

## WHAT WOULD JESUS DO WITH ALL YOUR STUFF?

**Craig L. Blomberg**

Despite some of the kitsch marketing, I thought the “WWJD?” bracelets were a great idea. I just don’t know how many people seriously tried to answer the question represented by the acronym around their wrists. Take material possessions, for example. When American evangelical Christians continue to average barely over 3% of their annual incomes in giving to the Lord’s work, it’s hard to believe very many have a clue what Jesus would do. Add to that the frequent heresy propounded in certain “Christian” circles that, if one just has enough faith (and sends enough money to the person or organization proclaiming this principle!), one can be both healthy and wealthy—all the time! With one group of believers apathetic or entrapped by materialism and another group rightly suspicious of the prosperity gospel, it’s no surprise that people are both confused and disobedient in the arena of stewardship.

The Bible discloses a quite different model concerning possessions. The patriarchs who were rich were also generous in helping others (Gen. 13; 41:56-57; Job 29:11-17). The Mosaic Law enshrined private property as a fundamental good, but for that very reason created checks and balances so that hopefully every Israelite would have a chance to own some (Num. 26). The sacrificial system, laws against interest, Sabbath days or years and Jubilees, taxes and tithes, and numerous laws concerned with justice for the poor all provided safeguards against the idolatrous use of possessions. While wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites received manna, which required different individuals with varying needs and abilities to collect it six times a week. Exodus 16:18 (NIVI) records the miraculous result: the one “who gathered much did not have too much,” while the one “who gathered little did not have too little.” Although this was a temporary desert arrangement, Paul quotes these words centuries later to guide the Corinthians in

taking up a collection for the needy believers in Judea (2 Cor. 8:15). God is not asking us to trade places with the poor, merely to give from our surplus, but to be ruthlessly honest how much is surplus.

A similar “golden mean” appears tucked away in Proverbs 30:8—“give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.” Why? “Otherwise, I may have too much and disown [God] and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God” (v. 9). Many scholars believe this text lies behind the petition in the Lord’s Prayer for God to give us but our daily bread. What then of the “prosperity gospel”? It is based on the uniquely Old Testament arrangement between God and Israel that, as his people were largely obedient to the Law they would be materially blessed and as they were largely disobedient they would be cursed. No text in either Testament ever suggests that this arrangement was duplicated with any other nation or in any other era.

So what would Jesus do? Call everyone to sell all like he did with the rich young ruler (Luke 18:22 pars.)? Of course not. Again, that is a unique command addressed to no one else in the entire Bible. Zacchaeus gives up only half and a bit, and that voluntarily (19:8). The servants in the parable of the pounds are praised when they invest their master’s money and make more, but they recognize that it all remains the property of their master (vv. 11-27). So maybe Jesus would have tithed? As a Jew obedient to the Hebrew Scriptures, he probably did, but then the two annual tithes for the Lord’s house and his workers and the one triennial one for the poor and needy averaged out to 23 1/3 % giving each year for the faithful Jew in Jesus’ day (cf. Lev. 27:30-33 with Deut. 14:22-29).

In the era of the new covenant, however, no command to tithe ever appears. Instead, we read of models of generous, even sacrificial giving (see esp. 2 Cor. 8:1-5). The problem with

10% for most middle-to-upper-class Westerners today is that it is often too *little* to truly qualify as generous and sacrificial, given all our assets. The “graduated tithe,” by which one gives away a higher *percentage* the more one makes may well better reflect biblical priorities. That at least is what my wife and I have attempted to do in our twenty-five years of marriage. Starting with 10% to our church and to other Christians and Christian organizations particularly concerned with ministering a holistic gospel, addressing people’s physical as well as spiritual needs at home and abroad, we have increased that percentage by one or two percent every year since. And yet our comfortable middle-class lifestyle suggests to me that we still have much more to learn in our lifetime about truly sacrificial giving.