



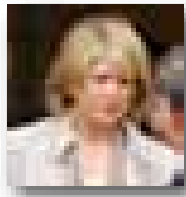
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# Cheating Ways: Back to Babylon



The ugly specter of greed and deceit has lately even thrust its menace into the kitchens of America with Martha Stewart's recent conviction. It seems as good a time as any to again comment on the slide to rampant corruption and deceit in our world and society.

Ms. Stewart's case is only a small, even trivial, facet of a much greater whole — one that America and other nations are deliberately allowing to continue.



Parts of this corrupt edifice have come into clearer view in recent years with major corporate and financial scandals taking place. These spectacles of corruption and unbridled greed have been both fantastic and farcical. While widely publicized investigations have centered on wealthy people and large corporations, it would be wrong to conclude that it is only the prosperous who have given themselves over to cheating. Far from it. The entire saga — from beginning to end —

reveals a deep ambivalence about deceit. Many average citizens have come to accept corruption as a fact of life and hardly even rise to protest anymore. In this regard, this epidemic truly qualifies as one of the most condemning signs of the times.

Crucially, it is a phenomenon that is in alignment with last-day events that lead the world back to Babylonia, involving some massive power shifts on the world scene. More than anything, it reveals who is the true god of our nations and it carries a message for America and her sibling countries — Canada, Britain, Australia and others. They all show similar duplicitous symptoms.

## Justice for a Few in the Name of Continued Prosperity

Have you ever heard of a crime in which only a few of its known perpetrators are punished? Imagine that the crime of murder is occurring all across the land. The judiciary and regulators of the country decide that they will punish only a few of those who have committed this capital offense. The crime is so widespread that officials fear that “justice for all” threatens to disrupt the entire society and may even invite revenge from powerful and connected criminals. They therefore choose only to try and convict a few of the wrongdoers. They carefully select a few high-profile cases or well-known personalities who can be made to look like egomaniacal monsters or buffoons. The officials publi-

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cize their actions of “law and order” by making sure that the media, cameras in tow, are informed of the times and places of arrest. The few “chosen” villains are then marched across the front pages of our nation’s newspapers with handcuffs and plenty of policemen in the background. Justice is at work and “evildoers will be punished,” is the intended message.

For various reasons, other high-profile evildoers are more difficult to prosecute. They may be heads of large corporations with vital ties to politicians or executives running companies in industries that the nation does not wish to harm lest the nation’s economy suffer. Sometimes in these cases, the companies are fined, their culpable executives allowed to hide in obscurity. None of their faces are displayed on the evening news programs. Some of these companies must pay billions of dollars in penalties. But no one is actually charged with any wrongdoing. In fact, these “wrongdoers” explicitly admit to no crime or infraction of law. They claim they have done no wrong yet agree to pay large fines. In this great saga, many other perpetrators of the same crime are not even pur-

sued. Many known murderers are left to run free.

Is this justice? Very few citizens would be satisfied with a nation that practices law and order in this way. It speaks of duplicity at the highest levels and seems ludicrous. But it is happening.

The crime in question is not murder. Rather, the situation applies to something that God considers much more grievous — idolatry. This very travesty of justice we are witnessing today has occurred with the crimes of deceit and corruption. Greed has run rampant and we dare not confront it. We fear that if we eradicate it entirely, the economic strength of our nations will collapse. In fact, most of the “free market” world openly appeals to greed as it provides the incentives to drive our economies and material prosperity.

Behind the façade of the many corruption trials of the past few years, we very plainly see a fact of our times: Greed is a sin near to our nations’ hearts. We dare not uproot it because it lies at the very foundation of our popular worldview and the essence of our existence. Mammon is the supreme and highest god of our nations. As a consequence, its

forces drive people and nations to ruin.

Crucially, we see that some voices that identify themselves as speaking for the Church are in the middle of a parade celebrating greed and affluence.

Was there ever another time such as this?

### Rampant Greed in the Old Testament

The Bible documents a similar time that met God’s great displeasure ... so much so that He sent His prophets to warn about the consequences. Said Jeremiah:

“Pour it out on the children in the street and on the young men gathered together; both husband and wife will be caught in it, and the old, those weighed down with years. Their houses will be turned over to others, together with their fields and their wives, when I stretch out my hand against those who live in the land,” declares the LORD. “From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit” (Jeremiah 6:10–13).

Jeremiah’s statement surely sounds inordinately harsh and incriminating ... certainly out of



touch with the common sensibilities and discernment of our day. Could it really have been as he said — that it is possible that an entire society from “the least to the greatest” all practiced deceit? Those who believe the Bible as the literal Word of God will accept Jeremiah’s words for their plain meaning. Yet we may feel out of touch with its reality, since the events the prophet described occurred almost 2,500 years ago. We may even rationalize that Judah must have deserved the prophesied punishments. After all, God clearly warned and admonished them through many prophets, not just Jeremiah.

But are things really different today? Could our societies also be greedy for gain from top to bottom? If so, then we have no lack of prophecies to consult on this matter.

Consider just a few of God’s warnings spoken to Israel and Judah at different times and for different eras.

“I was enraged by his sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his willful ways” (Isaiah 57:17).

“But your eyes and your heart are set only on dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood and on oppression and extortion” (Isaiah 22:17).

“In you men accept bribes to shed blood; you take usury and excessive interest and make unjust gain from your neighbors by extortion. And you have forgotten me, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will surely strike my hands together at the unjust gain you have made and at the blood you have

shed in your midst” (Ezekiel 22:12-13).

These are only some of the warnings recorded in the Bible. But why are there so many admonitions about unjust gain and greed? What can a little cheating, self-interest and greed hurt? The prevailing line of thinking is that it makes the world go ‘round, it can pay the bills, lead to a better chance for prosperity, and fuel faster growing and more competitive economies. That may be the popular thinking, but not with God. The record shows that God was particularly angry at the sin of greed because it was idolatry — the breaking of the very first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Deuteronomy 5:7).

#### Today – A Moral Myopia

Are we living in a time that deserves a Jeremiah? Readers can judge for themselves as we review some of the conditions and attitudes of our times. But as we do, please do not view me as a Jeremiah. I certainly do not measure up and am more tainted by our consumerist, materialistic culture than I could ever know. In fact, we live in a society so tainted by greed, it almost seems unlikely that a true Jeremiah might be found. The rot has gone deep and many people are completely blind to its occurrence. Not that America doesn’t have moral voices; however, a double standard has emerged when it comes to money and affluence.

What is going on?

Quoting from a recent book, *The Cheating Culture*, by David Callahan:

“Religious figures and intellectuals and newspaper columnists have talked endlessly in recent years about moral issues large and small; teen pregnancy, school uniforms, violent videos and so forth. God, who previously didn’t play much of a role in American politics, has come to be as omnipresent in election campaigns as corporate donors seeking favors. Yet, America’s watchdogs of virtue have been largely silent about the new epidemic of cheating.

Something strange is going on here. Americans seem to be using two moral compasses. One directs our behavior when it comes to things like sex, family, drugs and traditional forms of crime. A second provides us ethical guidance in the realm of career, money and success.”

An outright duplicity exists, as David Callahan succinctly shows in his book. It exists from the bottom to the top of our society. The issue here is not wealth or prosperity, but rather about an improper attitude towards its acquisition. This can apply to the wealthy just as it does to the poor ... everyone.

#### In the Church: False Prophets of Mammon

Apparently, not enough people realize the enormous temptations of money and gain. Not everyone is called to be wealthy and few are capable of being unstained by it. So says the Bible. Some God does choose to bless in this way. Others choose this blessing for themselves without God. In their unbridled wants, they fall into a trap. “People who

want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction” (1st Timothy 6:9). There is no reason not to believe that the same principle applies to nations. Nations who vaunt prosperity as their chief aim eventually will plunge to ruin and destruction. The Bible repeatedly warns about the deceitfulness of riches. Satan is keenly aware of the beguiling device of riches, and has used the human disposition towards the “love of money” to great endtime advantage.

Christian leaders are to be found among the proponents that call forth the benefits of “tamed” greed for America and its sister nations. The saddest aspect of our nations’ fall into abject slavery to materialism is that some Christian theologians have used Scripture to whitewash “a culture of affluence.” Underestimating the dangers and temptations of Mammon, of which the Bible clearly warns, they can lead us astray. In effect, they have joined hands with Mammon to bring about God’s Kingdom to earth. It would be difficult to bring a balanced and complete documentation to this topic here, but a few quotes from notable “Christian” thinkers will certainly set the tone.

Says renowned Christian social theologian, Michael Novak, “The church could lead the way in setting forth a religious and moral vision worthy of a global world, in which all live under a universally recognizable rule of

law, and every individual’s gifts are nourished for the good of all.”<sup>1</sup> No doubt, that statement is underpinned by noble objectives. While that may be true, the methods proposed are worldly works of man. This scholar goes to great lengths to claim that Christianity (mostly Catholicism, in his opinion) invented capitalism.

Others make sweeping statements that seem to imply that the Bible needs major revision in order to apply to this day and age. Says one author, “I have come to believe that capitalism (for all its problems) is not just the greatest liberating power in human history, but also that its cultural workings provide an unusually good opportunity for the expression of true Christian faith and virtue.”<sup>2</sup> Further, he says, “that both these common perspectives — the cultural and the biblical — on faith and wealth have to be renovated in the light of fresh evidence and theory.” That’s a sweeping statement.

But, just where is this evidence and theory to be found? In the Bible? No. Much of the evidence cited is from secular research that appeals to “culture” and quantitative techniques.

From my perspective of the inner workings of the global financial circles and a theoretical understanding of capitalistic and monetary systems, I really don’t see that much has changed under the sun. Man’s tools and systems today may be bigger, more powerful and capable of global reach, but the underlying character of man and his chief enemy

remains the same. In this sense, nothing needs to be revised in the Bible, nor does one need to twist God’s Word to tickle today’s panting lust for materialism.

### Ushering in God’s Kingdom with Force

Secular economists have long harnessed the “animal spirits” of free-market capitalism for good works. They see little conflict and danger. For example, Lawrence Lindsay, the former economic advisor and director of the National Economic Council at the White House, proudly states that, “two aspects of the ethos of capitalism — materialism and individualism (read, greed and self-interest) — are what make humanitarianism possible.”<sup>3</sup> Mr. Lindsay also here makes the point that two sins, if performed judiciously, can lead to a right. Could this really be true? While he does not speak with any claimed authority on behalf of Christianity, his views are little different than those who do.

A movement to join Mammon with the worldly agendas of the Church is at work under many guises. Some, recognizing that big money has big power in the present “Age of Global Capital,” even adopt the tactics of pillaging portfolio managers. They ride their steeds for change towards a Christian worldview, atop large church pension funds, actively prodding companies to adopt their views at the bayonet-point of pulling out their investments. One recently founded organization, the Interfaith International Investment Group (3IG), openly waves its sword



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for change by declaring that its eleven founding denominations wield over \$7 trillion in wealth, half of this in financial form.

Soaring to new heights of insight, Mr. Novak even postulates "... increasingly in the West, it's going to be affluence that leads people to God."<sup>4</sup> Even secular economists who make no pretense of belonging to any religion know that this is not true. Well-documented studies clearly show that as societies become more affluent, they become less interested in a faith in God.

We could quote more sources from this movement that seeks to wed the good of Mammon to the agenda of physically establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. This is a serious indictment. Mammon, after all, is the entity that opposes God. There are only two realms, that of God and Mammon. How then can any good come of this coming together? "You cannot serve both God and Mammon" (Matthew 6:24).

#### Borrowing from Balaam

It is one thing for lost humanity to live by the rules and powers of Mammon. It is quite another to see that the Church enjoins Mammon for a "heaven on earth" mission. It is this type of error that at least two apostles expressly warned about.

"This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority. [...] these men blaspheme in matters they do not understand. [...] With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed—an accursed brood! They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness [...] they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him" (2nd Peter 2: 10–19).

These are serious allegations. The result? Not freedom, but slavery. Actually, it is even worse as the above Scriptures describe what is occurring today in the Church. Here, the stakes get higher. "It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them" (2nd Peter 2:21).

Jude felt urged to write about the same error:

"Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord. [...] Yet these men speak abusively against whatever they do not understand; and what things they

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do understand by instinct, like un-reasoning animals—these are the very things that destroy them. Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion” (Jude 1:3–4, 10–11).

Both Peter and Jude cite Balaam's error. What was it? While Balaam did not pronounce curses upon Israel as King Balak had requested, he did supply him with an even more powerful plan to ruin Israel. It was the strategy of infiltrating Israel with idolatrous beliefs and practices. It worked. The motive? Profit and self-interest. Balak wanted to preserve his kingdom and Balaam was being paid handsomely for his advice as a sociologist and economic theologian.

Today, similar perversions have led to an even more sorry state. It is now a global problem. From a number of perspectives, there can be no doubt that the world's troubles today have deep religious dimensions. A Martian would surely find it curious that the world is roughly divided into two parts — prosperous historical Christendom of the West and the relatively poor rest-of-the-world (materialistically, at least).

#### Points to Ponder

It is as if the Church has decided to borrow a volatile fuel

from Mammon for its agenda to reform the world into its earthly conception of Christ's Kingdom on Earth. The perspectives developed in this regard are much more sophisticated than the well-known prosperity gospel that preaches that it is every true Christian's divine right to be prosperous. While this latter group caters to individual self-interest and self-esteem, the ideology we are examining here proposes much greater ambitions. This group seeks to reform the world. But, they ally themselves with fallen forces. By employing the two innate human proclivities of “self interest” and the “love of money,” they have harnessed these “animal spirits” for the sake of winning world peace and abolishing poverty ... yes, even winning people for Christ.

The two human compulsions mentioned are dangerous material, like atomic fuel — plutonium, for example. Yes, we can bundle it into the controlled core of a nuclear reactor and produce energy to power an agenda. But, we must carefully keep these plutonium fuel rods cooled lest they react uncontrollably and cause great damage. Unrestrained, this fuel can melt down the entire reactor and wreak great destruction, emitting wide-

spread fall-out. Even if all goes as planned, the toxic by-product remains for centuries. We must still bury the spent fuel in lead containers. And indeed, toxic by-products of this philosophy can be seen building up all around the world.

The situations described are just as depicted in Zechariah's vision of the measuring basket found in Zechariah 5. The contents of this basket, providing a depiction of greed, commercial and religious corruption, were covered with a lid made of the very same metal that can shield nuclear radiation...lead. Next month we will try to interpret this most interesting of prophetic visions. (MC)

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Novak, Michael, *How Christianity Created Capitalism, Religion and Liberty*, Volume 10, Number 3, (May/June 2000).
- 2 Schneider, John R. *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002, p. 2.
- 3 Lindsay, Lawrence, “The Generosity of Capitalism,” *Financial Times*, London, November 22, 2001, Section 1, Comment & Analysis, pg. 15.
- 4 D'Souza, Dinesh, *The Virtue of Prosperity: Finding Values in an Age of Techno-Affluence*, New York: Free Press, 2000. Pp. 143–144.