Creating wealth for the glory of God

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No-one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions; he had money as well.

- Margaret Thatcher,
Prime Minister of Britain (1979-1987)



The Good Samaritan
- Rembrandt, c.1633

It is good when Christian people learn to create wealth that will be utilised for the glory of God in service of the world he loves. This occurs as wise principles of stewardship and entrepreneurial thinking are prudentially applied to the honest and honourable production of surpluses that may be traded, invested, or donated. The utilisation of surpluses enables benefit for seller and buyer, and may also be used to support Christian ministries, and to assist needy individuals who require help.

The creational mandate to develop wealth

The goodness of wealth development is clear from the opening of Scripture, as the Book of Genesis describes God giving us the role of tending creation: *God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it"* (Genesis 1:28). As bearers of the image of God (who delights to work and to create) we are called *to work the ground* (2:5). So God *planted a garden ... and there he put the man he had formed* (2:8), *to work it and take care of it* (2:15). The pre-fall narrative not only endorses the harvesting of edible fruit, but also effectively commends mining, smelting technology, and the capacity to assess metallurgical quality - as in the land of Havilah, *where there is gold; the gold of that land is good* (2:11). The text also affirms the goodness and use of *aromatic resin and onyx* (2:12).

There is a clear connection between agricultural abundance and the ability to develop mining, metallurgy, and the cutting and setting of gemstones, since only societies with food surpluses can afford to achieve technological progress with all its ensuing economic benefits - including the opportunity to support Christian ministries and charitable enterprises.

Submitting our resources to the Lordship of Christ

While the creational call to produce wealth was compromised by sin, the work of Christ restores our relationship with God, and this transforms behaviour, including our ability to glorify him. This requires careful handling of the words of Christ - that *any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple* (Luke 14:33). Willingness to forsake all for him is certainly binding on each disciple, but having surrendered everything to God, it is good stewardship to retain and use property and wealth for his glory.

Hence the *wife of noble character* purchases a field, and *out of her earnings she plants a vineyard*. Keenly ensuring that *her trading is profitable ... she makes linen garments and sells them* (Proverbs 31:16-24). Furthermore, our Lord Jesus and his apostles were assisted by several women who were *helping to support them out of their own means* (Luke 8:3). Additionally, many who were among the first Christians retained use of their properties *... while from time to time those who owned land and houses sold them, brought the money ... and put it at the apostles' feet* (Acts 4:34-35).

Scripture includes many other warnings about the wrong use of wealth, so we may learn how to use money in service of God and the world he loves:

> *People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. 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* (I Timothy 6.9-10).
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> *Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives* (Titus 3:14).
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> *He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need* (Ephesians 4:28).
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> *Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share* (I Timothy 6:17-18).

Excelling in wealth creation

Although wealth can be earned either as a person forms a new business, or works for someone else, in the modern world it is increasingly difficult to establish a venture (especially in farming). However, working for someone else is a legitimate job, especially if bonus payments and commissions for excellence are available. These give a modern application to the biblical ideal of each man owning and using *his own vine and fig tree* (Micah 4:4).

Workers who serve with a firm sense of stake-holding, as if they owned the workplace, will suggest innovation and guard against operational failure, thereby greatly pleasing their employer. Such workers heed the instruction: *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men* (Colossians 3:23). Additionally, skilled persons may become consultants who work for themselves, under contract to larger enterprises.

New businesses are possible as food production rises to efficiently meet the demand, because a food surplus can be sold to purchase goods and services. Poor nations must increase food production and sell food locally to buy goods and services. Rich nations already produce plenty of food, and must continue to invent or locate products and services to put their food surplus to good use. This can include purchasing the satisfaction of helping poor nations.

But it is a mistake to simply give lectures or lessons about wealth creation without also providing capital, tools, mentoring, and hands-on supervision to those we seek to empower economically. That is because people who are poor often have learned to be helpless, and must be patiently shown and equipped, often repeatedly, to help them overcome their inabilities.

Barriers to creating wealth may include dysfunctional or broken family life, superstition, laziness, timidity, oppression, war, and a lack of access to natural resources including land and water. Hence there is not a simple or straightforward solution to poverty. It requires patience and assistance.

Wealthy Christians have the great opportunity to assist poor people to move from poverty to abundance by transforming raw materials into wealth. Thus worthless pumpkin that is fed to pigs may be fed to children whose vision is therefore protected; or sand may be turned into a silicon chip by wisdom and technology. Such processes gives us the opportunity to honour God as the one *who gives you the ability to produce wealth* (Deuteronomy 8:18).

Practicalities of wealth creation

Time, motivation, wisdom, and entrepreneurial ideas are required to found a new business or to help existing ventures grow in excellence and scope. People in poor nations must begin by growing food - if necessary borrowing money to start or enlarge the process. People in rich nations may either meet a need which is not yet satisfied, or invent a need which doesn't yet exist.

Ideas to found or grow a business can be explained to friends who have an interest in that line of activity. If they find the idea compelling, they should provide funds to prosper the work as share-holders and company directors. Hence they invest personally in the business and provide leadership as its financial stakeholders, who powerfully drive the enterprise toward success.

Stewardship lessons from the story of the Good Samaritan

Sound financial principles may be found in the Good Samaritan parable:

- The Good Samaritan not only had good intentions, he had money as well;
- He gained wealth either in his own business, or by working for someone else, or it came as a gift (hence the virtue of money-making enterprises);
- He used that wealth to help others (even the enemies of his people);
- The Good Samaritan had a credit rating (hence the virtue of borrowing).

The parable may be applied to rebut a well-known (though very foolish) saying uttered by Shakespeare's character Polonius (*Hamlet* Act I, Scene 3): *Neither a borrower nor a lender be*. The Good Samaritan borrowed from the inn-keeper, and lent goodwill to a person in great need - by donating money with no expectation of repayment from one who had lost everything.

But Good Samaritans can (and should) purchase influence in the name of Christ (the hero of the parable) to shape a needy man's life according to the Lord's words: *"Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings"* (Luke 16:9).

Friendship and care for the needy is the ideal basis for shaping the faith and nurturing the wealth-creating potential of those we serve in the Lord's name.

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