

# Redistributing Wealth, is it what Jesus taught?

By Dianne D. McDonnell

The idea of “redistributing wealth” leaps at us from speeches and recent policies. Some public figures are voicing that this concept has a connection with Christianity and the teachings of Jesus. Is this true? Did Jesus teach and advocate any form of the “redistribution of wealth”? If he did, then we will find it recorded in the Bible along with all of the other teachings of Jesus. So let’s look at different references to money, property, and buying and selling in the Bible and see if they agree with the concepts of “redistributing wealth”.

## Judas had charge of the money

The apostle John wrote, “Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor.” John 13:29, John 12:4-6. Judas was the treasurer of the group, and the food was purchased from money each had voluntarily contributed, and from the finances of several women that accompanied Jesus and the disciples. We find in Luke 8:3, “...These women were helping to support them out of their own means.” Each person could buy or sell their own property as they wished, and income from a sale belonged to that individual, not to the group as a whole. It was voluntary shared resources; it was not a forced “redistribution of wealth” as some claim.

## A Fatal Lie

There is one famous event recorded in Acts, chapter 5, that has confused some people. In the early New Testament church believers decided to band together, eating together and sharing their belongings. One member named Barnabas sold a field he owned and generously contributed the entire sale price to the apostles. Notice he still had private ownership, the land was not owned by the group. A couple, Ananias and his wife Sapphira, also sold some land that they owned. Wanting to look as generous as Barnabas, Ananias told the apostle Peter that he and his wife were contributing the entire amount they received from the sale. Peter immediately realized that the man was not telling the truth and said, “...you have **lied** to the Holy Spirit....” Peter continued, “Didn’t it [the land] belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal?” Peter pointed out that Ananias and his wife could still do **whatever they wanted** with their own money, it wasn’t necessary to lie! They could have kept all the money for themselves, or given any portion of it to the group of believers sharing food and expenses. It was still a system of PRIVATE OWNERSHIP and NOT a system of “redistributing wealth”.

Peter concluded, “...You have not lied to men but to God.’ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.” Three hours later his wife repeated the lie, and she too fell dead!

In this incident recorded in Acts 5:1-11, Peter was not enforcing “redistribution of wealth” at all. The offence was lying to God, and God punished the couple, not Peter. God knows the truth, so it is futile to ever lie to God! “...Whoever says that he belongs to the Lord must turn away from wrongdoing.” 2 Timothy 2:19, and Colossians 3:9. “Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices...” Their land belonged to them not to the group, and they could have kept ALL of the sale price for themselves if they wanted to, and God would not have taken their lives. Some people misinterpret these verses as an early form of communism or redistributed wealth but it was a totally **voluntary system** of sharing living expenses as each person decided to share.

### **Shared Resources and Paul’s “Rule”**

Later we find that this early voluntary arrangement was growing difficult due to some Christians working hard and others loafing. This is the common problem shared by any group that begins to share their resources. Human nature just doesn’t change. If a person’s own work doesn’t directly affect his own rewards, and his personal “bottom line”, but instead his pay is shared among many others, then the tendency is to stop working, sit back, and just collect a portion of the “share”. That natural phenomenon was even playing out among converted Christians who knew each other and were to love each other.

Paul writes forcefully, “...we gave you **this rule: If a man will not work, he shall not eat.** We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and **earn the bread they eat.**” 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12.

It was necessary to scold those who had stopped working! Under the rule Paul set up, each person must work to receive a share of their pooled resources. This early Christian arrangement still allowed for private ownership, and anyone could leave the group at any time without any punishment.

The first century community living at Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found had a similar practice, and we find rules similar to Paul’s rule among their writings. We do not find the practice continuing down into later Christian churches, probably because of these natural problems of human nature.

### **Give to the Poor and Come Follow Me**

Some like to cite the example of Jesus calling the wealthy young man to come and follow him as one of the disciples in Luke 18:18-27. Jesus told him to sell all he had and give the money to the poor. Wasn’t this “redistribution of wealth”?

Jesus was offering this young man a chance to become his thirteenth apostle. After Judas betrayed Jesus, this man would be prepared and there would be twelve apostles. There would be no need to select another apostle—Matthias-- after the betrayal of Judas, Acts 1:21-26. The young man could not manage all of his holdings and various sources of wealth and still follow Jesus traveling around the countryside. He had to decide which he wanted to do. It was his decision, and

he was not forced to give up any of his wealth. When he decided not to sell everything and become one of the apostles, Jesus did not punish him or take his wealth away from him forcefully.

### **Give to Caesar what is Caesar's**

In Luke 20:21-25 Jesus agreed that a government has a right to collect taxes. Yes, Christians are to pay their taxes. But Jesus was not saying that we should have to pay unlimited taxes, nor was he saying that government had no restrictions.

### **God's Tax Arrangement and God's Warning**

In the government first set up in ancient Israel each person paid the same percentage, a 10% tithe. Those whose work or endeavors had resulted in more income paid more money, but the same percentage of their total income. Those who were successful did not pay a higher percentage of their incomes; they paid the same 10%. God is fair and treats both rich and poor fairly.

At first Judges ruled the nation of Israel. When the people wanted a king like other nations, God warned them what would happen and the high price they would pay to have a king over them. See 1 Samuel 8:10-18. The people disregarded that warning. Israel's first king, Saul took increasingly more and more from the people, just as God had warned would happen.

The American colonists and our Founding Fathers saw the abuses of King George and found out personally the dangers of allowing too much power in the hands of any one person or a very few. After winning a bloody war with God's miraculous help, and with much prayer, they set up a Republic form of government as outlined by our Constitution. Today many people seem to be forgetting the lesson that the Israelites and later the American colonists learned at a great price, and are seeking to return to an all-powerful central government with a great deal of power in the hands of a few. It is time to read God's warning in 1 Sam. 8:10-18.

### **What exactly is Capitalism?**

Capitalism is thrown around like some sort of dirty word in many circles, so perhaps we should first define Capitalism: "An economic system characterized by **private** or corporate **ownership** of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decisions rather than by state control,..." Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, page 204.

In simple terms, Capitalism has to do with private ownership and investments determined by private decisions.

### **Jesus giving an example of Capitalism**

Jesus gives an example of capitalism and free enterprise in Matthew 25:14-30. In the story Jesus describes a wealthy man leaving on a journey and investing varying amounts of his money with three of his servants. At his return he rewards those who grew the money invested with them and punishes the one who did nothing with the funds invested in him, calling him a "lazy servant". Jesus shows

us to use whatever abilities and resources God gives us wisely and profitably, and not lazily abuse his investment in us. Jesus used an example of Capitalism to illustrate this godly spiritual principle! He used other examples of Capitalism in Matthew 13:44,45. If Capitalism is an “evil” system, why did Jesus use these parables based on free enterprise and private investments?

### **Greed and Capitalism**

Most people who oppose Capitalism mention “Greed” in their first opening words. Those who become rich in a capitalistic system are described as “greedy”. In reality Greed is something that is common in any governmental system and in any group of people. It is a failing all humans must struggle against. There have been greedy Socialists, greedy Communists, and greedy Marxists down through time. Does the leader of any system want to set it up so that he personally is POOR, or do the leaders of “the masses” always manage to see that plenty of that maligned, awful, greedy WEALTH gets put into their own bank account? Greed lives among mankind, not just in any one system of government.

### **Private Ownership is backed by two of the Ten Commandments!**

“You shall not Steal” is the eighth commandment, Deuteronomy 5:19. That clearly indicates that there is to be private ownership and to take something that is privately owned by another person is wrong—it is stealing. If you own a piece of property and another takes it away from you by force it is stealing. It is not an action that Jesus Christ would condone and accept. The apostle Judas abused the trust placed in him as the treasurer of Jesus’ disciples, and he is openly called “a thief” in John 12:6. Is it wrong to take money from a poor person but acceptable to steal from a wealthy, successful person? Is one act considered stealing and the other act “the redistribution of wealth”? No, both are Stealing!

“You shall not Covet” is the tenth Commandment and yet few people even know what “Covet” means! It means to strongly desire something that is not rightfully yours. It means to long to take something that is not for sale and is someone’s personal property. The principle even carries over to desiring the husband or wife of another person, as well as their physical possessions. If a person refuses to covet or desire what another has, then that person never commits the act of stealing or committing adultery as in the case of pursuing and seducing another’s spouse. The “you shall not covet” Commandment is incredibly wise and again backs up the idea of private ownership and having control over one’s own money, and a right to have one’s own spouse free from purposeful seduction. Deut. 5:21.

### **What is the definition of Socialism?**

We find Socialism defined by Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary on page 1118 as: “Any of various economic and political theories advocating collective or **governmental ownership and administration** of the means of production and distribution of goods...a stage of society in Marxist theory **transitional between capitalism and communism....**” In simple terms, the government begins to own things, administer them, and this socialism leads to communism.

### **What is Communism?**

The same dictionary on page 267 defines Communism as “a theory advocating the elimination of private property”. In every communist country Socialism was the first step, then groups were turned against one another—rich against poor, the non-religious against the religious, and especially against minority religions such as Judaism. Once these divisions divide and set citizens angrily against each other, then policies are advanced that confiscate privately owned property. This starts with property owned by the most maligned and hated group then spreads to others. Communism is based on forcefully taking over what is owned by private citizens and private businesses. That entire system of government automatically breaks TWO of God’s Commandments, the ones we have just covered, “You shall not steal” and “You shall not covet”!

### **Redistributing Wealth**

Does the “redistribution of wealth” also break both Commandments? Is it the taking from one person without the permission of that person and giving it to another person? When the system is NOT voluntary, isn’t that stealing? Even when someone desires what another rightfully owns, isn’t that Coveting? To vilify “the rich” and stir up sentiments and emotions against them and force them to fund the major cost of every social program—is that what Jesus taught? Jesus said, “So in everything, **do to others what you would have them do to you**, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” Matthew 7:12. Jesus also said, “**...love your neighbor as yourself**,” in Matt. 19:18; He doesn’t want us to hate that neighbor if he is wealthy, or to desire to take what rightfully belongs to him.

“Redistribution of Wealth” eventually becomes a system that destroys private ownership and private enterprise and the freedom to start a business and profit from that business. It ultimately kills the desire to work in most human beings, and will collapse any Democracy or Republic that attempts to dabble with it. It is NOT a system that was ever advocated by Jesus.

Suggested reading: all of the scriptures referred to in the article, and for secular reading, see the book, *Animal Colony: A cautionary tale for today*, by Dr. Thomas Allen Rexroth and Mark Andrew Olsen.

Also look for soon coming article:  
What did Jesus teach about the Rich and the Poor?