

TO HIS DISCIPLES HE EXPLAINED EVERYTHING

Mark 4:33-34 (NASB)

³³ “With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it;

³⁴ and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.”

You might ask at this point: Why should we care? Americans, in particular, generally approve of capitalism and perhaps do not perceive this to be a moral issue. There are intellectual influences in the United States that seek to undermine this positive view, however. And America is increasingly subject to economic change elsewhere in the world, such as the value of the dollar in international markets, cheaper labor, and demand for foreign products in the United States.

American businesses sell to foreign markets and import from all over the world. They hire cheap labor from other countries rather than the more expensive American labor. The first anti-globalization riots occurred in Seattle, and various anti-globalization groups lobby in Washington, DC, and at World Bank meetings to get what they believe to be a better economic deal for the poor. Increasingly powerful environmental lobbyists have consistently attacked the U.S. presidential administration for defending American industrial interests by refusing to sign the Kyoto Protocol. Terrorism and Middle East politics have caused oil prices to rise, and environmental groups assail gas-guzzling American SUVs for threatening the planet. These are all examples of the global interconnectedness of the American economy; and we need to understand how we, as Christians, are supposed to live in this brave new world.

To help us in this quest, we need to recover the basics that Jesus taught and examine how we are to live out—within our economic system—those values. This does not mean that we need a “capitalist theology,” but it does mean that we have to look at many reflections by theologians and statements made by church leaders with a fresh eye. We also need to ask whether we are like the young man Jesus confronts with His demand to follow. Many today would dismiss this as an unworldly demand. How can he give up all he has? How can we? **The point is that this is not the real question. What the young man, and we today, ought to be asking is this: *Lord, because I am held hostage by all that I have and all that I am, what can I do?***

We need to recognize that we are captive and that our freedom lies only in Christ—and that our aspiration should lie not in ambition but in communion with Him. The young man was lost from the moment he asked the question because the way to salvation was staring him in the face. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; so instead of asking the question, he should have just followed.

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All of us wonder how we can make a better life for ourselves and our family, how we can afford a new car or pay the kids' way through college. Yet how often do we ask ourselves how we are going to find salvation? In fact, we don't need to ask, because we simply turn to Jesus Christ and the question is answered at once. When we do that, then we will follow him. This teaching is about how we can follow Jesus in a complicated economic world by listening directly to His word in the parables He told.

Jesus sets out this simple command: **“Follow me.”** These were the simple words He spoke to the Twelve. They listened, they obeyed, and they followed. Our discipleship also means hearing, obeying, and following Jesus. He will then guide us along the path of discipleship; He will tell us what our discipleship is to be about. For each of us the path is different: for some it may involve teaching or nursing, while for others it may mean being a business leader or a gas station attendant.

Our work in the economy does not define our discipleship, but it is part of our vocation as Christians living and working in the world, influencing those around us for the better and taking the gospel to the four corners of the world. Whatever our calling, the Caller is the same. For the young man in the story, Jesus set an impossible command because He knew what stood between the young man and discipleship—namely, his love of wealth and material things. **We can and should ask ourselves: *What stands between me and discipleship?***

Wealth and material things will not save us, nor will the pretense that we can build a good society. Though the economy we have is the most effective economy humanity has developed, we recognize that it is not possible to construct a perfect economy. The notion that we can save the world with just a little more cooperation and organization is a fallacy, for the world is fallen. Humanity *can* have an economic alternative that will make things better because economics is all about managing competing interests and forces. Humanity is in conflict, and the economy reflects this conflict. It is wrong to suggest that if we match progressive economic ideas with the gospel then we can have a divine economy. If we want to try to rule the economy with the gospel, then—to borrow from Martin Luther—we better fill the economy with real Christians first.

A key mechanism of the free market economy is self-interest. This was identified by Adam Smith, the Scottish moral philosopher, back in the eighteenth century. Smith did not think that self-interest merely means selfishness, however, because what is in our self-interest is not necessarily a selfish thing to do. There are many occasions in which we act selfishly, only to learn that we were not acting in our self-interest. You could take up gambling your hard-earned wages, but is it in your economic interest to gamble away your money and savings? What Jesus says is in our self-interest because, in the divine economy, it is salvation that is in our interest.

We cannot look at the problems of the world as something that can be solved simply by human ingenuity and economic manipulation. We have to look at what God intends—what His plan is for salvation in the world—since the ultimate solution is not of this world but of the kingdom that is to come.

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If we confuse our economic ideas with the gospel, then we are just offering secular salvation and competing in the supermarket of ideas. Jesus then becomes the brand logo contending with other great leaders of history and idealizations of the “good society” down through the ages. Remember this: In the divine economy, there is no competition. There is only one Lord. Let’s listen to Him.

Things to Think About

- Consider the young man who spoke to Jesus. What obstacle stands between you and God? What impossible demand might Jesus be making on you in this regard?
- What do you think Jesus meant when He referred to “**treasure in heaven**” in [Matthew 19:21](#)? How would you compare that treasure to the “**treasures**” you have now?
- Do you think people are basically greedy? Do corporations and business leaders promote greed? How about government, or even churches: Are they different than the commercial world?
- Try to imagine an alternative to today’s economy. How would such a system operate? How does your understanding of human nature fit into this system?
- How do you suppose Jesus felt about the economy in his time? We will be exploring this throughout the book, but write down some reflections of “Jesus the economist”—and see if your conclusions are different by the end of our study.