

Is There a Biblical Definition of Economic Justice?

Ronald J. Sider

How do we as Christians discern the nature of economic justice? Whether or not we realize it, some normative system of values partially determines every economic decision we make. The Bible provides norms for thinking about economics in two basic ways: the biblical story and a biblical paradigm on economic justice.

THE BIBLICAL STORY

The biblical story is the long history of God's engagement with our world that stretches from creation through the fall and the history of redemption to the culmination of history when Christ returns. This biblical story offers decisive insight into the nature of the material world, the dignity and character of persons, and the significance and limitations of the historical process. For example, since every person is made by God for community, no one will ultimately be satisfied with material abundance alone, or with material abundance kept for oneself. Since every person is so important that God became flesh to die for her sins and invite her to live forever with the living God, economic life must be ordered in a way that respects this God-given dignity.

It is true that no biblical passage is a detailed systematic treatise on the nature of economic justice. But throughout the Bible, we find materials -- commands, laws, proverbs, parables, stories, theological propositions -- that relate to all the normative questions that economic decisions require. I will briefly develop a biblical paradigm, an internally consistent summary of the biblical material, on justice.

TOWARD A BIBLICAL PARADIGM ON JUSTICE

Justice identifies what is essential for life together in community and specifies the rights and responsibilities of individuals and institutions in society. Several aspects of biblical teaching point to a broad understanding of distributive justice. First, biblical justice has a dynamic, restorative character. Second, the special concern for the poor in the Scriptures moves beyond a concern for unbiased procedures. Third, the Bible centers on restoration to community -- including the benefit rights that dignified participation in community require.

Restorative Character of Justice. In the Bible, the terms for "justice" are frequently associated with "yeshua," the most important Hebrew word for deliverance and salvation; Psalm 76:9 says, "God arose to establish justice [mishpat] to save [hoshia] all the oppressed of the earth." Justice does not merely help victims cope with oppression; it removes it. Because of this dynamic, restorative emphasis, distributive justice primarily requires that we advance the well-being of the disadvantaged, not that we maintain a stable society.

Special Concern for the Poor. Partiality to the weak is the most striking characteristic of biblical justice. In the raging social struggles in which the poor are perennially victims of injustice, God and God's people take up the cause of the weak. Rulers and leaders have a special obligation to do justice for the weak and the powerless.

The Scriptures underline God's special concern for the poor in at least four different ways. First, the Bible repeatedly says that the Sovereign of history works to lift up the poor and oppressed. Annually at the harvest festival, the people of Israel repeated this confession: "The Egyptians mistreated us. . . . Then we cried out to the Lord . . . and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil, and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt" (Deut 26:6-8). God acted to keep the promise to Abraham and to call out the chosen people of Israel; He also intervened because He hated the oppression of the poor Israelites (Exod 3:7-8; 6:5-7).

Second, sometimes the Lord acts in the historical process to tear down rich and powerful people. James puts it bluntly: "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you" (Jas 5:1). James warned the rich so harshly because they had hoarded wealth and refused to pay their workers. But what if we work hard and create our wealth in just ways? The Bible tells us that such action is good -- as long as we do not forget to share. No matter how justly we have acquired our wealth, God demands that we act generously toward the poor. When we do not, God treats us in a similar way to those who oppress the poor and get rich by injustice. God judges societies by what we do to the people at the bottom.

Third, God identifies with the poor so strongly that caring for them is almost like helping God. "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord" (Prov 19:17). On the other hand, one "who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker" (Prov 14:31). The ultimate commentary on these two proverbs is Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats.

Fourth, God demands that God's people share God's special concern for the poor. The Bible says that if we do not imitate God's concern for the poor, we are not really God's people at all -- no matter how frequent our worship or how orthodox our creeds. Because Israel failed to correct oppression and defend poor widows, Isaiah insisted that Israel was really the pagan people of Gomorrah (Is 1:10-17). Jesus was even more blunt. At the Last Judgment, some who expect to enter heaven will learn that their failure to feed the hungry condemns them to hell (Mt 25).

Although God is partial to the poor, he is not biased. God has an equal concern for the well-being of every single person. By contrast with the genuine bias of most people, however, God's lack of bias makes God appear biased. God's lack of bias is not neutrality. God is "partial" to the poor, because in concrete historical situations, equal concern for everyone requires special attention to specific people.¹ Precisely because God loves everyone equally, God works against oppressors and actively sides with the oppressed, in order that all may be whole.

Justice as Restoration to Community. Justice involves restoration to community, and to the benefit rights necessary for dignified participation in community. In order to restore the weak to participation in community, the community's responsibility is "to cause [the poor] to be strong" (Lev 25:35). The purpose of this empowerment of the weak is "that they may live beside you," or be in community with you.

Providing the conditions for participation in community demands a focus on the basic needs for life in community. Achieving such justice includes access to the material essentials of life, such as food and shelter.² Enjoying the benefit rights crucial to participation in community goes well beyond "welfare" or "charity." People in distress are to be empowered at the point where their participation in community has been undermined.

¹ See Deut 10:17-18.

² See Ps 146:7 and Deut 10:18.

Biblical justice is the restoration of the community as a place where all live together in wholeness. Precisely because of its equal concern for wholeness for everyone, justice pays special attention to the needs of the weak and marginalized.

Distributive Justice. None of what we have looked at so far describes the actual content of distributive justice. I turn to that now with a discussion of equality. Equality has been one of the great slogans of the twentieth century, but what does it mean? Equality before the law, equality of opportunity, identical income shares? Is there a biblical definition of equality?

The biblical material on Israel and the land offers important clues about what a biblical understanding of equality -- or, better, equity -- would look like. Land was the basic capital in early Israel's agricultural economy, and the Law says the land was divided in such a way that each extended family had the resources to produce the things needed for a decent life. Some families became poorer than others, and some even lost their land. God therefore gave his people a law to guarantee that no family would permanently lose its land. Every fifty years, the people were to declare a year of Jubilee in which land returned to the original owners; thus, every family had enough productive resources to function as dignified, participating members of the community.³

The prophets' teaching about the land underlines these Jubilee principles. In the tenth to eighth centuries BC, major centralization of landholding occurred. Poorer farmers lost their land, becoming landless laborers or slaves. The prophets regularly denounced the bribery, political assassination, and economic oppression that had destroyed the earlier decentralized economy. The prophets also expressed a powerful eschatological hope for a future day of justice when all would have their own land again.⁴

We see a social ideal in which families are to have the economic means to earn their own way. Failure to act responsibly has economic consequences, so there is no assumption of economic equality. Central, however, is the demand that each family have access to the necessary capital so that responsible stewardship will result in an economically decent life.

APPLICATION TO TODAY

Does the biblical material offer a norm for distributive justice today? The Lord of history applies the same standards of social justice to all nations. That does not mean, however, that we should try to apply the specific mechanisms of the Jubilee to complex twentieth century global market economies. It is the basic paradigm that is normative for us today.

Since land in Israelite society represented productive power, we must identify the forms of productive power in modern societies. In an industrial society, the primary productive power was the factory; in an information society, it is primarily knowledge. Faithful application of these biblical texts in our societies means finding mechanisms that offer everyone the opportunity to share in the ownership of these productive resources. We must develop appropriate intervening processes in society to restore access to productive resources for everyone.

The central normative principle that emerges from the biblical material on the land is this: Justice demands that every person or family has access to the productive resources (land, money, knowledge) so they have the opportunity to earn a generous sufficiency of material necessities and be dignified participating members of their community, if, of course, they act responsibly.

³ Lev 25:10-24

⁴ See Micah 4:4, also Zech 3:10, Ezek 45:1-9

CONCLUSION

The biblical material tells us that distributive justice includes at least the following two components, in addition to fair procedures:

1) normally, all people who can work should work and 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) 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.

Although these two norms are somewhat modest in comparison with some ideals presented in the last couple hundred years in the name of equality, at least that much is demanded by the Scriptures when we ask what equality means. A successful effort to implement those two points would require dramatic change in Canada, the United States, and in every nation on earth.

This essay draws on a chapter Ronald J. Sider co-authored with Stephen Mott: "Economic Justice: A Biblical Paradigm," in *Toward a Just and Caring Society*, ed. David P. Gushee. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).