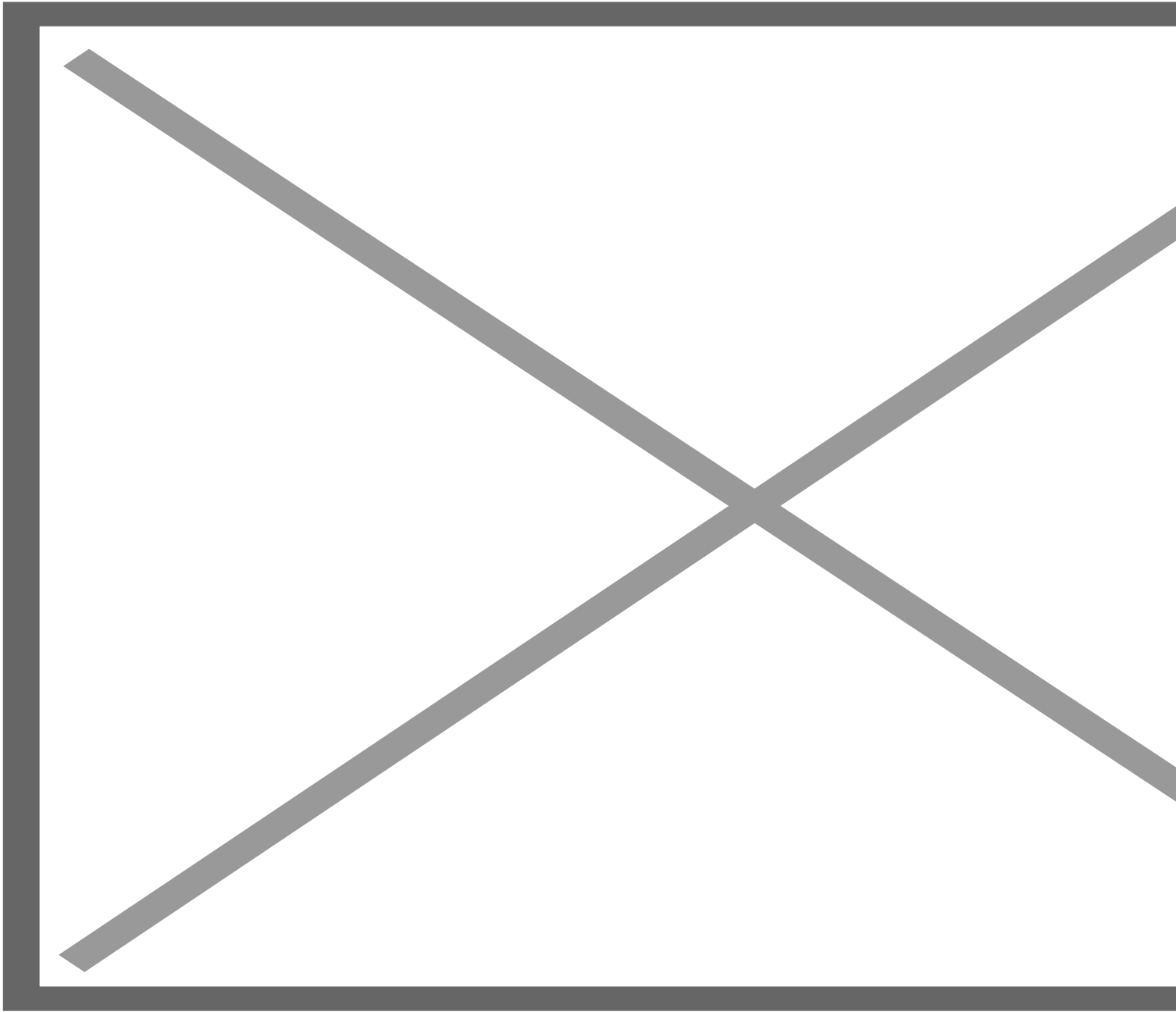


How much is too much?

In the fourth century, Basil of Caesarea argued that wealth doesn't just tempt the rich. At some point it warps their ability to see the world at all.

by [Andrew Sutherland](#) in the [September 2026](#) issue

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Century illustration

In 2021, Jeff Bezos spent four minutes in suborbital space. The brief flight cost him an estimated \$5.5 billion, making it the kind of prodigal expenditure for which many scorn billionaires. In the undergraduate seminar I teach on wealth and poverty in Christian thought, I used his extraterrestrial jaunt as a warm-up example for an activity I call, How Much Is Too Much?

One of the early church's most prevalent teachings on material wealth is that one's surplus should be given to the poor. In fact, it *belongs* to the poor, because God made all things for the good of all people. Stated in modern theological terms, there is a "universal destination of goods." Basil of Caesarea offers one of my favorite applications of this idea. Preaching amid a fourth-century famine, Basil excoriated rich Christians for thinking they had a right to keep their savings and their stores of grain:

"But whom do I treat unjustly," you say, "by keeping what is my own?" Tell me, what is your own? What did you bring into this life? . . . It is as if someone were to take the first seat in the theater, then bar everyone else from attending, so that one person alone enjoys what is offered for the benefit of all.

To help my students consider this idea concretely, I asked whether the money from Bezos's spaceflight should be seen as excess that belongs to the poor. I planned to progress from this easy yes to gradually smaller luxury purchases—a vacation home, a BMW, a Starbucks latte—as a way of considering what counts as surplus in our own middle- to upper-middle-class context. But to my surprise, the students came to Bezos's defense.

"It's tough," one said. "I mean, it's a lot of money, and it could help a lot of people. But what if going to space has always been his dream?"

Another student stated matter-of-factly that Bezos had earned the money. "Plus, he created thousands of jobs. He helps people in other ways."

Thinking they had misunderstood the activity, I suggested we move on to the next purchase: a vacation home. I reiterated that our purpose was to think on the early church's terms: One's surplus resources should be given to the poor. Is it too much to own a vacation home in a world where many struggle even to eat?

The students unanimously said no. One asked, "What if something goes wrong with your first house, like a natural disaster? The second home could help you provide for your family." Another student commented that there's nothing wrong with having nice things if you also use some of your money to help people.

I spent the next week reflecting on my massive flop of a teaching activity. My goal had been for students to reflect on their own resources in a world where, as it was for Basil, economic inequality leaves many struggling to scrape by while others accumulate and indulge. As sociologist Matthew Desmond shows in *Poverty, by America*, this inequality persists not only because of the gross excesses of billionaires but also for reasons far more mundane. Companies underpay workers to maximize returns for shareholders—for the 53 percent of the country that holds investments—and to make services like Uber and DoorDash affordable to their users. Moreover, tax expenditures like the mortgage interest deduction and 529 college savings plans funnel billions of dollars in government aid to middle-class families rather than to the families that need it most. We could oppose such government programs or refuse to patronize companies that rely on underpaid labor, but most of us simply enjoy the benefits they provide. In the final analysis, Desmond concludes, economic inequality in the United States persists for a reason that the middle class does not want to admit: "We like it."

It is difficult for affluent Christians to admit that the most relatable character in Luke's Gospel might be the rich man in the parable—the one who's in hell.

The truth that we choose personal economic benefits over feeding and housing our impoverished neighbors is a serious challenge to members of the middle class—like me—whose God says, “Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matt. 25:45). My students, however, saw no moral problem even with luxuries like second homes and spaceflight. They could not envision the needs of others as making a direct claim upon the surplus resources of the well-off. The idea was so foreign, it seemed, that they could not even entertain it hypothetically. Either that, or I had failed miserably at teaching it.

Some months later, I found myself preparing an adult Sunday school class on texts from Luke's Gospel about wealth and poverty, including the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. The text presents some of the same issues I had discussed with my undergrads. A poor man named Lazarus sits at the gates of an unnamed rich man, longing even for crumbs off the latter's table. The rich man feasts sumptuously, dresses himself in fine clothes, and presumably passes by Lazarus daily. When the two die, Lazarus ends up in the embrace of Abraham while the rich man finds himself in Hades—the ultimate indictment for living in excess while a neighbor languishes in need.

The day of the lesson, I pulled into a church parking lot full of SUVs—I was driving one, too—and felt Luke's challenge to the rich acutely. In no Lukan text could I honestly place myself in the position of the poor—or of one of Jesus' followers. The rich man in hell was the most relatable character by far. As we discussed Luke's teachings, several members of the congregation expressed similar feelings. Some confessed they fell short in serving the poor. Some sat in pensive silence. “Woe to *me*,” one said, riffing on Jesus' “Woe to you who are rich.”

Others, however, resisted suggestions that Christ's followers are obligated to give up their wealth for the sake of the poor. “If everyone gave away everything they have,” one member of the congregation asked, “wouldn't that just reproduce the problem? And how are you going to help the poor if you don't have resources to give? Think about the good Samaritan. Given how much he spent, we should really call him the *rich* Samaritan.”

A second member remarked that one could understand why some in the Catholic tradition become monks and nuns, “but not everyone is called to be a monk.” A third mentioned the claim in 1 Timothy that those who do not provide for their families are worse than unbelievers. “There's a real tension around wealth in the New Testament,” he concluded.

Many in the Sunday school class, I realized, shared my students' hang-ups. They could not imagine a moral duty to give up material abundance. They knew well what Jesus said. Many also served regularly in ministry programs for poorer members of our community. They simply could not see some of Jesus' more radical teachings as plausible at face value.

I had to admit that I could not imagine following these teachings, either. Although I believe that Jesus meant what he said when he called his followers (repeatedly) to renounce material wealth and give to the poor, I find myself offering the same kind of objections at every opportunity to sacrifice my surplus. Does giving up my middle-class comforts really solve anything? Doesn't financial security help me continue giving long-term? Don't I need to save for a house and for my daughters' education? I teach college classes on wealth and poverty in Christian thought, and studies like Desmond's have shown me my complicity in the persistence of poverty, but still I struggle to shake the idea that I *need* things that many would justifiably call surplus.

Since that Sunday I have begun to wonder if all these hang-ups provide evidence for another patristic teaching: Attachments to our surplus resources prevent us from seeing the world clearly. “Your possessions are more a part of you than the members of your own body,” Basil tells his rich audience. Because of this attachment, they become like the rich man in Luke 18 who asks Jesus what it takes to receive eternal life, then “lament[s] at relinquishing gold and silver and property—that is, stones and dust—in order to obtain the blessed life.”

Basil’s audience misperceives the value of their material resources. Worse, they see their neighbors’ needs in terms of their own material loss or gain. In one of his most vivid homilies, Basil describes the anguish of poor families forced to sell a child to put food on the table. To the rich purchasing this slave labor, he says,

In everything you see gold. . . . Just as those who are out of their mind do not see reality, but rather imagine things out of their malady, thus also your soul, being seized with avarice, sees everything as gold or silver.

This is not mere rhetoric. Basil means it when he says the rich cannot see reality, for reality is the universal destination of goods. God made the goods of the earth to meet the needs of all; God ordered the earth to distribute these goods, and anyone with eyes to see can observe these truths in the natural world. “The earth,” Basil points out, “does not nurture fruit for its own enjoyment, but for your benefit.” Rather than hoarding, it welcomes and gives. Even “unreasoning animals,” he says,

use in common the plants that grow naturally from the earth. Flocks of sheep graze together upon the same hillside, herds of horses feed upon the same plain, and all living creatures permit each other to satisfy their need for food.

Crazy as it may seem to the well-resourced, then, nothing could be more reasonable than the claim that we are responsible for meeting the needs of others with whatever surplus we have. It is a truth woven into the fabric of the creation.

Acting on this truth, however, requires more than knowing a principle and caring about others. The problem for Basil’s rich audience and for middle-class Christians like me is not that we do not know Jesus’ teachings on wealth and poverty. Neither is the problem simply a selfish refusal to follow Jesus’ teachings. The problem is that the material character of our lives has distorted our perception of need and obligation. Accustomed to surplus, we have made our high standard of living a moral standard that limits our care for those suffering poverty all around us.

If this is the case, then following the economic teachings of Jesus and the early church will always be unfathomable to us. Studying them will never sufficiently prepare us to serve the poor faithfully, much less to redress economic inequality in the ways Desmond suggests. To rightly perceive and act on our responsibility for the needs of others, we will first need to begin dispossessing ourselves—to renounce at least some of the surplus that we insist is justifiably kept.

But what counts as surplus? The question of how much is too much is difficult to answer, not only because standards of living have changed drastically since the days of the Roman Empire, but also because most in the church have made their peace with surplus. Occasional blanket condemnations of material wealth notwithstanding, the majority position, from the early church to today, is that wealth is not inherently evil—it simply needs to be used rightly. In keeping with this trend, most recent books by theologians and biblical scholars on wealth and poverty—and, in my experience, sermons by pastors across the denominational spectrum—avoid giving clear directions about dispossession to anyone but the obscenely affluent. The go-to

term for the rest of us is *stewardship*, defined capaciously to include giving, thrift, and wise investment.

It is striking to me, however, that as the church fathers spoke of “right use,” they typically defined it explicitly in terms of dispossession and redistribution. They also got specific about how much. Basil bluntly declared, “Those who love their neighbor as themselves possess nothing more than their neighbor,” stressing that bread is enough to live on and a single garment suffices for clothing. Gregory of Nazianzus condemned Christians for living in splendid houses and having extra clothes stored in chests while the poor starved. In a sermon on the rich man and Lazarus, John Chrysostom issued similar critiques, then concluded,

Let us use our goods sparingly, as belonging to others. . . . How shall we use them sparingly, as belonging to others? When we do not spend them beyond our needs, and do not spend for our needs only, but give equal shares into the hands of the poor.

To be sure, other patristic voices were more moderate. Augustine, for example, openly stated that Christians can possess wealth as long as they are not possessed *by* wealth. But even he maintained that failure to share one’s surplus is the equivalent of stealing from the poor and specified that true Christianity for the affluent requires constant readiness to sacrifice one’s resources for God and others. Not all are called to be monks, indeed, but Augustine believed the alternative was using one’s surplus for others whenever there is need.

These critiques and exhortations do not call everyone to sell everything they have in one fell swoop. But neither do they give permission to maintain one’s standard of living, whatever that may be. In a world with persistent poverty, whether the Roman Empire or the America that Desmond describes, heeding these teachings requires the habitual use of anything extra to serve the poor.

If the church fathers are right, then the kind of dispossession Jesus advocates for the sake of our neighbors requires at least that we become poor in *something*. That we trade comforts for subsistence in order to give more to those who lack subsistence. For those of us in the middle class, that might mean trading spacious homes and “nice neighborhoods” for small homes in less-nice neighborhoods, late-model cars for beaters, designer lattes for instant coffee—to name just a few luxuries that many today treat as standard. I am not sure how to pinpoint a truer standard. After reading the church fathers, I can’t trust my own judgment. But perhaps with baby steps like these, we can begin to perceive more clearly what we really need and what we owe our impoverished neighbors. Perhaps we can come closer to seeing reality.