

# **“Ye Cannot Serve God and Mammon”: An Institutional Interpretation of the Gospels**

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*Abstract: Jesus’ teachings on wealth are arguably some of the most controversial in modern times. This paper will examine these teachings through the lens of institutional economics. First, it will explore the political and economic background of the Greco-Roman world, including the zero-sum mentality of its inhabitants. Second, it will demonstrate how Jesus’ words and deeds suggest that wealth was seen as synonymous with extractive imperial policies. Finally, it will briefly discuss the interpretative implications for modern-day Christians. Keywords: New Testament; Gospels; Institutions; Jesus; Wealth; Roman Empire; growth; poverty*

## **Introduction**

In 2017, Yale University released a fantastic translation of the New Testament penned by Eastern Orthodox theologian, philosopher, and wordsmith extraordinaire David Bentley Hart. In the introduction, Hart puts forth a jarring, if not wholly surprising, interpretation of the New Testament’s view on riches:

On the matter of wealth ... we take it as a given that, while the New Testament enjoins generosity of the poor, it otherwise allows the wealthy to enjoy the fruits of their industry or fair fortune with a clean conscience. Common sense instructs us that it is not wealth as such that the New Testament condemns, but only a spiritually unhealthy preoccupation with it—the idolatry of riches, wealth misused, wealth immorally gained; riches in and of themselves, we assume, are neither good nor bad. But, in fact, one thing in startlingly short supply in the New Testament is common sense, and the commonsensical view of the early church

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is invariably the wrong one. For instance, the New Testament, alarmingly enough, condemns personal wealth not merely as a moral danger, but as an *intrinsic* evil. Actually, the biblical texts are so unambiguous on this matter that it requires an almost heroic defiance of the obvious to fail to grasp their import. (Hart, 2017, pp. xxv-xxvi)

Hart reminds readers “of Christ’s astonishing remark about camels passing more easily through needles’ eyes than rich men through the Kingdom’s gate,” suggesting that a better translation of the disciples’ question in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 19:25; Mark 10:26; Luke 18:26) should read: “Then can any [of them, the rich] be saved?” Jesus had “been anointed by God’s Spirit to preach good tidings to the poor (Luke 4:18)” and pronounced a reversal of fortune in the eschaton (Luke 6:24-25); a reversal demonstrated in his parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commanded his disciples to “give freely to all who ask from them (Matthew 5:42)” and “explicitly forbids storing up earthly wealth—not merely storing it up too obsessively—and allows instead only the hoarding of the treasures of heaven (Matthew 6:19-20)” (Hart, 2017, p. xxviii). The young rich man is exhorted to sell all he has and give the proceeds to the poor (Matthew 19:21) as are *all* of Jesus’ followers (Luke 12:33). Those who are unable to do this, Christ says, “cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33, KJV).

Hart’s reading, despite protests from some, is actually correct: wealth *was* largely seen as inherently evil in New Testament times. However, the Gospels have a specific historical, economic, and socioreligious context that offers a compelling explanation for Jesus’ condemnations of wealth. When this context is ignored, the extrapolation to the modern economy becomes either warped or virtually useless. Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan (2010) have described Americans and other Westerners as some of the WEIRD people on the planet and in human history: Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. Reading the Gospels with these “cultural blinders” (Richards & O’Brien, 2012) is bound to distort the text’s original meaning. To even attempt to wrestle with the ethics of Christianity as represented in the New Testament, we have to remove these blinders and understand Christ’s words within the economic and political context of his time.

This article will examine Jesus’ teachings on wealth through the lens of institutional economics. First, it will explore the political and economic

background of the Greco-Roman world, including the zero-sum mentality of its inhabitants. Second, it will demonstrate how Jesus' words and deeds suggest that wealth was seen as *synonymous* with extractive imperial policies. Finally, it will briefly discuss the interpretative implications for modern-day Christians.

### **The Imperial Context of the Gospels**

The Gospels emerged under the rule of the Roman Empire, “an aristocratic empire” in which “a small elite of about 2 or 3 percent of the population ruled.” This small elite “ruled by hereditary control of the empire’s resources of land and labor,” consuming “some 65 percent of its production” and confiscating “an estimated 20 to 40 percent of the [peasantry’s] catch, crop, or herd” (Carter, 2006, pp. 3-4). Philip Harland (2002, p. 515) paints the following picture of the imperial economy:

the ancient economy of Palestine was an underdeveloped, *agrarian economy* based primarily on the production of food through subsistence-level farming by the peasantry. The peasantry, through taxation and rents, supported the continuance of a social-economic structure characterized by asymmetrical distribution of wealth in favor of the elite, a small fraction of the population. Peasants made up the vast majority of the population (over 90 percent ...) ... [W]ealth in the form of rents, taxes, and tithes flowed toward urban centers, especially Jerusalem (and the Temple), and was redistributed for ends other than meeting the needs of the peasantry, the main producers. The city’s relation to the countryside in such an economy, then, would be parasitic, according to this view.

Even within urban centers, the inequality was vast. Baylor University’s Bruce Longenecker (2009) estimates that about 3% of the Greco-Roman urban population were wealthy (e.g., imperial to municipal elites), 17% had a moderate surplus (e.g., some merchants, traders, artisans) and the bottom 80% were just above, just at, or below the subsistence level. While trade, industry, and growth certainly occurred within the empire (Temin, 2006; Rhee, 2012), “the economy was [nonetheless] embedded in and reflected the hierarchical and oligarchical sociopolitical structures of the empire ... [T]he elite used taxes, rents,

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loans, interest, tribute, and trade to redistribute production from peasant farmers, artisans, and unskilled workers to themselves. The ruling few gained considerable wealth, enjoyed lavish lifestyles, and consumed much of the production. The majority's hard manual work sustained the excessive lifestyles of the few" (Carter, 2006, pp. 100-101). What's more, according to Walter Scheidel (2012, p. 89), "ancient Rome created the largest slave society in history ... Slaves were engaged in an enormous variety of activities, as estate managers, field hands, shepherds, hunters, domestic servants, craftsmen, construction workers, retailers, miners, clerks, teachers, doctors, midwives, wetnurses, textile workers, potters, and entertainers." These slaves "were vulnerable to physical control, coercion, and abuse in settings as public as the auction block and as private as the bedroom ... Slaveholders had unrestricted sexual access to their slaves. This dimension of slave life was most likely to affect female slaves and young male slaves" (Glancy, 2006, p. 9).

This is why New Testament scholar Bruce Malina (2001a, pp. 98-100) declares: "There is every reason to believe that in the eastern Mediterranean in New Testament times, 'rich' or 'wealthy' as a rule meant 'avaricious, greedy people,' while 'poor' referred to persons scarcely able to maintain their honor or dignity." It was believed that the wealthy "became rich as the result of their own covetousness or greed or that of their ancestors ... Significantly, one was presumed to have become rich by depriving others; defrauding and eliminating others; prospering by having others become wretched, pitiable, ill, blind, and naked. Thus the rich rank with persons who wield power for their own aggrandizement."

Given this setup, a zero-sum mentality was almost inevitable. For "the overwhelming majority of persons living in the first-century world," Malina (2001b, p. 89) says, life "was an unquestioned, if uneasy, acceptance of dominance by some supreme and remote power, with little control over conditions that governed their lives." This gave rise to "the perception that all goods available to a person are, in fact, limited." The things that constituted wealth were "seen as inherent in nature, there to be divided and re-divided, if possible and necessary, but never to be increased. Since all good exists in limited amounts that cannot be increased or expanded, it follows that individuals, alone or with their families, can improve their social positions only at the expense of others." This attitude is reflected in the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21),

in which “[t]he stereotype of the rich man as insatiably greedy reflects the ancient notion of limited good: the pie is finite, is already fully distributed, and cannot be expanded. Therefore if anyone’s share got larger, someone else’s automatically got smaller. Everyone who gained more as a result of his own dealing was thereby considered a crook” (Malina & Rohrbaugh, 2003, pp. 277-278). This is why (Wright, 2000, p. 222; see also Hultgren, 2000):

God calls him “a fool” (*aphrōn*) – that is, one who “has said in his heart: ‘there is no God’” (cf. Ps14:1, where *aphrōn* is also used in the LXX).

This dichotomy of rich and poor “reflects the typical agrarian social bifurcation between unjust rich and struggling poor which had already characterized strands of Jewish apocalyptic literature [particularly 1 Enoch], in which terrible judgment awaited the land-grabbing and luxuriously living wealth-elite who had forfeited their place within God’s covenant by their wicked exploitation of the Jewish peasantry” (Capper, 2009, p. 66). While Jesus typically does not provide a rationale for his condemnation of wealth, the Epistle of Enoch does. This influential book “cites failure to be mindful of God during the time of prosperity, relying on material wealth for one’s security (*1 Enoch* 94:8), or the perpetration of injustice upon the weaker people in society as a means to enriching oneself (*1 Enoch* 94:7; 96:8) as causes for calamity” (deSilva, 2012, p. 125). Thus, even the religious context of the Second Temple period gave shape to Jesus’ words on wealth.<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to Hart’s claim that the New Testament goes against the grain of “common sense” on the subject of wealth, the evidence provided above demonstrates that the text is actually chock-full of *ancient* common sense on the matter. Malina (2001a, p. 104) goes so far to say the belief that “the wealthy are inherently evil” was one of the “‘self-evident truths’ of the New Testament period.” Converting the “wicked wealthy,” he states, “easily fit[s] into Hellenistic *common sense*” (Malina, 2001a, p. 110; italics mine).

### **Wealth as Extraction**

The Roman situation described above seems to fit nicely into the distinction between *extractive* and *inclusive* institutions outlined by Daron

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Acemoglu and James Robinson in their important book *Why Nations Fail*. “Inclusive economic institutions,” they write,

... are those that allow and encourage participation by the great mass of people in economic activities that make best use of their talents and skills and that enable individuals to make the choices they wish. To be inclusive, economic institutions must feature secure private property, an unbiased system of law, and a provision of public services that provides a level playing field in which people can exchange and contract; it also must permit the entry of new business and allow people to choose their careers ... Inclusive economic institutions foster economic activity, productivity growth, and economic prosperity (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012, pp. 74-75).<sup>2</sup>

This bundle of institutional qualities has a positive impact on the poor. Using a sample of 92 countries over a 40-year period, David Dollar and Aart Kraay (2002, p. 219) find that “a basic policy package of private property rights, fiscal discipline, macroeconomic stability, and openness to trade on average increases the income of the poor to the same extent that it increases the income of other households.”<sup>3</sup> These policies “create a good environment for poor households—and everyone else—to increase their production and income. On the other hand, we find little evidence that formal democratic institutions or a large degree of government spending on social services systematically affect incomes of the poor.” In the 1990s, India moved away from a socialist command economy and adopted market-oriented reforms. In a book-length treatment of the results of this economic liberalization and institutional improvement, Jagdish Bhagwati and Arvind Panagariya (2013) find that the growth since the reforms has reduced poverty nationwide in both rural and urban regions alike as well as among the most socially disadvantaged groups. The Canada-based Fraser Institute publishes its oft-cited *Economic Freedom of the World* report annually. The report publishes rankings of economic freedom based on five major areas: (1) size of the central government, (2) legal system and the security of property rights, (3) stability of the currency, (4) freedom to trade internationally,<sup>4</sup> and (5) regulation of labor, credit, and business. Based on Acemoglu and Robinson’s description, a country’s economic freedom level could easily serve as proxy for the inclusiveness of its economic

institutions. According to the most recent report (which looks at data from 2017), countries with more economic freedom have substantially higher per capita incomes and economic growth. However, one of the most important findings is the level of income earned by the poorest 10% of the population between various countries. The poorest 10% in countries in the “most free” quartile earn nearly *seven times* that of the poorest 10% in the “least free” countries as well as close to twice the amount of the *average* income in these same countries. Furthermore, economic freedom is associated with higher degrees of civil liberty and political rights as well as greater gender equality (Gwartney et al., 2019). A survey of the literature by Joshua Hall and Robert Lawson (2014) shows that nearly 70% of studies that cite the EFW Index as an independent variable find economic freedom corresponding to “good” outcomes like faster growth, better living standards, more happiness, greater gender equality, and the reduced risk of civil conflict. Less than 4% found “bad” outcomes like increased income inequality.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, extractive economic institutions lack these poverty-reducing properties and mechanisms. Rather, they “extract incomes and wealth from one subset of society to benefit a different subset” (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012, p. 76), empowering the few at the expense of the many. With its excessive taxation, upward redistributive policies, forced labor, and so forth, the Roman Empire—and the wealth acquired by its elites—would fit snugly under the extractive label. Or, as one economic historian notes, New Institutional Economics would conceptualize the Roman state as a “predator” (Bang, 2012, p. 199). In fact, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012, p. 158) note: “Rome’s initial economic success was based on inclusive institutions—at least by the standards of their time.” But the shift from republic to empire increased extractive practices and “ultimately led to ... infighting, instability, and collapse[.]”

It should be clear from the cultural context provided in previous sections that wealth in the Gospels is *synonymous* with extractive institutions. In an inclusive institutional setting, wealth and corruption can be more easily untwined and disassociated. However, in a world where all wealth acquisition is suspicious and seemingly ill-gotten—a zero-sum game—coercion, extraction, and riches become one and the same. This entanglement of wealth and predation is captured in Mark’s rendition of Jesus’ encounter with the rich man. Christ implores the young ruler to keep the commandments: “Do not commit adultery, Do

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not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Defraud not, Honour thy father and mother” (Mark 10:19; KJV). “Defraud not” is the only commandment not found in the Decalogue, though similar notions are found in Leviticus (19:13) and Deuteronomy (24:14-15). However, this addition appears to have been on purpose given the fact that under Rome’s extractive system “there was little chance one could become rich without having defrauded people along the way.” In essence, “the man had already defrauded and thus not kept all of the covenant, as he had believed.” Christ’s follow-up command to “go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor” (Mark 10:21; NRSV) was in order for the rich man “to make restitution for his having defrauded so many of so much” (Peppard, 2015, pp. 603-604). Jesus was, as Julie Smith (2018, p. 568) puts it, “inviting this man to focus on a different kingdom” than Rome: the Kingdom of God. In short, to criticize wealth was equivalent to criticizing the exploitation by the Roman elite.

### **Do As I Say *and* As I Do**

We must also look at Jesus’ *behavior* regarding wealth. “Central to all ancient biography,” writes Richard Burrige (2006, p. 441), “is that the picture of the subject is built up through both their words *and* their deeds. So, to find the heart of Jesus’ ethic, we need to consider both his ethical teaching *and* his actual practice.” In short, a Greco-Roman biography—the genre of the Gospels—was an invitation to imitate. Jesus’ seemingly absolutist criticisms of wealth are softened by his *actions*. “Implicit in the Gospel narratives are local supporters who offered hospitality to Jesus and his traveling party and whose houses often became the venue for teaching” (Capper, 2009, p. 71). For example, despite Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John—who were likely business partners (Stanton, 2016)—leaving their boats and nets to be “fishers of men” (Mark 1:17), a boat was readily available and used by Jesus throughout the Markan narrative (e.g., Mark 3:9-10; 4:1-2; 5:2, 18, 21; 6:32, 45; 8:10, 14). As one scholar notes: “it seems the boat belongs to some of the disciples and that they will instruct slaves or hired laborers to get the boat ready” (Stanton, 2016, p. 110). Another describes Simon Peter and Andrew as “experienced businessmen” who “came from a prosperous, assimilated Jewish middle-class family” (Murphy-O’Connor, 1999, p. 10). Levi the tax collector threw “a great banquet” and hosted “a large crowd” (Luke



5:29; NRSV) *after* Christ extended a call to him, indicating that he had both the means and approval to do so. Joseph of Arimathea was “a rich man” and “also a disciple of Jesus” (Matt. 27:57; NRSV) who was able to approach Pilate and obtain Christ’s body for burial in a family tomb. Apparently, his wealth and influence had not been diminished by his discipleship.<sup>6</sup> Finally, “[a]ccording to Luke, Jesus was supported on his own preaching tours by the patronage of women of means who comprised part of his traveling party. These included Joanna the wife of Chuza, senior steward of the estates of Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee (Luke 8:1-3)” (Capper, 2009, p. 71). It becomes apparent that Jesus approved of at least *some* wealth, even if wealth overall carried the taint of the extractive institutions that produced it. One of the most prominent and consistent themes throughout Jesus’ teachings and the entirety of the Christian canon is an obligation to care for the poor and needy (Coogan, 1993; Gay, 2014). This theme, along with Jesus’ behavior toward well-off followers, increase the likelihood that the main targets of Jesus’ wealth rhetoric were exploitative kingdoms of the world rather than wealth itself. Contra Hart, the evils of wealth appear to be *extrinsic* rather than *intrinsic*. This seems to indicate that Christian responses to wealth should focus on the mechanisms and means of wealth acquisition.

### Conclusion

New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg (2012, p. 207) once recalled attending a couple of panel discussions in which “various economists lamented that, while they tried to be very cautious in weighing in on religious or theological topics about which they knew comparatively little, it seemed to them that biblical scholars and theologians did not return the favor, making confident but simplistic pronouncements on complex economic issues that deserved much more careful study.” A lived, meaningful, and applicable Christian theology not only requires that we understand the historical, cultural, and linguistic background of sacred texts, but also a literacy in social science in order to properly situate that theology within the complexities of the political economy. Harmful ideological positions can be influenced by misinterpretation of scripture, ignorance of social science, or both. Much of this confusion derives from Jesus’ controversial teachings on wealth. In response to the confusion, this article has examined recent claims about Christ’s teachings

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on wealth by exploring the political and economic background of the Greco-Roman world. It has then applied the lens of institutional economics both to Jesus' words and deeds, arguing that wealth was seen as *synonymous* with extractive imperial practices. For modern Christians, this should shift moral focus away from the mere *possession* of wealth to the *means of its acquisition*. This shift can resonate at both the personal and political level, from business ethics to economic policy. This shift also requires more detail-oriented Christians; ones who are willing to examine institutional blind spots and carry the moral burden of identifying and weighing trade-offs.<sup>7</sup>

To return to one of Hart's citations, Luke's Jesus began his public ministry by reading Isaiah 61:1-2 in the synagogue (Luke 4:18-19). This passage provides an excellent and, in the case of this article, concluding insight into both Jesus' ultimate view of wealth as well as the expectation of Christians. As New Testament scholar Warren Carter (2006, p. 20) explains, these verses

belong to the Jubilee tradition ... The Jubilee year envisioned the release of people from debt and slavery, and the return of land to households (Lev. 25). It was a socioeconomic mechanism that was to prevent wealth and power accumulating in the hands of Israel's elite ... By citing Isaiah 61, Luke's Jesus offers a societal vision that challenges Rome's elite-dominated, hierarchical structure ... His vision and actions, and the continuing ministry of followers, begin to repair the damage caused by Rome's world and anticipate its end with the establishment of God's purposes.

### Endnotes

1. For a more in-depth exploration of Jesus and apocalypticism, see Ehrman (2001).
2. Property rights are especially important for "long-run economic growth, investment, and financial development," seeing that they constrain "arbitrary behavior and expropriation by the state and elites" (Acemoglu & Johnson, 2005, p. 988).
3. This was confirmed in a follow-up study over a decade later (Dollar, Kleineberg, & Kraay, 2016).
4. The populist backlash to global trade in recent years has led to a

string of academic books empirically and philosophically defending the merits of international trade. See Irwin (2015); van der Vossen & Brennan (2018); Clausing (2019); Panagariya (2019).

5. While *within-country* income inequality has increased with greater economic globalization, *between-country* inequality has decreased (Liberati, 2015; Milanovic, 2016; World Bank, 2016).
6. This could be due to the secrecy of his discipleship (John 19:38). “Nevertheless, Joseph’s request of for Jesus’ body was an act of courage. Especially for someone outside the family to make the request, it could identify one with the person executed for treason. Far from Joseph’s wealth and influence protecting him, it could have also made him a target for special scrutiny and envy. Joseph acts more courageously here than do Jesus’ previously public disciples” (Keener, 2014, p. 308).
7. As one popular economist puts it: “There are no solutions; there are only trade-offs” (Sowell, 1995, p. 142).

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