

Money, Greed, and God

Why Capitalism Is the Solution
and Not the Problem

Jay W. Richards



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List of Figures and Tables

ix

Introduction: Can a Christian Be a Capitalist?	1
1 Can't We Build a Just Society?	9
Myth no. 1: The Nirvana Myth (contrasting capitalism with an unrealizable ideal rather than with its live alternatives)	
2 What Would Jesus Do?	33
Myth no. 2: The Piety Myth (focusing on our good intentions rather than on the unintended consequences of our actions)	
3 Doesn't Capitalism Foster Unfair Competition?	59
Myth no. 3: The Zero-Sum Game Myth (believing that trade requires a winner and a loser)	
4 If I Become Rich, Won't Someone Else Become Poor?	83
Myth no. 4: The Materialist Myth (believing that wealth isn't created, it's simply transferred)	
5 Isn't Capitalism Based on Greed?	111
Myth no. 5: The Greed Myth (believing that the essence of capitalism is greed)	
6 Hasn't Christianity Always Opposed Capitalism?	135
Myth no. 6: The Usury Myth (believing that working with money is inherently immoral or that charging interest on money is always exploitive)	

7 Doesn't Capitalism Lead to an Ugly Consumerist Culture?	157
Myth no. 7: The Artsy Myth (confusing aesthetic judgments with economic arguments)	
8 Are We Going to Use Up All the Resources?	183
Myth no. 8: The Freeze-Frame Myth (believing that things always stay the same—for example, assuming that population trends will continue indefinitely, or treating a current “natural resource” as if it will always be needed)	
Conclusion: Working All Things Together for Good	209
<i>Appendix: Is the “Spontaneous Order” of the Market Evidence of a Universe Without Purpose?</i>	<i>217</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>225</i>
<i>Notes</i>	<i>227</i>

Can't We Build a Just Society?

BIG CARS, BIG STEAKS, BIG CHURCHES

As a young adult, I liked revolutionary rhetoric. It was more sophomoric rebellion than careful conclusion, but it was enough. In my eighteen-year-old mind, I had plenty to rebel against. I was born and raised in Amarillo, a place on the High Plains of the Texas Panhandle so isolated we thought our town of 150,000 was the big city. Three icons capture the flavor of Amarillo better than an entire essay. It is bounded on the west by the Cadillac Ranch—ten Cadillacs planted nose down in concrete, their tail fins neatly in a row—and on the east by the Big Texan Steakhouse, a restaurant where you can get a seventy-two-ounce steak free if you can eat it in one hour. In between are a bunch of really big churches. In four blocks of downtown Amarillo, for instance, the First Baptist Church, the Central Church of Christ—where my best friend went—and St. Mary's Catholic Church together claimed more than twelve thousand members.

In between these parking-lot-happy congregations sat our church, First Presbyterian. It was smaller than the others, but with its quasi-Gothic architecture, gray stones, and red tile roof, it looked like a country-club church—a problem exacerbated by the fact that it *was* a country-club church. Our congregation heard few hard lies from the pulpit—and even fewer hard truths.

It was a comfortable church, a church that found the culture wars unseemly.

But things changed when I entered junior high and came under the sway of a firebrand youth pastor, Darren Clark. Clark was a divorced former Southern Baptist (a core Presbyterian constituency in Texas) who had an uncanny knack for illustrating Bible stories with lyrics from the Beatles and Simon and Garfunkel. I wasn't always sure if his lessons owed more to the Beatles or the Bible, but they were easy to remember.

He was always railing against nuclear weapons, war, and the indifference of Christians to poverty. Whether Jesus died for our sins was less of a priority. In any case, he must have railed a lot against the evils of wealth, because I remember the Bible verses on those topics better than any others: "You cannot serve both God and Mammon." "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." "The love of money is the root of all evil."

New thoughts entered my mind: Is it right that some should be so rich while others remain poor? Should hordes of people have to work in unsafe conditions, barely getting by on their meager salaries, while their bosses grow fat and complacent? Wouldn't it be better if everyone had as much as they want, or at least as much as they need? Shouldn't we do whatever is necessary to get rid of such injustices? These questions bothered me. I wasn't sure what we were supposed to do about poverty or nukes other than feel really bad about them, but still, to a teenager in a conservative Texas town, this was heady stuff. Clark offered me a rare commodity: a chance to rebel against authority and feel self-righteous doing it.

EXIT STAGE LEFT

The seeds sown in junior high and high school were reaped in college. I attended a small liberal-arts school north of Austin, Southwestern University. The college had a tenuous tie to the Methodist Church, but whatever Christianity remained had long since been converted to Protestant Liberalism—think of the *New York Times* editorial page laced with Bible verses. To a freshman weaned on George Strait and chicken-fried steak, the ambiance seemed smart and sophisticated.

I had already decided to study political science, so I found myself right away in “Introduction to American Politics,” taught by a soft-spoken professor, Suk Kim, who had immigrated to the United States from Korea. In one of his first lectures, Kim asked the class to name the most disagreeable jobs we could think of. Someone said garbage collector, another said sewer repair, then hard laborer in extreme climates, and so forth. He then asked for the most agreeable jobs, which, everyone agreed, were movie stars, professional athletes and musicians, CEOs of large corporations, bank presidents, and so forth. Kim then asked us to rank the pay scales of the various professions. With few exceptions, the jobs voted most disagreeable were also the lowest paying. Kim asked to great effect if anyone thought that was fair. No one raised a hand. I certainly didn't. The lesson was obvious.

Professor Kim's lectures were reinforced by the reading assignments. He required a standard textbook describing the bicameral legislature, the separation of powers into the judicial, legislative, and executive branches, and all that other stuff I had already learned in high school civics. But we had two other, quite memorable books. The first was a short work by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels—*The Communist Manifesto*. Written in 1848, it describes history as a series of struggles between oppressors and oppressed, each struggle punctuated by a social upheaval in which one system gives rise to another. According to the *Manifesto*, the original state of man was a primitive communism without private property. The mass slavery of Egypt and other ancient cultures represented the fall from this primeval state of

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innocence. The slave system eventually gave way to feudalism, with poor serfs caring for large tracts of land owned by nobles. And feudalism eventually gave way to capitalism, with its highly productive urban industrial centers.

In modern capitalist societies, Marx and Engels argued, the business owners—what they call the bourgeoisie—seek above all else to increase their profits. So they pay workers as little as possible while taking the “surplus value” produced by the workers as profit. With those profits, they then invest in tools and factories to extract more from the labor of fewer laborers, which again creates more surplus value. The capitalists compete to produce more and more with less and less. Workers become more and more alienated from the fruits of their labor, as capitalists skim more and more of the surplus value of their work without giving them just compensation.

The bigger and better capitalists inevitably beat out the smaller ones. These big businesses can then produce far more with still fewer workers. In this way the few remaining business owners inevitably grow fatter and richer, while a growing pool of laborers grows poorer and poorer. Capitalism thus sows the seeds of its own destruction, by creating a large oppressed population that will eventually revolt against its oppressors. The workers, Marx and Engels predicted, would usher in the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” where the people—that is, the state—would own all industry. But for those afraid of big government, don’t worry. This would be merely a temporary socialist way station on the road to full communism, where the state would wither away into a brotherhood of man, and milk and honey would flow through streets of gleaming gold, or something like that.

Although Marx and Engels claimed that such a revolution is inevitable, they wrote *The Communist Manifesto* to help the inevitable along. They concluded with a call to arms:

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The

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proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

Workingmen of all countries, unite!

This worked well alongside the other required text, *Democracy for the Few*, by American socialist Michael Parenti. With Parenti's book, Professor Kim offered students a great deal: read it five times and get an "A" for the course.¹ For me, it was an easy assignment, since the book was filled with facts I couldn't refute and moral fury I couldn't resist. On almost any page, Parenti offered hard evidence of the perverse inequalities of American life:

The top 10 percent of American households own 98 percent of the tax-exempt state and local bonds, 94 percent of business assets, and 95 percent of the value of all trusts. The richest 1 percent own 60 percent of all corporate stock and all business assets. True, some 40 percent of families own some stocks or bonds, but almost all of these have total holdings of less than \$2,000. Taking into account their debts and mortgages, 90 percent of American families have little or no net assets.

By the end of the semester, I had highlighted practically every line in the book. Parenti's point seemed undeniable: Just as Marx and Engels had predicted 150 years earlier, American capitalism had produced gross inequalities between rich and poor. A rich oligarchy controlled more and more of the wealth and left the vast majority of Americans with very little. The only way to balance the scales was for the national wealth to be owned and controlled by the people as a whole.

My five trips through Parenti's book gained me zeal and an "A" for the course. I had a grid for interpreting pretty much everything. Suddenly, the materialism and greed of American life started popping up everywhere. I noticed all the BMWs and Saabs on campus. And I was surprised how many guys in my dorm had the same poster of Garfield the cat. On the poster, Garfield was covered in jewels and leaning against a Ferrari,

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