

# Do We Care Enough? By Ron Sider

Biblical faith demands something that goes well beyond what America—or any other society today—offers: equality of opportunity up to the point that every person or family has the productive resources necessary to earn their own way and be dignified participants in their community. But meeting that goal may not preclude major differences in income and wealth between rich and poor.



Does that mean that biblical people should be indifferent to great extremes between rich and poor? Not at all. Precisely because of what scripture tells us about sin and power, biblical people must always oppose great extremes of power. In a fallen world, powerful people will almost always take advantage of weak neighbors. And money, especially in a market economy, is power. Therefore, great extremes of poverty and wealth threaten justice and democracy.

The biblical understanding of human nature warns us about the potential for evil afforded by sharp differences in power among individuals and groups in society. John Calvin described a "rough equality" in the Mosaic Law. In commenting on the canceling of debts in the sabbatical year, he wrote:

*In as much as God had given them the use of the franchise, the best way to preserve their liberty was by maintaining a condition of rough equality, lest a few persons of immense wealth oppress the general body. Since, therefore, the rich if they had been permitted constantly to increase their wealth, would have tyrannized over the rest, God put a restraint on immoderate power by means of this law (The Harmony of the Last Four Books of Moses).*

A Christian political philosophy and economic theory accordingly must be based on realism about sinful human nature. Because great imbalances of power almost inevitably lead to injustice, Christians must oppose great extremes of wealth and poverty.

To be sure, that norm is general. It does not tell us explicitly whether a ratio of 10 to 1 between the top and bottom 20 percent is dangerous and immoral. But the general warning against great extremes plus the clear demand that everyone has access to adequate productive resources does offer significant guidance. Certainly, whenever—as at present—the bottom 20 percent lack adequate productive resources and are losing

ground, *and at the same time* the top 20 percent are rapidly expanding their share of total income, the ratio is seriously askew.

But what should be done for those—whether the able-bodied or dependents—who for shorter or longer periods simply cannot provide basic necessities through their own efforts alone?

GENEROUS CARE. Both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, we discover explicit teaching on the community's obligation to support those who cannot support themselves.

The Pentateuch provides at least five important provisions:

1. The third year tithe was to go to poor widows, orphans, and sojourners, as well as the Levites (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 26:12).
2. Laws on gleaning stipulated that the corners of the grain fields and the sheaves and grapes that dropped were to be left for the poor, especially widows, orphans, and sojourners (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-21).
3. Every seventh year, fields were to remain fallow and the poor were allowed to reap the natural growth (Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-7).
4. A zero-interest loan was to be available to the poor, and if the balance was not repaid by the sabbatical year, it was forgiven (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-38; Deuteronomy 15:1-11).
5. Israelites who became slaves to repay debts went free in the seventh year (Exodus 21:1-11; Leviticus 25:47-53; Deuteronomy 15:12-18). And when the freed slaves left, God commanded, their "temporary master" was to provide liberally, giving the former slaves cattle, grain, and wine (Deuteronomy 15:14) so they could again earn their own way.

In John Mason's masterful essay "Assisting the Poor: Assistance Programmes in the Bible" (*Transformation*, April-June 1987), he argues that the primary assistance to the able-bodied person was probably the no-interest loan. This would maintain the family unit, avoid stigmatizing people unnecessarily, and require work so that long-term dependency did not result. Dependent poor such as widows and orphans received direct "transfer payments" through the third-year tithe. But other provisions such as those on gleaning required the poor to work for the "free" produce they gleaned. The widow Ruth, for example, labored in the fields to feed herself and her mother-in-law (Ruth 2).

The texts seem to assume a level of assistance best described as "sufficiency for need," with a fairly liberal interpretation of need. Frequently, God commanded those with resources to treat their poor fellow Israelites with the same liberality that God showed them at the

Exodus, in the wilderness, and in giving them their own land (Exodus 22:21; Leviticus 25:38; Deuteronomy 24:18, 22). God wanted those who could not care for themselves to receive a liberal sufficiency for need offered in a way that encouraged work and responsibility, strengthened the family, and helped the poor return to self-sufficiency.

WERE THOSE "welfare provisions" part of the law to be enforced by the community? Or were they merely suggestions for voluntary charity? The third-year tithe was gathered in a central location (Deuteronomy 14:28) and then shared with the needy. Community leaders would have to act together to carry out such a centralized operation. In the Talmud, there is evidence that the proper community leaders had the right to demand contributions. Nehemiah 5 deals explicitly with violations of the provisions concerning loans to the poor. The political leader would call an assembly, bring "charges against the nobles," and command that the situation be corrected (Nehemiah 5:113). Old Testament texts often speak of the "rights" or "cause" of the poor. Since these terms have clear legal significance, they support the view that the provisions for assisting the poor would have been legally enforceable. Mason concludes, "The clear fact is that the provisions for the impoverished were part of the Mosaic legislation, as much as other laws such as those dealing with murder and theft. Since nothing in the text allows us to consider them as different, they must be presumed to have been legally enforceable."

The sociopolitical situation was dramatically different in the New Testament. The early church was a tiny religious minority with few political rights in a vast pagan Roman Empire. But within the church, the standard was the same. Acts 2:43-47 and 4:32-37 record dramatic economic sharing in order to respond to those who could not care for themselves. The norm? "Distribution was made to each as any had need" (Acts 4:35). As a result, "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34).

The great evangelist Paul spent much of his time over several years collecting an international offering for the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8-9). For his work, he found a norm (2 Corinthians 8:13-15)—equality of basic necessities—articulated in the Exodus story of the manna in which every person ended up with "as much as each of them needed" (Exodus 16:17-18).

Throughout scripture we see the same standard. When people cannot care for themselves, their community must provide a liberal sufficiency so that their needs are met.

A ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT? At different points in the biblical text it is clear that the family has the first obligation to help needy members. In the text on the Jubilee in Leviticus 25, the first responsibility to help the poor person forced by poverty to sell land is the next of kin in the extended family (Leviticus 25:25, 35). But the poor person's help does not end with the family. Even if there are no family members to help, the poor person has the legal right to get his land back at the next Jubilee (Leviticus 25:28). Similarly, 1 Timothy 5:16 insists that a Christian widow's relatives should be her first means of support. Only when the family cannot support her should the church step in. Any policy or political philosophy that immediately seeks governmental solutions for problems that could be solved just as well or better at the level of the family violates the biblical framework that stresses the central societal role of the family.

But what role should government play? The earlier discussion of the economic components of justice is central for a biblical view of the role of government: "The Lord...has made you king to execute justice and righteousness" (1 Kings 10:9, Jeremiah 22:15-16). And these two key words—*justice* and *righteousness*—refer not only to fair legal systems but also to just economic structures. Again and again the biblical texts call on the king to promote justice and righteousness.

According to Psalm 72, there are oppressors of the poor separate from the state who need to be crushed. State power, despite its dangers, is necessary for society because of the evil power of such exploiting groups. "On the side of their oppressors there was power," Ecclesiastes 4:1 declares. Without governmental force to counter such oppressive power, there is no one to comfort (Ecclesiastes 4:1). Whether it is the monarch or the village elders (Amos 5:12, 15), governmental power should deliver the economically weak and guarantee the "rights of the poor" (Jeremiah 21:12, 22:15-16).

Sin makes government intervention in the economy necessary. When selfish, powerful people deprive others of their rightful access to productive resources, the state rightly steps in with intervening power to correct the injustice. When other individuals and institutions in the community do not or cannot provide basic necessities for the needy, government rightly helps.

This teaching on the role of government applies not just to Israel but to government everywhere. The ideal monarch was to be a channel of God's justice (Psalm 72:1), and God's justice extends to the whole world (Psalm 9:7-9). All legitimate rulers are instituted by God and are God's servants for human good (Romans 13:1, 4). In this passage, Paul states a positive

reason for government (government acts "for your good") before he specifies its negative function ("to execute wrath on the wrongdoer"). Romans 13 is structurally similar to Psalm 72: 1 in viewing the ruler as a channel of God's authority. All people everywhere can pray with the Israelites: "Give the king your justice, O God."

Government is an aspect of community and is inherent in human life as an expression of our created social nature. Governmental action to empower the poor is one way we promote the common good and implement the truth that economic justice is a family affair. However, when indirect approaches are not effective in restraining economic injustice, providing economic opportunity to all, or in providing care for those who cannot care for themselves, the state rightly acts to demand patterns of justice and provide vital services.

Does the biblical material offer a norm for distributive justice today? Some would argue that the biblical material only applies to God's covenant community. But that is to ignore the fact that the biblical writers did not hesitate to apply revealed standards to persons and societies outside Israel. Amos announced divine punishment on the surrounding nations for their evil and injustice (Amos 1-2). Isaiah condemned Assyria for its pride and injustice (Isaiah 10: 12-19). The Lord of history applies the same standards of social justice to all nations.

THE TRADITIONAL CRITERION of distributive justice that comes closest to the biblical paradigm is distribution according to needs. That is not to ignore the important truth that bad choices rightly have negative economic consequences. Nor is it to forget that the able-bodied have an obligation to work to earn their way. But it does mean that a theology of distributive justice grounded in scripture places much more emphasis on structural arrangements that guarantee basic needs for life in community than do other views.

The biblical material provides at least three norms pertaining to distribution of resources to meet basic needs:

1. Normally, all people who can work should have access to the productive resources so that, if they act responsibly, they can produce or purchase an abundant sufficiency of all that is needed to enjoy a dignified, healthy life in community.
2. The difference in wealth between the rich and the poor dare not become so great that inequality of wealth, and therefore power, lead to oppression.
3. Those who cannot care for themselves should receive from their community a liberal sufficiency of the necessities of life provided in

ways that preserve dignity, encourage responsibility, and strengthen the family.

Those three norms are modest in comparison with some ideals presented in the name of equality. At the same time they demand fundamental change in our nation.

If God's Word is true, then the United States today stands in blatant defiance of God's norms for society. Anyone who seeks to be biblical must demand an end to the scandal of poverty in the richest nation on earth.

*Ronald J. Sider, was a Sojourners contributing editor and president of Evangelicals for Social Action and publisher of Prism magazine when this article appeared. This is an excerpt from his forthcoming book Just Generosity: A New Vision for Overcoming Poverty in America (Baker Book House, October 1999).*

