



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 2

Faithful Citizenship: An Adult Lenten Study

Covenant for a New Economy

Introduction

How are you doing financially? Many of us may be struggling with money. The May 2016 *Atlantic* magazine points out that 47 percent of Americans would have trouble coming up with \$400 for an emergency, let alone a surprise bill that's much larger.¹ Financial insecurity and poverty are realities for many, many people. So how do we look at issues of economy and common good from a "faithful citizen" standpoint?

Economic Issues

Let's look at a few economic topics that touch all of us. One is **taxes**. Taxes increase government revenue that provide for things like our military, public services, parks, roads and other infrastructure, schools, and many other things. Cities that have lost tax revenue have consequently struggled to maintain crucial services. We complain about taxes and, at the same time, complain about pavement potholes, reduced hours at national parks, gaps in national security, and other things. We prefer for our leaders to promise lower taxes than to face the hard truth of their necessity. On the other hand, high taxes mean less money for personal and business finances and can affect economic growth. Too much debt hurts nations too.

Similarly, government **regulations** protect us from public health risks, environmental hazards, and the like, but regulations can also interfere with individual initiative and the free market, and regulations can be used as a self-interest tool by persons or companies that use the rules to their benefit. It is highly debatable what the "ideal" size of a government is and what the extent of regulations should be.

An economic issue related to these others is the **social priorities** taxes pay for. Should we have a strong military to protect our domestic freedoms and maintain America's status in the world? Should we support our own neediest people via social programs? Should we combine these priorities and, if so, how do we pay for it all?

Globalization, which is the integration of capital, technology, and information across national borders, has created a new context for thinking about our shared economic life. Aspects of globalization include the lowering of international trade barriers, the practice of corporations opening factories and markets in other countries, and the development and growth of technologies—all of which potentially benefit third-world countries because more money will flow to those places with increased global trade, and therefore standards of living can become higher. Critics point out that lower

trade barriers have led to unintended, harmful effects, such as the outsourcing of U.S. jobs, the suppression of wages, and the neglect of safety and environmental standards.

It Hurts to Be Poor

An article about families falling from the middle class relates the story of a Tennessee construction worker who lost his job. The family made decisions about which bills to pay and which things they could do without (including utilities!) until finally they lost their home and now live in a donated trailer. The wife noted that being labeled homeless is about “being called names. It’s being ridiculed. It’s running into people that have seen you in your highest and are not even speaking to you anymore because they’re too afraid for where you are and don’t know what to say.”*

*Laura Bassett, “Middle Class No More, Families Struggle to Fight Off Homelessness,” Huffington Post, May 25, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/02/04/middle-class-no-more-fami_n_450045.html.

Wealth inequality is another big issue. The *2018 World Inequality Report* notes that levels of wealth inequality have been especially great in Western Europe and the United States. In 1980, the top 1 percent of adults held close to 10 percent of the country’s wealth. It rose to 20 percent in 2016. Meanwhile, the bottom 50 percent of U.S. citizens share less than 13 percent of the wealth. The report, which discusses trends in several regions of the world, faults the United States for its great educational inequalities, a less progressive tax system, and wage-setting policies less favorable to middle- and low-income groups.² Related to wealth inequality, UNICEF statistics indicate that about 29,000 children die every day around the world, mainly from preventable diseases that are, in turn, related to poverty.³

Economic insecurity is still another topic. In his book *The Great Risk Shift*, Jacob Hacker writes about the loss of guaranteed pensions, the decline of health insurance benefits, the time crunch experienced by working couples, income volatility, and the increase

in corporate layoffs. Hacker believes that, during the Depression and the New Deal, a social ideal existed that he calls “social insurance”: institutions can absorb certain economic risks in order that many people can work toward economic well-being. But he argues that the political mantra of “personal responsibility” has shifted economic risk from institutions to individuals, thus making middle- and lower-class individuals and families more vulnerable to the difficulties of economic downturns than large companies.⁴

Our faith is never separable from these kinds of struggles, whether our own, those of other people in our community, or both. During Lent and throughout the year, we pray for our own well-being and offer intercessory prayers for those who are struggling. But we can also consider new ways to think prayerfully about economic issues.

Better Stories

When we and our families are suffering economically or when we’re frustrated with government handling of economic issues, then “covenant, community, and the common good” may take a backseat to our individual and family well-being. Remember that we began these Lenten sessions with the idea of being a faithful Christian citizen. As we consider being a faithful Christian citizen who has an audacious openness to other people, we seek to embrace our individual and family well-being without losing sight of our allegiance to shared values (covenant), our membership within our society (community), and the general welfare (common good).

Christian ethicist Eric Mount argues that we need a better sense of being in this together. It’s a sense that both liberals and conservatives may miss if they focus only on individuals’ well-being. We Christians can model ways to look at other people and their struggles more inclusively and to show that we are interdependent. We seek to respect people who are different from us while also thinking about our common good.

The church can help our nation remember its traditions about the individual and society. Indeed, there have always been two strands in our American tradition, one emphasizing our individual identity and the other stressing our community membership. The concepts of covenant, community, and the common good are realities to which the church can witness in its

gospel message as well as the heightened concern of its members.

For example, the tradition of covenant conveys a sense of indebtedness for unearned gifts and a requirement that such gifts be shared by all. Remembering covenant might help us recover a balance between the individual and the community.

Four Morality Tales

Economist Robert Reich writes about what he calls four “morality tales,” the frameworks with which we look at social problems. They are the Triumphant Individual, the Benevolent Community, the Mob at the Gates, and the Rot at the Top. The first two are hopeful models of society. In the first, people are ultimately responsible for their own success, and so the common good is best achieved when people are left alone to make their own lives. In the second, people pitch in to help others who are struggling in a vision of local neighborliness. The third and fourth tales are fearful models. In the third, the mob are welfare recipients, illegal immigrants, or any other group that is perceived to threaten the common good and therefore must be dealt with. In the fourth, the common good is threatened by the powerful, whether they are the rich or the government, and therefore we need smaller government, a redistribution of wealth, or other solutions.* Missing from even the hopeful tales is a sense of membership in the greater society and a vision of national and international community.

*Eric Mount, Jr., *Covenant, Community, and the Common Good: An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1999), 98–102. See also “Reich’s American Narratives,” *ChangingMinds.org*, http://changingminds.org/disciplines/storytelling/plots/reich_narrative.htm.

A Continuous Scriptural Theme

What are some Scripture passages to guide and direct us? Let’s deal with a notable verse first: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10). This verse is sometimes cited in discussions of welfare. The verse

(perhaps a saying of Paul’s time) teaches that if someone won’t work, he or she needs to accept responsibility. That’s true in many cases but, unfortunately, not in all! (Plus, some of the Thessalonians were idle because they were waiting for Jesus’ imminently expected second coming.) In our own time, plenty of people cannot find work, or they can find work and even hold down two or three jobs each week, but they still cannot make ends meet. We should never quote this verse with a dismissive attitude toward those who are economically struggling, as if the Scriptures give us an excuse to demean “them” as lazy.

Economic justice is a theme that is very strong in the Bible. It is a “hot potato” issue in politics, and our political opinions may influence our views about the poor and those in need. But the Bible is clear that God takes the side of the poor and the suffering.

“Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Ps. 82:3–4). “Those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor” (Prov. 14:21). “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt. 25:35). “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27). “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

The Bible reminds us about the poor many times (e.g., Lev. 19:15; Deut. 14:28–29; 15:8; Ps. 82:3–4; Prov. 14:21; 17:5; Matt. 25:31–46; Mark 14:7; Gal. 2:10; James 1:27; 2:1–26; and others). The Bible affirms that worship is meaningful only when combined with justice (Isa. 58; Mic. 4:1–8), but more specifically, the Bible calls us to care for the poor, to empathize with them, to welcome them, to help them find justice, to share our money with them, and to include them in our fellowship. God is frequently identified by “names” that reflect God’s caring attitude toward the poor (Deut. 10:18; Ps. 10:16–18; 12:5; 14:6; 34:6; 35:10; 68:10; and others). God blesses those who help the poor (Ps. 41:1–3; Prov. 14:21; 28:27, and others), and God punishes those who oppress the poor (Deut. 27:19; Prov. 17:5; Isa. 10:1–4, and others). God begins to set up ways to help the poor very quickly

The Bible reminds us about the poor many times more often than it (explicitly) reminds us about the Ten Commandments.

after the Ten Commandments: Exodus 22 and 23. God provides for the cancellation of debts and the manumission of slaves (Deut. 15:1–18), and the “jubilee year” of Leviticus 25:8–43 is still another God-given time (provided here in the supposedly legalistic Torah) for economic justice and liberty. You may think you know the sin of the city of Sodom, but in Ezekiel 16:49, the city’s sin was indifference to the needy!

If we Christians fail to catch the biblical vision, perhaps one reason is that we’ve been influenced by a kind of Puritan mind-set: poverty = laziness = disfavor with God. Ironically, when we think that way, we’ve tossed out the Puritans’ leading idea of covenant and common good! “Liberal” government programs that redistribute money from taxpayers to the poor are a hotly debated topic and another reason why some Christians have a comparatively harsh attitude toward the poor.

But the poor and needy call us, as it were, to examine our opinions and attitudes, because the Bible teaches that God takes the side of the economically distressed.

Three Stories

Although the story of the **Good Samaritan** (Luke 10:25–37) is not a “global” story, it concerns two groups of persons unfriendly toward each other: Jews and Samaritans. The two groups have common ethnic and religious roots, but the Samaritans had a different version of the Torah, had a different temple, and are possibly descended from the northern tribes conquered by the Assyrians in the eighth century. Ezra 4 records enmity toward Samaritans as the Jews tried to restore the temple and the city. Reading this Scripture, it’s easy to feel sympathetic to the “bad guys” of the story; it would be risky to help someone in a dangerous area, which the road to Jericho was. In spite of the risk, the Samaritan, surely a poster child for our theme of audacious openness, took the time and expense to help the injured man. The Samaritan must have been well-to-do, because a denarius was a day’s wages. The Samaritan

paid the innkeeper two denarii and promised more for expenses.

The Samaritan had money, saw an opportunity to help someone, and responded. He had no special obligations but took a risk and did a compassionate, uncalculated thing. We can contrast this to the **rich young ruler** of Luke 18:18–30. We might disapprove of the man:

How could he not give up all his money in order to follow Jesus? But most of us aren’t faced with that choice: we follow Jesus and still keep our money! A key to this passage is the specific thing Jesus told him to do with his money: distribute it to the poor. Sad about a choice he couldn’t make, he didn’t see Jesus’ command as an opportunity to help people in need.

Zacchaeus is another biblical example of audacious openness. Perhaps when you were little, you were told that this story taught that we should have our house in good physical and moral shape in case Jesus showed up! The story has that quality. Yet that is a very individualistic interpretation: What would Jesus think of *me*? Zacchaeus responded to Jesus with a new concern for the poor, a new vision of what he should do with his money, and a pain at the injustices he had caused. Jesus’ presence inspired Zacchaeus to examine his own economics, to make changes in his life, and to help the economically distressed.

To invoke our lesson themes again: the Good Samaritan and Zacchaeus had a sense of social responsibility toward others. Despite being outside certain social circles, they broke through those circles in order to provide for the well-being of others. Could we say that the rich young man had a strong civic role but somehow lacked civic virtue in the sense of acting on a sense of shared social responsibilities and common good?

We’re All on Welfare

We will continue to study aspects of global economics in the next weeks. We conclude this session with a story told by Eric Mount. A writer was going to write an article on welfare cheaters. He visited his daughter’s college and attended a football game and other activities, and finally he went to church service. He had a revelation, however, as he thought about several things. He had driven to the college on roads that had been cleared of snow. He thought about how much of his

daughter's college was paid for by other people, in the form of scholarships, etc. He thought about the traditions of knowledge that his daughter was learning from her several teachers and the joys of religious freedom that had once been fought for, the benefits of which they were now reaping. "I think I am going to have to rewrite the piece that I am doing on the welfare system because we are all on welfare."⁵

By thinking about economic issues with an eye toward our themes—covenant, community, and the common good—we can broaden our vision from just our personal concerns (important as those are) to a greater sense of compassion and solidarity.

Notes

1. Neal Gabler, "The Secret Shame of Middle-Class Americans," *The Atlantic*, May 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/05/my-secret-shame/476415/>.

2. World Inequality Lab, *World Inequality Report Executive Summary, 2018*, <http://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-full-report-english.pdf>.
3. UNICEF, Millennium Development Goals, <https://www.unicef.org/mdg/childmortality.html>.
4. Jacob S. Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5–8.
5. Eric Mount, Jr., *Covenant, Community, and the Common Good: An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1999), 102.

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