

# Poverty, Wealth and Jesus Christ

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*'Does having lots of stuff make you rich?'*

Bob Marley, 1945 - 1981

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## Introduction

I might give a donation, or tithe 100 bucks, but then teeter and resist a one-dollar gift to a poor man on the side of the road. I will question the merits of sponsoring a child in need of food totaling 50 bucks a year, and then without thinking cruise through the fast food joint and feed the family an unnecessary meal. The rubber hits the road in our faith when it comes to money. Jesus spoke a lot about money, more because of what it means than what it is. This is the truth about all things in life. Stuff is everywhere - material, physical, sensational - but because of our sin all this 'stuff' is no longer 'one with' God. We need to navigate this life in Jesus with our cross on our backs, ready to die and then die again until we come clean to and through the gates of glory. (Genesis 3:5-6; Jude 25; Revelation 21:1-5; 22:1-5; Mark 8:34-38)

Money is a currency for self, good and bad. We use it to feed the body, to finance good things, to finance bad things, to free people, to enslave people, to seek safety, to enjoy safety, to indulge, to express sacrifice to God (tithe), to express sacrifice to idols, etc. So our relationship to money is going to be about as 'live' a wire as our relationship to life and God.

Are you deep with God? Your relationship with money will be healthier. Are you weak in your faith? Your relationship to money will be more dangerous and interwoven in you than you may know or feel. If you try to get too comfortable in your theories and dealings with money, then money actually has too much of a hold on you. If you try to ignore money and act as if it does not matter or warrant your attention, then money actually has too much of a hold on you. You cannot 'box' money or relegate it to insignificance, nor can you elevate it to more significance. It is what it is, and you will be to it, and it to you, in direct and significant correlation to your love of God – the first and most important commandment (Matthew 22:36-40).

One of the best ways to 'do' money is the same as 'doing' life, and that is 'on the side' of your relationship with God. It matters, but should not be, never be, what is in the center of the picture, that thing in clearest focus. It should be in the picture, because God made life that way, but it should not ever be what you strain to have clearest in focus.

The only true rest you can and should be striving for is the 'rest' that God gives, and to know this day, this hour and in your relationships that He is in and through you (Hebrews 4:11; Psalm 27:4; Hosea 10:12). If you feel and hear the 'living waters' flowing through you, your money matters will be clear enough.  
(John 7:37-38)

## DEDICATION

*I thank Jesus, and dedicate this number to Him.  
(Genesis 32:22-31)*

## Poverty, Wealth and Jesus Christ

I grew up on the mission field, what they call a 'missionary kid' or 'MK'. My dad is a street preacher, has been since his 20s when he committed his life to Jesus. He and my mom, US citizens, struck out on the mission field from the day they got married – India, Lebanon, and on and on. They were with 'Operation Mobilization' (OM), and still are. I personally, after being born in the US, was brought up for a few years in Iran (till evacuated by the US government in 1979), then through Turkey, Belgium, and 2 ships for 4 years (all over Asia and South America). We trundled into Ireland in 1984, in a big, Ford transit van, 6 kids from 1 to 14 years old. I was 9 years old, and had been to 49 countries.

From the youngest of ages I have been exposed to not only life's natural disparities of wealth and health in a given community, but almost to the full spectrum of extremes across the world. When getting evacuated out of Iran due to the revolution in 1979, I remember hanging my 'Pooky' bear on the olive tree for the shepherd boy who worked in the field across from our apartment blocks. I was 3 years old, going on 4. Also in Iran I remember being told to duck and hide in the car because we were out past curfew and being stopped by police. Two of my other clear memories from that age and era were sitting in a bucket seat of a paratrooper plane with my rub-a-dub-dub-three-men-in-a-tub toy, jetting out of Iran bound for Turkey, back of plane open... and also standing at the foot of the first ship we moved onto, 'Logos', in the Philippines, thinking if I went up the gangway the ship was bound to tip over and fall, just going on the sharp edge the ship seemed to be balanced on in the dark waters of the night.

While on the ship we would dock in countries and fan out places preaching and teaching and sharing and caring. I remember the ship pulling away to the cheers and smiling waves of homeless children living under the docks. In 1980 our ship came across a stranded boat of 93 refugees fleeing Vietnam, destined now to die. We stalled the ship and pulled them all aboard, letting their vessel drift away empty, but no lives lost.

Every couple of years as a family we would make a trip back to the US, to touch base with churches, friends and family. My parents were financially supported by people donating to the Christian mission they were working with (OM). So it was important to get home and report on life and outreach work every couple years. My parents did send out a monthly letter to interested people, but there were no phone calls or emails or any other form of 'real time' update. In fact, when I was 18 years old and my now-wife and I went on a one-year mission commitment to Spain (1992-93), we did not have email or phone call opportunities even at that point. I spoke on the phone only one time to my parents that whole year, other than that it was hand-written letters. So go back to the 60s and 70s and communications were almost non-existent, so these trips back to the US were critical in letting people know you were still alive and kicking out there...

When back visiting the US, I remember so enjoying the smell and look of 'cookie monster'® on a frosted cookie in the dazzling Target®. Life was trademarked and registered. Amazing. Roads were smooth and teeth existed (whatever about white or straight). Shoes were everywhere and tragedy was defined and responded to urgently if I was lacking a second donut. Just blissful! We would visit people's homes from supporting churches, including millionaires with man-made waterfall pools in their back yard, and cinemas in their basements. Then pack up and back out to the warm, blue skies of Brazil, for example, with homeless kids swarming around having the deepest and darkest conversations about God before skipping back out to the dark streets of the unknown. I would watch them go. And it is now I see how ponderous those images and souls pressed in on mine. And I thank God for it. Because whether one sees it or not, it is truth and happening, and there are questions we need to ask and answer about God, life, wealth, poverty and the gospel, that find footing in this truth. Let me share with you some of what God has been teaching me in this area.

There will come a day when not only creation is perfect, but your capacity to enjoy it is perfect. It says in Ecclesiastes that blessed is the man who is able to enjoy the fruit of his labor (Ecclesiastes 3:13). To have or be in perfection, can be hell itself, if not capacitated to enjoy perfection. Remember, heaven and hell co-exist. At least in our minds they do, whatever about in their real times, spheres and dimensions in our future, God's 'time'. But drawing a parallel from our times here and now, we can and do find moments – even just moments – when we can enjoy life, light and sensation, and even forgetfulness; and at those same moments, still lodged somewhere in our psyche, is the belief that somewhere at that same moment heinous crimes are being perpetuated against mankind. How can we ever enjoy anything, therefore, when we know in our knower that hell is assailing another at that same moment? God in his mercy is giving us the capacity – to you and your evil neighbor – to enjoy a 'measure' of joy that is real (Matthew 5:45). Heaven is not only what is created around you, but what is in you. The outward and the inward have to line up spiritually. This is why many a rich man surrounded by earthly perfection, uses all his wealth, health and beautified resources to overdose in despair. Heaven is from God, is an eternal and not primarily a circumstantial thing. Eden lined up both the spiritual and the physical, and heaven will do that again. In heaven, light will exist, but not separate to Him like the sun. God will be the light – the creator and created, as it were, one and the same. (Revelation 22:5)

You may have noticed that life is material, physical. It is important to note that when God made creation, creation itself was not God, but was one with God. So God would walk with mankind in and through His creation, but when God was not walking with them, they were not incomplete or spiritually empty. Creation mankind was in, and mankind itself, was 'from Him and through Him and to Him' (Romans 11:36; and see Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3; John 1:3).

Since the Fall (Genesis 3), the presence of God in creation was separated in a way that was not meant to be. Creation became something separate to God, and in a new relationship to God. This is the only possible way that now creation – created things - can become idols and objects of worship – trees, sun and sky. Creation is now seen as separate to God because although it derives from Him, is sustained by Him, God’s spirit now stands beside but not laced through a pure creation. God loves it, but is not in it. Not like He once was and will be again. To admire, or ‘worship’ creation when in the garden of Eden would have been completely synonymous with worshipping God, because the worshipper and the worshipped would have all been in the same, pure spirit of God’s expression and creation. But now that darkness is laced through the core of the created, to admire (past a point) and worship creation, is to by-pass the creator and bow down to equal measures of the ‘image of God’ in all things (Genesis 1:27), and the death and decay that has made its rightful stamp on things because of our rebellion. We cannot worship the created because we are worshipping a darkness and measure of death that is not God, is an idol, another God, another spirit, a serpent. My descriptions here are necessarily pivoting and spinning on poetic license – how else can one speak to such things? I hope you afford me the same latitude God affords the Psalmist, and you afford a good movie. Roll with me here, and let’s try to access and touch truer truth than the literal can ever render (John 5:39-40).

Christians struggle with the issue of wealth and poverty. It is a live nerve, and we all would love to coat it; it is a kill-joy and we would all love to inoculate it, or eradicate its lurking, 'guilting' presence and potential to ambush. This issue is not just a struggle for Christians, it is part of the spiritual battle that wars on every man, woman and child on this dark sphere and era of the eternal. Jesus spoke so much about money, and not in order to equip us for 'financial peace' but spiritual peace. Same reason Jesus spoke about all things 'real' and tangible to us here. Not money, but the 'love of money', is a root of many kinds of evil (I Timothy 6:10) – because of what it means to your heart, not what it is, or how much it is, in your hand or bank account. The ash heap of a single dollar is very similar to that of a million dollars, and when the wind blows even those ash heaps dissipate and are no more. What is money? It is the very essence of all that is the 'temporal', is for here and will be left here. So like all things temporal, we need to '*subject them to be obedient to Christ*' (II Corinthians 10:3-5) – thoughts as well as cash.



Can a Christian drive a BMW? Do you remember that inane, and immature question circulating the first world, and distracting us from the gospel like so many other bumper stickers today? (Matthew 22:29). Yes, a Christian can, if Christ says so. If you are looking for an equation to justify or condemn said Christian, you are on that legalistic and prideful spectrum that has no superior end. It floats weightless in the dead expanses of vanity.

Melchizedek was rich beyond measure, but Abraham, led by God Himself, tithed to this man (Hebrews 7:1-2; Genesis 14:18-20). Jesus wanted the rich, young ruler to give away all his money, because it came between him and following Christ (or the first commandment of having no other God, Mark 10:17-22). This is seen because despite Jesus' love for him (vs 21), and the man's desire for eternal life (vs 17), he would not and could not give up his money for God. He went away sad and we hear no more about him. Joseph of Arimathea was a bold disciple and a rich man (Matthew 27:57). The centurion who 'wowed' Jesus with his faith was a rich man and Jesus added health to his wealth after commending him publicly (Luke 7:1-10). If you are obsessed about the ills and favors of money, in your life or that of another, you are deafened to the real voice of God and deceived by your own pride. You can be the richest and godliest man on earth, and the poorest and most money-hungry man on earth.

What's your treasure? What, honestly, is your reward? When you lie down at night, what is your prize for life lived, and even suffered? Can you, with the Psalmist, say, '*... earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail (and my health insurance, and 401k), but God is the strength of my heart (my true health and future security), and my portion forever*' (Psalm 73:25-26)? With the prophet can you say, '*... though the crops fail... yet I will be happy in God my savior...*' (Habakkuk 3:17-18)? Is the Kingdom of God to you as Jesus' described its value, a treasure in a field that is worth all we own? (Matthew 13:44) If the relationship of God to man is defined in such intense, all-consuming measure, by Jesus' own life and words, and the examples of our forefathers (Exodus 33:18), to not be in this place in our souls and our lives is to be missing out. If you are not there, are you 'seeking'? (Psalm 27:4; Hosea 10:12)

My struggle regarding resources is more on the end of having, not wanting. This is not more virtuous than any other struggle on this issue, just a different starting point to challenge and grow me in my walk with God. One reason for my particular struggle of having resources, that I have discovered deep down in myself, is to do with *how I would 'secure' them for myself if/when I have them*. Now this is after a long stretch of experiences, perceptions, and different financial situations (living on people's donations as a child, living as an earner/employee as an adult). This insight to my self and my own struggle is a subtle 'truth' and I'm going to expound on it here.

If one does not have resources, and is given them to live on (such as my type of childhood), one adapts to this modus operandi. You might experience certain difficulties from this lot in life – uncertainties, lack of predictability and limited material options – but you also do not carry the responsibility, really, to manage money nor give it away. Giving is a tough, spiritual discipline in itself, and no one is exempt from God's call to have a generous spirit and disposition. However, if, primarily, you are a 'beneficiary' financially, due to life's circumstances, one of God's blessings in that place, is that there is a lot less pressure on you in the spiritual challenges of giving money away. There may be much else that you are called to give, but money you do not have to give. What you do not have, as it were, you are not going to give account for. This is simplistic, for purposes of explanation and contrast.

Another one of God's blessings to the 'poor', as a spiritual gift to them for their suffering want, is that they are preferred, or specially equipped for more 'faith': '*... Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith...?*' (James 2:5) Jesus is serious about this principle of faith, and in order to protect its worth and work in our lives, God will not always be moving our lives towards more resources or material wealth. Your faith is more important to God than your material wellbeing. He really wants us to be free from the love of money (Hebrews 13:5). He speaks to a church in persecution and says, '*I know your poverty... yet you are rich!*' (Revelation 2:9) Jesus had the power to heal everyone, but did not. He had the power to multiply food all the time, but he did not (and see why: John 6:26). He is interested in His power being both a blessing – like the sun and rain on everyone (Matthew 5:45) – and a resource and demonstration to mold the truest of treasure in our soul, to endure for ever: to prize His presence, rich or poor, crucifixion or resurrection, over anything here and now, including relationships and wealth. Is this where you are at? (Philippians 3:10; Matthew 10:37-39)

Now, having said that Jesus could have done anything He wanted but did not (as I just said above) is not entirely true. It is deeper than that. There is, in fact, a principle here (regarding Jesus having resources and yet living in peace among the poor), that is *key* to our own peace in having and stewarding resources. So if you are like me, maybe more comfortable with the parameters of not having, then this principle is really important to understand, in order to break into that space and truth of freedom of 'having', yet being free and at peace in a broken and disparate world. This is a 2-pronged principle. (John 4:24; II Corinthians 3:17)

Firstly – or first prong – is that Jesus practiced what He preached. The true treasure of God is His presence, even in tribulation, demonstrated by His own preference to endure crucifixion and be in step with the Spirit – or in the will of God – rather than be spared but out of step with the Spirit or not fully in line with the will of God (John 5:19; Galatians 5:25). Jesus said, *I have food that you know nothing about...* (John 4:32,34), and also demonstrated in His mind-bending, brink-of-death fasting, that if it was bread and the voice of the Devil, He would prefer death and the *'word of God'* (Matthew 4:1-11). Such powerful liberation from the essence of this life's core structure and value system. Food was not the issue. For this reason Jesus 'ate and drank' and blessed with food (Matthew 11:19; Mark 6:30-44). This issue was, and always will be, until the 'renewal of all things' (Revelation 21:5), an issue of the heart. Jesus is after the heart and the spirit (John 6:63), and He will not give us a buy-out option.

We all seek safety from this tough walk with Jesus. We want to buy out or even buy in with suffering, and He will not allow us this stagnant relationship with God. He told Nicodemus, *'the wind blows where it wants... so it is with everyone born of the spirit.'* (John 3:8) He told the young man, *'Foxes have holes, birds or the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.'* (Luke 9:58). Jesus will not guarantee you a place to stay, or a nomadic life, money or adventure. He requires that *'daily'* we take up our cross and desire to be with Him, wherever He is, left, right or center. He is our safe place, and His name is our fortress (Proverbs 18:10). Jesus is *'the bread of life'* (John 6:35), *'living water'* (John 7:37-38), and is, in fact, not only the treasure in life, but Life itself (John 14:6; 17:3). It is a mysterious and deep spiritual reality and torrent, but it is the truth. Jesus said this news was 'good' for the poor (Luke 4:18; Isaiah 61:1). What do you believe people really, really need? Do you know the gospel and treasure it such that you sell – not buy – to protect it? (Matthew 13:44)

Second prong is this. Jesus had a 'guide', and offers to guide us. My child once asked me, 'If you were asked by a poor person today to give him your car, would you?' (you might here be thinking on Matthew 5:39-41). I said, 'Well, no. Because I don't believe the Spirit of the Lord would be calling me to do that.' There are scriptures one might use against me in this, but if it is not the word of the Spirit, it is simply a misuse of scripture. This is very important to see, believe and take hold of. The devil himself quoted scripture to Jesus – scripture that is about Jesus (Psalm 91) – with the intent to get him to commit suicide and/or worship Satan himself (Matthew 4:1-11). The written Word is for us to truly know the Living Word. Never let scripture become something used against truth - and it will be on all sides. You need to know God's Spirit well, not just chapter and verse. Know both scripture, and the *'power of God'*, Jesus tells us, in order to not be *'in error'* (Matthew 22:29; John 5:39-40). So Jesus stayed in step with the spirit, saying He did nothing outside of the will of the Father, outside of what He *'saw the Father doing.'* This is why one day Christ might heal one person, but not others. (John 5:1-15)

This mysterious union of Christ with the Father is real, and our union with Christ is real. If you try to do 'life in the Spirit' by simply knowing scripture and other nuggets of wisdom, you will forever be sitting on the runway. Ready for take-off, maybe, but not in the air and flying. No verse can tell you in itself if it is 'time' for that verse to be applied to a situation (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Proverbs 25:11). Keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25). How will you know the voice of your guide, so as to know when it is time to give and time to withhold? Jesus said His sheep know His voice (John 10:27). You will know His voice better the more you walk with Him. How? Obedience to Him (John 14:15), love of God and of Christ (Matthew 22:36-40; Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Love of and diligence in His word (Psalm 119:111), tenacious hold of Him (I Timothy 6:12), fellowshiping with the saints (Hebrews 10:25), love of others (Matthew 22:39; Leviticus 19:18), sharing your faith (Philemon 1:6), etc. You will know His voice better, the better you know Him.

The key, the question, the answer, pivots on this: Where is God in your moments, your path, your story, your vision, right now? Where is God in their story right now? Our passion and prize is God. He is the plot and the sub-plot. If in Him and through Him you are in a season of blessing – like Job at the end of his trials – than honor Him by receiving and sanctifying with thanksgiving all that He has given you (I Timothy 4:5). Praise God. Enjoy. Why? Because this is what God – not you – is doing in your life. If He calls it clean, who are you to call it unclean? (Acts 10:15) Have the faith and the humility to enjoy (I Timothy 6:17). Be free.

If you are in the first chapters of Job in your own life, then see this and own this. Look to God, to see God, and to yearn for His salvation and work in your life. Look to God for His prospering and healing. Do not look to mankind, as what is of man, man can affect and influence, but what is not of man, he will be powerless to influence. And if you burden mankind as if he could change your circumstances, you might take him down with you (Jonah 1:12). See what is of man, and what is of God, and be pleased – trial or prosperity – to want what is from Him more than what is from man.

This is how we walk amongst the rich when we are poor, and celebrate with them, rejoicing with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15). This love and passion for God is also how we walk among the poor when we are rich, and weep with them, if, indeed, there is a gospel of God at work even in their grief and midst. The gospel is the ‘good news to the poor’ (Luke 4:18; Isaiah 61:1-2), and this does not always include your soup kitchen addendum. My experience in working with the hurting and ministering Jesus in their pain, is that it is not them that struggle with the notion of God being good and relevant in their distress. It is, rather, we the rich who struggle with this concept. The poor seem to see, touch and taste the ‘good news’ that is the true gospel, whether we bear provision or not with this gift and ministering of faith. Do you truly know and love the gospel and Christ, such that you can give the gospel and nothing else with confidence to the poor? The reason we struggle to have confidence that the gospel and presence of Jesus is ‘good news’ and sufficient for the poor, is because the gospel and presence of Jesus is not good news and sufficient for us.

We need to discern what is faith and action (James 2:14-26) and what is fear and dismissive humanitarianism. Apart from Christ we can do nothing (Jn 15:5) – not even good works. Have the humility to seek and serve Jesus when with the poor, and to seek and serve Jesus when with the rich. Wealth is nothing, God is everything. Your poverty is nothing, for you are rich! (Rev 2:9).

God our treasure, our eyes' most prized object. The cross our glory, His presence our passion. If we do as Jesus said, with all our strength and mind to love God daily (Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 8:34-38), this will calibrate our relationship to money, and put it on a separate track to our real treasure. Man cannot serve both God and money. If you serve God, money will not even be on the spectrum or sphere of that value and system and reward. If you serve money, God cannot be on that value system or reward. Money cannot and should not feature in the deeper places of Christ in you (Colossians 1:27; Matthew 6:24).

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### **Note from the Author**

As set out in the introduction and through the body of this work, this is a theme that has worked, and is working me, hard! I think God wants us to know freedom in and through Jesus Christ, now and forevermore. And the route to this freedom – to His kingdom come, His will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9-13) – is the same every time: it is found in living by faith and not by sight (II Corinthians 5:7), in subjecting the ‘real’ to the ‘spiritual’ (II Corinthians 10:3-5), in standing on air, as it were, or Spirit, rather than on rationale (Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:3; 12:24). It is a narrow path, challenging, spiritual, exhausting, but much like the road of the cross and its ultimate prize. (Matthew 7:14; Mark 8:34-38; John 6:63; 4:24; II Corinthians 3:17)