

WHAT IS BIBLICAL ECONOMIC JUSTICE?

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Economic justice is a major message of Scripture. It is part of God's chosen plan for the earthly kingdom of His Son, and also for those persons throughout history who have chosen to pay attention. There is much misunderstanding by Christians as to what is meant by economic justice, but Scripture presents many explanations. So read on and see a little of what God has in mind for His people.

by Jim Jordal

God takes His stand in His own congregation; He judges in the midst of the rulers. How long will you judge unjustly, and show partiality to the wicked? Vindicate the weak and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and destitute. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them out of the hand of the wicked.

Psalm 82:1-4 (NASB)

Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke. Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

Isaiah 58:6-7 (NASB)

The idea for this column came to me when a friend, hearing my presentation of some frightening statistics on the growing range of income inequality in the U.S., jokingly (I hope) asked, When did you join the Communist Party?

Of course the implication is that if you care about poverty, income inequality, economic justice or anything else that questions conventional wisdom on these issues you must somehow be subversive, and possibly dangerous.

The view that the economic playing field may not be level is considered by some to be communistic in nature. Suggesting that a more equitable distribution of income might better square with America's humanitarian ideals of justice and fair play causes them to falsely envision Marxist class warfare and social revolution.

It's difficult to comprehend why people continue to be enslaved by concepts and systems they have struggled against all their lives. It's a sobering facet of human nature that those oppressed often come to identify with their oppressors. It's as if we rally around power and influence even when it threatens our very existence. Perhaps it's ignorance; or maybe it's an overarching desire for security, but in any event it too-often prevents us from clearly perceiving our problem and what needs to be done.

One statistic I criticized was that the top one percent of Americans own some 33 percent of the national wealth, while the bottom 40 percent own just .3 percent (yes, that's a decimal point in front of the 3). My friend evidently drew the conclusion that I was advocating total equality of wealth accomplished through forcible confiscation (taxation) and redistribution of resources.

So, perhaps I'd better explain what I mean when I call for economic justice. First of all, perfect equality of either income or amassed wealth is not biblical. It is also totally destructive of national vigor and economic health (look at the former Communist satellite nations if you doubt this). There ought to be a gain in wealth attributable to diligent, intelligent labor or management. So also should poverty result from slothful indifference toward gainful employment or bad personal habits. God allows people to choose by their behavior to be poor.

What God opposes is involuntary poverty resulting from unjust and oppressive laws, personal financial exploitation, callused indifference by the rich toward poverty, and world financial systems and structures that actually create economic distress. Scripture contains literally hundreds of verses identifying such actions as sinful, and pronouncing grim outcomes for such conduct.

What God demands is not financial equality, but economic justice: the chance for all to share equitably (not necessarily equally) in the world's bounty, and the opportunity to make of themselves whatever their abilities and opportunities allow.

Open your Bible and read the entire 58th chapter of Isaiah. See how the Lord commands the prophet, and by implication all Christians, to Cry loudly, do not hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet, and declare to My people their sins. He then asks why we claim to delight in Him and His ways, and why we continue hypocritical sacrifice and worship when our sins cry out for contrition and repentance. He then speaks of the only sacrifice He chooses, that of economic justice.

So if you want my definition of economic justice, try what God says here. Notice that He is not speaking only of charity, or the alleviation of poverty through individual acts of giving. Make no mistake, charity is good for both giver and receiver. But God demands something more. He speaks of the much more difficult task of unloosing the bands of wickedness by undoing the yoke of injustice and oppression afflicting humankind for thousands of years.

What a vision! What a challenge! It's nothing less than a foretaste of the soon-to-come kingdom rule of Jesus Christ here on earth. Meanwhile, our task is to create the impending kingdom in our daily lives and in our churches and communities.

We re in basic training, so to speak, for the future. Perhaps we can t solve all these problems immediately, and maybe we won t achieve economic justice soon; but we work for Someone who can and will in His due time, and at His pleasure. That s enough for me.