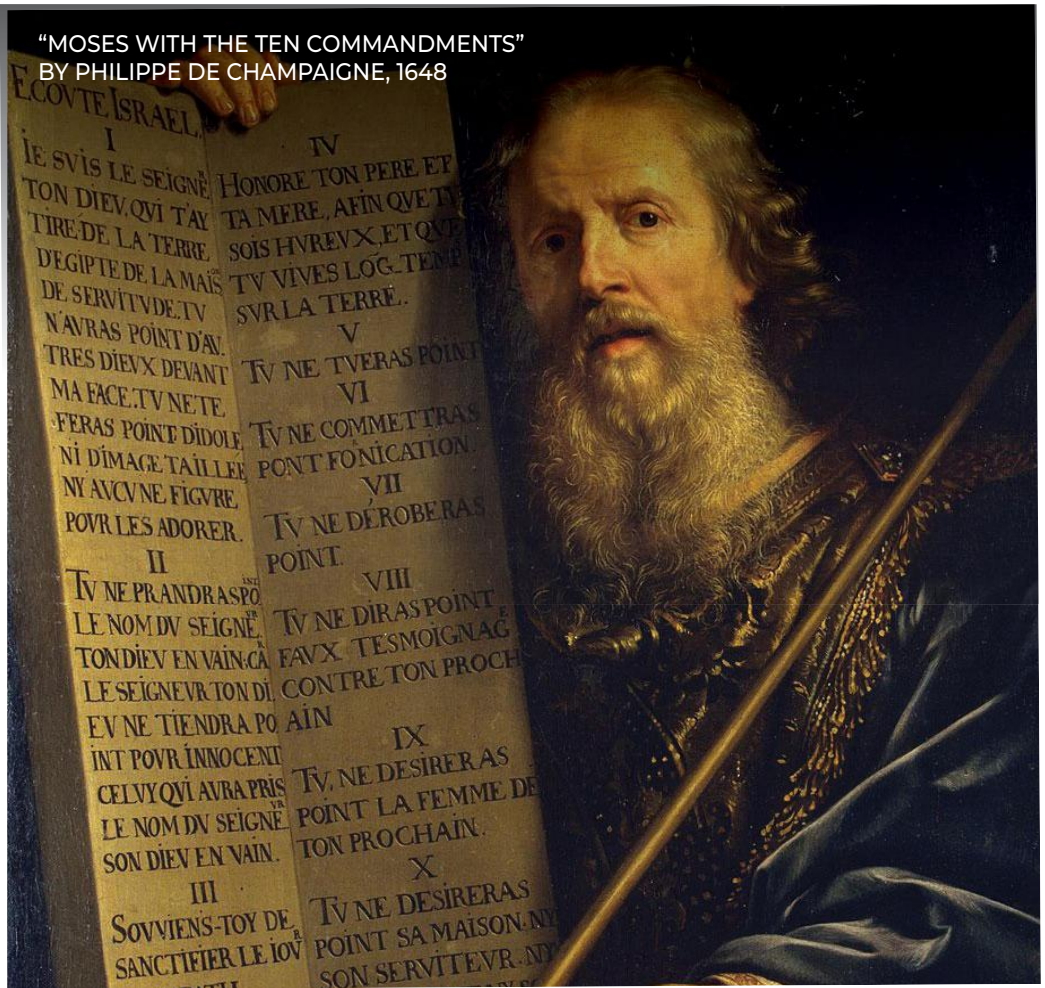
But Jesus was not impressed by the offer.

“Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only’” (Matthew 4:10 ESV).

Jesus, we can safely say, did not walk the earth to run the affairs of state, or to become a worldly leader of men. His mission field was us—we human beings, all. And our hearts, souls, and minds. Those deeply individual and personal spaces—and those alone—were His preoccupation. From the time He walked the earth until now, Jesus has been concerned with our eternal and personal salvation, and with our hearts. Loving God was at the heart of Jesus’s mission to the world, and loving us. He wanted those two things to be at the heart—and the center—of our lives, too.

But don’t believe me. When one of the teachers of the law asked Jesus which of the commandments was the most important, Jesus answered:

“The most important one . . . is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your



neighbor as yourself. 'There is no commandment greater than these' (Mark 12:29-31 NIV).

Those were Jesus's top two commandments, so they must be ours as followers of Jesus. And loving our Lord is something we must do as individuals. Just as loving one another—loving our neighbors as ourselves—is something we must do as individuals. Governments don't love people. They can try to assist people, try to help people in need. But people love people. Individuals love

other individuals. Love isn't a collective experience. It is a deeply personal one. It's the most powerful personal experience on earth. Life without love is inconceivable.

Yes, we can and should worship Jesus together and live and walk our Christian lives with groups of people, but we are called to love the Lord individually and personally. And we know from Scripture that He knows us all individually and personally. He knows our individual hearts and our minds better than we know our own.

If Jesus had wanted to end poverty in His time—or massively redistribute wealth—he didn't need to run for office or fashion a governing body or political system. He could have simply made those things happen. But He spent little time feeding the hungry—only a couple of occasions—and redistributing wealth. He fed the hungry masses most memorably at the mountain on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. But that story was less about feeding the hungry masses than letting the hungry masses witness for themselves—with their own eyes—who He was. Witness with their own eyes the miracles He could perform.

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" (John 6:14 ESV).

As for wealth redistribution, Jesus never mentioned it or even hinted at it in the Bible. In one instance He was asked to play the role of equity judge and settle an outstanding claim over an inheritance, and Jesus quickly and curtly refused.

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

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Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbitrator between you?” Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:13-15 NIV).

Jesus did not for even a second suggest any kind of redistribution or equal outcome. He instead warned those listening about the perils of greed, declining to be the busybody.

Which is why it seems so odd—indeed, so strange—to caricature Jesus, Our Lord and Savior, as the embodiment of a man-made political system like socialism. And so utterly odd to hear non-Christians, and some misguided Christians, call Jesus a socialist.

To reduce Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection—and His profound teachings—to a mere political system is a mixture of folly and arrogance. And yet there are some people outside the Christian flock—and some inside it too—who believe that the life of Jesus, and His lessons and teachings, support the political and economic theory that has come to be known as socialism.

Before any real discussion can continue on the subject, it is first important to understand what the word *socialism* actually means. This is what *Dictionary.com* says:

Noun: a theory or system of social organization that advocates the ownership and control of the means of production and distribution, capital, land, etc., by the community as a whole, usually through a centralized government.¹

In short, socialism calls for no ownership of anything, from a private business to private property. And calls for a centralized government—a

centralized authority—to control everything. In short, the state runs the lives of the people living in it, and it does so through the coercive power of the government. By force of law.

So what does the Bible have to say about socialism, if anything? What Scripture supports the idea that Jesus's teachings fall in line with modern-day socialism? This work will examine with great care what the Bible has to say about the matter. And what Jesus has to say in His own words. And with the help of His teaching, which often took the form of stories—or parables.

One thing is certain: anyone who believes that Jesus's message can be reduced—be shrunk down in size—to earthly realms like philosophy, ideology, or politics is reading a very different Bible than the rest of us.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD (Isaiah 55:8 NIV).

This work will instead take a deep plunge into the many times and many ways Jesus talks about these things that consume mankind when it comes to our daily life around wealth—or the lack thereof. This work will cover a lot of ground—including wealth and poverty, property ownership and community ownership, free will and coercion, envy and greed—and last, scarcity and abundance. And with Jesus's teaching—and Scripture—as the backdrop.

The hope is that more pastors and more Christians spend time thinking and praying—and talking and teaching—about Jesus's call on our hearts when it comes to these all-important matters.



"CHRIST AND THE RICH YOUNG RULER"
BY HEINRICH HOFMANN, 1889

CHAPTER 1: DOES JESUS—DOES GOD—HATE MONEY AND WEALTH?

Let's cut to the chase; socialists use as their ammunition several stories in the Bible that seem to support their claim that Jesus hated wealth and money. That Jesus hated the rich. But is it true? What do those stories, many of which we know, really say and mean? Rather than talk about the stories, let's first examine them.

The first and most well-known verse about wealth is the story of the rich young man who approaches Jesus for advice. It appears in the Books of Matthew, Luke, and Mark. Here's the story as it appeared in the latter:

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

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“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth (Mark 10:17-22 NIV).

It is a remarkable story, one that starts with an important question good Christians—and even good people who are not Christians—have been asking from the beginning of time: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus asks the young man if he knows the commandments and then rattles off a bunch of them. The rich young man quickly replies that he’s kept all of the commandments Jesus listed—and done so since he was a boy. This young man was no doubt a good guy—and a good Jew.

Before He gave the young rich man any further instruction, Jesus, according to Mark, “looked on him and loved him.” What a powerful sentence:

Jesus looked at him and loved him (Mark 10:21a NIV).

Jesus saw this young rich man for who he really was, as He sees all of us. And He loved him because the young man had an honest and sincere yearning to get to heaven. To be as good a man as he could be in Jesus’s eyes.

But Jesus also knew that this young rich man had a strong attachment to his money. How did He know that? Because Jesus knows our hearts, and sees and knows what we can’t. It is in this context—and out

of love for the young rich man—that Jesus asks him to give up everything. To sell his possessions and give them to the poor.

*“You will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me”
(Mark 10:21b NIV).*

When the young man heard the instruction of Jesus, we learn that “his face fell,” and that he “went away sad.” He went away sad because he had *heard* Jesus’s command, but could not *obey* Jesus’s command.

It turned out that his love of his possessions—the comfort and security they provided—were too much to part with. His emotional attachment to his wealth and status overruled his willingness to follow the words of Jesus. Small wonder he “went away sad.”

What was Jesus teaching the young man with this encounter? And why did He do it the way He did it? Jesus wanted to see if the young man loved his wealth more than God. Jesus wanted to see if the young man *worshipped* his wealth. If the young man had made a *false idol* out of his wealth. In short, Jesus wanted to see if the young man understood the all-important 1st two of the Ten Commandments:

1: You shall have no other gods before me.

2: You shall not make for yourself an [idol] (Exodus 20:3-4a NIV).

Remarkably, this wasn’t just any man giving the rich young man advice. This wasn’t any man testing the rich young man—and testing him not to trick him or harm him, but out of a deep love for him. And to give the young rich man some credit, he asked the right man for advice about how to gain eternal life. But he didn’t like Jesus’s answer. The young man could not give up his treasure, his wealth, and his money.

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And deep down inside, he knew it was wrong. It's *why* he walked away sadly. He had just ignored Jesus's command. He chose his money over Jesus—his worldly possessions over eternity.

In each of our lives, we know that feeling. That feeling that comes over us when we know what God demands of us—what Jesus commands—and despite that, put something we treasure above Him. We are sad when that happens, if we have any kind of walk with Jesus, because we are convicted. We are sad because we know what we're doing is wrong, but our flesh gets the best of us. We choose our earthly kingdom—and desires of the flesh—over the eternal Kingdom.

It is in this context that Jesus looks around and says to His disciples the following memorable lines:

*“Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!
It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle
than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God”
(Mark 10:24-25 NIV).*

If the young rich man had worshipped his job more than the Lord, or worshipped an athlete, rock star, hobby, wife, or a pastor more than the Lord, the lesson of the story would have been the same. Jesus, in this story, is not condemning wealth; He is condemning the worship of wealth. To be more precise, He is questioning the young man's priorities. God wasn't first in the young rich man's life, and *that* was the point.

Jesus's purpose in asking the young rich man to give away his possessions was not to shame him, but to love him. The rich young man was challenged not for Jesus's sake, but for his own benefit. The fact of the matter is, we—all of us—are the ones who suffer when we put wealth or work or family or anything else over God. Because when we

do so, we diminish and make smaller our relationship with God. The rich young man, in this way, is all of us. He is all of us when we misplace our priorities and don't put God first.

That's why reducing this complex and beautiful story to "Jesus hates wealth" is so awful. And so wrong. Because it reduces the sheer magnificence of Jesus's teachings to a crude political ideology.

Speaking of rich men in the Bible, it is Abraham (known as *Abram* until renamed by God in Genesis 17:5) who had the distinction of being the first rich man in Genesis.

Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold (Genesis 13:2 NIV).

There was no prior reference to Abraham's wealth. We only know that he and his wife packed up their bags and took everything they owned and hit the road. He picked up and followed God's command to leave his homeland and journey to a land God would one day show him. God was asking this 75 year-old-man to take an epic road trip to a place unknown to him—and Abraham simply obeyed!

Being that Abraham was able to acquire possessions and servants in Haran, he was not a poor man when he left home. But he would end up not just wealthy, but as the Bible indicated, *very* wealthy. And all because of his obedience to God's command. His wealth would consist of more than material wealth. God also promised Abraham a large family filled with heirs. How large?

[The Lord] brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be" (Genesis 15:5 NKJV).



"JOB RESTORED TO PROSPERITY"
BY LAURENT DE LA HYRE, 1648

God in this story wants us to know that all true wealth, material, and other types too, come from Him. We do not need to strive to get wealth if we only will believe in Him and put Him first. And with the full understanding that God's vision for what constitutes wealth is far bigger and better than the materialistic version we mere mortals envision.

The fact of the matter is, the first rich man—the first materially wealthy man in the Bible—did what God asked him to do. Abraham did what the wealthy young man in the New Testament refused to do: put God first. And use God's blessing, his wealth, not to serve himself but to serve God.

TALES OF OTHER RICH MEN IN THE BIBLE

There were other rich men in the Bible as well. Job was one such man, a man God was deeply impressed with. Don't believe me? Here are God's own words to Satan about Job:

“Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil” (Job 1:8 NKJV).

You all know the story. Job was stripped by Satan of everything he cared about. And through his travails and his trials, Job persisted and did not lose his faith in God. By the end of the story, Job had come to a place where he had even managed to pray for his terrible friends, those three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—who blamed Job for his losses. Those three friends judged Job and believed there must have been something he'd done to suffer such loss and grief. They did not