

## *“The Bottom Line: Taking Justice to the Marketplace”*

We live under the dominion of an organized global economic system that inherently exploits and commodifies people. The concept of capitalistic competition cannot do more. It necessitates that businesses and consumers participate in undercutting the competition by devaluing the labor of men and women all over the world to increase profits. The question these businesses and consumers ask is, “What can I gain for the least amount of money?” This approach to economics creates makes the labor of humans and the resources of creation commodities to be consumed, not resources of which to be stewards and can only exploit our brothers and sisters here and abroad.

Economics, like all other areas of our lives, should be Christo-centric or centered theologically on Christ’s model. A Christo-centric economics necessitates that “the market” cannot be compartmentalized from our spiritual lives. Christ cannot have dominance over our families, our homes, our spiritual gifts and talents, and our personal morality, but not our consumption, our wages, or our economic practices. Even more importantly, our minds cannot be captivated by what the organized economic forces tell us is practical or inevitable, but should be liberated to stand for what is consistent with God’s Kingdom vision. In the Kingdom of God, every member of the community is valued so that economics serves as a tool to ensure everyone has enough relative to their need, freeing them to use their gifts, talents and abilities to bear good fruit for the Kingdom.

The Bible makes clear that in the context of economics, we are expected to live out the principles of equity, respect, accountability and community. In the Law, we see an economic social policy develop that prioritizes relationships between community members and the preservation of peoples’ dignity in all economic transactions. These principles necessitated that all workers be paid fair wages for their work, that they are not taken advantage of, and that they were paid in a timely fashion. Leviticus 19:13, Deuteronomy 24:6, Job 22:6 and 24:3 all emphasize that in collecting debts from people, the Israelites were never to take a cloak, a millstone, an ox or a donkey as pledge for the debt. If you took these items, you were responsible for taking their livelihood, leaving them cold and exposed, without the tools to prepare food or without the ability to till the field. The Law is clear that in the Kingdom economic transactions impact our spiritual lives and that they should reflect the inherent value of each community member, rejecting exploitation of people or creation.

We see again the need of a Kingdom economics in Jesus’ parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-15. Though the parable is often interpreted in the context of the afterlife, its Kingdom-building interpretation leads to different meaning. In this parable, regardless of the time in the day that the worker began toiling in the fields, they are each paid one denarius, or the wage that will feed a large peasant family for one day. In the Kingdom, no matter how much someone works, if they work at all they are paid a wage that will feed their family. Each is paid according to their need. This model is in direct opposition to a competitive market model where employers seek to pay employees as little as possible in order to maximize profits.

Even more challenging, in Luke 19:1-10 we see the biblical enactment of an Old Testament retribution principle. Zacchaeus has accumulated wealth by overcharging Israelite taxpayers. When he meets Jesus, Zacchaeus vows to not only decrease his wealth by giving half of it to the poor, but he also promises to pay back four times what he has defrauded to those he wronged. In Exodus 22:1, Leviticus 5:16 and Numbers 5:7, we see this model of restitution is rooted in God’s Law to the Israelites. The Law states when there has been an economic wrong or a theft, the guilty party must make economic restitution. Zacchaeus’ wealth was accumulated at through the exploitation of others and he enacted the law of financial restitution to mend the relationship between himself and those he exploited.

In James 5:1-6, the writer warns the rich to weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to them. They have lived in pleasure and fattened their hearts in a day of slaughter and at the expense of workers who cry out. God has heard their cries and condemns the rich. As stewards of the resources that God has given us, both financial and in-kind, we are expected to do far more than tithe. We are expected to use the resources we have for the glory of God and the advancement of the Kingdom of God. The people of this land have been blessed with great resource. But whether or not we choose to acknowledge it, our excess and our bargain buys are accumulated through the exploitation of our brothers and sisters in this country and abroad. We are stewards of great resource and great power and we are expected to do great things to model economics of equity, accountability, respect and community. To do so, we must acknowledge and repent for our wrongs – individually and collectively – and develop an understanding of how Kingdom economics and global capitalistic economics are in conflict. Christ calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Can we say that our current economic practices reflect that love?