

Chapter 9

Wealth and Social Justice



There is a very famous short story named 'Six Feet Land', penned by the World renowned writer, Leo Tolstoy. The gist of the story is: There once lived a landless peasant. He wished to possess a freehold piece of land. He managed to get an appointment with the chief of the locality and requested for a strip of land. The chief agreed to grant his request on a condition: On a day–time, from sunrise onwards he can cover on the land of his choice – as much land he can go round on feet in a day is his own. If he doesn't return to the spot where he started, nothing will be given.

The delighted peasant started early on the next morning. He wanted to grab plenty of land. He left food, water, his coat, his cap, and his shoes, to save time. He longed to rest but it was impossible for him, if he meant to get back before sunset. He gathered all his strength and he walked on and on. After a hard walking, he began running. He was far away from his starting point. 'I have to gather much' he thought.

He was done up with the heat. He was breathless and exhausted. The sun was almost near the rim. His feet were cut and bruised. His legs began to fail. All his enthusiasm was gone! "All my labour has been in vain," he repented. "If only I have not blundered trying for too much! I can't get back before sunset." He gathered his last strength to get back.

Over-exhausted and breathless, he fell forward and dropped dead. "How much land does a man need?" The servants of the chief picked up the spade and dug a grave long enough for him to lie in, "Six feet" from head to heels.

This story is an excellent example of greed for more and more wealth and its destructive impact on man.

It is very important for us to know about relevance and importance of wealth and its right use in day to day lives. The right attitude towards wealth is not to reject the same or put one's total trust on it, but the proper and just use.

Wealth God's Gift

It is the genuine desire of all to be wealthy for enjoying prosperity in life. The very desire of a person to gather wealth is not wrong at all. It is the will of God that all human beings shall lead a comfortable and happy life. Wealth is a divine gift for the same. The psalmist declares that the one who depends on God shall lack nothing. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want" (Ps. 23:1).

There are many instances in the Bible exemplifying the fact that one's life will flourish if he / she puts trust in God. As long as we are sojourners here on earth, we need wealth. The Good Lord is pleased to give us the same for further progress and happy life. But we shall not forget that wealth is for our need and not for our greed. One who takes pride on wealth will perish.

We are Stewards of Wealth

With regard to the wealth, our Christian attitude is that we are not its masters; but we are only trustees according to the will of God, who is the real master and source of all wealth. We should use our wealth without submitting our hearts to the wealth of. One should learn to handle and utilize one's wealth acknowledging life the best thing in life are not material things and possessions and affluence.

Right to Possess Wealth and Property

Everyone has got his/her right to possess property and wealth. It is a basic human right to possess property irrespective of caste or creed. However, it shall not be at the cost of other's rights for the same – no question of denying another's claim to possess property.

Ownership of private property is encouraged by the Church. It helps us to enjoy freedom for further progress. The church also teaches that one should possess wealth with one's own hard works. But it should not be at the cost of social justice and equality.

Acquisition: Earning of Wealth

Wealth is a gift of God and it is very necessary for a fruitful and prosperous life. Therefore everyone has a right to possess wealth by right means and to save the same. One has to try to seek proper means to earn property and resources to make good use of the same. But one shall not attach undue importance to one's possessions. If we are pre-occupied with our possessions ignoring God, the very source of all wealth, it would be ingratitude towards him. We are able to acquire wealth only because God has given us talents and health. The Lord repeats the same. He once promised to the Israelites: "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'my power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth'. But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth; so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today" (Deut 8:17-18).

Acquisition of Wealth by Unjust Means

Though our possessions are God's bounty, we have no right to appropriate the fruits of another person's labour. Only the wealth acquired through proper channels will be ours to

enjoy. One has got right to earn for his / her immediate use and essential needs, like, food, shelter, and clothing. They are put ones disposal. But the wealth earned by fraud methods, not paying right wages, forcing up prices by taking advantage of ignorance and hardship of another are all against, social justice and violation of divine law. God tells us through the mouth of Prophet Jeremiah: "For scoundrels are found among my people; they take over the goods of others. Like fowlers they set a trap; they catch human beings. Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy " (Jer.5:26-28). These words warn us reminding not to hold possessions unjustly as it forbids usurping another's property. Divine laws recommend justice and charity in the case of earthly goods and fruits of one's labour. It demands common good and respect for other's rights.

So, it is wrong to earn wealth without one's hard labour. There are many wayward organizations to attract and tempt persons to possess easy money, without any labour through illegal and unholy sources, such as, black marketing, hoarding, conspiring to create artificial scarcity of necessary commodities, robbery, theft, looting, etc. Amassing wealth in an unjust manner will pull a person away from the path of salvation. The story of Zacahaeus teaches the same message. The wealth we earn through and only through our own efforts, by proper channels only, will add happiness and prosperity to one's life.

The universe holds enough resources in its stock to meet the needs of all and the humans have a right to make good use of them for his existence and due development. This principle must be the very foundation of earning and utilization of one's possessions. In this context, the Psalmist reminds us: "Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vein hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them" (Pslm. 62:10).

Utilization of Wealth

The 'ownership' of property makes its holder a steward of providence with the duty of making its benefits available to others also. When a person comes to the awareness that he possesses wealth with God's blessings or due to God's providence, he will never misuse it. It is not proper to God-fearing persons to think that it's my wealth, it's my property and I can use it according to my will and pleasure.

A true Christian has an obligation to earn and use his wealth for the welfare of his family and society. Wealth is to be utilized in accordance with the social dimension of wealth itself. St. Basil tells us: "The bread (loaves) you have reserved in your *almarha* is not yours. It belongs to the hungry. The clothes (dress) you have kept safe in your *almarha* are not yours. It belongs to the naked." With this conviction we must be able to utilize our possessions, by sharing our resources with the poor and the needy brethren.

Those who hold goods for life and consume the same should use them with moderation, reserving the better portion for others – the poor, the sick and the needy. One' shard earned

money shall be spent prudently. Both, lavish and miserly use of the wealth is equally considered sinful. So a Christian is advised to avoid wasteful expenditure. Our financial security also depends on the right use of the wealth. On this context, to recall the teaching of the Pope Pius XI is relevant. "Wealth should not be wasted away by its misuse or non-use at all." St. Thomas Aquinas highlights on the social perspective of wealth. He tells: "Men shall not consider his material wealth solely as his own. It shall be held as common properties to be shared with others." This attitude towards the proper use of wealth will help in our Christian commitment by which we will be blessed to lead a life of just and peace.

For God and for Ceasar

Jesus has taught us to give what is due to God and nation, without any hesitation. This principle must be strictly observed by everyone, on the use of wealth. A true Christian must become exemplary in this regard, standing for the cause of God and nation. There, certain portion of one's wealth shall be set apart for the nation as tax and tithe for God's sake. We must be useful citizens for the cause of God and nation.

It is the duty of a citizen to pay taxes to the nation. St. Paul writes: "Pay to all what is due them -taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due" (Rom 13:7). Our share & contribution is meant for the welfare of the society. It is taken for the protection and progress, social security of all, irrespective of caste or creed. Tax – evasion, tampering with ones accounts, malpractices like misappropriation of income and expenditure, etc are violation of the laws of nation and sin before God. It is unjust not to pay the social security contributions (taxes) required by legitimate authority.

We are duty-bound to give our share for the sake of God. We can see the custom of giving tithes in Old Testament. All kinds of juridical measures were taken to ensure individual obligations: "Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house" (Malachi 3:10). There are three different ways to offer what is due to God as religious duty.

Firstly, it is contribution towards different activities of the Church. This is to assist the church for the welfare of the altar servers and liturgical services. Secondly, contribution to support the needy and the poor (Care of the Poor). St. John Christotom vigorously says: If anyone hesitates to part his share of the wealth with the poor and needy, he will be a thief and murderer.

Thirdly, it is contribution towards the proclamation of the Word of God and evangelization programmes and other activities such as retreats, audiovisual programs, mass media, conventions etc.

We too can become participants and preachers of Good News by way of sharing our resources willingly. An increased sense of Justice and social awareness will be the basic thing to any fundamental development of human society. This development multiplies material goods and puts them at the service of the persons. It reduces poverty and economic exploitation. Let us generously impart our duty by offering our share, what is due to God and the nation.

Social Teachings of the Church

The church has ever been active in her responsibility in teaching the faithful on subjects like acquisition of wealth, responsible use of the same, social justice, etc. As devoted members of the church, it is our honour and duty to study and practice these official teachings of great importance.

Some of the important documents, both encyclicals and pastoral letters are given below for our information and further guidelines.

1. Rerum Novarum (The condition of Labour)

This is the encyclical issued by Pope Leo XIII, in May 15, 1891. This is considered as Magnacarta document on the rights of the labourers. This document stands for human, economic and social order. The major areas of concern are: Care of the poor, rights of workers, role of private property, duties of workers / employers, return to Christian morals and role of public authority.

2. Quadragesimo Anno (The Reconstruction of the Social Order)

This is another important social document decreed by Pope Pius XI, in May 15, 1931, on the 40th Anniversary of the declaration of Rerum Novarum. This document deals with solutions proposed for social challenges, with the Christian perspective. Major areas of concern are: Role of the church, responsible ownership, labour and capital, public authority, just social order, capitalism and socialism.

3. Mater et Magistra (Mother and the Teacher)

The official teaching (encyclical) was issued by Pope John XXIII, in May 15, 1961. Agricultural activities and the role of the developing nations are the major issues dealt in this document. The Pope articulates an important role of laity in applying the social teachings of the church. Major area of concern is just remuneration, agriculture, economic development, role of the church, international co-operation and socialization.

4. Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth)

This encyclical letter was issued by Pope John XXIII, in April 11th, 1963. The main tenets of this encyclical are the rights and duties to be followed by individuals, public authorities, national governments, and the world community. "Peace must be founded on truth, built according to justice, integrated by charity and put into practice in freedom". Major concerns are Rights and duties, role of authorities, common good, Christian world order, International relation and disarmament.

5. Populorum Progressio (The development of peoples)

The document was decreed by Pope Paul VI, in March 26, 1967. He speaks of the challenges of development by exploring the nature of poverty and the conflicts it produces. The Pope articulates the role of the church in the process of development. He concludes the document by terming 'development' as the new name for peace and exhorts all Christians to strive for justice. 'Peace is not the absence of war'. Major concerns: Human aspirations, injustice, church and development, new humanism, common good, economic planning, international trade and peace.

6. Sollicitudine Nostre (Our Social Concerns)

The document was issued by Pope John Paul II in December 30, 1987. It affirms the concerns of the church in dealing with the social problems. It advocates a just distribution of wealth as the Pope affirms that it will be possible only through a Christian way of life.

7. Centesimus Annus (One Hundred Years).

Pope John Paul II declared this official document in May 1st, 1991, on the occasion of the centenary of the publication of the encyclical, 'Rerum Novarum.' It deals with the collapse of communism worldwide and the reasons for the same. It also proposes solutions to various social problems posed by the present social situations. Major areas of concern are human dignity, human rights, justice, development, peace and economic systems.

These social teachings mentioned above are very important documents to be kept and studied for any Christians, as they give right guidelines for creating a just society.

Wealth is a gift of God which enables man to sustain and make progress in his life. It is to be utilized according to the will of God. We shall be aware of the fact that we are not the masters and owners of the wealth, but we are only trustees of the same. God is the real source of all wealth. When we live according to ethical norms in the acquisition and utilization of wealth in just and responsible way, we can claim to be stewards of wealth rather than owners of the same. Then we will be faithful trustees of wealth, taking care of the welfare of all, irrespective of cast colour, creed etc.

I. Let us Discuss

1. What would be your response if someone tells you: 'I do as I like with my possessions which I have earned with my labour'. Would you agree with him?
2. Can you justify a person who makes a business of profit through tax-evasion and other illegal activities?

II. Let us find out the Answers

1. What do you understand by the statement, Wealth is a gift from God?
2. We are not the masters of wealth but only trustees of the same. What does it mean to you?
3. What all things are to be kept in mind in the acquisition of wealth?
4. What are the measures to be taken whenever you want to use your wealth?
5. Enumerate on any five important social teachings of the church.

III. Activity

Undertake measures to support a poor family financially, under your parish.

IV. Let us Read and Reflect

Luke 12:13-21.