

LIVERPOOL PARISH CHURCH
OUR LADY & ST NICHOLAS

Faith Matters

Session 2: Wealth

River in
the City



I. The problem.

Throughout the ages, and perhaps more in the present age than before, Christianity is perceived as having a 'bias' towards the poor. Biblical texts such as the prophet Amos or the Gospel of Luke are explicitly critical of people with wealth.

The Christian attitude towards wealth sometimes seems to be summed up in this passage:

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

I Timothy 6.10

But this passage is also balanced by an acceptance of the ownership of wealth:

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

I Timothy 6.17-19

We can therefore make conflicting statements about the acquisition of wealth:

- a) It is prudent for ourselves
- b) It is at the expense of others
- c) It is necessary for helping others
- d) It makes a new idol for ourselves

2. Bible Study

Ruth 1.22-2.7, 11-12, 15-18

²²So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

***2**¹Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. ²And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favour.' She said to her, 'Go, my daughter.'³So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. ⁴Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, 'The LORD be with you.' They answered, 'The LORD bless you.'⁵Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, 'To whom does this young woman belong?' ⁶The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, 'She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. ⁷She said, "Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers." So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment.'*

¹¹But Boaz answered her, 'All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. ¹²May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!'

¹⁵When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, 'Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. ¹⁶You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.'¹⁷So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. ¹⁸She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied.

Some points which we can draw out from this passage.

- Although Ruth has nothing, she wishes to work rather than receive a handout from Boaz because he is her kinsman (not all of this is evident in the printed excerpt). She views work as a good thing.
- Boaz is mindful of her pride, which is why he lets her continue to glean crops behind his workers rather than give her charity (although in fact he does do this at a later point). At first he helps her very subtly, saying to his workers: “You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.”
- Ruth’s main motivation goes beyond feeding herself, because she wishes to support others (in this case, Naomi).

Both Ruth and Boaz would seem to be in a ‘right relationship’ with wealth. This passage helps us to get to the root of human motivation and feeling.

3. **Wealth - what is my motivation?**

Identifying and owning our motivation is at the heart of the possession of wealth for a Christian. Notably, St Paul learned a trade as a tent-maker so that he wouldn't be a financial burden on others, and yet he engineered a "collection for the saints" in Jerusalem (I Corinthians 16.1). Charitable giving is applauded in the Christian tradition, but is this merely a condition to justify the ownership of wealth.

Rowan Williams addresses this problem in the following way.

The 'for-myself' and the 'for-another' of awareness and speech are thus not separable. Even when I try to formulate or picture my 'real' self, what I am in effect doing is imagining an ideal other, an ideal interlocutor and observer, a listener to whom I am making perfect sense. The danger, of course, is that this imagined other, the perfect listener, blocks out the actual, less perfect, less sympathetic hearers with whom I am actually and temporally doing business, so that my self-perception remains firmly under my own control.

On Christian Theology, p241

Understanding ourselves cannot therefore be done in silent meditation, because we justify ourselves by constructing our own narrative. Understanding must come through relationship and dialogue.

- How do others perceive your relationship with wealth?
- If you are negotiating your own salary in the workplace, is your motivation an increase in wealth, or financial recognition of your worth, or a bit of both?

Williams continues by saying

I shall discover what is good for me, I shall discover how to construe and articulate my interest, just as I construe everything else about my self-perception—in the processes of encounter and exchange, not in the excavation of a buried inner agenda.

4. Discussion points

How do you feel about the following:

- *Of Christian Men's Goods, which are not common.* The Riches and Goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast. Notwithstanding, every man ought, of such things as he possesseth, liberally to give alms to the poor, according to his ability. (The 39 Articles of Religion, 1571)
- “No one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions; he had money as well.” (Margaret Thatcher in an interview for LWT's *Weekend World*, 6th January 1980)
- Money has a different meaning in the workplace, where it is just a commodity. It is only at home that we have the power to use wealth rightly or wrongly.

Next week we shall look at ethics and morality in the workplace

