

Part of ECF's charge is to support ministry for our siblings and children among us trapped in generational poverty. Generational poverty differs from situational poverty. Situational poverty is a condition caused by a sudden crisis, like environmental disasters, divorce, job loss, or severe health problems. *Generational* poverty occurs in families where at least two generations have been born in poverty and lack the tools to move out of their situation. The hallmark of generational poverty is hopelessness. Generational poverty is more like a prison, being enslaved by economic and legal systems that have trapped people in poverty, making escape seem impossible.

Sabbatical

Would it surprise you to know that God has an economic and social plan to eliminate every kind of poverty? It is a plan proclaimed by every prophet from Isaiah to Hosea, but Deuteronomy 15 spells it out most clearly. That is where God commands a Sabbatical Year. Every seven years, all debts shall be forgiven. Canceled. The slate was wiped clean. Like the sabbath command for a seventh day of rest, the commandment for a sabbatical year provided *everyone* time to pause, to lift the economic knee from the struggling neck, to take a breath and focus on things more important than one's own self. Like God. Or one's neighbor, neighborhood, the welfare of the larger community and nation. That is how and where the blessings of God flow to everyone, as certain as the laws of physics.

Even slaves were to be set free after six years of service—and not just set free, *but given reparations!* “When you set them free from your service, you must not let them go empty-handed. Instead, provide for them fully from your flock, food, and wine. *You must give to them from that with which the Lord your God has blessed you.*”^[1] I normally and vehemently object to literal or fundamentalist reading of our Holy Scripture, but even I am compelled to do the math to realize, with chagrin, that according to God's law, we are the ones in debt! We and our forebearers who have occupied this land of America from 1619 to 2020, are at least 401 years in arrears, having violated over 57 sabbatical commands to come clean.^[2]

Following God's Plan

Deuteronomy 15 is such a complete plan for the economic and social welfare of all members of God's chosen people that “there won't be any poor persons among you” if—repeat, *IF*—we choose to follow the plan. Holy Wisdom knew that people would *not* follow this plan. There will always be poor among us. “Poor persons will never disappear from the earth,” reads verse 11. “That's why I'm giving you this command: you must open your hand generously to the needy among you, and to the people experiencing income inequality who live in your land.”

Put another way, Deuteronomy is a plan for justice, but it hinges on the trust and obedience of God's people to a higher law. The conditional “if” in God's plan is the gap in which we live. It represents the choice we all have to make every day. Who are we really? Are we the people of God? *Do we really even want to be God's people?* Like it or not, we live out and answer that choice every day.

Jesus hammered home the Deuteronomic message as well: “You will always have the poor with you, and whenever you want you can do something good for them, but you won't always have me.”^[3] Please do not think for a minute that he is saying the poor do not matter, or that he is conceding anything to inevitability. He is quoting Deuteronomy 15:11 while giving his followers a loving slap in the face! He is saying—without saying it—*the only reason we “will always have the poor” with us is because you allow it to be that way.* They were not living by the economic plan God has given to his people. Neither are we. The solution, God's plan, involves fixing a much larger economic and social system.

Call for Justice

Our charity is a good and necessary response, but it will never begin to solve the enslavement of generational poverty. "Charity is only a patch until such a time that justice ensures enough for everyone," as our Bishop pointed in his recent email [For Faith and the accompanying podcast](#). He dependably invokes Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, pointing to the fact that the economic inequality we see happening now in this country has happened before to God's chosen people (shortly before they were conquered, decimated, and carried into exile).

Any society whose economic, legal, and social systems allow the rich to keep getting richer while more people are trapped and enslaved by poverty is doomed. The only answer, for the world and certainly for the Church, is justice. The only true justice, by definition, is God's. I think we have it on good authority that God hates poverty, but thankfully God has a plan for that. It is time for God's people to get onboard.

[1] Deut. 15:13-14

[2] $400 \div 7 = 57.14$

[3] Mark 14.7, and also Matthew 26.11 and John 12.8



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