

God's Welfare System

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For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.

--Deuteronomy 15:11

Libertarians and some conservatives like to talk about “the proper function of government.” “Government exists to protect people from force and fraud, and that the rest of human activity should be done on a volunteer basis; i.e., by individuals, businesses, churches, and charitable organizations.” Under this view, the government should be mainly the military, the police, a few regulatory agencies and the courts. (Most conservatives, as well as moderate libertarians, would also throw in some of the “natural monopolies” such as road building.)

Interestingly, despite the fact that Fundamentalist Christianity is associated with the political Right, God's priorities for government are just the opposite! If you look at the model government mandated in Exodus-Deuteronomy for the Hebrews to implement after the conquest of Canaan, you will find no king, president, legislature, standing army, or police force. The system more resembled the American Wild West than the government of any modern “civilized” country. There was no democratic legislature, for the law was fixed, but law enforcement was far more democratic than anything we would be comfortable with today. The military was simply the armed citizenry brought together by a prophet when the need arose – like some kind of extremist NRA fantasy.

Eventually, the people tired of the responsibility of self-governance and demanded a king. The Prophet Samuel's reply to this demand is a libertarian classic – one which was later quoted in Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* [1 Samuel 8:10-18].

But in the midst of all this borderline anarchy, there *was* a welfare system – one mandated by law! This is completely backwards from what most advocates of limited government consider to be the core “necessary” parts of government. It is

10. And Samuel told all the words of the Lord unto the people that asked of him a king.

11. And he said, This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you: He will take your sons, and appoint them for himself, for his chariots, and to be his horsemen; and some shall run before his chariots.

12. And he will appoint him captains over thousands, and captains over fifties; and will set them to ear his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and instruments of his chariots.

13. And he will take your daughters to be confectionaries, and to be cooks, and to be bakers.

14. And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your oliveyards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants.

15. And he will take the tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards, and give to his officers, and to his servants.

16. And he will take your menservants, and your maidservants, and your goodliest young men, and your asses, and put them to his work.

17. He will take the tenth of your sheep: and ye shall be his servants.

18. And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the Lord will not hear you in that day.

—1 Samuel 8

for this reason that I put the Law of Moses in the upper left quadrant of the chart on the home page of www.holisticpolitics.org. (Exactly how high it belongs in the freedom direction depends on how much you value the freedom to worship idols and engage in homosexuality vs. how much you value low taxes, personal weapons ownership, and lack of government employees.)

That said, the welfare system that was called for in the Bible was radically different from either socialism or the governmental welfare systems of modern “capitalist” countries. The objections of the Right to the modern welfare state do have merit, but the Bible’s answer was not no welfare system, but a much different welfare system.

Objections to Welfare

Helping out the poor is a good thing. However, modern welfare systems do have serious problems that need to be addressed:

- Welfare targeted at just the truly needy encourages some able-bodied people to fake neediness, thus encouraging unproductive and immoral behavior. For example, aid to single mothers discourages marriage.
- Extreme welfare systems and socialist states put everyone on the dole for certain services, such as education and retirement savings (Social Security) in the U.S. and medicine in Western Europe. This “robs Peter to pay Peter.” The result is bureaucracy, inefficiency, and loss of personal choice.
- Transferring wealth from the wealthy to the poor often means taking capital from the productive and giving it to unproductive consumers. This pulls down the overall wealth level. If overdone, the loss in general wealth can nullify the benefits of wealth transfer and actually increase poverty. This is what happened in the communist countries.
- The high income taxes needed to pay for a modern welfare state are extremely expensive to assess, violate privacy, reduce incentives to be productive, and hurt small businesses.
- Forcibly taking from one group to give to another is theft. This would be obvious if it were done by a private group instead of the government. Imagine if the Salvation Army were to arm itself and use its might to collect from all wealthy people in order to accomplish its good deeds.

All these objections are valid. All of them are answered in God’s welfare system. The power of God’s system is often overlooked today, as it was implemented for an agrarian society of very little bureaucracy. I am not going to propose that our government adopt an identical system in the modern age; times have changed. I am suggesting that we can learn powerful underlying principles from the ancient model, principles that can be used in both public and private programs to help the poor while preserving liberty and prosperity.

What it Wasn’t

In the minds of many Christians, God’s welfare system was that we are to pay a tithe (10% of our income) to the Church and/or charities who pass along a portion to the poor. Some reckon that since the income tax is used heavily for taking care of the poor, the Church needs less than 10% and Church revenues suffer accordingly (at least for some denominations).

This model does not match what was in God's original model society, ancient Israel. For starters, there were *three* different tithes.

1. The first was an annual tithe which was to be given to the Levites – the priests. It was not charity. It was tax (or rent) paid to God in return for the bounty of the world. The Levites (priests) were acting as agents for collecting this tribute. [*Leviticus 27:30-33; Numbers 18:25-32*]
2. The second tithe was also an annual tithe, but you were to spend it on yourself for travel money to get to three annual feasts, Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, and for celebration expenses while there. [*Deuteronomy 12:5-18; 14:22-29*] (A modern analog would be the large amount that people now spend on celebrating Christmas. But note that Christmas is not called for in the Bible. The origin of Christmas was an attempt by the early Church to Christianize old pagan celebrations for the benefit of the partially converted. Whether fully converted Christians should continue to celebrate this and other recycled pagan festivals is debatable [*see Deuteronomy 12:29-31*].)
3. The third tithe was not every year. It was either every third year, or more likely, the third year of the seven year cycle. (There was a Sabbath year at the end of a seven year cycle just as there is a Sabbath day at the end of a seven day cycle, as I will discuss later.) *This* tithe was indeed for the poor, as well as the Levite. [*Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 26:12-15*]

A 10% tax to help the poor every seven years is not much! That's less than 1½%! Very Republican, indeed!

Yes, the New Testament talks much about helping the poor. And there are passages in the New Testament that indicate that money for God can be diverted to the poor. For this and other reasons many people associate the New Testament with the Left and the Old Testament with the Right.

But they would be wrong. There is much provision for the poor in the Old Testament, of which the third tithe is a minor portion.

The Land Belongs to God

The land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is Mine, for ye are strangers and sojourners with Me.

—*Leviticus 25:23*

Libertarians believe that we own ourselves, that we are not owned by master, king, government, society, or The People. Therefore, we as individuals have a full claim on how to work, how much to work, and how to dispose of the products of our labor. Thus, income taxation to transfer wealth from one person to another is theft or slavery by government proxy.

As a Christian, I realize that the products of my work are not fully mine. The tools that I work with, my body, my mind and the natural resources I work with, were not created by me. As such it is reasonable to pay rent to the One who created them. The first tithe serves this purpose. I have no objection to this “income tax.” (And since this “tax” is purely self-assessed, there is no need for the burdensome paperwork of a government-imposed income tax.)

However, neither the government nor The People have such a claim to my income. I categorically reject the socialist notion that The People own the national income and have the right to distribute it as they see fit. To be a slave to the mob is only marginally better than being a slave to a single master, as Russian history has shown.

A radical libertarian would take this concept and say that no taxes are justified. As a realistic libertarian, I would note that preserving the natural rights of life and liberty are not free. I do not object to paying reasonable taxes for this valuable service. Given the economies of scale of police protection and national defense, paying protection money to a government is generally cheaper than hiring your own henchmen to guard your castle.

But does this principle rule out all government-induced wealth transfers? Is the only moral government that minimal one advocated by the Right?

Consider the biggest wealth transfer mandated in the Bible: the law of the Jubilee. Every 50 years there was massive land redistribution. And given that this was in a land-based economy, this was a major redistribution.

The legal principle was this: that the land belongs to God and that we are merely leasing it [Leviticus 25:23]. At the time of the conquest of Canaan, the land was divided roughly equally. From then on, the land was to be passed down through inheritance alone. There was no primogeniture, so all sons inherited land. Farmland could not be sold outright. *Parents could not sell away their descendants birthright.* Everyone had a right to some property.

At this point we are looking at an inflexible system. It would have no provision for those who want to live in the city instead of being farmers. It wouldn't allow farmers to mortgage their farms in order to pay for capital improvements.

The Jubilee law fixed this. Farm owners were allowed to sell a *leasehold* on their property. Since this leasehold had value, it could be used as collateral. But there was a limit on the duration of such leaseholds. You could not disinherit subsequent generations. All leaseholds terminated at the same time – in the year of Jubilee, which occurred every 50 years (seven Sabbath year cycles

8. *And thou shalt number seven sabbaths of years unto thee, seven times seven years; and the space of the seven sabbaths of years shall be unto thee forty and nine years.*

9. *Then shalt thou cause the trumpet of the jubile to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month, in the day of atonement shall ye make the trumpet sound throughout all your land.*

10. *And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubile unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family.*

11. *A jubile shall that fiftieth year be unto you: ye shall not sow, neither reap that which groweth of itself in it, nor gather the grapes in it of thy vine undressed.*

12. *For it is the jubile; it shall be holy unto you: ye shall eat the increase thereof out of the field.*

13. *In the year of this jubile ye shall return every man unto his possession.*

14. *And if thou sell ought unto thy neighbour, or buyest ought of thy neighbour's hand, ye shall not oppress one another:*

15. *According to the number of years after the jubile thou shalt buy of thy neighbour, and according unto the number of years of the fruits he shall sell unto thee:*

16. *According to the multitude of years thou shalt increase the price thereof, and according to the fewness of years thou shalt diminish the price of it: for according to the number of the years of the fruits doth he sell unto thee.*

17. *Ye shall not therefore oppress one another; but thou shalt fear thy God: for I am the Lord your God.*

—Leviticus 25

29. *And if a man sell a dwelling house in a walled city, then he may redeem it within a whole year after it is sold; within a full year may he redeem it.*

30. *And if it be not redeemed within the space of a full year, then the house that is in the walled city shall be established for ever to him that bought it throughout his generations: it shall not go out in the jubile.*

31. *But the houses of the villages which have no wall round about them shall be counted as the fields of the country: they may be redeemed, and they shall go out in the jubile.*

--Leviticus 25

plus one). Thus, a lease that started right after the Jubilee was more valuable than a lease that started late in the 50 year cycle. While having all leaseholds terminate at the same time was a bit inflexible, it greatly reduced the need for paperwork to track such things.

While some libertarians might object to such restrictions on what you could do with the land, it should be noted that this system prevented the feudal system of large estates and landless peasants – hardly a model of liberty. Also to be noted was the

fact that land in cities could be sold outright [Leviticus 25:29-31]. In cities, most of the value was man-created, and thus allowing full ownership is in accord with libertarian principle. (Note also that the tithe quotes only refer to agricultural products; not crafts, so possibly the tithes could fall under this principle [Leviticus 27:30-33]. Then again, this could be simply a reflection of the agricultural economy of the time.)

With a 50 year cycle, most people would have a chance at some time in their life to live on their share of the family estate rent free at some point in their life. Having a lazy, stupid, or unlucky ancestor was not a sentence to wage slavery.

That's right, I said wage slavery. While this sounds like a modern lefty term, it is worth noting that the language in the Bible partially equates being free with being your own boss.

References: *Leviticus 25:1-34; 27:14-34*

See also: "Really Natural Rights" on www.holisticpolitics.org.

Modern Application:

While the old system was easy to track, it lacked flexibility. It tied people to their extended family. Perhaps this was a good thing, but it would be difficult to implement in our mobile society, especially in the U.S. which was mobile from the start.

But the underlying principle of the land belonging to God, and each person having an equal right to a share can be applied in other ways. Modern proposals go back to Thomas Paine at least. They continue through the writings of Henry George on to modern "geolibertarians."

Modern proposals generally run as follows:

1. We all deserve equal share of the natural world's natural resources – things not created by Man. This includes such things as land, metals, oil, coal, broadcast spectrum, hunting rights, fishing rights, and right-of-ways.
2. Unequal ownership of natural resources does have economic advantages. Not everyone is destined to be a small farmer. There are economies of scale, especially in mineral extraction.
3. Therefore, unequal division of natural resource ownership should be allowed, but those who own more than the per capital value of all such resources should pay rent in the form of taxes

to those who own less.

The actual implementation would be a flat rate tax on the inherent value of land and other natural resources (before human improvement), *and* a per person rebate of the tax on the average share. That is, those who own less than the average would get back more than they pay – a citizen's dividend.

The rebate could be in the form of cash, government social services or something in between such as school vouchers for minors. The more libertarian form would be cash; paternalists would prefer something less flexible.

For example: suppose the total value of the land, mineral rights, broadcast rights and pollution rights of the United States were \$30 trillion (a completely made up figure for illustrative purposes; the real figure is probably higher). Divide this by 300 million people and you get \$100,000 of property for every citizen, roughly. Tax this at 3% and you average \$3000 for every person. Give every person \$3000 of dividend and/or government services and you have the owners of "excess" natural resources paying a net amount of tax while those without property effectively receive rent from the owners of natural resources.

Besides the moral arguments I have given, there are many other advantages to replacing our current maze of income taxes, labor taxes, inheritance taxes and so forth with a flat rate tax with rebate on natural resource use/ownership:

1. Such taxes would be far easier to assess than income or sales taxes. Private property has to be registered at the county land office to even exist in the first place.
2. There would be no need for tax prisons. The maximum penalty for not paying taxes would be loss of part of the property being taxed.
3. Despite being "flat," property taxes are more progressive than income taxes. Income taxes hit those *getting* rich. Property taxes hit those who *are* rich. There is no need for a progressive rate with all the bookkeeping that entails.
4. There are fewer economic distortions. Instead of discouraging labor, sales, or thrift, such "land" taxes discourage what economists refer to as "rent-seeking" – economically unproductive activities.
5. The citizen's dividend would be unconditional. You would not have to prove poverty to qualify. There would be no disincentive to work, save or marry.

Many conservatives and libertarians are uncomfortable with the idea of rent on above average natural resource ownership. They feel that once paid for, such resources ought to be owned outright without further fee. This view suffers from several flaws:

1. No land title is perfect. Go back far enough and you will find conquest. "All property is theft."
2. Even ignoring the problem of conquest, there is also the problem of unjust distribution of wealth at the time the land was first put up for sale. For example, African American slaves and their descendants were at an unfair disadvantage when the American frontier was put up for sale.
3. Much of land value is unearned windfall. The farmer whose farm happens to sit on an oil field did not create the oil.

4. Perpetual contracts suffer from the same moral problems as the “social contract” theory of government. They give people the right to sell away the natural rights of their descendants.

Points 1 and 2 bring up the whole issue of reparations for past injustices. The perpetrators are dead, but the effects of their crimes still show up as differences in inheritance. The concept of rent on excess natural resource use/ownership answers the reparations issue for all past injustices.

Capital

Libertarians and conservatives love to talk about “equality of opportunity” vs. “equality of outcome.” Someone who puts in 60 hours/week of hard work starting up a business deserves more income than someone who puts in 30 hours/week in a low stress job and 30 hours/week smoking pot and watching television. The same goes for someone who works hard at producing something that others want vs. working hard on a project just because it is personally satisfying. Equal income is not equality.

An open market without guild requirements, undue licensing requirements or artificial regulatory overhead does much for equality of opportunity. There is much that can be done that increases both freedom and economic equality, while reducing the size of government. But even with these measures taken, there remains a glaring inequality of opportunity that is based on ancestry versus personal merit: access to capital.

The Bible addresses this in several ways, one of which is the Jubilee law which I have already covered. Land functions much like capital, and land can be mortgaged for capital. But the Bible calls for more.

Wealthy Hebrews were expected to *loan* to the poor – at zero interest. Do note that this was zero interest using a hard money currency; i.e., no inflation. How much one was obligated to loan was not specifically mentioned. The prohibition on charging interest to countrymen was explicit. (Hebrews were allowed to charge foreigners interest, however.)

A zero interest loan is a form of charity and was understood as such. But by providing loans instead of gifts, charity monies could get stretched farther. It was possible to go beyond providing mere needs to helping the poor provide for wants and ambitions.

1. *At the end of every seven years thou shalt make a release.*
2. *And this is the manner of the release: Every creditor that lendeth ought unto his neighbour shall release it; he shall not exact it of his neighbour, or of his brother; because it is called the Lord's release.*
3. *Of a foreigner thou mayest exact it again: but that which is thine with thy brother thine hand shall release;*
4. *Save when there shall be no poor among you; for the Lord shall greatly bless thee in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it:*
5. *Only if thou carefully hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all these commandments which I command thee this day.*
6. *For the Lord thy God blesseth thee, as he promised thee: and thou shalt lend unto many nations, but thou shalt not borrow; and thou shalt reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over thee.*
7. *If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother:*
8. *But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth.*
9. *Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the Lord against thee, and it be sin unto thee.*

Any form of handout is subject to abuse. A person who fakes neediness is robbing from the truly needy. However, with loans such abuse is kept to a minimum. A person who takes largesse in the form of a loan to buy luxuries is in for trouble when it comes time to pay the loan back. In ancient times the terms were quite stern: to default on such a loan was to become an indentured servant for up to six years. Before condemning this system keep in mind:

1. Such lack of bankruptcy eliminated the need for collateral – rather important for the poor who need capital.
2. The indentured servants were to be treated as employees, not slaves.
3. At the end of the term of indenture, the servant was to be given capital on the way out.

Contrast this with the modern situation. Poor people have to pay extra interest in return for easy bankruptcy. This can mean that loans may not be available at all. Without the availability of loans for capital, a modern poor person needs to be a wage slave *before* getting the capital. In the Biblical system the capital came first and the wage slavery was bypassed if the capital was used wisely. Under the Biblical system you got the opportunity to stay independent and only had to work for someone else if you blew your chance.

Consider someone growing up in a modern housing project who has no savings, no credit history and little exposure to a work ethic. Under the Biblical system that person would have a chance to start up a farm or business using zero interest money. If that person were to fritter away that opportunity, spending the loan on fun instead of business, *then* that person would become a servant for a time, gaining continuous exposure to someone who does have a work ethic. Upon completion of that term, the person would get another helping of capital in return for labor done, another chance at independence with both free and clear money and lessons learned.

That said, there is much potential for abuse of a system allowing indentured servitude, so I do not advocate going all the way back to such a system. But we can learn from it.

References: *Exodus 21:1-11; 22:25-27; Leviticus 25:35-55; Deuteronomy 15:1-18; 23:19-20; 24:6-13*

10. *Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the Lord thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou puttest thine hand unto.*

11. *For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.*

12. *And if thy brother, an Hebrew man, or an Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years; then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee.*

13. *And when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty:*

14. *Thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy floor, and out of thy winepress: of that wherewith the Lord thy God hath blessed thee thou shalt give unto him.*

15. *And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee: therefore I command thee this thing to day.*

16. *And it shall be, if he say unto thee, I will not go away from thee; because he loveth thee and thine house, because he is well with thee;*

17. *Then thou shalt take an aul, and thrust it through his ear unto the door, and he shall be thy servant for ever. And also unto thy maidservant thou shalt do likewise.*

18. *It shall not seem hard unto thee, when thou sendest him away free from thee; for he hath been worth a double hired servant to thee, in serving thee six years: and the Lord thy God shall bless thee in all that thou doest.*

—Deuteronomy 15

Modern applications:

Perhaps the closest modern application of this principle is the guaranteed student loan program. The nominal interest rates are low, and when inflation is factored in, the real interest rates are very low. The fact that student loans cannot be defaulted through bankruptcy has some analog to indentured servitude. The fact that such loans are only for education does target the monies to a form of capital improvement vs. luxury spending.

Alas, such laws are not much good for those who gain little from college. Most people are not academically inclined; either they learn better through doing or simply have limited learning capacity. Denying these people capital is regressive.

A program that mimics serving an indenture and then getting capital is the GI Bill. This was a very successful program: giving people scholarships *after* they experience the rigors of military service means they are likely to have better study habits. The down sides of such a program are that it requires a delay before going to college and that it does not benefit those who are not academically inclined.

A couple of possible applications of this principle for the modern world come to mind:

The first possibility would be a modification of bankruptcy law so that people could get low interest loans without collateral in return for more difficulty in declaring bankruptcy. In return for priority in payment, lenders would not be allowed to charge the outrageously high interest and penalties that credit card companies charge when payments go late. Such loans should be limited to those who can prove self-responsibility by means other than age, such as by living independently for a time without incurring debt or by doing a term of military service.

A second possibility would be to modify the citizen's dividend mentioned in the previous section. Those going to college or starting a business could request an advance on their dividend. Then during their earning years, they get no dividend. The dividend would resume by retirement age, taking the place of Social Security. Once again, proof of self-responsibility would be a good idea before allowing this "loan."

The Gleaner Principle

Some people need more than capital. Some people need income. Sometimes this is readily apparent: the blind, the lame, the orphan, the destitute widow, and the very retarded obviously need help. Programs, either public or private, to help such people are the obvious solution.

The more tricky case is that of the somewhat mentally ill – such as those who you find begging for money in many downtown areas. Some of these people cannot help their behavior. Others could work for a living if they were given a good kick in the pants to sober up, get a haircut and get their act together. These present a pair of problems:

1. How do we tell the difference between these two groups? Indeed, this is really tricky when we consider that there is a continuum between being mentally ill and being naturally shiftless and lazy.
2. And just what should be the penalty for being a lazy hippie anyway? Some poverty, yes. But death by starvation?

It is better to feed some lazy bums who could work but don't than it is to starve those who

9. *And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest.*

10. *And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the Lord your God.*

--Leviticus 19

24. *When thou comest into thy neighbour's vineyard, then thou mayest eat grapes thy fill at thine own pleasure; but thou shalt not put any in thy vessel.*

25. *When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbour, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbour's standing corn.*

--Deuteronomy 23

19. *When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow: that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands.*

20. *When thou beatest thine olive tree, thou shalt not go over the boughs again: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow.*

21. *When thou gatherest the grapes of thy vineyard, thou shalt not glean it afterward: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow.*

22. *And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt: therefore I command thee to do this thing.*

--Deuteronomy 24

lack the capability to have the discipline to hold a job. But to be too generous hardens the hearts of those who do work and/or encourages more people to become lazy bums.

The Bible answers this problem nicely: it provided nearly free food in a way that minimizes the extra effort for the farmers. Anyone was allowed to go onto any farm to get food under the following conditions:

1. After a grain field was harvested, anyone could get the leftovers – the gleanings. Farmers were to harvest just the easily harvested sheaves. The corners were to be left unharvested by the farmer, and anything dropped was to be left on the ground [*Leviticus 19:9, 23:22, Deuteronomy 24:19*].

2. A farmer could make only one pass through a vineyard or olive orchard. Any fruit not yet ripe was to be left for the poor [*Leviticus 19:10, Deuteronomy 24:20-22*].

3. Before harvest, anyone could walk into a vineyard and pluck grapes for eating on the spot. Bringing in a basket was not allowed, however [*Deuteronomy 23:24*].

4. Before harvest, anyone would walk into a grain field and pluck ears by hand. Using a sickle or other tool was not allowed [*Deuteronomy 23:25*].

5. On Sabbath years (every seventh year), the land was to be left fallow. Volunteer growth was for the benefit of gleaners – no plowing, planting or harvesting was allowed on those years [*Exodus 23:10-12, Leviticus 25:1-12*].

By this mechanism, the poor were provided for by the landowners working *less*. The landowners were entitled to the easily harvested portions of the fields they had planted. The harder to get to items were left for the needy.

Gleaning a field is tedious and time-consuming. Those with decent jobs would not be tempted to abuse this privilege. There is no need to ration this privilege to those deemed needy; the needy will select themselves. Having a few pilgrims and hippies taking advantage of gleaning rights does not break the system. (Jesus and his disciples took advantage of these rights on at least one occasion [*Matthew 12:1, Mark 2:23, Luke 6:1*].)

But while this labor is time-consuming, it is doable by those with limited mental capability

or discipline. There is instant gratification between work and hunger fulfillment. This is within the capability of those you see standing on street corners begging for change.

Thus, the Bible provided an affordable means of getting largesse to the borderline needy, a means that did not discourage productive and moral behavior. Yes, it could be used by those who were lazy or spiritual, but this is not always a bad thing. Also, it could be used by the able-bodied who were between jobs or were suffering temporary hard times.

Some conservatives and libertarians might argue that forcing farmers to allow gleaners is a violation of the farmers' natural rights. Once again, we invoke the principle that "the land belongs to God." Without farming, land does produce food on its own. In a state of nature, there would be scattered bits of edible food available for gathering. Allowing the poor to glean fields simulates the status they would have in a state of nature. This weakening of private property rights allows preservation of another natural right. [See my essay "Really Natural Rights" at www.holisticpolitics.org.]

Modern Applications

We no longer live in a world of small farms within walking distance of the poor – who mostly live in cities these days. (However, we might move back toward that status if we were to implement some of the ideas in this essay and the others on my web site.) That said, the principles described do have application in our modern society. I see two important patterns:

1. Instead of the prosperous trying to extract every bit of income from their holdings, the prosperous should leave the scraps for the poor to pick up.
2. Natural resources in the commons could be left up for anyone to harvest *if* the harvesting technology was sufficiently restricted.

The first pattern is followed when grocery stores donate dented cans and ugly fruits and vegetables to food banks instead of trying to sell them. Another implementation is that of people donating used items to a thrift store instead of holding a garage sale. While the prosperous forgo small amounts of income by doing these things, they save time, thus maximizing the charity/cost ratio. True, not all such donations go to the truly needy; when I was in college I made many trips to the Salvation Army thrift store in my pickup truck for friends who wanted a couch for their dorm room. But when the cost of this type of charity is so low, such use by the not-so-needy is not really a problem.

Another application is the "bottle bill." The government mandates a deposit on bottles and cans. The amount of the deposit is chump change for the prosperous, but good, easy money for the very poor. Scouts can raise money by picking up and sorting recyclables. Bums can pay for their beer by cleaning up the litter on the sides of roads. We get neater streets, happier bums and happier environmentalists.

The second pattern can be found in hunting laws that allow for a longer season for those who hunt with a bow and fishing laws that require a license for a net but not for hook and line. The pattern can be extended to preserve traditional ways of life. Eskimos could be allowed to hunt whales as long as they use traditional technology. Cowboys could graze their cattle on open range as long as they use horses and no trucks. Fisheries could be restricted to boats and nets of a certain size – no giant drift nets. National forest harvesting could be limited to labor intensive selective cutting techniques.

Such an approach to natural resource harvesting is intentionally inefficient. Economists in the audience may find this objectionable. Such an approach *is* inefficient if we measure harvest per unit of labor. On the other hand, this approach does a better job of maximizing satisfaction per unit of natural resource. Having better harvesting technology for a fixed resource does not increase the harvest in the long run; it only reduces the number of harvesters. It generally leads to the income from the harvest going from a large number of laborers to a small number of owners of expensive equipment.

If labor is needed elsewhere, then what I propose is harmful to the economy. On the other hand, if better extraction technology results in once independent harvesters becoming burger flippers, Progress is not such a good thing.

If the joy and satisfaction of being an independent fisherman, cowboy, or lumberman is outweighed by the hardships and lost income, then this method of rationing fixed resources should be at least partially replaced by putting resources up for bid. We can tell when this is needed by noting when the harvest becomes less than optimal.

Conclusion

For much of history much of the world's wealth was owned by the fortunate few and the rest lived as serfs or slaves.

Then, with the advent of modern capitalism during the Industrial Revolution, immense wealth came to the world, including the masses. But this wealth first went to the fortunate few. In the interim, there were generations subjected to worse poverty and miserable working conditions. The process is still going on in the developing world.

In reaction to this inequality of wealth, communism was called for by many. This spawned totalitarian dictatorships which killed tens of millions of people. In reaction to communism, fascist dictatorships arose committing further atrocities. The net result was a very bloody twentieth century.

In the developed world things have settled down to a mix of capitalism, mercantilism and government run welfare programs. This is an improvement over socialism, but still has problems: high crime, excessive drug use, broken families and a permanent resentful underclass.

The Bible provides an alternative, one which is based on subtle understanding of economics and natural rights. The elegance can be easily overlooked as the principles were applied for a muscle-powered agrarian society with limited record keeping capability. But for those who look, the answers are there. And these benefits are available even for those who do not believe. There is no violation of the First Amendment called for here.

But the fact that such subtle wisdom can be found in a book written by a "primitive" society, wisdom that could have saved us from the biggest problems of the first centuries of the modern era, is an important data point in what makes me a Believer.

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