Measuring Our Worth

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You may have seen the commercial on television during primetime or while surfing the 'net. It depicts a man in a baseball cap and jacket running around the front entrance of a skyscraper in New York. He stretches police tape across the grounds, as if securing a crime scene. Guards from inside the building look nervously at the camera crew following this man around, trying to politely remove the man from the premises. The man holds up a bullhorn to his mouth and announces he is "here to make a citizen's arrest of the directors of American International Group, Inc. (AIG)."

At home, some viewers watch the commercial and chuckle. Others get the remote and turn the channel with disdain. Like it or not, audiences at home or in front of the screen are getting the word. Another film is coming from the controversial documentary director Michael Moore, whose films are geared to critique the political and social issues of the day. His new film is entitled "Capitalism: A Love Story." Hailed by some, scorned by others, the film represents Michael Moore's perspective on the ways that the U.S. and global economy have been handled, the federal bailout efforts, and the political finger pointing that goes along with it.

Stepping aside from the headlines and the cinema box office, do you know where the word "economy" comes from? The word "economy" comes from the Greek: *oikos* (house) and *nomos* (rule). Quite literally, an economy deals with how a household is structured or organized. And just as we struggle with twenty-first century ideological differences regarding the structure and stability of an economy, rest assured, talking about the economy was just as volatile and ideological in Jesus' day. The first century economy of Palestine differs remarkably from our present-day U.S. context. Nonetheless, talk about money long enough, and there will be strong disagreements arising. Talk about money and religion, and well....

The person who approaches Jesus is referred to as "the rich young ruler" in popular recollections of the gospel narratives. The difficulty, however, is when we gather together the three similar stories told by Matthew, Mark, and Luke and compare them. We will look at the differences and similarities during Adult Forum after services today, but for now, note a key difference of Mark's gospel. Mark notes little about the man, saying only that he has many possessions. Instead of thinking of this fellow as a rich young ruler, we will call him "the man of means."

The man asks Jesus a question that sounds primarily theological ("What must I do to inherit eternal life?"); however, the question is aimed at sniffing out Jesus' thoughts on the economy. Just as the Pharisees and the Sadducees have come forward, asking questions to test Jesus' teachings on religious orthodoxy, just as the Herodians will step forward to help entrap Jesus in a question of politics, the man of means appears on the scene as a representative of another sector of society unnerved by any upstart religious teachers, the financial elite of the day.

The gospels are told from the perspective of a limited good society. Very few people owned land. Very few people controlled the commerce of the day. And in

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turn, many people lived under the rule (and whim) of the very few, certain families inheriting great ancestral power and privilege, members of the ruling establishment, especially those in collaboration with the Roman Empire's resident government. The man of means who presents himself to Jesus wears the robes of the upper echelon, a far cry from most of the other characters who interact with Jesus. Most everyone, Jesus and the twelve included, are part of the peasantry. No "middle class" exists in the New Testament. A select few enjoy the high life. Everyone else scrapes by at the subsistence level, working day and night and having very little to show for it. Some New Testament scholars would label the man of means kneeling before Jesus as part of the "elite," one who keeps a style of life largely denied to anyone who is not already part of the power and financial base. When one lives in a limited good society, a person with significant finance is a person not to be trusted. There is a deep suspicion of the elite, as they have not evidenced anything less than self interest and self preservation at the expense of the multitudes.

The economic background is helpful, as we hear the exchange between Jesus and this man with a bit more barb to it. The edge to this gospel story is economic and theological: what is the measure of a person's worth? Who has the last word on economics? Will the "house rules" be determined by the elite, the "powers that be" that work with Rome and the Temple, aka "the established powers that be," or the Lord God whose kingdom Jesus is proclaiming?

Initially, the man of means would claim "God" is the determiner of all things. After all, he claims, the man of means is an observant man. The commandments Jesus cites are all agreeable to the man of means, yet he does not realize Jesus has cited only part of the Ten Commandments, those focusing on those commandments dealing with one's behavior toward others. Like many opponents before him, the man of means has stepped into the snare. As New Testament scholar Bill Herzog notes, the man of means is "moral, but selectively moral."[1] The man of means has been so vested in maintaining his own economic privilege that he has claimed to be observant of a religious faith steeped in traditions of protecting the poor from exploitation and decrying covetous behavior and been part of the effort to create a different economic reality that left most of the populace in systematic impoverishment.

There is a common myth that the New Testament has no use whatsoever for persons who are wealthy, and this story of "the rich young ruler" (as we tend to hodgepodge the three stories together) is cited as the final word. In truth, the New Testament depicts the earliest Christians as socio-economically diverse, including persons who are well to do. Nonetheless, the Christian teachings would side with those who are vulnerable and condemn those whose wealth has been attained by exploitative practice. Thus, the man of means who kneels piously before Jesus represents a class of people who have not lost a wink of sleep over their exploitation of others.

Bill Herzog cites Jesus' reframing of the commandment about covetous behavior. Jesus slips it in the midst of the commandments, a sly word in Greek (apostereō) we would render in English as "do not defraud." The man of means has visions of the good life continuing in the life to come. He is not bothered in the least that he has spent this life taking advantage of others. He wants the free pass he has enjoyed since being born into the right family or being at the right time at the right place with the sweetheart deal that sets him up for life. He claims faith, yet he does not know the economy (house rules) of God, the One whose law provisions for all persons as part of the most sacred covenants of God with the people Israel. This man's wealth is at the cost of covenant obedience. His faith extends only so far.

As for the disciples, their response to Jesus makes sense. We usually stop with the incredible image of the camel squeezing itself through the eye of the needle and chuckle a bit. The disciples wonder how anyone can get into heaven. Hear Jesus' response again: "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

The economy, house rules, that matter most to Jesus are the ones ensuring the covenant is kept: no one is left out in the cold while others kick back and reap the benefits of kicking others. The little people of the rural villages are not the lower rung functionaries of the elite's monopoly or Rome's all consuming empire. Indeed, the economics of Jesus are astonishingly defiant of the way things usually work out with humanity. We can craft our economic theories down the generations, yet we still have the all too human tendency to create chasms between the "haves" and the "have nots." The early Christians practiced a way of life that we still struggle to be at peace with and follow, for we are too much a product of the economics we devise, craft, and inhabit.

The house rules set up by the gospel look out for those who are told to stand at the back of the line. In fact, Jesus turns the order of things around, just as the covenant and the Ten Commandments described before. Persons who are of means have their place in the kingdom of God, yet there are no "gold card level memberships" to be found in Jesus' vision. Persons of all means, great and small, are welcomed into the kingdom, or as I like to say it, there are no second class citizens in the Kingdom of God. The system that keeps elite elitist and the peasant majority invisible shall not stand. The early Church became a subversive alternative, providing a place where all folks from all levels of socio-economic status learned to live together as a counter-testimony to the ways of Empire. And indeed, those accustomed to being told they are the last will have the last word.

In the meantime, the followers of Jesus have to ask pressing questions of the economics of the day. What should be the house rules of a country that consumes more than its share of the world's resources? What should be the house rules of a nation that can write a blank check for warfare yet balks at the provision of healthcare? What should be the house rules for Christians who live in the "first world" while most others (even fellow Christians) live in the hell of the two-thirds world?

My friends, the Church has much to ponder in the first century or the twenty-first. What are our house rules? Where does the economy we live under diverge from the economy of the gospel? How do you get a camel to fit through the eye of the needle? You cannot.

Note

1 William R. Herzog, II. *Prophet and Teacher*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005), 138.