

Biblical Call to Address Wealth Inequality

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“Moral Injustice: The Biblical Call to Address Wealth Inequality”

Good morning. It is a great privilege for me to be here this morning with your congregation. I have the honor of working with Pastor Cubilette and with Craig Myrbo, a longtime leader in this church. They both serve on the board of Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice, the organization which I direct. I thank both of them for inviting me to provide a Labor Day message this week.

We come together in this holy sanctuary each week not only to pray and to be in fellowship with one and other but to reset our moral compass, to focus our attention on where we as individuals and as a community are going astray and where we need to move forward.

Wealth distribution in our country is one such place that we as a society is going astray. The disparity in wealth in this country is one of the great moral crises of our time. As of 2013, just over 400 Americans have more money than over 158 million of their fellow citizens. The gap between rich and poor has not always been this great is continuing to grow. This is evidenced by the fact that in 1980 the average American CEO earned 42 times as much as is or her average worker and in 2001 a CEO earned 531 times as much as the average worker.

The Hebrew Bible, which Christians and Jews share as a holy text, repeatedly commands us to care for vulnerable, poor and powerless. But it also gives us a vision of how to prevent the growth of gap

between the rich and the poor. The laws of the sabbatical and jubilee years which we read about in the reading from Leviticus are a moral call to address the inequality crises in our day.

The first seven verses of Leviticus 25 say that when the Israelites enter the land they shall let the land rest every seven years and that everyone, workers, landowners, and slaves should have access to its produce during the sabbatical year. Later in the Book of Deuteronomy we learn that this seventh year should also be a year in which all debts should be forgiven.

The Sabbath year can be seen as a biblical injunction to prevent the problem we face today- a growing economic inequality in the population. The gap between the rich and the poor, the landowners and the landless, closes in the process of freeing the poor from their debts and preventing the landowner from producing more wealth. These laws are given at the time when the people are becoming landowners for the first time. The Israelites have been wandering in the desert, where they are nomads and only own what they can carry. It is striking that the Bible teaches these laws at the moment that the people will first become property owners and some will begin to acquire more wealth than others. There is an acknowledgement of the natural human potential for greed and sets up a system to prevent wealth disparity from the outset of wealth accumulation.

A biblical commentator from my tradition, the great medieval Jewish commentator of the Bible, Rashi, understands the sabbatical year as a time to re-establish parity between people. He explains the meaning of Leviticus 25:6 which is telling the landowner, who has just been commanded not to sow or reap the fields, that he can eat of the produce of the land. Rashi explains the confusion this may cause by re-writing the verse,

“Although I [God] prohibited the produce [of the sabbatical year] to you, I did not prohibit you to eat it or to derive benefit from it, only that you should not treat it as if you were its owner. Rather, everyone is deemed equal [regarding the use of the sabbatical year’s produce]-you, [your slaves,] and your hired worker and resident.”
(Rashi on Leviticus 25:6)

Rashi explains directly that the sabbatical year is a time when the system is reset and everyone is equal. Everyone, free or slave, boss or worker, has the same access to the produce. This not only prevents a wealth gap in a material way but also in an experiential way. The experience of the rich and poor is narrowed in the fields during the sabbatical year. There is a glimpse of what a more equal distribution of wealth may look and feel like. The wealthy may gain experience that living with less and allowing the poor to have more will not end in catastrophe for them. The sabbatical year has the potential for changing people through lived experience. The Bible’s moral call is not just to redistribute wealth but to force us to understand our neighbor. This system creates true empathy that can motivate the creation of society that is based on ‘love our neighbor as yourself.’

The bible does not stop its program of creating equal distribution of wealth with this sabbatical year. Today’s reading from the book of Leviticus continues with the description of the Jubilee year. The Jubilee year is like an epic sabbatical year. It includes all the laws of the sabbatical year plus all slaves are freed and land is returned to its original owners. There are a few significant aspects to the laws of the Jubilee that should be highlighted. First, the Jubilee is not just an economic injunction but a time of holiness. The releasing of debts, of slaves and creating rest for the land is a sacred act. Secondly, the text not only mandates the laws of release but also addresses the pitfalls that may accompany the laws. There is a warning in verses 14-17 about how people will act prior to the Jubilee year. There is a warning

that people should not take advantage of these laws when selling or buying property with the knowledge of the coming of the Jubilee. In other places in the Hebrew Bible there are similar warnings against **not** loaning money to the poor because one knows the sabbatical is coming. Thirdly, the land is not completely redistributed among all the inhabitants. It is returned to the original holders of the land. The Torah is advocating not a socialist system or an unrestricted free market. As contemporary rabbi and social justice leader, Rabbi Jill Jacobs states, “[T]he Torah – as well as later Jewish law- favors a checked market system that permits the ethical acquisition of wealth, with measures aimed at ensuring that the market does not allow the poorest members of society to end up with close to nothing.”

Lastly, further into the chapter of Leviticus, past our selection, in verses 23 and 24 we see the reason for these laws is based on the notion that all the land belongs to God and that we are mere renters or stewards of the land. This theological notion that humans can never fully own the land is the foundation of these principles that prevent massive disparities of wealth. It is important to understand that this redistribution of the land is not an act of charity but is a religious obligation. The *Mishnah*, the primary book of Jewish law published in the 2nd century of the Common Era, teaches:

One who does not allow the poor to glean or allows one and not another, or helps one of them [in the gathering], robs the poor. Concerning such a man it has been said, ‘Remove not the ancient landmark.’ (*Mishnah Peah 5:6*)

The ancient landmark referred to here is the Jubilee. This passage refers to the laws that allow the poor to glean from the produce left in a field at any time not just in the sabbatical year. The *Mishnah* is teaching that when one does not allow all the poor to glean, as the Bible instructs, they are actually stealing from the poor because of the

Jubilee. By the time the *Mishnah* was written the laws of Jubilee were not followed. However, the text here is asserting that if Jubilee were followed that the land from which the poor are gleaning may have been their land and they could have been harvesting their own grain instead of depending desperately on gleaning from another's field.

Therefore, when one allows only some poor people to glean the fields, they are actually stealing from the others because it may be their land. The landowners are being reminded that the goal of the Jubilee, of creating a just society that keeps inequality in check, is still applicable even if the laws are not. Charity can be governed by the whim or favoritism but we are taught here that such action is unacceptable. The obligation is to create a just society and not to rule over the poor with acts of charity.

These ancient biblical laws may seem radical, they may seem inspiring but how could they possibly help us today. A universal cancellation of debts and a redistribution of land do not seem like a reasonable action plan in our country to address wealth inequality. But I think there are many ways they can help shape a vision for us in our day and our country. First and foremost these biblical laws are moral injunction against wealth inequality. They show us, as people of faith, that we cannot tolerate the inequality that is growing and plaguing our country and must speak and work against it.

These laws of the sabbatical and jubilee years however are not just a call to justice but provide us with a number of provide at least two key lessons for us in the fight against wealth inequality. First, unlike charity these laws address the systemic, root causes of inequality in society. They are not a temporary fix but instead a regular practice to mediate human greed and the disparity that arises from it. This is crucial in our context. Providing for the basic needs of people through programs of feeding, housing and clothing those in in need is crucial but it is not a

solution. We must examine the root causes of inequality and poverty and address these causes. That is what the Bible is teaching us today.

Secondly, these biblical laws are set up as obligations not as choices that are based on the good nature or willingness of the landowners or the wealthy members of society. The Bible is telling us that it is not an option to provide opportunities for all people to flourish in our society rather it is an obligation. People are often impressed and grateful when ultra-wealthy members of our society give large amounts of money to fund admirable services. Although these individual people should be lauded the system is flawed. We should not need to depend on the good-hearted nature of those with money to fund the needs of our communities. And they, the Bible, teaches should not have the power to decide the priorities for social programs. Rather, the Bible commands that there are systems that prevent the explosion of wealth inequality that we are experiencing in our country today.

The Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice that I represent and on whose board your pastor serves is a group that addresses the root causes of inequality. In our 16 years as an organization we have assisted workers in forming unions, we have protested outside businesses that are mistreating workers, we have put pressure on the District Attorney to prosecute more wage theft cases and we created the workers' rights center that helps workers address the injustices at the work place. This biblical call to address and prevent wealth inequality is at the heart of our mission and we provide opportunities and resources for faith communities to join the chorus of those speaking and acting out against this moral crisis. We currently are engaging in a long term process to bring a living wage to every working in Wisconsin, we are working in partnership with the Fight for 15 campaign that organizes low-wage workers to speak out for \$15 an hour in the workplace and we are surveying Latino workers to understand the particular needs facing immigrant workers in our

community. We invite you to join our work to enact the biblical call from Leviticus that we read today.

Let us together make the moral call of today's readings a reality. Let us to speak to the justice embedded in our faith despite the strong messages of individuality and greed that shape our national conversation. Let us assure that worker, landowner, businessperson, orphan, widow and everyone in between has access to the great wealth of our nation. Let us have the courage individually and collectively to stand up for a better world. May that be God's will.

Amen.