

SESSION 2

The Bible and Wealth

- “Is God Really on the Side of the Poor?” by Ronald J. Sider
- “Jesus Visits the Hamptons,” by Will Willimon
- “Tax the Rich,” by William H. Gates Sr. and Chuck Collins

Few things rob humans of their dignity more than poverty. While many theologians have made the case that God has special concern for the poor, Ronald J. Sider argues we must be careful to acknowledge that God is not partial to any group of people but loves each person, regardless of economic status. Yet in the gospels Jesus strongly presses the rich, Will Willimon writes, in a way that should challenge us today to reflect on wealth and its effect on relationship with God and the poor. William H. Gates Sr. and Chuck Collins examine the biblical and moral limits imposed on absolute private ownership of wealth and property in the context of the “estate tax,” the United States’ only levy on accumulated wealth.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In what ways has your economic status affected your relationship with God? How has economics affected relationships in your church—between members and in your neighborhood or town? Have you ever felt personally challenged by Jesus’ teachings on wealth? Create a family “wealth history,” examining what personal initiatives, social policies, or circumstances led your family to accumulate or lose wealth.
2. Willimon would agree with this quote about luxuries: “It is a pleasure to live with them and a tragedy to live for them.” How do you understand affluence or luxury in your own life? How is luxury presented in the media and in advertising? What are the connections between luxury and leisure?
3. Is it your experience that contemporary Christians are unwilling to criticize capitalism? What do you think of the Pope John Paul II’s statement, “A balanced and well-regulated world market can bring with prosperity the development of culture, democracy, solidarity, and peace. But one can expect very different effects from an unbridled market that, under the pretext of competitiveness, prospers by exploiting people and the environment to excess”?
4. Why has the repeal of the federal estate tax become such a “hot ticket” item for many Christians? Consider the intent behind the years of Jubilee and years of debt release in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15. Comment on how these passages speak to the U.S. government’s efforts to repeal the estate tax.

RESOURCES

- Ronald J. Sider has several books on Christians and wealth and poverty. His breakthrough book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (reissued by W Publishing Group, 2005) examines the movement from affluence to generosity, and *Just Generosity* (Baker Books, 1999) looks at what it will take to overcome poverty in America.
- *Wealth and Our Commonwealth: Why America Should Tax Accumulated Fortunes*, by William H. Gates Sr. and Chuck Collins, argues that individual wealth is a product not only of hard work and smart choices but also of the society that provides the fer-

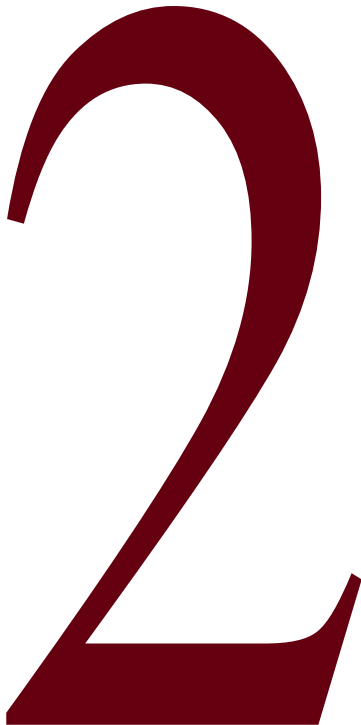


Christians and Poverty

tile soil for success. (Beacon Press, January 2003)

- Ministry of Money is a Christian ministry that encourages persons to become free from their attachment to cultural values regarding money and to live out joyfully God's call for their lives and resources. It offers retreats, a monthly newsletter, and excellent resources. (www.ministryofmoney.org)

- *Affluenza* is a groundbreaking film that diagnoses a serious social disease—caused by consumerism, commercialism, and materialism—that has a devastating impact on our families, our communities, and the environment. This PBS special also has a Web site (www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza) with numerous resources on the topic. You can order the DVD through Bullfrog Films (www.bullfrogfilms.com).



IS GOD REALLY ON THE SIDE OF THE POOR?

by Ronald J. Sider

Is God, as some liberation theologians suggested in the 1970s, biased in favor of the poor? The Bible has a clear answer. God is not partial. God has the same loving concern for each person created. For precisely this reason, God cares as much for the weak and disadvantaged as for the strong and fortunate. In contrast to the ways you and I, as well as the comfortable and powerful of every age and society, always act toward the poor, God seems to take a special interest in the poor and oppressed.

Might there in fact be some important sense in which one should say that God is on the side of the poor? I want to examine four strands of biblical teaching related to this question.

The Bible clearly and repeatedly teaches a fundamental point that we have often overlooked. At the crucial moments when God displayed mighty acts in history to reveal God's nature and will, God *also* intervened to liberate the poor and oppressed.

God displayed power at the Exodus in order to free oppressed slaves. When God called Moses at the burning bush, God's intention was to end suffering and injustice: "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians" (Exodus 3:7-8).

Now of course the liberation of oppressed slaves was not God's only purpose in the Exodus. God also acted because of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God wanted to create a special people to whom God's self could be revealed. The liberation of a poor, oppressed people, however, was right at the heart of God's design (Exodus 6:5-7).

The preamble to the Ten Commandments, probably the most important portion of the entire law for Israel, begins with this same revolutionary truth. Before God gives the two tables of the law, Yahweh identifies God's self: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Deuteronomy 5:6, Exodus 20:2). Yahweh is the one who frees from bondage. The God of the Bible wants to be known as the liberator of the oppressed.

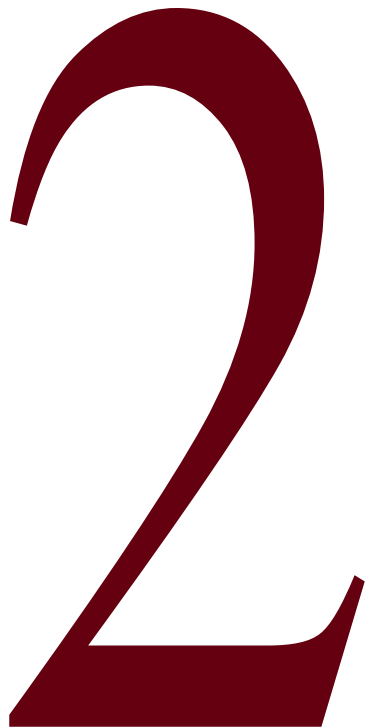
The Exodus was certainly the decisive event in the creation of the chosen people. We distort the biblical interpretation of this momentous occasion unless we see that, at this pivotal point, the Lord of the universe was at work correcting oppression and liberating the poor.

WHEN THEY SETTLED in the promised land, the Israelites soon discovered that Yahweh's passion for justice was a two-edged sword. When they were oppressed, it led to their freedom. But when they became the oppressors, it led to their destruction.

When God called Israel out of Egypt and made the covenant with them, God gave them God's law so that they could live together in peace and justice. But Israel failed to obey the law of the covenant. As a result, Israel was destroyed, and God's chosen people were sent into captivity. Why?

The explosive message of the prophets is that God destroyed Israel not just because of idolatry but also because of their economic exploitation of the poor.

The middle of the 8th century B.C. was a time of political success and economic prosperity unknown since the days of Solomon. But it was precisely at this moment



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that God sent the prophet Amos to announce the unwelcome news that the northern kingdom of Israel would be destroyed. Penetrating beneath the facade of current prosperity and fantastic economic growth, Amos saw terrible oppression of the poor. He saw the rich “trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth” (2:7). He saw that the affluent lifestyle of the rich was built on oppression of the poor (6:1-7). Even in the courts the poor had no hope, because the rich bribed the judges (5:10-15).

God’s word through Amos was that the northern kingdom would be destroyed and the people taken into exile (6:4-7; 7:11, 17). Only a very few years after Amos spoke, it happened just as God had said.

We must not ignore other very important factors. The prophet Hosea (a contemporary of Amos) disclosed that the nation’s idolatry was another cause of impending destruction. But the catastrophe of national destruction and captivity reveals the God of the Exodus still at work correcting the oppression of the poor.

CHRISTIANS BELIEVE that God revealed God’s self most completely in Jesus of Nazareth. How did the incarnate one define his mission?

His words in the synagogue at Nazareth, spoken near the beginning of his public ministry, still throb with hope for the poor. He read from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19).

After reading these words, he informed the audience that this scripture was now fulfilled in himself.

Some avoid the clear meaning of Jesus’ statement by spiritualizing his words. Certainly, as other texts show, he came to open our blinded hearts, to die for our sins, and to free us from the oppression of guilt. But that is not what he means here. The words about releasing captives and liberating the oppressed are from Isaiah. In their original Old Testament setting, they unquestionably referred to physical oppression and captivity.

Jesus’ actual ministry corresponded precisely to the words of Luke 4. He spent most of his time not among the rich and powerful in Jerusalem, but among the poor in the cultural and economic backwater of Galilee. He healed the sick and blind. He fed the hungry. And he warned his followers in the strongest possible words that those who do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoners will experience eternal damnation (Matthew 25:31-46).

At the supreme moment of history, when God took on human flesh, we see the God of Israel still at work liberating the poor and oppressed and summoning God’s people to do the same. That is the central reason for Christian concern for the poor.

Not only does God act in history to liberate the poor, but, in a mysterious way that we can only half fathom, the sovereign of the universe identifies with the weak and destitute. Two proverbs state this beautiful truth. Proverbs 14:31 puts it negatively: “Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker.” Even more moving is the positive formulation: “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord” (19:17). What a statement! Helping a poor person is like helping the creator of all things with a loan.

BORN IN A SMALL, insignificant province of the Roman Empire, Jesus was first visited by shepherds, persons viewed as thieves by Jewish society. His parents were too poor to bring the normal offering for purification. Instead of a lamb, they brought two pigeons to the temple. Jesus was a refugee (Matthew 2:13-15) and then an immigrant in Galilee (Matthew 2:19-23). Since Jewish rabbis received no fees for their

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teaching, Jesus had no regular income during his public ministry. Nor did he have a home of his own (Matthew 8:20). Jesus also sent out his disciples in extreme poverty (Luke 9:3; 10:4).

His identification with the poor and unfortunate was, he said, a sign that he was the Messiah. When John the Baptist sent messengers to ask Jesus if he was the long-expected Messiah, Jesus simply pointed to his deeds. He was healing the sick and preaching to the poor (Matthew 11:2-6). Jesus also preached to the rich. But apparently it was his particular concern to preach to the poor that validated his claim to messiahship.

Only as we feel the presence of the incarnate God in the form of a poor Galilean can we begin to understand. “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

If this saying of Jesus is awesome, its parallel is terrifying. “Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me” (v. 45). What does that mean in a world where millions die each year while rich Christians live in affluence? What does it mean to see the Lord of the universe lying by the roadside starving and walk by on the other side? We cannot know.

We can only pledge, in fear and trembling, not to kill him again.

JESUS’ STORY OF the rich man and Lazarus echoes and illustrates a third teaching prominent throughout scripture: The rich may prosper for a time, but eventually God will destroy them; the poor, on the other hand, God will exalt.

Mary’s Magnificat puts it simply and bluntly: “My soul magnifies the Lord. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away” (Luke 1:46-53). And James’ letter is a constant theme of biblical revelation: “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you” (James 5:1).

Why does scripture declare that God regularly reverses the good fortunes of the rich? Is God engaged in class warfare? Actually, our texts never say that God loves the poor more than the rich. But they do constantly assert that God lifts up the poor and disadvantaged. They insist that God casts down the wealthy and powerful—precisely because they became wealthy by oppressing the poor and because they failed to feed the hungry.

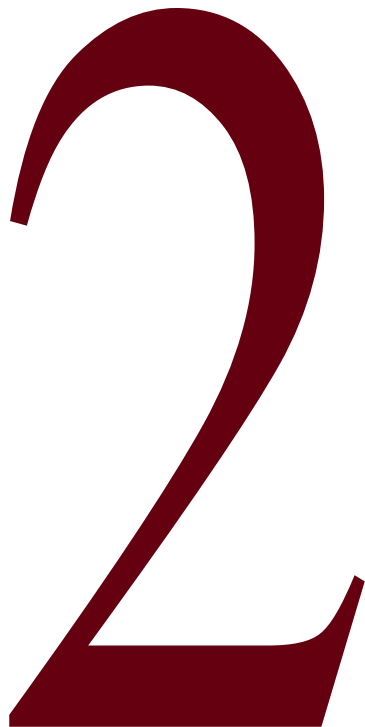
Why did James warn the rich to weep and howl because of impending misery? Because they had cheated their workers: “You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter” (James 5:3-5).

God does not have class enemies. But he hates and punishes injustice and neglect of the poor. And the rich, if we accept the repeated warnings of scripture, are frequently guilty of both.

Through the prophets God announced devastation and destruction for both rich individuals and rich nations who oppressed the poor (Jeremiah 22:13-19; Amos 6:4-7; Jeremiah 5:26-31; Isaiah 1:21-26). Nowhere is this clearer than in Isaiah. Through Isaiah God declared that the rulers of Judah were rich because they had cheated the poor (Isaiah 3:14-25).

Sometimes scripture does not charge the rich with direct oppression of the poor. It simply accuses them of failure to share with the needy. But the result is the same.

The biblical explanation of Sodom’s destruction provides an illustration of this terrible truth. If asked why Sodom was destroyed, virtually all Christians would point



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to the city's gross sexual perversity. But that is a one-sided recollection of what scripture actually teaches. Ezekiel shows that one important reason God destroyed Sodom was that it stubbornly refused to share with the poor: "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them, when I saw it" (Ezekiel 16:49-50).

The text does not say that they oppressed the poor. It simply accuses them of failing to assist the needy.

Affluent Christians remember Sodom's sexual misconduct and forget her sinful unconcern for the poor. Is it because the former is less upsetting? Have we allowed our economic self-interest to distort our interpretations of scripture? Undoubtedly. But precisely to the extent that our affirmation of scriptural authority is sincere, we will permit painful texts to correct our thinking. As we do, we will acknowledge that the God of the Bible wreaks horrendous havoc on the rich. But it is not because God does not love rich persons. It is because the rich regularly oppress the poor and neglect the needy.

Since God cares so much for the poor, it is hardly surprising that God wants God's people to do the same. God's command to believers to have a special regard for the poor, weak, and disadvantaged is the final theme of biblical literature I want to explore.

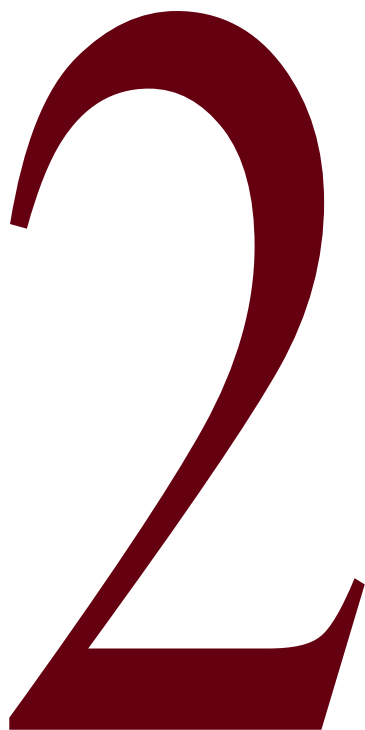
Equal justice for the poor in court is a constant theme of scripture (Exodus 23:6; Psalm 72:1-4; Amos 5:10-15). Widows, orphans and strangers also receive particularly frequent attention (Exodus 22:21-24).

The Bible specifically commands believers to imitate God's special concern for the poor and oppressed. In the Old Testament, Yahweh frequently reminded the Israelites of their former oppression in Egypt, when Yahweh commanded them to care for the poor (Exodus 22:21-24; Deuteronomy 15:13-15). Jesus taught his followers to imitate God's mercy in their lending as well (Luke 6:33-36).

When Paul took up the collection for the poor in Jerusalem, he pointedly reminded the Corinthians that the Lord Jesus became poor so that they might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). When the author of 1 John called on Christians to share with the needy, he first mentioned the example of Christ: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16). Then, in the very next verse, he urged Christians to give generously to the needy. It is the amazing self-sacrifice of Christ which Christians are to imitate as they relate to the poor and oppressed. We have seen that God's word commands believers to care for the poor. In fact, the Bible underlines the command by teaching that when God's people care for the poor, they imitate God. But that is not all. God's word teaches that those who neglect the poor and oppressed are really not God's people at all—no matter how frequent their religious rituals or how orthodox their creeds and confessions.

God thundered again and again through the prophets that worship in the context of mistreatment of the poor and disadvantaged is an outrage. Isaiah denounced Israel (he called it Sodom and Gomorrah!) because it tried to worship Yahweh and oppress the weak at the same time: "Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? ... Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. ... Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood" (Isaiah 1:10-15).

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God wants justice, not mere religious rituals, from such people. “Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice; correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:16-17; also 58:3-7).

NOR HAS GOD changed. Jesus repeated the same theme. He warned the people about the scribes “who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers” (Mark 12:38-40). Their pious-looking garments and frequent visits to the synagogue were a sham. Like Amos and Isaiah, Jesus announced God’s outrage against those who try to mix pious practices and mistreatment of the poor.

But he was even more blunt, and sharp. To those who do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoners, he will speak a terrifying word at the final judgment: “Depart from me you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). The meaning is clear and unambiguous. Jesus intends his disciples to imitate his own special concern for the poor and needy. Those who disobey will experience eternal damnation.

But perhaps we have misinterpreted Matthew 25. Some people think that “the least of these” (v. 45) and “the least of these my brethren” (v. 40) refer only to Christians. This exegesis is not certain. But even if the primary reference of these words is to poor believers, other aspects of Jesus’ teaching not only permit but *require* us to extend the meaning of Matthew 25 to both believers and unbelievers who are poor and oppressed. The story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29ff) teaches that anybody in need is our neighbor. In light of the parable of the Good Samaritan and other clear teachings of Jesus, one is compelled to say that part of the full meaning of Matthew 25 is that those who fail to aid the poor and oppressed (whether they are believers or not) are simply not the people of God.

Lest we forget the warning, God repeats it in 1 John 3:17-18. “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (see also James 2:14-17). Again the words are plain.

What do these words mean for Western Christians who demand increasing affluence each year while fellow Christians in the Third World suffer malnutrition, deformed bodies and brains—even starvation? The text clearly says that if we fail to aid the needy, we do not have God’s love—no matter what we may say. It is deeds that count, not pious phrases and saintly speeches.

But the question persists. Are professing church believers no longer Christians because of continuing sin? Obviously not. Christians know that sinful selfishness continues to plague them. We are members of the people of God not because of our own righteousness but solely because of Christ’s death for us.

But that response is inadequate. All the texts we have explored surely mean more than that the people of God are disobedient (but still justified all the same) when they persistently neglect the poor.

Certainly none of us would claim that we are fully implementing the biblical call to side with the poor. And we cling to the hope of forgiveness. But there comes a point (thank God, for God alone knows where) where neglect of the poor is no longer forgiven. It is punished. Eternally.

Is it not possible that large numbers of Western Christians have reached that point? North Americans earn 14 times as much as the people of India, but we give a tiny amount to the church, and most churches spend much of that pitiful pittance on themselves. Can we seriously claim that we are imitating God’s concern for the poor and the oppressed?

God is not biased. But neither is God neutral in the struggle for justice. The Bible

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clearly and repeatedly teaches that God is at work in history casting down the rich and exalting the poor. Why? Because the rich have failed to aid the needy. Or because they have often become rich, as scripture points out, precisely because they have oppressed the poor. The God revealed in scripture is on the side of the poor precisely because God is *not* biased, precisely because God is a God of impartial justice.

God longs for the salvation of the rich as much as for the salvation of the poor. God desires fulfillment, joy, and happiness for all creatures. But that does not contradict the fact that God is on the side of the poor. Genuine biblical repentance and conversion lead people to turn away from all sin—including economic oppression. Salvation for the rich will include liberation from their injustice. Thus God’s desire for salvation and fulfillment of the rich is in complete harmony with the scriptural teaching that God is on the side of the poor.

God’s concern for the poor is astonishing and boundless. We can only begin to fathom the depth of God’s identification with the poor as we see it disclosed in the incarnation. His passion for justice compels him to obliterate rich societies and individuals who oppress the poor and neglect the needy. Consequently, God’s people—if they are indeed God’s people—follow in the footsteps of the God of the poor. ■

Ronald J. Sider was part of the Jubilee Fellowship of Germantown in Philadelphia when this article appeared in the October 1977 issue of Sojourners.



JESUS VISITS THE HAMPTONS

by Will Willimon

Some time ago I was returning from a preaching gig in the Hamptons, home of Martha Stewart, Steven Spielberg, and numerous others of the very rich. There I had seen homes with two bedrooms on the market for \$6 million, a house with a 200-car garage, and other architectural obscenities. But we had a wonderful weekend among the beautiful people of the Hamptons, and no one walked out of my sermon on Sunday. As my wife and I flew back to drab Durham, North Carolina, I asked her, “Would you please explain to me what Jesus has got against rich people? I like rich people. I’ve met some great people who are rich. What’s the problem with Jesus?”

Well, like it or not, built right into the fabric of the gospel and the practice of the Christian faith, there seems to be a deep suspicion of, even a hostility toward, the prosperous. I would have a much better time visiting the Hamptons if I were not forced to take Jesus with me.

As G. K. Chesterton said, “It may be possible to have a good debate over whether or not Jesus believed in fairies. It is a tantalizing question. Alas, it is impossible to have any sort of debate over whether or not Jesus believed that rich people were in big trouble—there is too much evidence on the subject and it is overwhelming.”

There is a peculiar pastoral burden of having to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified in the midst of a nation of prosperity, particularly if the affluent are among us when we preach. Most of us preachers (to the discredit of the American church) preach to relatively affluent congregations. Jesus makes a prickly pulpit partner when in the pews sit those for whom he appears to have had deep antipathy.

We were guests at an affluent Episcopal parish (a tautology?) in the mountains of western North Carolina, where rich people go to retire. We made our way through a parking lot of Cadillacs and Lincolns. The liturgy went well enough until we got to the sermon. The lectionary’s assigned text was from 1 Kings, the reign of King Solomon. The priest told us that Solomon was the world’s wisest man, king at a time when Israel at last stood at the summit of national development. No longer was Israel jerked around by larger nations. Israel had a big army and lots of chariots. The economy was booming. A great temple was being built as a sign of national prosperity. Then he paused and said, “And yet Israel learned that the reign of Solomon was a time when the nation was as far from the heart of God as it could get.” Then the preacher hammered us for our stock portfolios, our pointless leisure, and problems with our spoiled children.

Where else but church would you get a read like that on a “well-functioning economy”?

The plight of the poor becomes particularly problematic in a time of prosperity. Recent books by Michael Lewis and Dinesh D’Souza celebrate the lives and psyches of the New Economy’s millionaires, seeing them as irrefutable evidence that America never had it so good. Yet a great 2001 book by Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, portrays an America many of us do not know. Ehrenreich, who holds a Ph.D. in biology, wondered what America is like seen from the bottom up, as a member of the “working poor.” Leaving her home in Key West, she traveled from Florida to Maine to Minnesota, working in low-paying jobs, determined to live on what she earned. Twelve million women have been pushed into the labor market by welfare “reform”; how do they survive on the wages of the unskilled—at \$6 to \$7 an hour, only half of what is considered a living wage?



Jesus Visits the Hamptons (cont.)

As a waitress in Florida, Ehrenreich's name is suddenly transformed to "girl," and the manager explains that he won't take the trouble to learn her name because people in jobs like hers only work for a few weeks anyway. She records what it is like to get down on your knees and scrub toilets in a hotel where the rooms cost more for a night than she took home in pay for a week of work. She shares her budget, showing how it was impossible to make ends meet—even with careful management, good health, and no kids—on the wages that she earned. Even when she works two jobs, seven days a week, she almost winds up in a shelter for the homeless. In Maine, she stretches to get housing for \$675 per month and is still called "trailer trash." As Ehrenreich says, the laws of supply and demand have been reversed. Rental prices skyrocket, but wages never rise. Jobs are relatively plentiful, but it takes more than one to survive. Behind those trademark Wal-Mart vests, she discovers, are the borderline homeless.

After her experience, she wrote that the working poor "are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high."

One of the most revealing things in Ehrenreich's book is what it's like constantly to be reminded that you are poor in an America where—according to the TV advertisements and sitcoms, the radio commercials, and the movies—everyone is doing just great. Invidious comparison is a particular burden that must be borne by the poor in our culture. I remember hearing a sociologist note that poverty in a culture like ours is particularly cruel not only because the gap between the rich and the poor is so great but also because the gap is so constantly self-evident. In cultures where there are large, visible numbers of the poor, poverty seems less dramatic, more a part of life than a judgment upon you as a person.

A man in my church, after telling me of the hardships his family endured during the Great Depression, concluded by saying, "Despite it all, it wasn't so terrible, because everybody, at least everybody we knew, was poor. When everybody's poor, it doesn't hurt so much to be poor."

TODAY, EVEN SOMEWHAT compassionate politicians plead for the "working poor," as if simply to be poor were not a sufficient cause of concern. Just as we once made a distinction between the "deserving poor" and those shiftless, worthless, welfare cheaters who were just "poor," now we distinguish between the blessed "working poor" and all the others. We imply that we have a social responsibility to the "working poor" while the rest of those who, for whatever reason, don't work can be left to forage as best they can for themselves. This we call "compassionate conservatism."

Conservatism it may be, but whatever it is it doesn't sound Christian. Built right into this faith is God's concern for, blessing of, and promises made to the poor. If you are going to be a bona fide member of the Animal Protection Society, then you must cultivate a prejudice against the mistreatment of cats. If you are going to be a Christian, then there is no way to avoid a tendency toward condemnatory judgment of the rich and gracious, charitable compassion for the poor.

Therefore, in our land of relative prosperity and governmentally sanctioned greed, I see the following agenda for biblical Christians:

1. We must cultivate, in our churches and ourselves, a deep suspicion that affluence is a spiritually debilitating and morally dangerous condition. During the campaign debate over doing away with the inheritance tax, I recalled a statement by Augustine that anyone who inherits a great fortune has committed robbery—if not by

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himself, then at least by his father. A great fortune, unearned through hard work, reasoned Augustine, means that someone is living off unjust gain. Christianity and material prosperity are bad bedfellows.

2. Politicians often put a happy face on everything, telling us that we live in the best of all possible worlds and that if you are not doing well economically, then there must be something wrong with you. Therefore, Christians must practice resistance through a studied determination to notice, to care for, and to stand with the poor among us. They represent a visible, undeniable minority report on how well our society is doing.

3. One of the greatest gifts we have to offer this aggressively materialistic culture is a prophetic Christian critique of the present order. We created this economy; God did not. We have decided to reward some people and types of work and not others. A “fully functioning economy” is to be measured by factors greater than the aggrandizement of the few. It falls to Christians to be among those who point this out.

4. Finally, we preachers must preach the doctrine that, no matter what we do or don't do, God will finally have God's way with the world. God will get the world God intended. That, scripture suggests, involves good news for the poor and less than good news for the rich. Whether God's news is for me good or bad depends to a great extent on where I happen to be when I get the news.

On the first Sunday of the school year, we had a group of students over to our home after the university chapel service. We had a picnic for them, then some lingered to play basketball or to talk. I sat on our patio with one student. He said, “Dr. Willimon, thanks for having us over to your home. This is the first time I've ever been in a faculty home.”

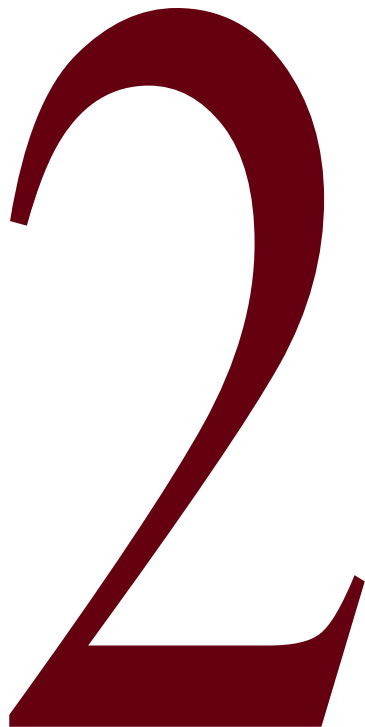
“That's a disgrace,” I said. “I think that we faculty ought to have students in our homes as often as possible.”

“Well, few faculty think that way, I can tell you,” said the student. “And you have a beautiful home,” he said. “Let me ask you, do you feel at all guilty being a Christian and living in such a nice house? How have you thought about that?”

And I responded, “Now I'm remembering why it was not such a great idea to invite you people over to my house.”

Such are the challenges of attempting to be Christian in the midst of affluence. ■

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TAX THE RICH?

by William H. Gates Sr. and Chuck Collins

“We believe that permanent repeal of the estate tax would be bad for our democracy, our economy, and our society. Repealing the estate tax, a constructive part of our tax structure for 85 years, would leave an unfortunate legacy for America’s future generations.” —from “A Call to Preserve the Estate Tax,” a 2001 statement signed by more than 1,200 prominent business leaders and high-net-worth individuals—people who would likely pay the tax.

In the last several years, Congress has debated whether to eliminate the federal estate tax—or “death tax”—our nation’s only levy on accumulated wealth. The paltry debate over elimination of the tax has not grappled adequately with the negative consequences of repealing the estate tax. One hundred years ago, during the first Gilded Age, we had a rigorous debate about the dangers of concentrated wealth in a democracy. The debate over the estate tax goes to the heart of the question of “what kind of country do we want to become” and ethical questions about society’s claim upon the accumulated fortunes of the wealthy.

Ten years ago, a number of wealthy families—including the heirs to the Mars and Gallo fortunes—began bankrolling a campaign for wholesale repeal of the tax. Instead of revealing the true beneficiaries of repeal—households in the top 1 percent of wealth holders—they put forward a media campaign representing farmers and small-business owners as injured parties to the tax. Much of this mythmaking, however, has obscured the dangerous impact of eliminating the tax.

Proponents of repeal argue that the estate tax is un-American, that it punishes success and discourages parents from passing on wealth and businesses to their children. They successfully included elimination of the estate tax in President Bush’s Tax Relief Act of 2001, through which the estate tax would gradually be phased out and then repealed for one year in 2010. Now repeal advocates are pressing to permanently eliminate the estate tax.

WHY PRESERVE THE estate tax? The tax generates substantial revenue to pay for government. These funds are raised from those most able to pay—households in the richest 1 percent. Between now and 2009, the amount of wealth exempted prior to paying the tax will rise to \$3.5 million. Based on recent IRS data, that means that only about 6,000 estates a year will pay the tax, with an average estate valued at more than \$21 million. Eliminating the revenue from the estate tax will shift the tax burden off those most able to pay onto everyone else or lead to cuts in services for those most in need.

Many states have state-level inheritance or estate taxes that are linked to the federal estate tax. Repeal of the federal estate tax may lead to a severe drop in revenue for states—an estimated \$5 billion—at a time when they can ill afford the loss. Almost every state in the country is grappling with severe budget deficits and many are cutting lifeline social programs for low- and middle-income people.

The estate tax serves as a catalyst for charitable giving. Many people give to their religious congregations, community organizations, and other charities regardless of the tax advantages. But evidence suggests the estate tax encourages wealthy households to give even more, particularly households with wealth higher than \$20 million. Bequests motivated by the estate tax go toward creation or capitalization of foundations, medical and research organizations, and religious organizations. A U.S.



Tax the Rich? (cont.)

Treasury Department report estimates that charitable giving will drop by \$6 billion a year without an estate tax incentive.

The estate tax is part of our country's historic response to excessive inequality. The American experiment is rooted in a suspicion of concentrated wealth and power and in the rejection of aristocracy. The estate tax was established in 1916 as a populist response to the excesses of the Gilded Age. At a time when the gap between the very rich and everyone else is once again at historic levels, it seems un-American to eliminate the one tax that discourages the build-up of dynastic wealth holdings.

SOCIETY HAS AN enormous claim upon the fortunes of the wealthy. This is rooted not only in most religious traditions, but also in an honest accounting of society's substantial investment in creating the fertile ground for wealth-creation.

One of the dominant myths of our time is the "great man" theory of wealth creation—the notion that one's individual success is rooted entirely in one's own effort. You can hear these sentiments in debates over taxes: "I made this money on my own" and "The government has no right to my money." It is important to affirm and celebrate the role of the individual in the creation of wealth and successful enterprises. One significant reason that some people accumulate great wealth is through their hard work, creativity, tenacity, and sacrifice. Individuals do make a difference.

Yet it is equally important to acknowledge the role of a wide variety of influential factors such as luck, privilege, other people's efforts, and society's investment in the creation of individual wealth. The notion of a "self-made millionaire" or "I made this money without any help" is hubris. It is an example of extreme individualism that runs counter to ethical and religious traditions.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all affirm the right of individual ownership and private property, but there are moral limits imposed on absolute private ownership of wealth and property. Each tradition affirms that we are not individuals alone but exist in community—a community that makes claims upon us. The notion that "it is all mine" is a violation of these teachings and traditions.

In the Jewish tradition of *tzedakah*, owners of property are required to care for those in need. This is not a matter of charity or choice—it is an obligation. Individual wealth is provided by God, observes business ethicist Meir Tamari, and it is not meant only for the needs and wants of the private owner but also to satisfy the needs of the poor. Tamari believes society acquires a property right in the wealth of the individual to provide, through compulsory acts of taxation, the social and charitable needs of its members.

The moral basis of welcoming and providing for the stranger is in the Hebrew people's experience of being strangers and slaves in the land of Egypt. This memory acknowledges that the Hebrew people would still be oppressed and in Egypt but for the grace of God. The notion "this is all mine" is inconsistent with Jewish law and may be the sin related to the mark of the "people of Sodom." Tamari observes, "The Sodomite view of absolute private property rejects any obligations to assist others, which is contrary to the Jewish concept of limited private-property rights."

THE MUSLIM APPROACH to charity includes *zakat*, a compulsory component, and *sadaqa*, voluntary giving. Zakat is rooted in the individual's obligation as a member of a community. The prophet Muhammad wrote, "Like the organs of the body, if one suffers then all others rally in response." Joseph Singer, author of *The Edges of the Field: Lessons on the Obligations of Ownership*, notes that *zakat* "represents the unbreakable bond between members of the community." Since all wealth is owned by God and held by humans in trust, owners of property are not allowed to consider their interests alone.

Tax the Rich? (cont.)

This notion is similar to the principle of stewardship in the Christian tradition. Riches are granted as a gift from God and humans are expected to be responsible stewards of this wealth, including sharing it with those less fortunate. Author and Harvard professor Peter J. Gomes notes, “Upon those who have wealth, there is a burden of responsibility to use it wisely and not only for themselves.” The wealthy must be “generous in proportion to their wealth” because “to whom much is given much is expected.”

The Catholic bishops have reiterated the notion that there is a “social mortgage on capital”—another way to express society’s claim. They affirm the importance of private property and ownership as opposed to statist or collectivist approaches. Yet they balance fundamental American aspirations of freedom and obligation with society’s claim on capital.

Support of private ownership does not mean that anyone has the right to unlimited accumulation of wealth. Private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute or unconditioned right. No one is justified in keeping for her exclusive use what she does not need, when others lack necessities. In the American bishops’ pastoral *Economic Justice for All*, they noted, “[Owners and managers] have benefited from the work of many others and from the local communities that support their endeavors.” Pope John Paul II, in the *Encyclical on Human Work*, wrote that capital “is the result of work and bears the signs of human labor.” Those who have labored hold a claim to accumulated wealth and capital.

AS AMERICANS WE are more inclined to enshrine individual success and undervalue these other components in wealth building. But for the good of the country, we need to better account for the true origins of wealth and success.

Consider the many components of the social framework that enables great wealth to be built in the United States: a patent system, enforceable contracts, open courts, property ownership records, protection against crime and external threats, public education, and so on. Even the stock market is a form of society-created wealth, providing liquidity to enterprises. When faith in the system is shaken, as in the last year, it is clear what happens to individual wealth.

This is a matter that goes beyond the discussion of the estate tax. We must recognize that society has a legitimate claim upon the wealth of the wealthy. It is not simply a matter of charitable giving to institutions that have made a difference to us, such as schools and libraries. It is also an obligation to pay taxes, to pay for the public institutions that foster equality of opportunity, and to give others the opportunities that we’ve had. It goes to the heart of how we think about ourselves, as individuals and as a society.

Society’s claim on individual accumulated wealth is a fundamentally American notion, rooted in recognition of society’s direct and indirect investment in an individual’s success. In other words, we didn’t get here on our own. ■

William Gates Sr.—whose son is Microsoft founder Bill Gates—was co-chair of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Chuck Collins was co-founder of United for a Fair Economy and Responsible Wealth when this article appeared in the January-February 2003 issue of Sojourners.

