

'Jesus Was a Progressive Because He Advocated Income Redistribution to Help the Poor'

– “Jesus Christ Was a Progressive Because He Advocated Income Redistribution to Help the Poor”

I first heard something similar to this cliché some 40 years ago. As a Christian, I was puzzled. In Christ's view, the most important decision a person would make in his earthly lifetime was to accept or reject Him for whom He claimed to be—God in the flesh and the savior of mankind. That decision was clearly to be a very personal one—an individual and voluntary choice. He constantly stressed inner, spiritual renewal as far more critical to well-being than material things. I wondered, “How could the same Christ advocate the use of force to take stuff from some and give it to others?” I just couldn't imagine Him supporting a fine or a jail sentence for people who don't want to fork over their money for food stamp programs.

“Wait a minute,” you say. “Didn't He answer, ‘Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's’ when the Pharisees tried to trick Him into denouncing a Roman-imposed tax?” Yes indeed, He did say that. It's found first in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 22, verses 15-22 and later in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 12, verses 13-17. But notice that everything depends on just what did truly belong to Caesar and what didn't, which is actually a rather powerful endorsement of property rights. Christ said nothing like “It belongs to Caesar if Caesar simply says it does, no matter how much he wants, how he gets it, or how he chooses to spend it.”

The fact is, one can scour the Scriptures with a fine-tooth comb and find nary a word from Christ that endorses the forcible redistribution of wealth by political authorities. None, period.

“But didn’t Christ say he came to uphold the law?” you ask. Yes, in Matthew 5: 17-20, he declares, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” In Luke 24: 44, He clarifies this when he says “...[A]ll things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.” He was not saying, “Whatever laws the government passes, I’m all for.” He was speaking specifically of the Mosaic Law (primarily the Ten Commandments) and the prophecies of His own coming.

Consider the 8th of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not steal.” Note the period after the word “steal.” This admonition does not read, “You shall not steal unless the other guy has more than you do” or “You shall not steal unless you’re absolutely positive you can spend it better than the guy who earned it.” Nor does it say, “You shall not steal but it’s OK to hire someone else, like a politician, to do it for you.”

In case people were still tempted to steal, the 10th Commandment is aimed at nipping in the bud one of the principal motives for stealing (and for redistribution): “You shall not covet.” In other words, if it’s not yours, keep your fingers off of it.

In Luke 12: 13-15, Christ is confronted with a redistribution request. A man with a grievance approaches him and demands, “Master, speak to my brother and make him divide the inheritance with me.” The Son of God, the same man who wrought miraculous healings and calmed the waves, replies thusly: “*Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?* Take heed and

beware of covetousness, for a man's wealth does not consist of the material abundance he possesses." Wow! He could have equalized the wealth between two men with a wave of His hand but he chose to denounce envy instead.

"What about the story of the Good Samaritan? Doesn't that make a case for government welfare programs, if not outright redistribution?" you inquire. The answer is an emphatic NO!" Consider the details of the story, as recorded in Luke 10: 29-37: A traveler comes upon a man at the side of a road. The man had been beaten and robbed and left half-dead. What did the traveler do? He helped the man himself, on the spot, with his own resources. He did not say, "Write a letter to the emperor" or "Go see your social worker" and walk on. If he had done that, he would more likely be known today as the "*Good-for-nothing* Samaritan," if he was remembered at all.

What about the reference, in the Book of Acts, to the early Christians selling their worldly goods and sharing communally in the proceeds? That sounds like a progressive utopia. On closer inspection, however, it turns out that those early Christians did not sell everything they had and were not commanded or expected to do so. They continued to meet in their own private homes, for example. In his contributing chapter to the 2014 book, "For the Least of These: A Biblical Answer to Poverty," Art Lindsley of the Institute for Faith, Work and Economics writes,

Again, in this passage from Acts, there is no mention of the state at all. These early believers contributed their goods freely, without coercion, voluntarily. Elsewhere in Scripture we see that Christians are even instructed to give in just this manner, freely, for "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). There is plenty of indication that private property rights were still in effect....

It may disappoint progressives to learn that Christ's words and deeds repeatedly upheld such critically-important,

capitalist virtues as contract, profit and private property. For example, consider His “Parable of the Talents” (see one of the recommended readings below). Of several men in the story, the one who takes his money and buries it is reprimanded while the one who invests and generates the largest return is applauded and rewarded.

Though not central to the story, good lessons in supply-and-demand as well as the sanctity of contract are apparent in Christ’s “Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.” A landowner offers a wage to attract workers for a day of urgent work picking grapes. Near the end of the day, he realizes he has to quickly hire more and to get them, he offers for an hour of work what he previously had offered to pay the first workers for the whole day. When one of those who worked all day complained, the landowner answered, “I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

The well-known “Golden Rule” comes from the lips of Christ Himself, in Matthew 7:12. “So in everything, **do unto others what you would have them do unto you**, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” In Matthew 19:18, Christ says, “**...love your neighbor as yourself.**” Nowhere does He even remotely suggest that we should dislike a neighbor because of his wealth or seek to take that wealth from him. If you don’t want your property confiscated (and most people don’t, and wouldn’t need a thief in order to part with it anyway), then clearly you’re not supposed to confiscate somebody else’s.

Christian doctrine cautions against greed. So does present-day economist Thomas Sowell: “I have never understood why it is ‘greed’ to want to keep the money you have earned but *not* greed to want to take somebody else’s money.” Using the power of government to grab another person’s property isn’t exactly altruistic. Christ never even implied that accumulating wealth

through peaceful commerce was in any way wrong; He simply implored people to not allow wealth to rule them or corrupt their character. That's why His greatest apostle, Paul, didn't say money was evil in the famous reference in 1 Timothy 6:10. Here's what Paul actually said: "For *the* love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." Indeed, progressives themselves have not selflessly abandoned money, for it is *other people's* money, especially that of "the rich," that they're always clamoring for.

In Matthew 19:23, Christ says, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to get into the kingdom of heaven." A progressive might say, "Eureka! There it is! He doesn't like rich people" and then stretch the remark beyond recognition to justify just about any rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul scheme that comes down the pike. But this admonition is entirely consistent with everything else Christ says. It's not a call to envy the rich, to take from the rich or to give "free" cell phones to the poor. It's a call to character. It's an observation that some people let their wealth rule them, rather than the other way around. It's a warning about temptations (which come in many forms, not just material wealth). Haven't we all noticed that among the rich, as is equally true among the poor, you have both good and bad people? Haven't we all seen some rich celebrities corrupted by their fame and fortune, while others among the rich live perfectly upstanding lives? Haven't we all seen some poor people who allow their poverty to demoralize and enervate them, while others among the poor view it as an incentive to improve?

In Christ's teachings and in many other parts of the New Testament, Christians—indeed, all people—are advised to be of "generous spirit," to care for one's family, to help the poor, to assist widows and orphans, to exhibit kindness and to maintain the highest character. How all that gets translated into the dirty business of coercive, vote-buying, politically-

driven redistribution schemes is a problem for prevaricators with agendas. It's not a problem for scholars of what the Bible actually says and doesn't say.

Search your conscience. Consider the evidence. Be mindful of facts. And ask yourself: "When it comes to helping the poor, would Christ prefer that you give your money freely to the Salvation Army or at gunpoint to the welfare department?"

Christ was no dummy. He was not interested in the public professions of charitableness in which the legalistic and hypocritical Pharisees were fond of engaging. He dismissed their self-serving, cheap talk. He knew it was often insincere, rarely indicative of how they conducted their personal affairs, and always a dead-end with plenty of snares and delusions along the way. It would hardly make sense for him to champion the poor by supporting policies that undermine the process of wealth creation necessary to help them. In the final analysis, He would never endorse a scheme that doesn't work and is rooted in envy or theft. In spite of the attempts of many modern-day progressives to make Him into a political redistributionist, He was nothing of the sort.

Summary

- Free will, not coercion, is a central and consistent element in the teachings of Christ.
- It is not recorded anywhere that Christ called for the state to use its power to redistribute wealth.
- Christ endorsed things like choice, charity, generosity, kindness, personal responsibility, and voluntary association—things that are irreconcilable with coercively-financed redistribution schemes.
- For further information, see:

"For the Least of These: A Biblical Answer to Poverty,"
Anne Bradley and Art Lindsley, editors:
<http://tinyurl.com/kez32e3>

“Socialism: Spiritual or Secular?” by Francis Mahaffey: <http://tinyurl.com/njpd2kx>

“The Parable of the Talents: The Bible and Entrepreneurs” by Robert Sirico: <http://tinyurl.com/p4gr8yl>

“Lawrence Reed on The Platform” – a short video interview on income redistribution, the welfare state and Christianity: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reo0p9N1p4A>

“Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Economics” by Doug Bandow: <http://tinyurl.com/n9sjth9>

Cliché #20: “Government Can Be a Compassionate Alternative to the Harshness of the Marketplace” by Lawrence W. Reed: <http://tinyurl.com/nnt3qty>

“Christian Charity and the Welfare State” by Mark W. Hendrickson: <http://tinyurl.com/ks2xdxn>

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