

## You Lack One Thing

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, February 25, 2018, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Mark 10:17-27](#) and [Leviticus 25:8-13](#)

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I think that Jesus' understanding of Sabbath economics is rooted in the tradition of the Jubilee Year.

Last week, we heard the story of the manna in the wilderness from Exodus 16. We established that the core values of the Sabbath economy are:

- Everyone has enough;
- No one has too much; and
- The economy is not dependent solely on human labor – that is, that one can take a day off each week and there will still be enough for everyone.

By the time we get to Exodus 23, we hear about the Sabbath year. Every seven years, the land gets to rest. It is left fallow, and whatever is produced is gleaned by the poor and wildlife. This Sabbath year restores equilibrium to the community, and it does this by restraining the activity of 'productive' members of the economy and by freeing the constraints that have limited the activities of those the economy has marginalized (namely, the poor and the natural environment).

By the time the book of Deuteronomy is written, the interpretation of the Sabbath year has expanded. Now it includes debt relief. Check out [Deuteronomy 15](#) for the details. "This debt relief was intended as a hedge against the inevitable tendency of human societies to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of the few, creating hierarchical classes with the poor at the bottom. In agrarian societies such as biblical Israel (or parts of the Third World today), the cycle of poverty began when a family fell into debt, deepened when [the family] had to sell off its land in order to service the debt, and reached its conclusion when landless peasants could only sell their labor becoming bond-slaves."<sup>1</sup>

Something very similar happened in the United States after the Civil War, when freed slaves ended up being share croppers and were sucked into a debt cycle that left the essentially slaves again. Debt forgiveness as outlined in Deuteronomy 15 includes freeing debt-slaves, sending them away with sufficient resources to make it on their own.

The fullest expression of this Sabbath economic logic is outlined in the Levitical Jubilee. We heard part of the passage from Leviticus that establishes the Jubilee. Every fiftieth year is established as a Jubilee. The land is given rest. Debts are forgiven. Slaves are freed. The land is restored to the members of the tribes to whom it was originally given after the conquest. "The rationale for this unilateral restructuring of the community's assets was to remind Israel that the land [ultimately] belongs to God (25:23) and that they

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<sup>1</sup> Ched Myers, *The Biblical View of Sabbath Economics* (Washington, D.C.: Tell the Word, 2001), 14.

are an exodus people who must never return to a system of slavery (25:42)”<sup>2</sup> and the Imperial economy.

When Luke tells the story of Jesus beginning his public ministry, he sets the story in Nazareth. Jesus goes to the synagogue and reads from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”<sup>3</sup>

It is widely recognized that proclaiming “the year of the Lord’s favor” meant proclaiming a year of jubilee. That’s why Jesus is bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives. That is why Jesus is letting the oppressed go free. “Jubilee consciousness defined Jesus’ call to discipleship, lay at the heart of this his teaching, and stood at the center of his conflict with the Judean public order.”<sup>4</sup>

There’s at least a whole sermon just on how the Jubilee ethic runs through the gospels in Jesus’ teaching and actions. But I want to get to today’s gospel lesson. So, let’s just acknowledge that the Sabbath economy, where everyone has enough and no one has too much (guaranteed by its periodic forgiveness of debts and redistribution of wealth), is at the heart of Jesus’ ministry.

Think for a moment about how this story made you feel as you heard it read. Was it familiar enough that you know where it was going, so you erected a bulwark against it touching your feelings? Did it make you feel uncomfortable? judged? (I don’t want to think of myself as rich even though I probably am.) Did you want to explain away what this passage seems to be saying?

Here’s what this passage does *not* say: It does *not* say that it’s important that those who have significant resources to take care not to let their affluence get in the way of their love for God and the church. That lesson waters down – no, it ignores what Jesus is really saying.

Let’s try to figure out what the story *does* say.

The story has a movement. It starts off with the rich man being concerned about eternal life (and I think he means eternal life after this life). Jesus moves the discussion from the rich man’s concern about “eternal life” to Jesus’ concern about “the kingdom of God.” And when Jesus talks about “the kingdom of God,” he’s presenting the alternative to the kingdom of Rome. The kingdom of God is presented as the alternative to an empire that was politically oppressive, economically exploitative, and religiously legitimated.<sup>5</sup>

If we remember that the kingdom of God is Jesus’ alternative to the kingdom of Rome, we can understand why Jesus would tell his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!... Children, how hard it is to enter the

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> See Luke 4:16-21. This quote is verses 18 and 19.

<sup>4</sup> Myers, *op. cit.*, 23.

<sup>5</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 130.

kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Jesus is right! How hard it is for the rich to leave the Empire of Rome and join the Commonwealth of God. That’s because God’s Commonwealth is based on a Sabbath economy, not an Imperial economy. In the Imperial economy, in the economy of the Empire of Rome, there is no such thing as a concept of *too much* and there’s no such thing as a concept of *too little*. It doesn’t matter how much you have; it can’t become “too much.” The poor don’t have enough to live on? That’s just the way it is and there’s no such things as “too little.”

On the other hand, in the Sabbath economy, in the economy of the Commonwealth of God, there *are* concepts of *too much* and *too little*. Those concepts exist to help you know if you have a Sabbath economy or not. If people have too much or people have too little, you don’t have a Sabbath economy. It is oxymoronic to have a rich person, a person who has too much, in the kingdom of God. By definition, the rich cannot enter the kingdom of God – at least not with their wealth intact.

But fear not. This is not simply a condemnation of wealth. It is also, and perhaps more importantly, a condemnation of the system that allows disparities of wealth to occur.

Let’s dig a little deeper.<sup>6</sup>

The rich man gives himself away in the first question he asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The word, “inherit,” is a verb used in connection with real property. We are told this man is rich, and in first century Palestine, land (not commodities) was the basis of wealth. In fact, verse 22, which tells us he had many possessions, can be translated, “he possessed many properties.” The tiny landed class of first century Jews took great care to “keep it in the family,” doing all they could to pass their possessions from one generation to the next. For this man, eternal life, like property, is something to be inherited.

Estates grew rich in one of three ways. Family assets could be consolidated through marriage or political alliances. Sometimes expropriated land was distributed through political patronage. But most often, land was acquired through a debt-default system that I described earlier, a system that reminds me of the payday loan business plan. Small agricultural landholders, suffering under the burdens of tithes, taxes, tariffs, and operating expenses, would fall behind in the payments and they were forced to take out loans secured by their land. When unable to service the loans, the land was lost to the lenders.

Since there weren’t banks, the lenders were the large landowners who had surplus capital. Thus, land holdings got bigger and bigger, the rich got richer and richer, and the poor got poorer and poorer.

Remembering this, you may find Jesus’ list of commandments interesting. “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.” Jesus skipped the first four of the big ten (worship God; don’t make and worship idols; don’t use God’s name in vain;

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<sup>6</sup> This deeper digging is based on Myers, *op. cit.*, chapter 4, pages 30-37.

keep the Sabbath holy). These are givens. But did you notice that he replaced “do not covet your neighbors stuff” with something else?

“You shall not defraud,” Jesus says. Think about the payday loan industry. It’s designed for borrowers who need quick cash. Someone is making it, paycheck to paycheck, but the car breaks down, so they take out a payday loan, a short-term loan that they’re supposed to repay when they get their next paycheck. The thing is, borrowers are often over-extended already and are unable to pay off the loan on time. The loan may have an initial “flat 15% fee or an interest rate that doesn’t seem particularly high. But costs can quickly add up if the loan isn’t paid off, and the effective annual interest rate is actually 300% or more.”<sup>7</sup> California Attorney General Xavier Becerra calls this “a rigged debt cycle.”<sup>8</sup> People take out a loan, and then take out another loan to pay off the previous loan, etc., etc., until they are in a hole so deep they can’t get out.

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau was in the process of establishing rules to help protect poor people from these leaches, but under the Trump administration, the Bureau has moved to protect the lenders, not the borrowers.<sup>9</sup>

“You shall not defraud,” Jesus said. You shall not defraud. I suppose, technically, the payday loan business isn’t fraud. The rigged debt cycle is all spelled out in the loan papers, I suppose – except for the part about it being a rigged system. Even if it doesn’t rise to the level of legal fraud, it sure violates the spirit of Jesus’ commandment.

It impresses me that Jesus was able to look at this man who prospered because of a corrupt, fraudulent system and still love him. Maybe that’s because for Jesus, love does not equivocate.

“You *lack* one thing,” Jesus tells him. Here, the word “lack” implies that the man is in debt. How’s that for a turn of events? But in the logic of the kingdom of God, in the logic of Sabbath economics, this rich man is poor. “Go, sell what you have, give the money to the poor; then come and follow me.” Jesus is asking this man to let go of the wealth he has accumulated through his participation in the Empire’s economy. And by redistributing this wealth to the poor, Jesus is inviting the rich man to embrace God’s economy.

“Jesus is not inviting this man to change his attitude toward his wealth, nor to treat his servants better, nor to reform his personal life. He is asserting the precondition for discipleship: economic justice. Stung, the man whirls and slinks away.”<sup>10</sup>

I realize that what I am preaching is heresy to capitalists. “Private controlled wealth is the backbone of capitalism and it is predicated upon the exploitation of natural resources and human labor. Profit maximization renders socio-economic stratification, objectification and alienation inevitable. According to the gospel, however, those who are

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<sup>7</sup> Jim Puzzanghera, “Consumer protection bureau cracks down on payday lenders with tough nationwide regulations,” *Los Angeles Times*, <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-payday-loan-regulations-20171005-story.html> (posted 5 October, 2017; accessed 24 February 2018).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> See David Lazarus, “In bizarre reversal under Trump, consumer agency reveals moves to protect payday lenders,” *Los Angeles Times*, <http://www.latimes.com/business/lazarus/la-fi-lazarus-cfpb-payday-lenders-20180119-story.html> (posted 19 January 2018; accessed 24 February 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Myers, *op. cit.*, 34.

privileged within *this* system cannot enter the Kingdom [of God].... So the unequivocal gospel invitation to repentance is addressed to us. To deconstruct our 'inheritance' and redistribute the wealth as reparation to the poor – *that* is what it means for *us* to follow Jesus."<sup>11</sup>

Does Jesus really expect his followers (that is, us) to participate in a Sabbath distribution of wealth as a condition of discipleship?

Yes, he does. As impossible as it seems, he does. "I know it seem impossible to you," Jesus tells us, "but for God all things are possible."

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 36-37.