

Is Honesty the Best Policy?

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We have heard that “Honesty is the best policy.” Oh yeah? “Show me!” What about those who “play by the rules” and have seen their “401 K” become a “201 K.” How about families struggling to pay their mortgages who are also taxed to keep deadbeats in pricey houses from being evicted? Then, we see Auto CEOs surrender their companies to envious politicians who have never run a business much less built a car. And, presto, “Cash for clunkers” which doles out some \$24,000 a heap for days before bankruptcy. Some clunkers! A brand new car cost about \$26,000 in August ‘09.1 The American Dream of hard work and prosperity is becoming a Socialist, share-the-wealth nightmare. Ask Joe the plumber.

Why is it that business leaders seem powerless to resist business-clueless Czars in D.C. empowered by the politics of guilt and envy? Is modern Capitalism inherently flawed as alleged by Marx? How is it that America, through industrial development, has prospered to become the envy (God help us) of the world? How can we reclaim the heritage of the Puritans whose depersonalized mass markets successfully restrained impoverishing forces of envy² during the industrial revolution? How do we restore the Protestant Ethic which fosters the Spirit of Capitalism?

The Puritans, ascetic in all but marriage, worked tirelessly for the glory of God to extend Christ’s Kingdom here on earth. They observed Solomon’s watchword, “Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men” (Proverbs 22:29). Capital gains, living expense excepted, were reinvested in their business ventures which led to enlarged plant facilities to realize economies of scale in production that further reduced their selling prices.

Once the Industrial Revolution commenced, all Europe was forced to industrialize to compete successfully with Great Britain’s flourishing economy. In America, Puritans sensed they were as God’s Elect destined to found a New Jerusalem, a city set on a hill before the whole world. Puritans both here and in Britain had admitted Scrooge-like shortcomings that Dickens critiqued in his “Christmas Carol.” Still, these movers and shakers in the industrial revolution were scrupulous in their business dealings; a free contract was inviolable.

Puritans were, in a word, honest in business as was the Patriarch, Jacob, whose business career is fully revealed in Genesis. Now, wait a minute. Isn’t it true Jacob tricked his brother Esau out of his birth right? Doesn’t everyone know that Jacob also got Isaac’s blessing by deceit? He actually lied to his father, Isaac, saying he was Esau (Genesis 27:19). How can any one trust anything that Jacob said or did? Wasn’t Jacob dishonest in business until he and Esau were at last reconciled (Genesis 33:1ff)? Sadly, this negative assessment of the Patriarch Jacob is indeed commonly held among God’s people. There are, however, Biblical facts that give a quite different picture of Jacob.

Let us then heed Solomon's counsel (Proverbs 18:17) and hear the rest of the story regarding the Patriarch Jacob. Many revealed facts raise nagging questions of the plausibility of cursory readings of Genesis that dismiss Jacob as a morally challenged leader. What about the Bible's use of the same word to describe both Jacob and Job, who each recovered from disastrous setbacks? How could Esau be so foolish as to sell his birthright for a mess of beans? Was Esau really starving after all? Why didn't Isaac react by cursing Jacob when Esau's return ended Rebekah's short lived charade?

First, let us compare Jacob and Job. Job is described as a "perfect" (honest) man despite Satan's persistent accusations to the contrary. Yet, the same Hebrew word, "tam," is translated "plain" when used to describe Jacob. "Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents" (Genesis 25:27). These master shepherds both built up their households after severe business reversals starting from scratch. Yet, Satanic slanders against Job are dismissed while Esau's envious slanders of Jacob are entertained.

Esau sold his birthright to two thirds of Isaac Enterprises. He was not starving to death as he claimed (Genesis 25:32). He was just a "skunked" hunter with a rumbling stomach. Physicians know that a man literally starving cannot immediately ingest a full meal and just walk away as did Esau. Moses, who wrote Genesis, justly confirms that "thus Esau despised his birthright" (Genesis 25:34). Esau was not coerced or defrauded into selling his birthright. The terms were clear. He took an oath (Genesis 25:33). But, later Esau sought to void the deal by securing Isaac's blessing. When this failed, he bitterly wept accusing Jacob of taking away *his* birthright and blessing (Genesis 27:36).

Then, we have the strange fact that Isaac did not curse Jacob when Rebekah's judicial ruse became apparent. Rather, it is tellingly recorded that "Isaac trembled very exceedingly" (Genesis 27:33). Thereafter, one of the names of God was "the fear of Isaac" (Genesis 31:42). Indeed, Isaac later renewed the blessing when he sent Jacob to Padanaram to seek a wife (Genesis 28:1-5). And, finally the Lord Himself confirmed Isaac's blessing at Bethel (Genesis 28:10-22). So, when all the Biblical facts are taken into account, Jacob is shown to be honest in all of his business deals. Otherwise, Jacob's visionary ladder becomes the blessing and endorsement of a scoundrel who wronged Esau.

Next, we will re-examine the facts in Genesis that reveal Jacob's rise in Padanaram from being Laban's servant to be the charismatic patriarch of his own prosperous household in twenty years. There, as in the Isaac's household surrounded by envious Philistines (Genesis 26:12-22), Jacob proved again that honesty is the best policy even under an unfair, exploitive boss. In light of Biblical facts, Jacob was indeed a plain, perfect, honest businessman and we had better believe it. Getting Genesis straight is pivotal to reclaiming the American dream of happy hard work and prosperity.

1. <http://www.edmunds.com/help/about/press/159446/article.html>

2. See "The Buyer Is A Thief," Helmut Schoeck, Envy: A Theory of Social Behavior, Liberty Fund, 1966.