

The Economy of The Kingdom Luke 12:15-34 (Acts 4:32-34)

INTRODUCTION

As Scott has said, today, we come to the next in our sermon series on the politics of the kingdom – inspired by this book “Jesus for President” by Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw. We have already discovered that, as Christians, we are citizens both of this earthly world and of the Kingdom of God. We live in the world but are not of the world. Our citizenship of God’s Kingdom will impact hugely on how we live as citizens in the secular world.

Politics is all about how society operates. We have seen that Jesus, whilst on earth, was very political indeed (that’s political with a small “p”) and so calls us also to be political, to be changers of society, as we are ambassadors of His Kingdom. We are called to be political but not partisan or party political.

God does call some Christians to get involved in politics with a big “P” and it is great when that call is answered.

Currently some 34 MPs are registered as members of Christians in Parliament. We should pray for these brothers and sisters, as Politics with a big “P” is a difficult world in which to be a Christian. But this series is not aimed at people with such a calling, it is aimed at all of us who want to follow Jesus in our everyday lives.

Two weeks ago, Malcolm showed us that the Kingdom of God is not interested in empire building and wielding power through wealth and violence, but is interested in liberation and justice for all. Last week Scott highlighted that the cross, with Jesus driven there by His love for us, was a hugely political act. And today we turn our attention to questions of money and wealth as we look at the economy of God’s Kingdom.

For most secular governments, the first and most urgent thing they have to worry about, unless their country is at war, is money. How is the economy doing? How do we generate wealth? And, how do we pay for everything we want to do? Government’s usually succeed or fail based on economic issues, because that is what matters most to their citizens. As Democratic strategist James Carville memorably said during Bill Clinton’s 92 US presidential campaign, “It’s the economy, stupid” – to remind Bill and everyone in the campaign that people would vote based on how they felt about the economy.

So, today, we will try to answer – “What does God’s economy look like”? Now, I am not looking to teach economics (I am certainly not qualified), nor to suggest we can change the whole world order of capitalism. But, as Christians, we are called by Jesus to live by a different model – based on sufficiency and solidarity and not scarcity and competition.

GOD’S ECONOMY

The world is materialistic and wants to accumulate stuff; it wants to get wealthier. Under capitalism, our measure of national wealth is GDP (Gross Domestic Product, the value of all the services and goods we produce as a country). More GDP is better. More GDP per person is even better. Our current Government and particularly our Chancellor has made growth in GDP the mantra by which she will succeed or fail.

If, however, we stand back and look at what this push for growth has achieved over the last 80 years, my take is that whilst many are better off, many, many in the world are not. The gap between rich and poor has grown hugely. The lives of many children and others have been ruined in sweatshops and illegal mines and the environment of our planet has suffered irreparable harm

in our quest for more and more. It will not surprise you to know that God's economy does not work that way – indeed it is based on a completely different set of truths about the world.

What I want to do today is to unpack what the Bible says are the economics of the Kingdom of God. In doing so, we will find principles linked to the three key issues:

Ownership, generosity and wealth. We will then look at the implications of these on how we live our lives as citizens of God's kingdom – being in the world but not of the world. So, please, would you pick up your church Bibles and turn with me to our reading from Luke 12 – you'll find that on page 625. In passing it is worth noting that, in the four Gospels, Jesus speaks more about money than He does about prayer. This subject mattered greatly to Him as He realised that our attitude to money and possessions says a huge amount about our attitude to God. So, first, ownership.

Who actually owns the possessions we have? In giving us the parable of the Rich Fool and then teaching on money and possessions, Jesus does not directly answer the question as to who owns stuff because His original hearers would be well aware of the Old Testament position that everything belongs to God. We will look at what Jesus says in a moment but first that Old Testament background. Genesis tells us that God created everything.

King David in Psalm 24 says that [“The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him.”](#)

And 1 Chronicles 29 records what David said to God when he collected the gifts from the people to build the temple, he said:

[“But who am I, and who are my people, that we could give anything to you? Everything we have has come from you, and we give you only what you first gave us!”](#)

Everything we have, even our lives, are a gift from God – we do not own anything.

We can see this assumption in Jesus' teaching. In verse 16 – the fine crops are produced by the farm, not by the farmer. In verse 20, the man's life is a gift from God – the language Jesus attributes to God in ending the fool's life, is actually that of a loan being called in. In verses 24 and 27, Jesus equates God's provision for birds and flowers with His provision for His people – an idea that is beautifully summarised in verse 31, [“Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and he will give you everything you need.”](#) It is all God's to give.

As the Apostle Paul said, [“We brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it.”](#) Truly understanding that we do not own anything but are just the temporary custodians of that which God has given us, is life changing and will free us from the headlong drive to own more.

Let's now turn our attention to the principle of generosity.

In the capitalist world in which we live, individual success is measured by how much we have. We are encouraged to want more and have more as that is what drives economic growth. The economy of God's kingdom works totally in the opposite direction – it is about what we give away. Jesus covers this in the introduction to the parable in verse 15 – [“Life is not measured by how much you own.”](#), and in a single sentence in verse 33: [“Sell your possessions and give to those in need.”](#)

My friends, I cannot see many ways of sugar-coating this for us. Our wealth and possessions are given to us, yes so that we may have what we need, but also so that we can give to others what they need – our role is to close the gap between rich and poor. It is not a direction necessarily to sell and give away everything (although that was Jesus' instruction to one particular rich young man in Luke chapter 18), but the direction of travel is clear. Generosity is the name of the game

– remember, we don't own what we have anyhow, it is God's – so it is not our place to hold onto it when He tells us to give it away.

As an aside; I think this generosity should extend to those in the supply chains of the goods we buy. Many of our cheap goods are only cheap because those involved in their production are not paid a fair wage. We should be generous to them too.

Jesus' teaching on ownership and generosity leads us neatly to the third of our principles, wealth.

Wealth is our treasure, the money and possessions that we have stored up, and is an area of focussed concern for Jesus. The final verse in our passage, verse 34, sums it up perfectly, "Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be." Jesus knows (and, if we are honest, we also know) that there is an inextricable link between our treasure and our heart's desire, between our treasure and the focus of our attention, between our treasure and the worries of our mind and between our treasure and the worship of our hearts. Are we putting our trust in the things of this world or are we looking to store up treasure with God? As Jesus points out in verse 33:

"The purses of heaven never get old or develop holes. Your treasure will be safe; no thief can steal it and no moth can destroy it."

Let's look again at the parable of the rich farmer in verses 15-21. You might think the key verse in the parable is God's judgement in verse v20. But, if you look at the careful structure of the way Jesus tells the story, it becomes apparent that the key verse is actually verse 18 – the bad decision the farmer makes. Let's just look at that together:

"Then he said, 'I know! I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll have room enough to store all my wheat and other goods.'"

Just look how self-centred this decision is;

I know! I'll tear down **my** barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll have room enough to store all **my** wheat and other goods.

There is no acknowledgement of God as the owner or provider. The farmer is worried about preserving his goods. It is all about what he has. Where is the understanding that he does not own the wheat because it is a gift from God? Where is the generosity of giving the wheat to the hungry and poor? It is very clear that the desire of his heart and the focus of his mind sit with the bigger barns he plans to build. I suspect God's judgement may have been different if he had simply opened the doors of his existing barns and invited all his neighbours to come and take what they needed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR JESUS' FOLLOWERS

I suspect, and indeed I hope, that you, like me, are feeling rather uncomfortable at the moment as Jesus shines this light on us. Being rich, of course, is relative, but I note that someone earning the median salary in the UK of just under £40k is well within the top 10% of earners in the world. Let's be clear, riches of themselves are not sinful – they are a gift from God after all – it's what we do with them that matters.

But, before we think about what all this means for us, I want to read a few verses from Acts chapter 4 which describe how the early church behaved – after all, they included the people who had directly heard Jesus talk about these matters.

This is at the top of page 657 in your Bibles if you want to follow it – Acts 4 and verses 32 to 34.

“All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had. The apostles testified powerfully to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God’s great blessing was upon them all. There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them.”

It would certainly seem that these early Christians understood that they did not own anything, that generosity was essential and that storing up wealth on earth was not important.

So, when it comes to us, let me be clear; I don’t think it is my job to tell any of you what you should do with your money and possessions. And I accept that living in the modern world is potentially much more complex than living in first century Judea. But I don’t believe the principles of Kingdom economics have changed. All I can do, as I hope I have done this morning, is to lay out what I believe Jesus teaches, and then encourage you to consider what God would have you do. And, please be assured, I do not stand here as someone who thinks they have got this all sorted in their own life!

Maybe, as a role model, I can recommend John Wesley.

John Wesley was an 18th century Christian teacher and preacher. His famous dictum on finances was this, “Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can”. What did he mean? First, generate as much income as you can but always acting ethically with respect to others. (And, today, I think we would add ‘and always being respectful to God’s creation’). “Save all you can”, is not about banks and savings accounts, but about not spending money wastefully – only buy what you need and find satisfaction in God rather than possessions. And, having done those two things, then give away all your surplus money.

When John Wesley started out as a preacher his income was around £30 a year (about £6000 in today’s money). He worked out that he needed £28 a year to live simply, so he gave £2 away. As his income increased, he kept his expenses at £28 a year (there was virtually no inflation then). At the height of his popularity his income was some £1400 a year (around £0.25m in today’s money) but he still lived on £28 and gave the rest away.

As I said, I am not going to try to be prescriptive from the front here, we are all in different positions, but I do ask you to commit to do one thing, either later today or in the coming week. Please, consider before God how the economics of the Kingdom should work out in your life.

I’m going to leave you with what the Apostle Paul had to say on all this to a young leader called Timothy – it comes from the end of Chapter 6 of his first letter.

“Teach those who are rich in this world not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which is so unreliable. Their trust should be in God, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment. Tell them to use their money to do good. They should be rich in good works and generous to those in need, always being ready to share with others. By doing this they will be storing up their treasure as a good foundation for the future so that they may experience true life.”