

GIVING: Geese and Golden Eggs

Helping the plight of the poor and critically needy people is always a concern of God's people. Since proper use of our money relates to spirituality and ethics it is a constant topic of discussion. Conscientious disciples are often torn between two concepts. One is that we gain favor with God by living an austere life in order to give freely of our money to those in need (or to buy church property and pay salaries of religious professionals). The other is that God wants us to enjoy the good things he has given us while at the same time sharing with those in need.

Although I do not have my thoughts outlined relating to these matters, I do intend to deal with them in a few of these correspondences with you. I trust that you are familiar with the plentiful texts of Scripture relating to this subject, so I will not be tedious about listing them all.

Let's begin with thoughts about wealth, even great riches. Immediately, we have to recognize that "wealth" and "riches" are relative terms. A person on welfare or Social Security in our country may be considered wealthy in comparison to the living standards of many people in our world. On the other hand, a person may have a luxurious house and accommodations on which he is making payments. If he loses his job, as many do, he can soon be penniless, in debt, and destitute.

Liberal socialists and politicians have made "rich people" the whipping boy. There is a growing disdain for those who make it rich in business; however, athletes, movie actors, and entertainers are idolized because of their great wealth. Which of those is contributing most to our economy and society? Which is doing most for the "have-nots"? More on that as we go along.

In all ages God and his spokespersons have called for compassionate sharing, but there has been no law or principle demanding sharing equally. Laws forcing equality in income leave out the motivation of compassion, making it a matter of obeying law. Russia has been the prime example of the failure of such a system. The incentive of labor dissipates when there is no profit or rewarding fulfillment for diligent work.

Just because a loving person may have money, it does not mean that he would be wise to give it all to an immediate, pressing need. The most effective help may need planning. For example, a person or a group may go into a destitute society and give great help. Through medical care and provision of food many lives are saved. Life expectancy is expanded and the infant mortality rate is reduced drastically. But when that mission is done and the helpers return home, what happens? By having saved those lives, the number of mouths to feed has increased, yet they will have to depend on the same land and resources which had allowed impoverishment and starvation already. Unless food is continually imported in greater amounts, the starvation will become worse. The longer

food and medicine are imported, the more lives will be saved making a continually increasing amount of food and medical aid necessary. The more help is given, the more will be necessary. It makes for a snowballing problem. The goose will eventually run out of eggs.

So, since resources are always limited, what is the solution? More lives may be saved in the long run by teaching the people how to raise crops and by providing wells or dams for irrigation. Teaching them cleanliness and how to prevent illness is needful. Teaching them to manufacture or otherwise use their natural resources to provide money to buy medications and pay doctors may pay great dividends. Teaching and providing these services can lead them to become self-sufficient and free from their former destitution. The old maxim is still true: Give a man a fish and he will eat for the day; teach him to fish and he will eat for a lifetime. The golden eggs serve better if hatched in the needy country and developed into their own egg-laying geese. This sort of benevolence is wise intervention and prevention, yet we are not advocating the total ignoring of immediate needs. Use of our limited resources always calls for hard decisions.

Is it sinful for a person to be rich? Jesus declared, *“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”* (Matt. 19:23-24).. To those who laid up treasures gained dishonestly and lived in luxury, James wrote, *“Come now, you rich, weep and howl, for the miseries that are coming upon you”* (James 5:1-6). Paul wrote, *“But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils...”* (1 Tim.6:9-10). As we read such texts, we must also consider that many righteous men of old, like Abraham, David, Solomon, and Joseph of Arimathea, were wealthy. Evidently, they were men who gained and used their wealth honorably. The statements above by Jesus, James, and Paul were directed to those who loved money above serving God, who were so greedy as to gain it dishonorably, and who hoarded it for selfish use.

Several aspects need to be considered. Bill Gates is the poster boy of wealth. Has he robbed you in order to be wealthy? What has his gaining of billions in wealth taken from you and others? Nothing! On the contrary, thousands of employees have received billions of dollars because of his industry. Through the use of their earned money, the whole economy has benefited. Much poverty has been prevented.

It is hardly believable that Bill Gates has vaults packed with billions of dollars. His wealth is invested in all that makes up his industry. If Bill Gates were to sell all and give it to the poor, that would make world-wide news, would it not? It would help many people – temporarily. But think of the far-reaching economic loss to thousands of families that action would bring. It would be killing the goose that laid the golden eggs. It is wiser to keep the goose alive and let her continue to lay the golden eggs. Instead of impoverishing others, Bill Gates has prevented poverty by providing jobs. If you have only one employee whom you fire in order to “give to the Lord” by helping a poor family, have you really helped the poor? Or have you just changed the names on the list?

That leads to the prejudicial fallacies promoted by politicians seeking the votes of poor people. Tax industries and industrialists! Sock it to them! Would that put money in your pockets? That is a no-win, no-brainer tactic. If it weakens the industry by taxation, everybody loses. If the taxed industry is to continue its strength, then prices for its products and services will have to be raised to make up the difference. And who pays for it? The consumer! We pay the taxes in increased prices. So that is another effort to kill or restrict the goose that lays the golden eggs. It is better for industry to help the economy by providing jobs than for the government to weaken industry by taxes and then dole part of it back to the people the taxes helped to impoverish. And only a small part would be doled back after going through a government bureaucracy.

How philanthropic Bill Gates must be and how much of your resources must be given to the poor, I do not pretend to judge. I have enough difficulty making my own decisions about use of the little the Lord has entrusted to me.

My aim here is not to advance political and economic policies but to point out ethical and spiritual implications in the use of our money. Each of us would do well to plan our giving for the ultimate effect. Our geese may not be too productive, but as good stewards we will consider how to wisely invest it so as to multiply the golden eggs. Jesus encouraged that in his parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30. []

(Cecil Hook; August 2004)

Talkin' Texas: Brazoria County has more species of birds than any other area in North America.

YOUTH MINISTER OPENING: This urban, multi-cultural, semi-ecumenical, gender inclusive congregation invites applications from persons interested in working with this group according to Steven Hopping. Contact: Southwest Central Church of Christ, 4011 W. Bellfort, Houston, TX 77025. www.swcentral.org. Office: 713-667-9417; Fax: 713-667-9135