

# Should a Christian Own Possessions?

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In one passage of the New Testament, Jesus Christ gave the following instructions to an individual: “**If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor**, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Matt. 19: 21). A little later, when the New Testament Church was *first founded*, we find the Church living under, what appears to be, a self-imposed system of **communism**.

In this article, we will answer the questions: Should a Christian *own* possessions? Does the New Testament endorse *communism*?

## The Root of All Evil?

Doesn't scripture tell us that “money is the root of all evil”? Actually, no, it doesn't! Rather, it says this: “For the **love** of money is a root of all *kinds of evil*” (I Tim. 6:10, *NKJV*). (The *KJV* says “**the** root,” but most other translations say “**a** root.”)

The most important *distinction* we see in the scripture quoted above, is that it is **not** money *itself* which is a root of all kinds of evil; rather, it is **the love of money** which is a root of all kinds of evil!

Speaking of the coming *end-time*, the Apostle Paul said, “For men will be lovers of themselves, **lovers of money...**” (II Tim. 3:2). Regarding the Pharisees of Christ's day, we are told that they likewise, were “lovers of money” (Luke 16:14).

If money **itself** is evil, then *no* Christian should *have* any money! Nor should you be *accepting* money from your employer!

Having “money” is **not** evil! What *is* evil, is having a “**love** of money.” What *is* evil, is “**trusting**” in riches. And, Jesus Christ Himself *tells us that*. Christ said the following: “Children, how hard it is for those who **trust** in riches to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:24).

Let's now look at an *example* of an individual who “**trusted**” in his riches:

Now as He [Christ] was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, “Good Teacher, **what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?**” So Jesus said to him... “You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit

adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not bear false witness,’ ‘Do not defraud,’ ‘Honor your father and your mother.’” And he answered and said to Him, “Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth.”

Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “**One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor,** and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.”

But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for **he had great possessions.**

Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, “Children, how hard it is for **those who trust in riches** to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10: 17-24).

This man **trusted** in his riches. And, Jesus Christ—*being* the “Son of God”—*knew* this man’s *heart*. Jesus *knew* that this **particular** man had a problem— that of **trusting** in his riches.

Christ’s statement to this man, about “**selling his possessions**” is a statement **directed at** all those who “**trust** in riches”!!

Christ was **NOT** saying that everyone who becomes a Christian, should “sell their possessions”!

## Sell Your “Lands” and Property?

Let’s now *continue* the discussion in Mark chapter 10:

Then Peter began to say to Him, “See, **we** have left all and followed You.” So Jesus answered and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or **lands**, for My sake and the gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time— houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, **eternal life**” (Mark 10: 28-30).

Notice first of all, Peter was saying that it was **he and the other disciples** who had left houses and families—in order to *literally* follow Jesus during His ministry. Christ had specifically chosen these men to perform a *special mission*.

Yet... does the above passage mean, that *everyone who becomes a Christian* should “leave” or sell their “lands”—that is, **give up their property?**

Well... **if** that is what Christ meant, then (according to this passage), Christ would **likewise** mean that we must give up our “brothers,” our “sisters,” our “fathers,” and our “mothers”!!

It would mean that whenever someone becomes a Christian, he automatically cuts all ties with his parents and siblings! Obviously, that is **not** what Christ wants us to do!

Yes, under **rare** circumstances, it might be *necessary* to cut all ties with a *particular* family member. And—even though every Christian should be **fully willing** to give up anything or anyone that stands in his or her *way* of practicing a Christian life—it is certainly **not** the *norm* that one would have to forsake these things (including the *selling* of his property).

After all, consider God’s Ten (Great) Commandments! One of those Commandments says to “*honor* your father and mother.” Would that be “honoring” them, if—once you become a Christian—you automatically “leave”... **cut all ties** with your parents?!

## Did Christians OWN Possessions?

If Christ meant that everyone who becomes a Christian, should “sell his possessions,” then that would mean that **no** Christian should **own** any possessions—**no** Christian should **own** any property! It would mean that every minister *and* every member of God’s Church should **sell** all of their possessions! It would mean that, for the past 2,000 years, every Christian who **owned** property, should **NOT** have owned that property!

Yet, scripture shows that many of God’s *faithful* servants were very well off financially. Many **owned** property...and **even businesses!** Abraham was quite wealthy... as was Job. In New Testament times, Joseph of Arimathea was wealthy! (Matt. 27:57). Furthermore, the New Testament speaks of many Christians *owning* their own homes.

Now, if Jesus Christ wants Christians to **sell** their possessions, then that would mean that John, “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” should **NOT** have **owned** his own home! Yet, what do we read in the book of John? “Now there **stood by the cross of Jesus** His mother, and... When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, ‘Woman, behold your son!’ Then He said to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother!’ And from that hour that disciple took her **to his own home**” (John 19: 25-27).

No, the ownership of private property is **not** wrong! Again, consider one of God’s Ten (Great) Commandments: “Thou shall not **steal**.” “Stealing” **means** that you are “taking someone else’s **private property**”!

Yes, one of the very Ten Commandments of God, *recognizes* “**ownership of property**”!

## Being Rich

Consider again, Christ’s words in Mark chapter 10: “Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, ‘How **hard** it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!’ And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, ‘Children, how hard it is **for those who trust in riches** to enter the kingdom of God!’” (verses 23-24).

The above passage plainly shows that *if* you are rich, then there’s a **very great possibility** that you will begin to **trust** in those riches... and, to the point, that it will become a **stumbling-block** to your very **salvation!**

**However...** the Bible does **NOT** teach that it is “wrong” to **be** rich!! It’s just that “riches” can easily **become** a stumbling-block.

Again, the patriarch Abraham was **rich!** (Gen. 24: 34-36). Yet... the Apostle Paul referred to Abraham as “**the father of all those who believe**” (Rom. 4: 11).

## New Testament Communism

Did the early New Testament Church practice communism? The answer can be found in the book of Acts—which relates the *history* of the early New Testament Church.

Acts chapter 2 discusses the *founding* of the Church, when the Holy Spirit was poured out in a very powerful and dramatic fashion. Later, in the same chapter, we read the following:

Now all who believed were together, and **had all things in common**, and **sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need** (Acts 2: 44-45).

With that in mind, consider what *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* gives as the very *first* definition for “communism”: **1-a:** a theory advocating elimination of private property. **1-b:** a system in which **goods are owned in common and are available to all as needed.**

So... this definition (especially 1-b) describes *what we just read* in the book of Acts!

However... *Webster* (as does all dictionaries) gives a *number* of possible definitions of “communism.” And, the definition quoted above (their *first* definition) is a very **simplicistic** definition of communism... whereas the bulk of *Webster’s* remaining definitions, describe what we *normally* think of when we hear the word “communism”—a **totalitarian** system in which an **authoritarian government** owns all the goods... and distributes those goods, as it sees fit.

Therefore, although Acts 2 describes the New Testament Church temporarily engaging in what could be described as “a very rudimentary form of communism,” this temporary, communal activity of the early New Testament Church was **far different** from this *world’s* “brand” of communism. And... that fact will become clearer, as we continue.

The events described in Acts chapter 2, occurred **in** Jerusalem, and at the time of the festival of Pentecost. Many people (including the pioneer-members of “Christianity”) had traveled **from afar**, to keep this festival of Pentecost in Jerusalem.

Notice what *Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the Bible* says about Acts 2: 44-45 (verses in Acts which we previously read):

But this probably means that, as a consequence of this remarkable outpouring of the Spirit of God and their conversion, they were **detained longer** at Jerusalem

than they had originally intended, they formed a kind of community **for the time being**, that none might suffer want **on the present occasion**; as no doubt the unbelieving Jews, who were mockers, v.13, would **treat** these new converts with the most marked disapprobation [i.e., with harsh condemnation].<sup>1</sup>

Thus, we see that this was a rather *unique* situation! Because of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (which resulted in the formation of the Christian Church) these pioneering members stayed there in Jerusalem **longer** than they had expected... and *also* had to endure harsh treatment by the Jews there.

Let's now notice a quote from *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, concerning Acts chapter 2:

While [the book of] Acts implies that overt persecution of Christians came somewhat later, in certain instances economic **and** social sanctions were undoubtedly imposed on the **early** believers. So **the communal life** described in vv.44-45 should be understood, at least in part, as a **response to** these pressures.<sup>2</sup>

Now, looking at **Acts chapter 4**, we read of a *continuation* of the situation from chapter 2:

Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; **neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.** And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for **all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need** (Acts 4: 32-35).

Consider now, what *Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible* says about the above passage:

It was customary with the Jews to call the **poor** together to eat of the sacrifices; but as the priests were **incensed against** Christ and Christianity, consequently the Christian poor could have no advantage of this kind. Therefore by making a **common stock** for the present necessity, the poor [i.e., the poor among these pioneering-Christians] were supplied; so there was none among them that lacked. This provision therefore of the community of goods, which could be but **temporary**, was made both suitably and seasonably.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, as we just read, the brethren **sold** their houses and lands, and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet.

Yet, by reading those passages in the book of Acts, we clearly see that those actions taken by the believers was totally **voluntary**! *No statement* was made by Church *leaders*, instructing them, or even urging them, to do this. It was completely voluntary—and most commentaries seem to point that out. (For a discussion on Ananias and Sapphira, see “**FOOTNOTE**” below.)

## Communism is NOT the “Standard” for Christians

We have seen that the incident in the book of Acts represented **voluntary** giving—and was implemented *temporarily*, in response to a *unique* situation of hardship. It was a matter of expressing love and charity. That incident absolutely does **not** point to “common property” as the “standard” for Christians! Nor is there *any other* place in scripture pointing to “common property” as the “standard” for Christians!

No, the Bible does **not** teach communism. **Nowhere** does the Bible *condemn* the ownership of private property! Again, the 8th Commandment (“thou shalt not steal”) plainly *recognizes* “property ownership” by the individual!

As you read the *remainder* of the book of Acts (such as Acts 12:12)— as well as some of the epistles— it’s clear that first century Christians *owned* property, and some even owned their own businesses. In fact, we even read of certain wealthy Church members who had servants.

Later on, *after* the temporary situation described in Acts 2 through 4, we read that the *elderly widows* in the Church were to be provided for from a common Church fund— but *only if* they had *no* children or grandchildren in the Church who could support them (I Tim. 5: 3-16). By that fact alone, it is obvious that (during this later time), Church members *in general* were **not** living off of a common Church fund!

Also consider this: Jesus Christ Himself, taught many parables (including “the parable of the talents”) that demonstrated that Jesus Christ *endorsed* not only “private property ownership”— but also other features considered to be “capitalistic.” (For example, read the following: Matt. 25: 14-29; Matt. 20: 8-15; Mark 4: 24-25.)

## In Conclusion

The Bible does **not** teach communism! There is **no** place in the Bible, that points to “common property” as the “standard” for Christians.

God’s Word endorses giving... **and** helping the poor. It does **not**, however, endorse “communism” as a standard for Christians. Nor does the Bible, in any way, *condemn* private ownership of property!

## FOOTNOTE “Ananias and Sapphira”

In Acts 4:32-35, we read that the brethren sold their houses and lands, and laid the proceeds at the apostles’ feet. As we continue, in Acts chapter 5, we read the account of Ananias and Sapphira:

But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. And he kept back *part* of the proceeds, his wife also being aware *of it*, and brought a certain part and laid *it* at the apostles’ feet. But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to **lie** to the Holy Spirit and keep back *part* of the price of the land for yourself?’ (Acts 5:1-3).

So, Ananias lied! In what *way* did he lie? Obviously, he had given only **part** of the proceeds, but **told** everyone he was giving the entire amount! And, that becomes *more apparent* when you read verses 8-9, where Peter questions Sapphira:

And Peter answered her, ‘Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?’ She said, ‘Yes, for so much.’ Then Peter said to her, ‘How is it that you have agreed together to test [or lie to] the Spirit of the Lord?’... (Acts 5:8-9)

Here, we see that their *sin* was **not** in holding back some of the proceeds, but in conspiring to **lie** about what they had done! In verse 4, Peter said:

Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men **but to God**. (Acts 5:4)

Again, **none** of these brethren were under any **obligation** to sell their possessions. Speaking of the possessions that Ananias had sold, Peter said:

While it remained, was it not **your own**? And **after** it was sold, was it not **in your own control**? (verse 4).

Clearly, the property **and** its proceeds *belonged to Ananias*... and he was *free* to do what he wanted to with it!

## References

1. *Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the Bible, Abridged by Ralph Earle*, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, Nov. 1983, p. 962
2. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (NIV)*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1981, Volume 9, p. 290
3. *Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the Bible, Abridged by Ralph Earle*, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, Nov. 1983, p. 967