Eye of the Needle
What do Christian teachings on wealth mean for philanthropy?
By Evan Sparks
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Wealth and the Will of God: Discerning the Use of Riches in the Service of Ultimate Purpose
by Paul G. Schervish and Keith Whitaker
Indiana University Press, 2010

Jesus of Nazareth didn’t make it easy on his rich followers.

One devout young man, satisfied that he led a worthy life, was told to sell all he had and give it to the poor.
He went away sad, for he was very rich.

In a parable, a rich man built massive barns to store his bumper crops and went to bed happy in his wealth,
only to die that very night. “So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God,”
concluded Jesus.

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to
the one and despise the other,” Jesus said. “You cannot serve God and money.”

More often than not, Jesus presents wealth as an obstacle to a life of faithful discipleship—just as the eye of
a needle would obstruct a camel. His followers have since swung to extremes on how to understand Jesus’
teaching on riches, with some ignoring it (imploring their followers to live their “best life now”). Others
have taken his teaching quite literally, giving away all they have and living in pious, monastic, or needy
communities. What is the wealthy Christian to do?

The answer, write Paul Schervish and Keith Whitaker (a Philanthropy contributing editor) in their new book
Wealth and the Will of God, is not to start from the perspective of wealth. They instead propose that the first
question the wealthy Christian should ask lies along the lines of the first question in the Westminster
Shorter Catechism: “What is the chief end of man?”

Schervish and Whitaker inquire deeply into the thought of five seminal Christian thinkers—Thomas
Aquinas, Ignatius of Loyola, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards—as well as Aristotle, that
“master of those who know” who so influenced medieval Christianity. Each chapter is organized by what
these thinkers had to say about ultimate purposes, capacities for pursuing those purposes, and deliberation
about matching those capacities with ultimate ends.

(The authors’ reliance on the concepts of “moral biography” and the sociological concept of agency supply
the book’s architecture. Unfortunately, they are the weakest elements of the book. But even though their
academic tone will make it slow going for the general reader, Schervish and Whitaker have done donors a
service by collecting and investigating these thinkers’ beliefs, and readers will find it a valuable comparative
study.)

What are these ultimate ends? Expanding on Aristotle’s ultimate purpose of happiness—that is, the “activity
of a soul in accordance with virtue”—Aquinas posits “final perfect happiness [that] can only come from the
vision of the divine essence.” Ignatius offers the praise and service of God as man’s ultimate end.
According to Schervish and Whitaker, Luther endorses “spiritual marriage,” the union of Jesus Christ and the church. Calvin emphasizes salvation from sin by grace alone. And for Edwards, the goal of life is for a Christian to “remanate”—Edwards’ word—God’s love to the world as it has been given to him.

And does having money get in the way of loving, praising, serving, desiring, and reflecting God? The thinkers represented are united in viewing wealth not as intrinsically detrimental because it does not belong—ultimately—to the wealthy person. As Calvin wrote, “the endowments which God has bestowed upon us are not our own, but His free gifts, and . . . those who plume themselves upon them betray their ingratitude.”

This is not to say that private property should be banned; Aquinas and Calvin alike make a strong argument for the recognition of private ownership. (“People have a natural authority over external things,” writes Aquinas, “since people have a reason and a will that can make use of external things for human benefit.”) The challenge for the rich Christian, especially for an entrepreneur or businessman who made his own fortune, is to view himself as a mere steward of wealth that he did not merit apart from grace.

One way to do this, endorsed by Catholic and Protestant thinkers alike, is to practice detachment. “We ought to use these things to the extent that they help us toward our end, and free ourselves from them to the extent that they hinder us from it,” writes Ignatius. “To attain this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things.” Ignatius spiritualizes Jesus’ teaching on poverty, urging his disciples neither to desire nor to spurn wealth, but merely to direct one’s longings toward Christ only. Indifference to wealth is rooted in Scripture. The Apostle Paul writes, “As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.” Should God call one of his followers to material poverty, he or she would be able to accept the call joyfully.

So, if you are a wealthy but indifferent Christian, what do you do now? You can give it all back to God, since he is the source of the wealth in the first place. But should you “give back” to God in return for his grace? What, exactly, does the wealthiest Christian have that would add to God in any way? How could the corpus of even the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation add a speck to the beauty and glory of the Lord?

Jesus told the devout young man to give all he had to the poor. The thinkers whom Schervish and Whitaker marshal all offer various precepts for cheerful, loving disposition. Aquinas’ “order of charity” moves from God to oneself to one’s neighbor to one’s own body. Luther’s hierarchy of living encompasses first the church, then education, the aged and infirm, the homebound poor, “industrious newcomers to the city,” capital projects, and finally stores of food. (Luther’s counsel led the Wittenberg city council to form a “community chest” in 1522 to meet these needs.) Needless to say, the Christian tradition offers a wide range for philanthropic activity. Schervish and Whitaker’s purpose is not prescriptive. Rather, they offer wealthy Christians a theological and philosophical framework for discerning—for themselves—whether, why, and how they ought to give.

Ultimately, the Christian should find that giving comes naturally, “a grateful response to unmerited gifts from God,” as Schervish and Whitaker put it in their chapter on Calvin. And perhaps giving has a deeper wellspring, they write in their chapter on Edwards: “We give from our immersion in God’s overflowing generative love.” The grace of God transforms wealth. No longer an obstacle to following Jesus, it becomes a means of service to God.

“The poor have always been the favorites of God and His saints, but I believe that it is one of the special achievements of Grace to sanctify the whole of life, riches included,” says Lady Marchmain in Evelyn Waugh’s novel Brideshead Revisited. “It’s very unexpected for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, but the gospel is simply a catalogue of unexpected things.”

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