

# What Does the Bible Say About Economics?

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The Bible tells of God's presence in human history. Through the stories in the Bible, we acquire an understanding of what it means to be God's people: who God is, who we are, and what God requires of us. The Bible reveals to us the many aspects of God by telling how God works in this world, creating, judging, bringing justice, salvation, and mercy. The Bible tells how human beings have responded to God's presence, God's demands, and God's teachings. In sometimes simple and sometimes complex ways the Bible makes clear that those who seek to avoid God often end up in the belly of the whale. But those who hunger and thirst for righteousness find living water to quench their thirst.

The Bible is a central resource as we struggle to understand what it means to call ourselves Christian, and to interpret Jesus' teachings and God's demands within our modern communities. It is not, of course, the only resource. We use our own experiences and those of others around us. We also turn to the wisdom of prophets and leaders (from Martin Luther to Martin Luther King Jr.) who have relied on their faith to find a way through difficult modern times. But in Christian communities, the Bible is used most frequently as the primary source of knowledge and wisdom about how to live a godly and righteous life.

## Reading the Bible

As Christians, we believe that many of the moral and religious messages imbedded in biblical stories are universal, that they teach us about a God who operates at all times and in all places. Yet we often choose not to follow the literal messages in the Bible when they seem no longer relevant to our modern age. For instance, although most Christians agree with the Old Testament injunction against murder, few pay attention to the ban against eating pork. Thus, we interpret the Bible selectively. Where appropriate, we use its words literally: "Love your neighbor as yourself [Matthew 19:19]" has remained a timeless statement. But when the Bible uses formulas no longer relevant for our lives, we reinterpret the words in sermons and in our own minds so that the same message comes through in a modern context. "You shall not covet your neighbor's . . . ox [Exod 20:17]" is mentally translated quickly into "Do not covet your neighbor's expensive car."

Understanding what the Bible has to say about economic life may be particularly difficult for many modern readers. Unlike Abraham and Isaac, we no longer live in a tribal society. Unlike David or Amos, few of us are shepherds. Unlike Jesus and his disciples, we are not asked to obey the political dictates of the Emperor of Rome. In fact, one reason why religion has become divorced from economic issues in our modern society may be that the direct economic messages that pervade the Bible appear to have little connection with the economic choices in our lives today.

It is not easy for most Americans to read passages that call them to forgive debts, to share property, or to give all their possessions to the poor. To discover the relevance of these passages in our lives we must interact with the text as we read it. As we listen to the biblical stories, we must constantly ask ourselves, "What does this mean about my behavior in my life today?" In some cases we may discover that these words, difficult as they are, have direct meaning for our lives. In other cases, it may be necessary to translate the direct message in a way that preserves the underlying call for economic justice, but adjusts it to our current time and place.

Our own past history heavily influences this type of interactive reading and interpretation. We read through the lenses of our own experience. Those of us who are white, middle-income Americans tend to “see” the text in a way that is very different from those who come from other cultural, economic, and racial backgrounds. For instance, those who have worked hard to achieve economic security respond very differently to the news that God feeds the hungry without charge and sends the rich away empty [Luke 1:53] than do those who are struggling with unemployment or discrimination. There is always a temptation to ignore or downplay the texts that make us uncomfortable, and to concentrate on those that are most easily adaptable to our lives. It may be useful to read some of the more radical passages on economic life and to ask explicitly, “How would I interpret and ‘see’ this passage if I were unemployed and struggling to survive economically? If my great-grandfather had been born a slave? If my parents had fled political or economic oppression in another country?”

Selective interpretation of the biblical message is unavoidable. Even when we listen to a familiar biblical passage, such as the Twenty-third Psalm, we hear it differently in a time of deep grief than we do in a time of great joy. In part, this occurs because the Bible is a complex book with multiple levels of meaning. It also reflects the fact that we can see in the text only that which our own experience prepares us to understand. A person who has never felt deep grief may never recognize the depths of anger and pain in many of the psalms.

There is no single correct interpretation of the economic messages in the Bible. The Bible does not speak from a single voice. For instance, even when Luke tells the same stories as Mark, he often gives them a different emphasis or interpretation. And each reader will bring his or her own lenses to these stories. There are, however, some general themes about economic justice and economic decision-making which recur throughout the biblical stories, in both the Old and New Testaments. Scholars have come to see these themes as crucial parts of the biblical message, not because of any specific passage that proves their importance, but because of the repetition of these themes throughout the Bible. The following sections outline three of these recurrent themes that speak directly to our economic lives.

### **Theme 1: A God Concerned with Economics**

Throughout the Bible, God manifests a deep concern for economic justice and economic well-being among God’s people. The theologian Douglas Meeks argues that one of God’s primary roles in the Bible is to be an economist. God the Economist acts in history to assure that the household of God’s people is a just household, where all have the resources necessary for life.

The formative event of the Old Testament is God’s liberation of slaves from Egypt. While this is a religious event, resulting in a covenant of faithfulness between God and the Chosen People, it is also a political and an economic event. God leads the Israelites out of the oppressive household of Pharaoh, out of slavery and into freedom, establishing a new household and a new economic system. God cares for the physical needs of the Israelites, providing manna in the desert. God gives the law, which not only teaches the proper forms of worship, but also sets out an economic and political framework for the Israelites to live by, designed to assure a just distribution of resources.

The Law of the Old Testament explicitly protects the rights of the least powerful and neediest in the household of the Israelites. These include the poor, the stranger, the sojourner, the widow, and the orphan. God’s people are directed to tend to the needs of these most marginalized groups and to be sure that they receive their just share of the community’s resources (Deuteronomy 10:17-18). There is to be a regular redistribution of property and the forgiveness of past debts (Leviticus 25:1-55; Deuteronomy 15:1-11). It is clear that God demands that a faithful people order both their spiritual and their material lives in ways that are pleasing to God.

This emphasis on economic and social justice as well as spiritual faithfulness recurs again throughout the prophecies of the Old Testament. Isaiah speaks of economic prosperity and peace as an integral part of

God's desire for Israel. Amos, Jeremiah, and Micah denounce the political and economic injustices within Israel as well as its spiritual practices.

Jesus' ministry continues this theme. Jesus talks as much about economics in his teachings as he does about spiritual life. Many of the Gospel stories directly pose the question "What sort of economic decisions should one make to be faithful to God?" How should Nicodemus make retribution for his past life? Should Mary spend her time cooking or listening to Jesus speak? How should the wise steward use his master's money? What should the rich young man do with his possessions? What role should the moneychangers have in the church? These stories are both metaphors for spiritual lessons as well as direct lessons in economic decision-making.

Jesus not only feeds the souls of his followers, but also literally feeds their bodies with loaves and fishes (Mark 6:35-44; Mark 8:1-10). Jesus emphasizes that the hungry shall be fed in God's kingdom (Luke 6:21) and feeding the hungry here on earth is a way to do God's will (Matthew 25:31-45). He castigates those who focus on material possessions as the primary aim in life, and who do not share their wealth with others. His story contrasting the behavior of the rich with the widow who quietly gives from her meager resources to help the poor (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4) remains a compelling indictment of the selfishness exhibited by those who have too much and give too little.

What emerges is a clear message that God is not only concerned with the spiritual life of God's followers, but that God also cares deeply about their economic life. Individual economic decisions, as well as the economic structures of the church and the government, are subject to God's judgment and God's demands.

## **Theme 2: God's Covenant with the Human Household**

Closely connected to God's concern for the economic—and non-economic—life of God's people is the idea of a covenant between God and the people of God. While the interpretation of this covenant changes through the Old and New Testaments, in all cases it is clear that this covenant involves mutual responsibilities on the part of both God and God's people.

The initial biblical covenant emerges at the beginning of Genesis, as a shared promise between Creator and creation. The Creator fills the world with good things, providing abundance and livelihood for all living creatures. The creation, both human and nonhuman, is charged with using this abundance in accord with the created order. Adam and Eve are driven out of Eden when they attempt to become something other than what God intends, when their pride sets them against God. Human beings, made in the image of God, serve God by working as God's agents in the creation.

Some theologians have written about the creation as a three-way covenant: between God, humanity, and the non-human creation. In this view, humanity is not set over the rest of creation, but lives in harmony with creation; the earth provides abundance in exchange for humanity's care and nurture of the good things God has made. This interpretation of the creation has deep economic implications regarding the appropriate human use of the environment.

The covenant between God and the Israelites becomes explicit under Moses' leadership. At this time, the Israelites are chosen to receive the law. In return, they pledge to worship God and to order their household in accordance with God's wishes. As we have seen, this includes explicit attention to the economic order by which they live.

Because of God's covenant, God remains faithful to the Israelites, acting in history to assure their survival. But God demands that they fulfill their covenantal responsibilities. The prophets are sent to call Israel back to faithfulness, both in spirit and in action. Again and again it is clear that faithfulness to God involves more than proper temple worship; the covenantal responsibilities of God's people encompass the entire range of their individual and community lives. God, speaking through Isaiah, describes the type of worship that brings the Lord's blessing: "If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the

afflicted, then . . . the Lord will guide you continually [Isa. 8:10-11].”

In Jesus’ ministry, God’s promises are expanded beyond the tribe of Israel to a far more inclusive household. All willing followers are promised a part in this new covenant. Jesus offers God’s mercy to all people, but also makes it clear that accepting God’s offer means committing one’s whole life to God. Jesus’ followers are explicitly called to follow his example; to be God’s agents in the world, healing the sick, caring for the poor, and challenging the powerful.

This theme of covenant illuminates the nature of human responsibilities in the light of God’s concern for economic justice. As Christians who have accepted the promise of Jesus, we are brought into covenant with all peoples. God’s household becomes our household and there are no longer any strangers among us. Charged with carrying out God’s will, we are called to see that all persons have the resources—spiritual and economic—necessary for life.

### **Theme 3: God’s Special Concern for the Poor**

Our covenant with God binds all of us within God’s care and concern. But stories throughout the Bible emphasize that God has a particular concern for the poor and the oppressed. As people who seek to do God’s will, we too are called to give special attention to the well-being of the poor.

The law received by Moses emphasizes the responsibilities of the Israelites to care for widows, orphans, and strangers, persons who would typically have no means of economic support (Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18; Deuteronomy 15:7-11). Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the reader learns that certain persons are particularly good and righteous by stories that show them giving shelter to travelers or assistance to the poor. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) is probably the best known of these.

Jesus’ own life, beginning in poverty and ending with death as a political prisoner, embodies God’s particular concern for the poor. Through Jesus, God becomes one with the poor and lives in suffering love with their pain and oppression. In Luke, Jesus begins his ministry with the announcement that he has been appointed to preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and to set at liberty the oppressed (Luke 4:18). The identification of God with the poor is nowhere better expressed than in Jesus’ words, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me [Matt. 25:40].”

The statement that God cares particularly for the poor is often heard as an exclusive statement. If God is particularly concerned for the poor, does this mean that God has less concern for the well-being of those who do not suffer daily hunger or oppression? To hear this as an exclusive statement is to ignore God’s infinite capacity for love. Parents of a child who is experiencing difficult personal problems may feel a special concern for that child, but do not love or care for their other children any less. To proclaim God’s concern for the poor in no way implies that God is not concerned for middle-income Christians as well. But it does imply that middle-income Christians are called to share in God’s concern.

The message that God cares particularly for the needs of the poor is linked with the message that those who are not poor have special responsibilities. Those with food are called to share it. Those with a home are called to provide a bed to the homeless. Those who sit in the councils of power are called to listen to the cries of the powerless. Those who have profited from injustice are called to repent and make restitution.

## **What Does This Mean About Our Faith?**

These three biblical themes are by no means the only ones that link our faith with our economic lives, but they are a good starting point. From these themes emerge several important implications for the life of

the church and for the life of individual Christians.

*Christians are called to be fundamentally concerned about their neighbors, which means to be concerned with the household (economy) of God's people.* Our covenantal responsibilities as Christians demand that we consider the well-being of our fellow members of the human household in all our actions. We are to work toward the full inclusion of all our neighbors into one common household, assuring that everyone has access to the resources necessary for life and that everyone is allowed to fully participate in the life of the community. This is not a substitute for spiritual outreach, but a complement to it. We are called to both proclaim the presence of God in our midst and to live a life that reveals that presence by fighting against poverty and oppression and striving for economic justice.

This emphasis on community, covenant, and shared responsibilities and obligations may at times come into direct conflict with our modern lives. Messages from the contemporary world often encourage us to live for ourselves and to focus solely on our own or our family's needs. Although all of us have important responsibilities to our families and to ourselves that should not be taken lightly, the biblical vision calls us to a larger sense of who and what we are. We are not just individuals or small family groups, required to make only self-focused decisions. We are members of a community, who may be called to invest time and effort in responding to the needs of others.

Even when community concerns are explicitly recognized, it is often tempting to limit the definition of community. We are Americans, who live in a particular state, city, and neighborhood. While these are important communities, the answer to "Who is my neighbor?" is broader than their boundaries. Our sense of "neighborhood" is consistently being challenged and enlarged by our Christian commitments. Ultimately, our neighbors live around the globe.

*Christians are called to recognize the interconnectedness of worship and just action.* The biblical themes previously highlighted emphasize the inclusive nature of God's call. Biblical faithfulness involves more than regular and proper worship and daily prayer, although these are crucial parts of any Christian life. God is also worshipped by faithful daily living, which means dealing fairly and justly with all neighbors, whether they are nearby or far away. God judges both individuals and nations who are not faithful and who deal unjustly with the poor and powerless.

Nothing in our entire realm of daily living can be divorced from our religious life. Our lives demonstrate our Christian commitments many ways, not least of which is to seek God's will in our personal economic decisions and to build and maintain social, economic, and political institutions that operate inclusively and justly.

*Christians are called to listen to the voices of the poor and to seek reform and redress for injustices.* God's particular concern for the poor must be mirrored by those who act as God's agents within the human household. On a personal level, Christians are regularly challenged to ask, "How much of my time and energy should I give to others?" Some of this giving will be directed to our extended family, our friends and co-workers, and our actual next-door neighbors. Listening to the trouble of a long-time friend is an important act of love. We must, however, also be available to listen to the needs and pain of those we may never meet face-to-face, whose lives may be very different from our own.

Jesus challenges the affluent to put on the "lenses" of the poor and to see how life looks to those who have less. He challenges the comfortable to view life through the eyes of those of a different race or different nationality. This means opening ourselves to the uncomfortable confession that our personal and institutional lifestyles sometimes contribute to the poverty, fear, and powerlessness of others. In our modern world, this is a challenge both to individual Christians and to the institutional church.

## Summary

The Bible is a primary source of information about our faith. How we read it is heavily influenced by our own personal histories and experiences. It can be useful to recognize explicitly some of the biases that we bring to our own reading of the Bible, and to work at seeing biblical passages through alternative perspectives. There are a number of themes within the Bible that relate to economic issues. These include God's concern the economic life of God's faithful people; the sense of covenant between God and creation, including the interconnecting responsibilities between those within God's household; and God's special concern for the needs of the poor and oppressed. These themes provide information on how we are called to live our spiritual as well as our economic lives. As members of a faithful community, we are called to be God's agents in this world. This call means acting justly to all of our neighbors, not only through our own personal behavior, but also through the institutions and structures that we create and maintain in order to live together in society.

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## GROUP DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

### Suggested group exercise

Divide the group in half. Designate one group as "poor." Have each individual imagine a role for him- or herself that matches this designation (a recent immigrant, an inner-city African American, a teenage mother, an elderly person with limited income, and so forth) Designate the other group as "well-off" and ask each person to imagine his or her role (a self-made business-person, a successful doctor, a member of an affluent family, a person who has inherited substantial income, etc.) Tell the members of this subgroup that they are all faithful churchgoers. Ask each group to read and discuss the following four passages within their respective roles: Deuteronomy 15:1-11, Mark 12:14-17, Luke 6:20-25, and Luke 18:22-25. As each group discusses these passages, it should decide what it wants to tell the other group about the faith lessons that should be drawn from these passages.

Bring both groups together. Give members of each group a chance to tell members of the other what they heard in these passages about their faith. Then, give each group a chance to respond and to discuss the different perspectives.

### Starting discussion questions

1. Give examples from the Bible in which God acts as an economist. How do you respond to this image of God?
2. How do you respond to the claim that God has a special concern for the poor and the oppressed? What might this mean?
3. Read the discussion of the sabbatical year and the jubilee year in Leviticus 25. Is there any way to translate these requirements into ones that might make sense in today's world? What are the underlying themes in this chapter? What are the underlying behavioral principles that God is trying to reinforce through these laws?