



the heart of God

JUSTICE FROM GENESIS TO REVELATION

PART FIVE

God and Economic Justice

DEUTERONOMY 8





Part Five – God and Economic Justice

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We Can't Compartmentalize Our Spiritual Life from "Real Life"

The God who is speaking to us through his inspired word, the Scriptures, is going to be "unveiling" and "revealing" those places where we might rather keep him out of. Or to take it one step further, he will be revealing the idols of our hearts – those places we often turn to for our sense of security, or identity – those 'good things' that can too easily become 'god-things', our ultimate thing.

"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." – Matthew 6:24

Jesus uses the word "mammon." Why? Because "mammon" is the name of a "god," a false-god.

This word mammon comes from an Aramaic word *mamone* that means "trustworthy." It's describing wealth as something that has a sort of power, that is tempting you to trust in it for your security and happiness.

God knows we need stuff – like food and clothes. Jesus knows this.

God has packed creation with abundance – with enough for every creature to live its best life. The birds of the air; God takes care of them. The flowers in the field; more beautifully dressed than kings and queens.

This creational 'abundance' doesn't lend itself to greed. It's not about excess. For Jesus has warned us off that already; warned us off making our life about our stuff. This leads him to conclude:

"For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." – Matthew 6:32-33

I. Assumption One: *My Stuff Is My Stuff*

The Bible does speak of property ownership.

- Exodus 20:15: "You shall not steal."
- Exodus 20:17: "You shall not covet your neighbour's house...or anything that belongs to your neighbour."

But this text isn't ultimately "about" ownership. It's about relationship – to God and others. The "law" God gives is intended to help us maintain good relationships – a flourishing community.

And part of the way it does that is to *protect*. To give good boundaries that help us flourish as people and as a community.

Corrective One: Stewardship

In Genesis we saw that to “image God” is to represent God and his interest to the rest of the world. The job includes to “work it and take care of it.”

Why? Because it belongs to God, and to be a human is to be a steward of God’s good and gracious gifts. We looked at that in terms of environmental stewardship, it’s the recognition that, as the Psalmist says: “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.” – Psalm 24:1.

Stewardship applies to property and wealth as well. Jesus’ parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 makes this clear. We are all responsible to use what God gives us to invest, but it’s an investment *on behalf of God, the Master that owns it all.*

“Love your neighbour as yourself.” That’s what your freedom is for, and what your stuff is for.

Think of how freeing this really is: when I live like that, I don’t have to stress about my stuff; my heart is not wrapped around what I own. Rather, I invest it for God’s kingdom work.

II. Assumption Two: *I Made This Happen So I Deserve This*

Deuteronomy 8:10-18

As Israel grow wealthy, they begin to live as if, well, as if they are the centre of their economic world. And when they do, they forget God.

And we are liable to do the same. In the vacuum of worshipping and obeying the true God, we’ll worship something or someone. Of course, there is no such thing as “not worshipping.” We’ll just begin to serve another god, the “god Mammon” – the very wealth that led us away from God can become our source of security, can become our *functional God.*

Corrective Two: All I Have is a Gracious Gift from God

“If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides.” – 1 Peter 4:11

“Better little with righteousness than much gain with injustice.” – Proverbs 16:8

1. Work Hard

We use what God has put in our hands to work at whatever calling he has on our lives, recognizing that whatever I produce is not ultimately about me. It’s all gift. How freeing is that!? It means my value and my identity cannot be reduced to my portfolio or achievements or bank statement.

2. Live With Contentment

I need to be aware of the difference between “want” and “need”, for when I believe I “need” something, I begin to feel I have the *right* to it, that I am “owed” this thing, and can end up down a dangerous road of compromise, of justification, in my attempts to get what I “need” that will lead me away from the way of following Jesus. That’s how *mammon* gets to work on us.



- At a practical, personal level, this is how people get into serious debt.
- On the larger, natural resources level, this impacts our ability as humans to be wise, faithful stewards of the earth that God made and loves. Greed, in various forms, at the root of the ecological crisis.
- Greed often drives injustices associated with child slavery in sweatshops.

“But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.” – 1 Timothy 6:6

III. Assumption Three: *The World is a Place of Scarcity, Just Grab What You Can*

Christian thinking is carefully making the best out of a less-than-ideal system.

1. We see the concept of **property ownership is there in the scriptures**, BUT **the Christian view is deeply tempered by a true stewardship understanding**, aimed at responsibly using resources for God’s glory and the good of our neighbour.
2. We see **God calls us to give ourselves to working hard**, BUT **the primary motive isn’t selfish – it’s to serve those around us out of love, beginning with our closest neighbours, our own household, and then spreading to our neighbours**. Freedom to work and earn a profit isn’t itself wrong, but it is to be aimed not at self-interest but motivated by love for God and for others.

Although free market capitalism may be the economic system we inhabit, we don’t uncritically share all the common assumptions about how to participate within it. Instead:

- We do believe in God and believe that God does instruct us in terms of how we envision money and markets.
- We share with each other of the good gifts God has entrusted us.
- We give generously to the poor, and fund mission organizations that seek to make a more just world for those who are oppressed.
- We don’t view our stuff as our stuff but invest it for kingdom gain – knowing we will report to the Living God at the end of it all.

Corrective Three: Jubilee and Compassion

“Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan.” – Leviticus 25:10

Not only were people freed to start over, but all that land would also be returned. It’s like a “reset button” that was to be pushed every fifty years.



“At bottom, the purpose of the law of Jubilee is to impede the perpetuation of socioeconomic discrimination and to diminish the causes that generate social conflicts. Every fifty years socioeconomic inequality must cease, and each member of the society must begin with a new cycle of opportunity.” – Enrique Nardoni, *‘Rise Up, O Judge: A Study of Justice in the Biblical World’*

The Bible does not envision a scenario where people can just become billionaires, can be the “super-rich.” Now, there is no “Jubilee” in our economic system. But what does this Jubilee principle look like for us today?

1. The principle of Jubilee is at work when wealthy nations cancel international debts they hold over poorer nations.
2. The principle of Jubilee is at work when Christian people consider how the redistribution of wealth would factor into how we evaluate political platforms and what it would look like for taxes to be used in truly just and helpful ways.

Commenting on Jesus’ call for Christians to be the “light of the world,” D.A. Carson says: “Prison reform, medical care, trade unions, control of a perverted and perverse liquor trade, abolition of slavery, abolition of child labour, establishment of orphanages, reform of the penal code – in all these areas the followers of Jesus spearheaded the drive for righteousness.”

– D.A. Carson, *‘Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation of the World’*

“Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the fatherless, for their Defender will take up their case against you.” – Proverbs 23:10

3. The principle of Jubilee is at work when Christian people consider how the drive for wealth and power led nations into deep injustices associated with the colonial project and the “moving of ancient boundary lines” to use the language of the Proverbs.

Compassion

Compassion is a key incentive for how we are to think about how we order our existence, including our economic life.

Says Jesus our Master: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them to do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” – Matthew 7:12

The Gospel

Our greatest incentive is the love of God, poured out abundantly for us in Jesus Christ.

What’s the motive Paul offers for God’s people to be radically generous to those in need?

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

– 2 Corinthians 8:9

What is our prime motive to be generous? **The radical generosity of God to us through Jesus.**





Open Up

Though much of our lives are taken up with the “economic” – the reality of work, and production, and incentives to pursue goods and services – some would say that we as Christians don’t often give much time or effort to thinking Christianly about the economy?

Have you given much thought to a Christian vision of economics? Why or why not?

What stood out in particular from the message this week?

Dig In

1. Read **Matthew 6:19-24 and 28-34**.

- a. How does Jesus’ vision of abundance – of God’s ability to supply enough for our need (though not all our greed!) – help set the stage for how we think about our resources?
- b. How do Jesus’ words personally challenge you today?

2. In the message we looked at three “assumptions” we often make within our economic situation, and three correctives. The final corrective was about Leviticus 25 and the year of Jubilee – that every 50 years God’s people were to release anyone who had sold themselves into slavery, and all the land was to be given back to the original owner.

Discuss the ways that applying this same principle today might impact how we think and live (see above for three ideas of how that would look).

3. “So, in everything, do to others what you would have them to do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” – Matthew 7:12. How does this instruction help us live with God’s vision in terms of economic justice?

Prayer

Thank God for the creational abundance that he gives, providing for our needs. Ask God for wisdom to know how to best enact the sort of economic justice we discussed this week.