

GOD AND MAMMON

The words of Jesus in **Matthew 6:24** and **Luke 16:13**, “You cannot serve God and Mammon,” are more important now than ever, because our global economic system focuses primarily on money and the ideology behind it gives priority to the accumulation of wealth. It is now clear that in biblical times wealth was the result not of virtue but of exploitation and disobedience to the covenant. In his book, *Jesus, Justice and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (WJK, 2000), William Herzog writes:

The rich were those strong enough to deprive others of their property and livelihood, leaving only enough to maintain a subsistence existence. The only way to become rich was to exploit others, so wealth was not an expression of blessing but the mark of a social predator.

To have no other gods before Yahweh means to keep Yahweh's covenant by respecting Yahweh's gift. If the land is Yahweh's gift, then it belongs to all of Yahweh's people, and the bounty of the land was meant to be extended to include especially those in need, the widow, the orphan, and the poor. The debt codes of the Torah, found mainly in Deuteronomy, were fashioned to express that basic impulse behind the covenant and to warn against losing covenant perspective. (63)

Jesus thus carried on the prophetic tradition, when he announced good news to the poor and denounced the exploitation of the rich and the abuse of the Torah to justify the domination system.

Like Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah, Jesus the prophet interpreted what was happening to the people of Galilee who were being increasingly squeezed by colonial domination and internal exploitation. He taught them to read their distressing situation not as God's will but as the consequence of the violation of God's covenant. (67)

In the first century C.E. as well as in the eighth century B.C.E., peasants were being alienated from their land, and ruling elites were redistributing wealth to an indigenous ruling class while creating bureaucracies to mediate their power and manage their control. Priests and prophets were collaborating with the emerging rulers, legitimating this juggernaut of change and justifying the ways it trampled and destroyed the traditional clan system and network of tribal loyalties. (62)

- 1. Consider the ways in which the accumulation of money, possessions, or wealth has become a central drive of our culture and around the world. List concrete examples. Is this idolatry?**
- 2. Explore ways in which as followers of Jesus we can resist and reverse this drive for accumulation in our own lives, in our faith communities, and in our society. Give practical examples.**