

Biblical Basis for Liberal Politics

By David Chandler

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The "Religious Right" (Moral Majority, Christian Coalition, etc.) gets so much media attention for its conservative political activism that a casual observer would think conservative Christianity somehow equates to conservative politics. This is not the case. In fact many people with left-leaning political views find a solid basis for their positions in the Bible. There are many sides to this topic, but we will limit our focus to attitudes toward the rich and the poor.

America is as much an economic phenomenon as it is a nation. It is built on a system whose driving force is the profit motive. Our economy blatantly rewards greed. In classic economic theory greed is good. A person who is motivated by greed will create, as unintended byproducts, benefits for everyone, such as employment and the development of new goods and services. Let the rich get richer, the saying goes, and the benefits will "trickle down" to the rest of us. "A rising tide raises all boats." Under a pure capitalistic system the government keeps hands off and allows the market to decide how the money flows. The problem is, as we have found in this era of deregulation, the money flows to the top. [The original article contained a variant on the graph shown on the [L-Curve web site](#).] Tampering with the market system to redistribute the wealth or assure that the poor are protected is labeled "socialism."

By these standards Jesus was a socialist.

Jesus spoke remarkably often about wealth and poverty. To the poor he said, "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God," (Luke's version). To the rich he said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth," and "go, sell what you have, and give to the poor." When the rich turned away from him because they couldn't follow his command he observed, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

For Jesus, helping the poor and the outcast is not optional: it is the essence of what it means to love God. In the parable of the last judgement he welcomes the righteous into heaven saying, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." When the righteous answered that they didn't recall doing any of these things, he said, "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

We are to "forgive our debtors" and "give to every one who begs from you." But don't handouts contribute to moral decay? Jesus was more concerned about the moral decay in those who are so attached to their wealth that they would hoard it for themselves. In our better moments most of us recognize that giving does not corrupt. We sacrifice to give good things to our children and do our best to provide them with years of carefree existence as they grow up. We do this to give them a sense of security and a foundation for growth. People who have been devastated by misfortune, or for whatever reason are down and out, may need even more help because they may not have what it takes to recover on their own. Many of us will help a friend in hard times, even though we know we will never be repaid. It is when dealing distantly with people in the abstract that we fall back on the "moral decay" argument.

What's wrong with trickle-down economics? Every time I hear that phrase I think of the story Jesus told about a rich man and the beggar Lazarus "who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table." Needless to say, the story ends with Lazarus going to a better place than the rich man. Trickle down theory is about crumbs. Those who say we should settle for crumbs would make us a nation of beggars.

Greed may be a driving force for the economy, but Jesus saw it is as destructive to community. Greed may leave a few crumbs behind for the poor, and it may do some unintended good, but it destroys compassion. Compassion is in short supply in our society today where workers are being downsized in the name of efficiency, prisons are being expanded to insulate society from its underclasses, and the middle class is abandoned by the rich to fight it out with the poor for the table scraps.

Jesus' response to economic inequality is very direct: we are to share the wealth. I once heard a talk about world hunger. The point was that we produce far more food than is needed to feed everyone on earth. The problem is not lack of supply; it is maldistribution. Many people are simply too poor to buy the food they need. This talk gave me a new perspective on the story of the feeding of the 5000. Jesus was out in the desert followed by a huge crowd. The disciples were concerned that it was getting late in the day and they didn't have enough food to feed the crowd. My suspicion is that Jesus sensed there was plenty of food in the crowd, but whereas some had plenty, others had nothing. Sensing an opportunity to make a point, he instructed his disciples to take their five loaves and two fish and distribute them freely to the crowd. By the sheer audaciousness of this act he induced those with food to join him in giving it away. The result is everyone was fed that day with twelve baskets left over. If Jesus simply did a magic trick and made food appear, what's the point? Whoopee! He's divine. He's not like us. But if, by his act of giving away all he had in the face of the overwhelming crowd, he demonstrated the power of a sharing community, he achieved a real miracle! Sharing is a lesson we especially need to learn today.

Is concern for the poor to be simply a private matter to be handled by charity, or does it have anything to do with politics or government? The Bible calls upon the rulers to create a just society. In a democracy, we are the rulers. We have the power to make the rules. The actions of the nation are extensions of our own actions. By our active participation or passive consent we share responsibility for what our nation does in our name. We have inherited a system that works efficiently to produce tremendous wealth, but fails to distribute that wealth equitably. It neglects the poor and it corrupts the rich. On both counts it destroys community. A decent life for all is a matter of simple justice, not charity! There are remedies that will make the system work better in the interests of all the people, but it takes active political involvement to bring them about.

Is this "bleeding heart" liberalism? You bet it is! Jesus is the definitive bleeding heart, and he calls us to follow him.