

“It is an issue of equality...”
Biblical Reflections on Wealth and Poverty

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It is an issue of equality concerning your present abundance and their need... As it is written, “Those who had much didn’t have too much; those who had little had enough.” (II Cor 8:14f)

“WE READ THE GOSPEL as if we had no money,” laments American Jesuit theologian John Haughey, “and we spend our money as if we know nothing of the Gospel.” Indeed, the topic of economics is exceedingly difficult to talk about in most churches, more taboo than politics or even than sex. Yet no aspect of our individual and corporate lives is more determinative--and few subjects are more frequently addressed in our scriptures.

The preeminent challenge to the human family today is the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth and power. The United Nations reported in 1992 that income disparities between the world's richest and poorest have doubled since 1960. Today the wealthiest 20% of the world's population receives almost 83% of the world's income, while the poorest 20% receive less than 2%! Any theology that refuses to reckon with these realities is both cruel and irrelevant. We Christians must talk about economics, and talk about it in light of the gospel.

There are many good over views of the biblical witness concerning wealth and poverty (see for example Elsa Tamez’ *The Bible of the Oppressed*, Orbis Books, 1982; or Ron Sider’s *Cry Justice: The Bible on Hunger and Poverty*, Paulist Press, 1980). I will here only summarize that witness by briefly examining what I believe to be its three salient axioms:

1. The world as created by God is abundant, with enough for everyone—provided that human communities restrain their appetites and live within limits;
2. Disparities in wealth are not “natural” but the result of human sin, and must be mitigated within the community of faith through the regular practice of wealth redistribution;
3. The prophetic message calls people to the practice of such redistribution, and is thus characterized as “good news” to the poor.

In a word, the Bible is about justice, not charity; as the apostle Paul puts it, economic sharing is “an issue of equality.” I will illustrate each of these three axioms below with a few representative texts from both testaments.

I. The Sabbath Principle of Equitable Distribution

“Those who gathered more had no surplus, and those who gathered less had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.” (Ex 16:18)

The biblical standard of economic justice is grounded in God’s call to “keep the Sabbath.” The Hebrew verb /*Shabat*/ first appears in the Bible as the culmination of the story of Creation: “God rested on the seventh day from all the work God did” (Gen 2:2). /*Shabat*/ is “blessed” (2:3), just like the creation itself (1:22,28). This pattern captures the double theme of the creation story: abundance (the fruit of creative, “good” work, Gen 1:31) and limits (stopping, rest).

Human beings are to imitate this divine pattern. The next place we encounter the term *Shabat* is in the story of Israel’s first “test of character” in the wilderness (Ex 16). Sprung from slavery in Egypt, the people must now face the harsh realities of life outside the imperial system. The ancient Hebrews – like modern Christians – had trouble imagining an economic system apart from Pharaoh’s military-industrial-technological complex. “Would that we had died at the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread!” (Ex 16:3).

The archetypal manna story is a parable that illustrates Yahweh’s alternative to the Egyptian economy (Ex 16:6). Bread “raining from heaven” symbolizes cultivation as a Divine gift, a process that begins with rain and ends with bread (see Is 55:10, Josh 5:12).. The “moral” of this story concerns the three instructions on how to “gather” (Ex 16:4). The people’s first lesson outside of Egypt concerns alternative economic production and consumption!

First, every family is told to gather just enough bread for their needs (Ex 16:16-18). In contrast to Israel’s Egyptian condition of oppression and need, here everyone has enough. In God’s economy there is such a thing as “too much” and “too little”—in contrast with modern capitalism’s infinite tolerance for wealth and poverty. Second, this manna should not be “stored up” (Ex 16:19-20). Wealth and power in Egypt was defined by surplus accumulation—after all, Israel’s forced labor consisted of building “store-cities” into which the tribute of subject peoples was gathered (Ex 1:11). Israel is enjoined to keep wealth circulating through strategies of redistribution, not concentrating through strategies of accumulation.

The third instruction introduces Sabbath discipline (Ex 16:22-30). “Six days you shall gather; but on the seventh, which is a Sabbath, there will be none” (Ex 16:5,26). The prescribed periodic rest for the land and for human labor—expanded in the social justice code of Exodus 23:10-11 to a Sabbath year—functions to disrupt human attempts to control nature and maximize the forces of production. Because the earth belongs to God and its fruits are a gift, the people should justly distribute those fruits, instead of seeking to own and hoard them.

“Sabbath economics” are fundamental to the identity of Israel. *Shabat* is instituted before the Commandments at Sinai, then reiterated soberly at the

conclusion of the Covenant Code: if the people do not practice Sabbath, they will die (Ex 31:12-17). Not only then is *Shabat* the crowning blessing of creation; it is also the “beginning and end of the Law” (see Heb 9:4).

Throughout the gospels we find the echoes of this tradition in the teaching and practice of Jesus of Nazareth. In Luke 12, for example, Jesus is approached by someone who asks him to adjudicate a dispute over an estate (Lk 12:13-21). Inheritance mechanisms represented (then as now) an important vehicle by which wealth is preserved and consolidated from generation to generation. Jesus responds with a reminder of the second “manna instruction,” couched in a parable about the futility of a man who tries to guarantee his household’s security by building “bigger barns” in which to store up his wealth.

Jesus follows this with his famous—and often sentimentalized—teaching about the “lilies of the field” (Lk 12:22-34). This is hardly quaint transcendental poetry. Rather, it is a concrete and polemical contrast between the “economy of grace” intrinsic to creation, symbolized by the flower and the raven, with imperial economies based upon accumulation and concentration, symbolized by Solomon’s temple. The former promises “enough” to those willing to settle for sufficiency, the latter delivers only a compulsive spiral of anxiety.

The Sabbath vision is diametrically opposed to our modern assumptions about material security. Classical economics is based upon two suppositions: 1) the natural condition of scarcity; and 2) the human propensity for unlimited appetite. The first justifies inequality, the second fuels ideologies of unlimited economic growth. Sabbath economics, however, teaches exactly the inverse: God’s gift is natural abundance, and our response should be self restraint.

II. Redistribution and the Critique of Economic Disparity

“If there be any poor among you in the land I give you, do not harden your hearts, nor refuse to stretch out your hand to them.” (Dt 15:7)

The Bible recognizes that inequalities inevitably arise in “fallen” society—a realism it shares with the worldview of modern capitalism. Unlike the social Darwinism of the latter, however, the biblical vision refuses to stipulate that economic disparity is therefor a permanent or “natural” condition. Instead, God’s people are instructed to dismantle, on a regular basis, the fundamental patterns and structures of stratified wealth and power through communal mechanisms of economic redistribution.

Deuteronomy 15 develops the notion of the Sabbath year to include debt forgiveness (Deut 15:1-81). In agrarian societies such as biblical Israel (or parts of the Third World today), the cycle of poverty began when a family fell into debt, deepened when it had to sell off its land in order to service the debt, and reached its conclusion when landless peasants could only sell their labor, becoming bond-slaves. Since there were no banks in antiquity, it was larger land owners who acted as creditors. When the Deuteronomist warns Israelites never to “harden their

hearts” against the poor, he is reminding them they are not immune to “Pharaoh’s disease.”

The Sabbath year debt release intended to safeguard both social justice (“there will be no one in need among you”) and sound fiscal policy (“creditor nations will not rule over you,” Deut 15:4-6). But anticipating human selfishness, the practical Deuteronomist specifically forbids people from tightening credit in the years immediately prior to the Sabbath remission (15:7-11). The remission applies to debt-slaves as well, not only freeing them but demanding that they be sent away with sufficient resources to make it on their own (15:12-17).

According to Leviticus 25, the Sabbath cycle was supposed to culminate in the Jubilee, or "sabbath's sabbath" (seven times seven years). The Jubilee sought to dismantle inequality by redistributing the wealth through three mandates:

- releasing each community member from debt;
- returning all encumbered or forfeited land to its original owners;
- freeing all slaves.

The legislation included a prohibition against lending money at interest to the poor (Lev 25:36f). The rationale for this unilateral restructuring of the community's wealth was not social utopianism, but to remind Israel of its identity as an Exodus people who must never reproduce a system of slavery (25:55). The symbolism of Jubilee was even structured into the annual harvest festival (Lev 23:9-25).

Israel’s betrayal of its Sabbath vocation became a central complaint of the prophets. When Isaiah charged the nation’s leadership with robbery -- "The spoil of the poor is in your houses; what do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?" (Is 3:14f) – he was echoing the manna tradition’s censure of stored wealth in the face of community need (see also Mal 3:5-12). He also rails against wealthy creditors who foreclosed on indebted farmers, “adding house to house and field to field until there is room for no one but you” (Is 5:8). Amos accused the commercial classes of regarding /Shabat/ as an obstacle to market profiteering instead of “keeping the Sabbath holy” (Am 8:5). When he castigates the rich for "buying the poor for silver...and selling sweepings of the wheat" (8:6), Amos is referring to how the poor were being denied their Sabbath gleaning rights (see Ex 23:10f; Lev 19:9; Mic 7:1).

Hosea laments that fidelity to international markets had replaced Israel’s allegiance to God's economy of grace: "I will go after my lovers; they give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink" (Hosea 2:5). Most telling of all, however, is the tradition that attributed the downfall of Jerusalem to the people’s failure to keep Sabbath: “God took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped the sword... to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years” (II Chron 36:20f; see Lev 26:34f).

Jesus continued the prophetic critique of economic injustice. In his reappropriation of Isaiah's "lovesong for the vineyard" (compare Mk 12:1ff to Is 5:1ff), Jesus adds that the owner "let the land out to tenants" and then "went into

another country" (Mk 12:1). Thus he directs the tale to the Jewish ruling class of his time, who were also absentee-landlords (Mk 12:12), challenging them to imagine life from the bitter perspective of rebellious tenants.

These "tenants" feel the rage of having to hand over the fruits of their labor to the absentee landlord, and so begin to violently resist (Mk 12:4-8). Two levels are operating simultaneously here. At the social level the story is an accurate depiction of the struggle between disenfranchised sharecroppers and oppressive overlords, which often resulted in peasant revolts that were in turn inevitably crushed by the owners (12:9).

At the allegorical level, however, the parable begs the question as to who is the "true" owner of the land. According to Isaiah the vineyard belongs to God; similarly, Leviticus insists that God alone holds title: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants" (Lev 25:23). By casting owners as tenants, the parable indicts the ruling class for the murder of all those "sent by the true owner"—that is, the prophets. And it convicts them of conspiring to "own" (for commercial profit) what is God's gift to all.

III. Good News/Bad News

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news for the poor" (Lk 4:18)

The word "evangelism" comes from the Greek /euangel/ we translate as "gospel" or "good news." In first century Hellenistic society it was a term associated with the "secular media." It was synonymous with imperial propaganda, announcing the birth or ascension to power of an emperor or a Roman military victory in the provinces.. It is extraordinary that the early Christians used this term to describe both their story of Jesus (Mk 1:1) and Jesus' own message (Mk 1:14). In a world in which the power and the reach of the imperial media was unrivaled, the early Christians expropriated the term specifically to challenge the dominant culture.

Luke's version of Jesus' inaugural sermon announces "good news to the poor," citing Isaiah 61, which in turn is citing the Jubilee vision. Only real debt-cancellation and land-restoration could represent /good/ news to real poor people. Jesus seems to promote redistributive practices at every turn, such as in table fellowship between debt-collectors and debtors (Mk 2:14-16), in his banquet parables (Lk 14:1-14), or in his political principles of status-reversal in which the "greatest" must become "servants" (Mk 10:38-45).

But a gospel that heralds that God "has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Lk 1:53) was most likely unwelcome news to the wealthy. We see this challenge in Jesus' invitation to his first disciples to become "fishers of people" (Mk 1:17). This image alludes to the prophetic censures of the rich and powerful: "YHWH has sworn by his holiness: The time is surely coming

upon you [who oppress the poor and crush the needy], when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.” (Amos 4:2; see also Jer 16:16, Ezek 29:3f, Hab 1:14-17). Jesus is summoning these common laborers to join him in going after the “Big Fish”!

The Reign of God is defined explicitly in terms of redistributive economics in two contrasting stories of Jesus’ call to the rich. In Luke 19 the chief tax collector Zaccheus (representing the exploiter class in occupied Palestine) embraces a radical program of wealth sharing, while in Mark 10:17-22 the alleged piety of a large land owner is unmasked by his refusal to do the same. Jesus follows the latter episode by concluding that the rich cannot enter the Reign of God (Mk 10:23-24). This long-troubling statement simply stipulates that the Reign of God is that “social condition” in which there are no rich and poor. The story ends with a positive illustration of Jubilee, inviting “whosoever will” to share lands, estates and family assets in a community of “abundant sufficiency” (10:28ff).

The early church appears to have practiced Sabbath economics. The most obvious example is the Acts account of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, which occasioned an experiment in wealth redistribution that echoed the manna story: assets were “distributed to any as had need” (Acts 2:45; 4:35). Central to the itinerant ministry of the apostle Paul was his appeal to the new Gentile churches to learn Sabbath economics by practicing inter-church mutual aid (2 Cor 8). James is perhaps most unequivocal on the subject of economic justice: “Weep, you rich, and howl for the miseries that are coming...” (Jas 5:1-6). And John the Seer envisions the divine overthrow of the imperial economy of oppression (Rev 18) and establishment of a new social order in which abundance for all is ensured (Rev 21).

IV. A Vision That Haunts our History

The standard of economic justice is woven into the warp and weft of the Bible; pull this strand, and the whole fabric unravels. Fortunately, the “subversive memory” of Jubilee has kept erupting in church history, among early monks, medieval communitarians and radical Reformers. Nor has it been extinguished despite the hostility of modern capitalism; visions of biblical justice were preserved in tracts by 18th century “Levelers” and in 19th century African slave spirituals. As we approach the turning of the millennia, Sabbath economics is again firing the imaginations of faith-based activists.

John Paul, in a 1994 apostolic letter entitled *Tertio Millenio Adventiente*, stated that “a commitment to justice and peace in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the preparation and celebration of the jubilee. Thus, in the spirit of the book of Leviticus (25:8-12), Christians will have to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world.” But those of us who insist that the Bible’s ancient socio-economic vision remains relevant in our context have hard work to do.

The London-based “Jubilee 2000” Campaign (www.oneworld.org/jubilee2000)

is leading the growing movement in support of debt-relief for impoverished Third World countries. Ross and Gloria Kinsler (*The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life*, Orbis, 1999) call for experimentation with small-scale, alternative business practices, technologies, land uses, financial systems, trade patterns, consumption habits, and income distribution schemes. Rabbi Arthur Waskow (*Down to Earth Judaism*) recommends that people of faith focus on venture capital recycling and neighborhood empowerment. Feminist community organizer Barbara Brandt (*Whole Life Economics*) examines addictions to work and money and calls for their “reevaluation.”

The task is as imperative as it is daunting. The unaccountable markets of the globalizing economy must be resisted and real relationships restored between producers, distributors and consumers. In all of this, the church can help nurture commitment and creativity by promoting “Sabbath literacy,” a spirituality of forgiveness and reparation, and practical economic disciplines for individuals, households and congregations. Christians should be supporting initiatives such as credit unions that make capital available to the poor, the Community Supported Agriculture movement, alternative investment strategies, community land trusts, and cooperative business ventures.

"Who, then, can be saved?" (Mk 10:26). Mark's epilogue to the call of the rich man anticipates our incredulity. Does Jesus really expect the “haves” (that is, us) to participate in wealth redistribution as a condition for discipleship? Can we imagine a world in which there are no rich and poor? To the disciples' skepticism, and to ours, Jesus replies simply: "I know it seems impossible to you, but for God all things are possible" (10:27). In other words, economics is ultimately a theological issue.