

Listening to Jesus: On poverty, wealth, and a Christian approach to our economic life

by

Daniel Wolpert

As I write this article Minnesota, my home state, has recently emerged from a government shutdown. The United States was on the brink of a major economic crisis related to the debt ceiling, and even after that was “solved” it has become clear that our period of ongoing worldwide economic instability is perhaps just beginning. Most Church bodies are in some sort of financial crisis or another related to lack of funds and giving. Worldwide nearly a billion people live in a constant state of economic destitution with several billion more living in conditions of immense suffering and debilitating poverty. Economic problems are everywhere and often they seem to be getting worse rather than better.

In response to such economic difficulties and destitution, certain voices in the Church have tried to wage a campaign against poverty. Under the cry of God’s justice, the “war on poverty” has been preached from pulpits, written about in books and magazines, and has been the focus of entire conferences and gatherings. Yet much of this talk has either fallen on deaf ears or hasn’t made any significant change in our economic life together.

A church in a wealthy suburb that my family attended for several years provided a perfect example of the paralysis created by such an approach to poverty. Our senior pastor preached regularly about the problem of poverty and God’s desire to lift up those who had nothing. The congregation smiled and nodded. They told him what a wonderful preacher he was; and they did little to change their economic behavior or engage in work that might lessen the poverty of others.

This inaction is frustrating, confusing, and difficult to experience as an aspect of Christian community. These challenging feelings, that arise in response to our seeming ineptitude, are compounded by Jesus's comments related to poverty. On the one hand, He clearly upholds the concept of God's justice, but on the other, He doesn't seem to be on our side when it comes to the notion of eliminating poverty. For just over our shoulder, in spite of our efforts, we know that He whispers, "Blessed are the poor," "Give away all you have and follow me," "The poor will always be with you," "It's harder for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of God," and finally, "The son of man has no place to lay his head."

The question I want to address here is whether or not the standard American Christian approach to the issue of poverty is fundamentally misguided. Are we tackling this issue in a way consistent with God's justice, or have we simply missed the point altogether? I would suggest that although our intentions are good, that is we desire to act in a manner that is just; our methods and approaches will not help us achieve this end. In this article I wish to explore the nature of our fundamental confusion about how we approach poverty. I would suggest that if we are going to institute God's justice we don't need to eliminate poverty, rather we must embrace a vision and a practice of sustainable, Christian poverty as the hallmark of our life together. We must all become poor.

Most of the American Christians I've met don't take Jesus's comments about wealth and poverty either literally or seriously. They figure He must be talking about spiritual poverty, or He's using wealth as a metaphor of some kind, or He's saying that it's ok to be wealthy as long as you love God too. These interpretations fit a Church inhabited by those who are trying to live

the American dream of ever increasing wealth AND be a Christian too, i.e. the American Church. Such a hermeneutic is also at the heart of the war on poverty. If we could only give the poor more money, or institute a living wage, or give away more to our favorite non-profits - activities designed to lift the poor out of poverty to our level - then everything would be fine.

In the late 1980s, my wife and I went on an extended pilgrimage around the world. It was in South Asia that I began to realize that this view of wealth and poverty was fundamentally flawed. We were taking this journey at a time in our life “before kids,” at the beginning of our careers. By American standards our incomes and savings would have landed us somewhere between middle class and lower middle class.

But when I got to rural Indonesia, or Thailand, or India, or Nepal, I realized that we were millionaires compared to those around us. One cloth merchant we spoke to even said, “All Americans are wealthy,” and he was pretty close to being correct, provided you could export any American, with their current income and assets, into his world.

What I quickly realized is that poverty and wealth aren't absolute terms. Of course this isn't a brilliant discovery, but when we talk about “eliminating poverty” we are ignoring the truth of this basic economic fact. The relative nature of the concept of poverty is what creates consumerism and the “keeping up with the Joneses” approach to our American existence. When everyone is trying to get more and more, there is no concept of “enough” and poverty is an ever moving target. Are you poor if you can't eat? Or if you don't have a house? Or are you poor if you live with your friends? Or your parents? Or if your TV is only 19 inches and not 54?

The answer to these questions is that we don't really know the answer! Take something as obvious as food. Perhaps all would agree that if you're literally starving to death you are poor.

But what about if you have to get your meals at a soup kitchen? You're poor compared to someone who can eat at a nice restaurant every day, but you might be rich compared to the person living on a garbage heap.

Fundamentally, the problem of the ever changing definition of poverty makes eliminating it impossible. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when He said that the poor will always be with us. I see a reflection of this conundrum in the confused look on the faces of teenagers who get up early during Christmas vacation to deliver food baskets to the "poor" of our community. They find themselves walking into run down apartments with large HD TVs mounted on the wall. "Are these people really poor?" they wonder, and if so, what's that TV doing there?

Yet at the same time, we do sense, and Scripture does proclaim, that God wants people to live in a manner such that their economic situation doesn't crush their lives. To address this problem from another direction, we need to examine people's economic experience and their decision making process.

The human ego, the basis of who we are, develops as we grow into adults. The process of the ego wraps our experience of the world around something we call our "self" and then begins to make choices, and have preferences, regarding what we do with that self in the world. The main thrust of ego process is to get as many goodies for "myself" as possible.

The ego, and the basic nature of the human mind, has existed since conscious humanity appeared on this planet and it hasn't changed much in several thousand years. Thus we can read texts and stories from the iron age and think, "Wow, that story sounds pretty familiar to me." It is familiar! It's the story of any person trying to navigate the world as best they can.

Ego process isn't all bad. Without it, we couldn't do anything. The problem, and theologically we call this sin, or original sin, is that once we've established a separate self, we see that self as the center of the universe. We experience ourselves as mini-gods, and we try to do everything we can to get as much as we can for ourselves. This is true even if we do so through altruistic means! With billions of egos jostling each other for position in the world, we can see why the call to "eliminate poverty" largely doesn't work.

Each level of economic success experienced by a person is accompanied by a desire for more and a reorientation as to what constitutes wealthy and poor. These two forces - accumulation and recalibration - cause people to continually strive for more and this undermines any attempt to put the breaks on increasing consumption. We see this process unfold all around us. Despite having way more things in America than we need, or can even reasonably use, we continue to feel that we need more and more, newer and newer, bigger and better. This has reached such a level of bizarre absurdity that we now have thousands of huge homes standing empty, the result of foreclosure, while we continue to discuss the need for a robust housing construction industry.

Additionally, any thought of giving up significant wealth is immediately experienced by the ego as an assault on our very existence and is strenuously resisted. In recent public debates about issues like healthcare or taxes or the debt any discussion about those who are wealthy sharing that wealth was met with a great outcry by rich and poor alike! This desire to cling to wealth is the reason for the incredibly low level of giving among Christians in spite of the Biblical mandate to tithe.

Jesus seemed to understand this problem of ego process and the need for a fundamental reorientation of the human person. He saw that the problem of God's justice wasn't necessarily how much one had, but rather whether or not one was fundamentally connected to God. In His teachings and His life He addressed the need to change the orientation of our selves, to change the inherent preferences that lie at the heart of a "natural" human ego. Thus He commanded His disciples to love their enemies, do only that which God wills, realize that the poor are blessed, and give up everything to follow Him.

Each of these four teachings undermines the problems of the ego that I mentioned previously. If we are in love with those who we think are trying to harm us, if we are only oriented towards what God wants and not just towards what the self wants, and if we embrace the blessedness of poverty, then we will resist the endless temptation for more. "Enough" becomes a clear concept. It is through this "anti-ego" process that we become true disciples, shift our economic focus such that there is bounty for all, and enter the kingdom of heaven.

Of course this non-ego oriented process flies in the face of our "natural" consumerist lifestyle, so we can easily see why it has been ignored, if not outright rejected, by the American Church. Yet I would suggest that this approach is the only one which can ultimately address the issue of economic conditions that violate God's justice.

We know that there is more than enough of the basic stuff we need to go around; not just around America, but around the whole world. God's creation is so abundant that it can support even our current high population. However, what it cannot do is support our population with an expectation of ever increasing wealth to the level of American upper middle class lifestyle.

Therefore, the economic point of our faith isn't to get rid of poverty, it is to become poor. Yet not poor in a way that debilitates and isolates and leads to despair but rather in a way that brings us closer to ourselves, and to one another, and to God. The primary example of such a life in the history of our faith is that of various religious communities. From the first Jerusalem community of followers, to monasteries, to Amish farms, to lay communal houses, many have tried to live in a way that takes Jesus's approach seriously. Of course, the history of these communities is complex and multi-faceted. However it is true that millions of people found all that they needed and much more as they embraced a life of poverty to find God.

At the heart of these communities was the life of prayer; a life dedicated to the practices of our faith that help redirect the preferences of our ego process. In such a life, our focus shifts from the self at the center of our world to the other that is God, and to our fellow human beings. This practice of prayer, or the practice of contemplation, is simple yet very difficult.

People are both drawn towards and repelled by these practices. We want to remain as mini-gods, even as we realize that the isolation and alienation of such a life brings only death and despair. However, as we enter into the stillness of a life with God, we are drawn outward into the suffering of the world. We experience both the incredible generosity of God and a tremendous compassion for our fellow human beings. The former gives us the confidence that we can have enough in this world, and the later gives rise to a true desire to give away what we have for another.

A more modern, modest example of the possibility of poverty in a spiritual context was my experience on a small farm in Vermont. There we grew organic produce, both for sale and for our own consumption. I also built a small medical clinic space for my wife, who's a family

doctor,. For several years I worked at a local mental health center, although I eventually began to run the farm full time. We did take some insurance at the clinic, but it was mostly cash pay, and the charge for a one hour office visit was \$30. Both of our sons were babies and then young children during our time there. Like the spiritual communities of our faith, this life was fueled by, and based upon, our spiritual practice of contemplation and the vision of a life that arises from such practice.

What was the overall economic result of this arrangement? First of all, we provided affordable medical care for everyone. On a massive scale, such an approach to healthcare would solve our current healthcare crisis. Secondly, we were, by the external standard of the Federal government, poor. Measured against the federal guidelines for poverty for a family of four, our adjusted gross income regularly fell below the poverty line. However this external definition had no connection to our experienced reality. We had all we needed, and more. We were of service to others, our kids had a wonderful experience of their early life; we were blessed by God in a million ways. In short, our economic arrangement was not only viable (and wonderful), but it was one that could be sustainable and positive worldwide. It was a brief, and imperfect, example of positive Christian poverty.

Other movements, churches, and communities outside of monastic orders have also tried to practice and lift up the ideal of Christian poverty. However, like our small attempt, these activities have been way outside of the mainstream of the American Church. Far more popular, because they fit so neatly within American capitalism, have been movements such as the prosperity gospel. This theological approach is shameless in its wedding of material wealth and the Christian faith.

I think that Jesus was quite serious in His proclamations about poverty and wealth and the kingdom of God. If we in the church continue to ignore His teachings we doom ourselves to endless confusion and frustration as we watch our efforts in relation to poverty fail. On the other hand, if His teachings were taken seriously by the mainstream of the Christian Church, we might begin to provide living examples of alternatives to our current economic life, a life that is not only crumbling, but has also put so many in the midst of such misery and hopelessness.

The mainstream Church faces enormous obstacles should it try to shift its focus and approach to wealth and poverty. I know this. However, perhaps this current time of such economic uncertainty and upheaval is the perfect opportunity for church leaders to at least begin a conversation about changing our message and theological outlook regarding this most important subject.