

Reflections on The Good Samaritan's Money

READINGS

1. Christians committed to new ways of seeing that money is more fairly distributed among people in the United States need to work to pass new legislation and to change the whole tax structure if they want:

- (a) a guaranteed annual income and
- (b) the severe limiting of the amount of property wealthy people can pass on to their heirs.

The collective efforts of many individuals to make incomes more just and to limit their own bequests to their families will not have any noticeable influence on the country as a whole without government action.

2. Christians working to develop for themselves new life styles with less dependence on money and property are headed in the right direction, but they will find this almost impossible to do except in the context of a disciplined Christian community.

3. The Women's Movement is aware of the importance of money, but its leadership has not faced head-on the importance of earning, investing, and spending (including reinvesting)

of money as the ultimate source of power in the United States. Until large numbers of women make the commitment of their lives, talents, and energies to the making of large fortunes, men will continue to have more power than they do. Or, as the radical fringe of the Women's Movement is beginning to do, women in general can work for an entirely new social, political, and economic system in which money is not so important. One way or another, they must deal with it and the power it represents.

4. Family considerations are inextricably interwoven with money and vice versa. They cannot be dealt with separately. Those who inherit money are given family traditions and expectations along with it. Those who work their way up from poverty to wealth carry with them their childhood experiences. Both those who have inherited it and those who have earned it must then decide how to pass it along to their children. Even if they take the unusual step of not willing any of it to the next generation, they must recognize that there will be profound consequences in the lives and the feelings of their children resulting from this decision.

5. How can Christians and other concerned Americans find ways of investing their capital in socially productive, non-defense industry businesses? Ought a group of concerned Christians with money set up a small research office to find out answers to this question for the benefits of themselves and others?

6. How ought Christians with extra income give it away? Who can advise them?

7. At this retreat, the phrase, "give to the poor" was used repeatedly. Who are the poor in modern America? How is poverty defined in our affluent country? Do we know what we are talking about when we say "give to the poor"? And who are the wealthy? Where is that line of definition drawn?"

Thoughts stimulated by a Wellspring retreat¹

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RATIONALE FOR SIMPLE LIVING

Why should I as an American Christian in the 20th century, live simply? Would this not be a mere symbolic gesture with little or no meaning beyond its symbolism? Simple living by an individual or simple living by an entire church is certainly not going to change the world drastically. But it can make a difference. In fact, it can make a difference in three ways.

First, by living more simply, an individual, a family, or a church can free up substantial resources—financial resources—that can be put to work to directly help alleviate some of the suffering caused by poverty in our world. There are so many places where money can be invested that will be substantially used to aid a people struggling to become self-sufficient. Living simply does cost less money. The Corinthian Christians receiving Paul's admonition to make equality the goal of their sharing with their brothers and sisters in need may have been puzzled at first. How could they afford to help others live the way they were living? They couldn't, of course, and it would not have taken much of a mathematical mind to realize that this goal would mean that they would have to voluntarily lower their own abundant lifestyle in order to give as Paul was asking them to.

But we need to discuss more than just direct giving to alleviate a particular situation—there is the need for a Christian witness calling for substantial change in the way our country relates to other countries. How will a simple lifestyle relate to this challenge? Too often, it seems, the Church has spoken about matters of justice, but its voice has not carried a ring of authenticity. It has spoken but, as a people, it has not lived the very message its voice spoke. In order to give integrity to its work in the political arena, the Church as a people must demonstrate that it is willing to live in a new order of society where justice for all people is the foundation. Such an order will of necessity involve cuts in our American consumption patterns. What better way to affirm our will to live in such a world than to actually live now with reduced consumption—

to demonstrate with our lifestyles our belief that what we say is right.

Finally, the question of regaining control of our own lives, rather than letting large corporations, etc., make our decisions, would urge us to step aside from the contemporary current of life, and quietly, simply, and forcefully say "No, thank you" to those who would lure us with a life of ease and plenty—if only we give all the decisions to them. To cut back is a vote against the power of those who would blind us with a life of ease to what others are suffering because of our ease.

—Carol Westphal¹

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Lord, help us not to succumb
to the arrogance of the rich
who overfeed their bellies
and pad their bank accounts
without thought for their fellow man
or the God who endowed them

Help us to become
immune to the symbols of wealth
individually responsive to those oppressed
more truthful in our relation to You
and humble in our walk before You
Lois Shank Hertzler²

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There is no greater joy in life than the discovery of (what in this context I call) *curved logic*. Less is more has the power of *liberating you*. The less you need, the less you need to worry; and the less worry there is, the better are likely to be your

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personal and suprapersonal relations. You don't *have* to join the rat race; you don't *have* to be a great financial success. If they raise the tax on tobacco, and you don't need tobacco—what is there to worry about?

Life on this earth is not about *consuming as much as we can afford*, but about some very simple things, which can be expressed in very simple words like:

- Do for others what you want others to do for you;
- Love your neighbor as you love yourself;
- Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.

Why beat about the bush? *This* is what life is about. *More* is *more* stands in the way of it. *Less is more*, even though it sounds absurd, can show the way. For what we really need is so little that any system of good will can provide it. It follows that it is not so much a matter of “system” but of good will—and this depends on our own inner understanding.

—E. F. Schumacher, in Preface to
Less Is More, Goldian Vanden Broeck, Editor¹

QUESTIONS

1. What proportion of your present income and resources are being used to minister to the needs of others? What steps might be taken to free up more money for this purpose?

2. Have you ever had experiences of giving which were frustrating and counter-productive? What did you learn from these experiences?

3. John Wesley told his people to “converse more, abundantly more, with the poorest of the people.” In what ways would personal acquaintance with economically deprived persons help us feel better about our “ministry of money”?

4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of giving to the church as a way of ministering to the needs of others? What

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steps could your church take in order to use the funds it receives more effectively?

5. Why are we sometimes hesitant to give our money to philanthropic organizations? What are some guidelines which might help us determine which groups to support with our money?

MEDITATION

"And he said to him. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

(Matthew 22:37-39)

Lord of all life, I remember very gratefully the times others have been aware of my needs, and have done what they could to help. And I recall thankfully the times I have been able to be helpful to others. Increase my understanding and expand my awareness of what is happening around me, so that I may respond generously and effectively. Whether the need is obvious or subtle, dramatic or quiet, large or small, let me notice it, and act with imagination, good judgment and love. Forgive me for my failures in the past, and help me to forgive myself. May I learn to love others, and myself, as you do, God of grace.

Time for reflection

I love you, Lord. I want to express my love with all my heart and soul and mind. May I love others more deeply and compassionately, see them as sisters and brothers, and give with a glad heart, using all my resources as instruments of love. Let this prayer be a preparation for growth and action.

Silent prayer