



## Indivisible: Prophets and Profit

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*By Marvin Olasky, Ph.D.*

I'd like to offer a brief overview of biblical teaching as it relates to the economic concept of profit. My overview begins with chapter 2 of Genesis, prior to the fall, where God gives Adam physical and intellectual work to do: till the ground to grow crops and name all the animals. In the following chapter, the work becomes much harder, as the ground is cursed as a result of the fall. What theologians call “the fall of man” is also the rise of economics, because, once food and shelter can no longer be taken for granted, scarcity enters the picture. Arguments over production, consumption, and distribution are unavoidable.

The Bible makes it clear that, on this side of the fall, only by the sweat of our brows will Adam and we, his descendants, profit. But, despite the added hardship, our task is still the same as it was before the fall: to take the raw materials God has created and impose order on them for human flourishing.

The Hebrew and Greek words translated as “profit” appear 43 times in one careful translation of the Bible, the English Standard Version (ESV). Some uses do not relate to finances, but those that do suggest two positive lessons and two warnings that still deeply affect our debates about the role of profit.

First positive: Hard, smart work is good, and profiting by it is admirable. One indication of God's blessing of the Old Testament patriarchs Abraham and Jacob is that they became "very rich," with sheep, camels, donkeys, and much besides. Women also can be entrepreneurs: The ideal wife in chapter 31 of Proverbs rises while it is still night, "evaluates a field and buys it," and "sees that her profits are good."

Second positive: Profit is a gift from God because our lives and our ability to work at all are totally dependent on Him. The epistle of James notes, "You who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'"

First warning: Profiting from the distress of the poor is wrong. Chapter 25 of Leviticus states, "If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner." During this period of temporary support, "Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you." There is a similar warning in the book of Job: A person who "has crushed and abandoned the poor... will give back the fruit of his toil... from the profit of his trading he will get no enjoyment."

Second warning: While profit can be a blessing, don't think that profit proves or indicates godliness. Psalm 73 castigates those who confuse wealth and salvation: "Pride is their necklace... Their eyes swell out through fatness... They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth." The Bible frequently warns about dishonest gain: Paul wrote that an elder must not be "a lover of money" and a deacon must not be "greedy for dishonest gain." The Book of Acts criticizes silver-smiths who profited from making idols.

These teachings together display the biblical teaching that profit, in most circumstances, is good but not ultimate. To be sure, some Christian scholars have taken individual verses out of context, thereby creating barriers to hard work and human flourishing. For example, the prophet Ezekiel says the righteous man "gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not lend at interest or take any profit..." The context makes it clear that this prohibition concerns lending to or profiting from the

destitute—yet some have interpreted such verses as precluding all interest or profit, and a few still do.

### **Risk, Investment, and Profit**

The Bible's strongest pro-profit teaching comes in two parables—in Matthew, chapter 25 (often called “the parable of the talents”) and in Luke, chapter 19 (often called “the parable of the minas”). In both of these, Jesus speaks of a master going away and entrusting wealth to his servants: Roman “talents” were worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, perhaps even millions; a mina was worth considerably less, but still, perhaps, the equivalent of 100 days of labor.

In the parable of the talents, both the servant who receives five talents and the servant who receives two invest them and garner a 100 percent return. The master responds to each, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much.” But the servant who received one talent, fearful of losing it, buries it in the ground: The master calls him “wicked and slothful” and says that at least the servant should have left the money with bankers so that it would have earned some interest.

In Jesus's parable of the minas, the master gives 10 of his servants one mina each and tells them to engage in trade while he is away. One servant multiplies his investment tenfold and is told, “Well done, faithful servant.” Another servant multiplies his investment fivefold and also receives commendation. But the master condemns the servant who hid his mina: He gives it to the one who has ten, noting once again—as in the other parable—that he should at least have earned some interest on it.

Christ's parables typically have multiple meanings, and these are no exceptions. Jesus clearly was referring to faithfulness, not just finance. He was showing that the reward for responsible action is not vacation but more responsibility. But the parables also display the assumption that legitimate profit is praiseworthy. Over the past 2,000 years many Christians have criticized profit wrung from the poor, but some have gone on to attack profit-making enterprises generally—and that critique is thoroughly unbiblical.

Misquoting the Bible has sometimes led to other mistakes. Some Gnostics, ancient and modern, have seen all matter as evil, leading them to argue that “money is the root of all evil.” A Lexis-Nexis search reveals current

leaders ranging from a Las Vegas registrar of voters to a *New York Times* headline writer saying the same. But Paul the apostle (who, like other biblical writers, had nothing against food, drink, and other material things in the right amounts) wrote: “The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil” (ESV). It’s the *love* of money, not the money itself, that is the problem.

These Scriptural texts can correct those who preach unbiblical economics. The Bible also suggests (and the history of the past 2,000 years confirms) some additional lessons. Among them: that individuals work hardest when their efforts are likely to be rewarded; that the creation of wealth and the reduction of poverty require risk-taking that is likely to occur only when the opportunity for profit is present.

It’s vital to understand that the Bible is more than a series of vignettes and verses. It repeatedly conveys a realistic sense of human nature (which makes sense, since the Author of the Bible made humans and knows our frailty). Unlike the scriptures of other major religions that characterize their founders—Buddha, Muhammad, or others—as ideal human beings, the Bible shows the flaws of its leading figures. Noah, recently saved from death by flood, gets passed-out drunk; Abraham, fearing for his life, is ready to pimp his wife; Jacob is a deceiver, Samson a muscular twit, and David an adulterer who covers up that act by having a loyal captain killed.

### **Profit and Mutual Benefit**

As a result, economic truths known by free-market economists resonate with the biblical view of the world. Biblical realism opposes communists and socialists who believe that human beings forced into a non-competitive environment will all be ready to work hard for no profit but the satisfaction of providing for others. Biblical realism suggests that, without the opportunity for profit, most individuals bury their talents, both occupational and financial. Profit leads to further investment and wealth creation; without profit, economies contract. After all, without profit, there is no wealth left over to be re-invested.

The opposite of profit, remember, is loss. Some equate profit with greed, but it’s the absence of profit that’s likely to produce greedy consumption rather than risky investment.

Biblical realism also helps us to see that few among us are likely to love our neighbors as ourselves on a regular basis—but we are normally quite willing to help our neighbors if we can help ourselves in the process.

Free markets provide the opportunity for willing buyers and sellers to come together to make “a trade that helps both teams,” as baseball fans say. Markets merge altruism and selfishness in a way that no system based on either command and control or singing around the campfire can do.

James Madison, trained in biblical realism at John Witherspoon’s Princeton, noted in *Federalist* 51 that “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” Perhaps if men were angels, profit and loss statements would be unnecessary (although they would still be valuable, since profit or loss communicate whether capital is being allocated perceptively or poorly). But since we are not angelic, the opportunity to profit makes us more inclined to serve than to be surly. Those who have had the foresight to anticipate which goods and services buyers most want should be rewarded—otherwise, we won’t have those goods and services.

Furthermore, when we minimize the importance of profit we also reduce the magnitude of philanthropy. The faith of a woman who donates her last pennies is wonderful, but many charity leaders would also welcome gifts of appreciated stock.

The Bible is pro-property and pro-compassion. In chapter 5 of Acts, Peter the apostle scolded a liar named Ananias about property, saying, “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?” The problem wasn’t the property but the lie. Ananias was pretending to be more generous than was true: The biblical goal is to make a profit and give much of it away.

We have witnessed in our recent economic travails what happens when honesty is hard to find and people don’t trust each other enough to go to market. Econometrics without econo-ethics fails all of us.

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