

PROVERBS ON POVERTY

1. Introduction

ELLISON SEES HIMSELF AS AN ENLIGHTENED EGOTIST

Why has billionaire and Oracle founder Larry Ellison wanted to buy Apple Computer? Because he has a mission to put a computer on the desk of every American child. "This is all being done pro bono. The question is: What do you do with your life? This is what, after the first several billion dollars, keeps you going... I mean, the goal is not be the richest guy in the graveyard. I don't care how much I'm worth when I'm dead. How do I make myself feel good? The only way I know to make myself feel better is to make the world feel better. Don't mistake that for altruism. It's egotism. Call it enlightened egotism." (Vanity Fair June 97)

2. Proverbs on the rich and the poor

There are approximately 125 verses in Proverbs dealing with wealth and poverty which address the following nine issues.

2.1 Causes of Poverty

- Laziness (6:6-11, 10:4, 12:24, 13:4, 14:23, 19:15, 20:4, 20:13, 21:25, 24:33-34)
- Foolishness (21:20)
- Sin (5:7-10, 6:31, 13:25, 14:11)
- Injustice (13:23, 16:19)
- Haste (21:5)
- Gluttony (21:17, 23:21)
- Withholding unduly (11:24)
- Chasing fantasies (12:11, 28:19)
- Ignore discipline (13:18)
- Talking only (14:23)
- Shiftlessness (19:15)
- Oppressing poor to increase wealth (22:16)
- Giving gifts to the rich (22:16)
- Putting up security (22:27)
- Drunkenness (23:21)
- Stinginess (28:22)

2.2 Consequences of poverty

- Commit crime (6:30, 30:9)
- Shunned (14:20, 19:4, 19:7)
- Ruin (10:15)

2.3 How the rich should treat the poor

- Don't ignore (21:13)
- Be kind, lend (14:21, 14:31, 19:17)
- Don't oppress/mock (14:31, 17:5, 22:22; see also James 5:1-6)
- Share food (22:9)
- Care about justice for the poor (29:7)
- Defend rights of poor (31:9)

2.4 Things more valuable than material wealth in God's economy

- Wisdom/understanding (3:13-16, 4:7, 16:16, 17:16, 28:11)
- Humility (16:19)
- Peace & quiet (17:1)
- Justice (17:23)
- Blameless walk (19:1)
- Prudent wife (19:14)
- Wife of noble character (31:10)
- Love (15:17)
- Love/honesty (19:22)
- Knowledge/instruction (8:10-11, 20:15)
- Righteousness (10:2, 11:4, 11:18, 11:28, 16:8)
- Kindness/Respect (11:16)

- Fear of God (15:16)
- Good name (22:1)
- Blamelessness (28:6)

2.5 Consequences of greed, or danger of pursuing material wealth

- Treasures of no value (10:2)
- Fleeting (21:6, 23:4, 27:24; see also James 1:9)
- False hope (18:11)
- Hardening (18:23)
- False friends (14:20, 19:4)
- Victim of crime (13:8)
- Trouble (15:27)
- Wear self out (23:4)
- Political instability (29:4)
- Disown God (30:7-9)

2.6 What one should do with one's wealth

- Honor God (3:9)
- Don't put up security (6:1-5, 11:15, 17:18, 20:16, 22:26, 27:13)
- Be willing to sell/don't hoard (11:26)
- Leave an inheritance (13:22)
- Be kind to needy (14:21, 14:31)
- Give without sparing (21:26)

2.7 How to attain wealth

- Pursue wisdom (3:16, 8:18-21, 21:20)
- Honor God (3:10)
- Diligent work (10:4, 12:11, 12:14, 12:24, 13:4, 14:23, 20:13, 21:5, 28:19)
- Obtain God's blessing (10:22)
- Generosity (11:24, 11:25)
- Patience (13:11)
- Righteousness (13:21, 13:22, 13:25, 14:11)
- Humility (22:4)
- Fear of God (22:4)
- Trust in God (28:25)
- Give to the poor (28:27)

2.8 How not to attain wealth

- Dishonesty (10:2, 11:1, 13:11, 21:6)
- Accept bribes (17:23)
- Charge exorbitant interest (28:8)

2.9 Standing of rich and poor before God

- Equal (22:2; see also James 2:1-7)

3. Examples of caring for the poor

- Boaz left extra grain for Ruth to gather after the harvesters. (Ruth 2:2, 2:15-16)
- There were no needy among them. (Acts 4:34-35)
- Tabitha always helping the poor. (Acts 9:36-39)
- Macedonian churches gave beyond their ability out of their poverty. (2 Co 8:2-5)
- Paul was eager to remember the poor. (Gal 2:10)

4. Jesus' teaching on the rich and the poor

- "The more you have, the more it has you." (Mt 19:21-23, Lk 16:13; see also I Ti 6:10)
- Poverty cannot be eliminated. (John 12:8)
- Give to the needy privately. (Mt 6:1-4)
- Care for the poor; parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31-46)

5. Paul's teaching on the poor

- Set aside money (to give to the poor) in keeping with your income. (1 Co 16:1-2, 2 Co 8:12)
- Sow generously; give cheerfully (not reluctantly) what you have decided to give. (2 Co 9:6-11)
- Our desire is...that there might be equality...your plenty will supply their need. (2 Co 8:13-15)
- "Need" is to "plenty" as "hungry" is to "well-fed". (Phil 4:11-13)
- Work so that you will not be dependent on anybody. (1 Thess 4:11-12)
- We gave this rule: if a man does not work he shall not eat. (2 Thess 3:10)
- Care for widows really in need. But if they have families, let them care for them. Don't burden the church so the church can help those really in need. (1 Ti 5:3-16)
- If we have food and clothing we will be content with that. (1 Ti 6:8)

6. Questions

6.1 Does the Bible teach Marxism/Communism?

- Principle of Socialism: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his work."¹
- Principle of Communism: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need."²

Constitution of the USSR (1977)³

Article 14. The source of the growth of social wealth and of the well-being of the people, and of each individual, is the labour, free from exploitation, of Soviet people.

The state exercises control over the measure of labour and of consumption in accordance with the principle of socialism: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his work". It fixes the rate of taxation on taxable income.

Socially useful work and its results determine a person's status in society. By combining material and moral incentives and encouraging innovation and a creative attitude to work, the state helps transform labour into the prime vital need of every Soviet citizen.

Conclusion: No. The Bible says nothing about the state controlling how much one works or earns or spends, nor about the state caring for the poor beyond ensuring justice. Caring for the poor is the responsibility of families and the church.

¹ John McCarthy, <http://www-formal.stanford.edu/jmc/progress/marxism.html>

² Ibid

³ US Information Agency, <http://csde.aces.k12.ct.us/friends/constitution/const-ussr1977.html>

6.2 Does the Bible advocate total socio-economic equality?

- Our desire is...that there might be equality...your plenty will supply their need. (2 Co 8:13-15)
- There were no needy among them. (Acts 4:34-35)
- Poverty cannot be eliminated. (John 12:8)
- Different people of have different levels of income (Lk 16:25, 1 Co 16:1-2)
- Be rich toward God; parable of the rich fool (Lk 12:16-21)
- Use worldly wealth to gain friends (Lk 16:9)

Conclusion: No. There are many causes of poverty, and many honorable ways to obtain wealth. The Bible advocates glorifying God with one's wealth. The Bible does not command an egalitarian society in which everyone has the right to possess material wealth equal to everyone else's.

6.3 Who are the poor that we should help?

Those who (all three must apply):

- don't have enough to eat or clothes to wear (Mt 6:31-33, Phil 4:11-13, 1 Ti 6:8)
- who have no family to support them (1 Ti 5:3-16)
- who are incapable of work (1 Thess 4:11-12, 2 Thess 3:10)

7. Application

Do you give to the poor?

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