

CARING FOR THE POOR

Wisdom of God and the Schemes of Man

“Be rich in good works, generous, ready to share.”

1 Tim. 6:18

Christian Socialism

The phrases “social justice” and “social equality” are prevalent today. While these phrases seem harmless enough (who’s not for justice and equality), they are examples of the socialist infiltration of our culture. Even well-meaning Christians, who have a God-given desire and directive to care for society’s less fortunate, are advocating for Christian Socialism, combining the moral obligations of Christianity with the tenets of Marxism.

However, we must not substitute or compromise the wisdom and commands of God for the deceitful schemes of man. Just because we Christians are called to care for the poor does not mean that we should “care” for them the way the world does. Following a biblical mandate in an unbiblical way does not glorify God or help the individual.

Defining terms is always a good place to start. According to *Dictionary.com*, social justice is “the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society.” Again, on the surface, social justice seems harmless, but in light of socialist doctrine, wealth, opportunities, and privileges are distributed by the State (government) to the benefit of one group at the expense of another. Justice is a good thing, yes, but when the word “social” is added to it, then justice is modified to mean something different. Social justice is really just socialism.

While God is just and He expects justice in society, the secular and biblical interpretations of justice contradict. The secular view of social justice is sameness. Take for example the distribution of wealth (from the definition) or the more familiar term “redistribution of wealth.” Advocates of social justice believe that civil government (the State) should take from one person and give to another, all in the name of fairness or justice (sameness).

A Parable

Daniel Mitchell of *TheCommentator.com* tells the story of an economics professor who experimented with socialism in his classroom to teach a lesson. One day after a test, he said, “All grades will be averaged. Everyone will receive the same grade.” For the first test, everyone received a B. The students who studied hard were upset. Those who studied little were happy.

As the second test rolled around, the students who studied little studied even less, and the ones who studied hard decided they wanted a free ride too, so they studied little. The second test average was a D. Now, no one was happy. On the third test, the average was an F. As the tests proceeded, the scores never increased as bickering and blame resulted in hard feelings. No one would study for the benefit of everyone else.

Mitchell explains the point of the parable. First, we cannot legislate the poor into prosperity by legislating the wealthy out of prosperity. Second, what one person receives without working for, another person must work for without receiving. Third, the government cannot give to anybody anything that the government does not first take from somebody else.

Fourth, we cannot multiply wealth by dividing it. Fifth, when half of the people get the idea that they do not have to work because the other half is going to take care of them, and when the other half gets the idea that it does no good to work because somebody else is going to get what they work for, then that is the beginning of the end of any society.

Pilgrim Socialism

The Pilgrims experimented with socialism when they arrived in 1620. They were forced into a system of communal property by their investors, in order to pay back their loans. Pilgrim Governor William Bradford described the experience in his journal *Of Plymouth Plantation (1651)*.

“The experience that was had in our common course and condition, tried sundry years, and that amongst godly and sober men, may well prove the vanity of that conceit of Plato and other ancients, that the

taking of property and bringing the community into a commonwealth would make them happy and flourishing, *as if they were wiser than God*. For this community was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment.

“For the young men who were most able and fit for labor did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men’s wives and children without any recompense. This was thought an injustice. The aged and greater men to be equalized in labors with the meaner and younger sort thought it some indignity and disrespect unto them. For men’s wives to be commanded to serve other men, as dressing their meat, washing their clothes, etc., they deemed it a kind of slavery. Let none object that this is man’s corruption. Seeing all men have this corruption in them, *God saw another course fitter for them*.

“All this while, no supply was heard of; neither knew they when they might expect any. So, they began to think how they might raise as much as they could that they might not still thus languish in misery. At length, after much debate of things, the Governor gave way that they should set corn every man for his own, and in that regard trust to themselves. So, I assigned to every family a parcel of land, according to the proportion of their number for that end and arranged all boys and girls under some family. This had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted and gave far better content. The women now went willing into the field and took their little ones with them to set corn, which before would allege weakness and inability, who if compelled would have thought it great tyranny.

“By the time harvest was come, instead of famine, now *God gave them plenty*, and the face of things was changed, to the rejoicing of the hearts of many, for which they blessed God. The effect of their planting was well seen, for all had pretty well to bring the year about and some of the more able sort and more industrious had to spare and sell to others, so as any general want or famine hath not been among them since.”

Historian Edward Eggleston wrote in his book, *The Beginners of a Nation* (1896), “The Pilgrims suffered from the unskillfulness in colony planting. The same system of partnership with mercenary shareholders that had brought disaster in Virginia was tried with similar results in Plymouth. An attempt at communism in labor and supply was made, this time under the most favorable conditions, among a people conscientious and bound together by religious enthusiasm. It resulted, as such sinking of personal interest must ever result, in dissension and insubordination, in unthrift and famine.”

Eggleston continues, “The colony was saved from its prolonged misery by the wise head and strong hand of its leader, William Bradford. After two years of labor in common had brought the colony more than once to the verge of ruin, Bradford had the courage and wisdom to cut the knot he could not untie. During the scarce springtime of 1623, he divided the fields by proportion to their number, leaving every household to shift for itself or suffer want. The assignment was a revolutionary stroke, in violation of the contract with the shareholders and contrary to their wishes. But Bradford saw it was a life and death necessity to be rid of that *pernicious* system.”

Note Eggleston’s description of socialism – “that pernicious system.” According to Webster, pernicious comes from the Latin word for death or murder. In English, pernicious means “destructive or injurious.” A pernicious system is “a way that seems right to men, but it only leads to death” (*Prov. 14:12*).

Bradford criticized man’s ways (Plato and the ancients), “as if they were wiser than God.” He said, “God saw another course fitter for them..., by the time harvest was come, instead of famine, now God gave them plenty, and the face of things was changed, so as any general want or famine hath not been among them since.” What is the wisdom of God to which Bradford referred? Consider *2 Corinthians 8* and the church’s willingness to care for the poor in Jerusalem.

God's Redistribution of Wealth

In *2 Corinthians 8*, Paul encouraged the Corinthian believers to fulfill their desire to give a contribution to the saints in Jerusalem who were experiencing hard times (*1 Cor. 16:1-4*). He first set before them the example of the Macedonian Christians, who gave “according to their ability” and “of their own accord” (*2 Cor. 8:3*). Then, Paul set before them the example of Christ, who “though He was rich became poor, so that through His poverty, we might become rich” (*v.9*).

Though Paul pointed out these examples of generosity, he made clear that giving to others is not a command (*v.8*). Instead, he believed that “at the present time” the Corinthians were experiencing a season of abundance, that God had richly blessed them, not only for their own good, but for the good of others, so that they could be a “supply to meet their need” (*v.14*). Then, Paul turned the tables and implied that someday, when the Corinthian believers found themselves in want, the Christians in Jerusalem may return the favor (*v.14*).

Finally, Paul reminded the Corinthians of the people of Israel during the exodus, when they gathered their daily portion of manna. “He who gathered too much,” Paul wrote, “did not have too much, and he who gathered little had no lack” (*v.15*). The Lord instructed the Israelites to gather an omer (or jar's worth) of manna each day (*Ex. 16:13-18*). Some people were able to gather more than an omer, and some gathered much less than an omer (i.e., elderly, children, or infirmed). But God instructed the people to share so that no one went hungry. If anyone hoarded the manna for himself, keeping more than an omer, God caused the extra manna to rot and stink.

The principle is clear. God's people are responsible to take care of those who don't have much – within their family first, then within the church, and finally within the community (*Deut. 15:7-11; 24:19-22; Matt. 25:40*). God has His own redistribution of wealth program, but it is not Christian Socialism. He blesses His people with much so that they can help those with little.

The Bible supports the principle of private property. It also teaches that there is a disparity of wealth in the world – some are rich, others are poor – but out of gracious, Christ-centered generosity, “those who are rich in this present world are to be ready to share with others” (*1 Tim. 6:17-19*).

In *2 Corinthians 8:14*, Paul wrote that there will be “equality” or “fairness” as a result of Christian generosity. In context, he was not advocating for social justice (sameness in wealth), but rather that all physical needs will be met equally. In other words, in God's economy, no one should suffer want or lack.

Government Care of the Poor

Taking care of the poor through progressive taxation, legislation, welfare, or redistribution programs is not one of the purposes of civil government. Rather it is the duty of the people of God to “love their neighbor as themselves.” God instituted civil government to be a negative force in society, to restrain the wickedness of men and to protect the life, liberty, and property of law-abiding citizens (*Rom. 13:1-7*). When civil government becomes a positive force in society, providing for the needs and wants of citizens, it creates a host of problems.

First, a government redistribution program takes private property from responsible citizens, discourages hard work, diminishes productivity, and fosters resentment. Second, such a program eliminates personal responsibility and, instead, creates dependency in the people who receive government handouts, which in turn expands its control over those welfare recipients. Third, a government-run “charity” program diminishes the charity of individuals and churches, which adopt the mindset that if the government is going “to take care of the poor” then why should we?

Fourth, a government redistribution program creates a sense of ingratitude and entitlement in people. Once they receive “free” money, they come to expect it as something owed. Fifth, government handouts do not combat poverty but rather perpetuate poverty. Why would citizens work to make a living for themselves when the government is going to “take care of

them”? Remember the Pilgrims? Remember the parable? The tendency of those who receive government assistance is to remain dependent on it. Therefore, while government redistribution programs may sound benevolent or beneficial on the surface, they are pernicious systems that slowly rot civilizations from within.

In 1964, the federal government declared “war on poverty” as part of its Great Society initiative, spending \$22 trillion over 50 years (which is three times more expensive than all U.S. wars combined), providing cash, food, housing, and medical care for poor and low-income families (Heritage.org). In 2013, after 50 years of government redistribution, the poverty rate was nearly the same -- 14.5%. The government’s stated goal was to “give the poor a hand up, not a handout,” to turn them into “taxpayers instead of tax-eaters,” and to make poor families self-sufficient, but the exact opposite happened. The Great Society programs only perpetuated poverty. No country can cure poverty while creating it.

The Way Out of Poverty

The way out of poverty is not socialism or redistribution of wealth. Civil government should protect the rights of the poor (which is justice) without providing for the needs of the poor (which is social justice). The way out of poverty is personal industry and responsibility. Paul wrote, “Work with your hands so that you will not be in any need” (*1 Thess. 4:11, 12*). He even set an example to follow, by working night and day so as not to be a burden to anyone; and he gave this command, “If anyone refuses to work, neither shall he eat” (*2 Thess. 3:7-10*).

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, when unemployment reached unprecedented numbers, the federal government took steps that made matters worse (FDR’s New Deal). Rather than foster an economy where everyone could find a job, the government started the welfare system and gave handouts. The Nanny State was born. The feds even started government work programs in order “to give people jobs” and social security system to ensure funds for the elderly.

How benevolent the government was, right? It seemed on the surface that politicians really cared for people. The problem with the New Deal was that, for the first time in our history, the American people became dependent on the government for survival, which was the point all along. By peddling “help” and “care” for the poor, the federal government stole the independent, self-governed spirit of our citizens and created a generation dependent on its “generosity.” As Solomon wrote, “The borrower is a slave to the lender” (*Prov. 22:7*).

So then, what is the federal government’s role in caring for the poor? The government’s role in caring for the poor is to maintain an economic system that allows people the opportunity to work, produce, and prosper on their own. Such a system encourages businesses to grow, and as businesses grow, jobs are created, and people can earn a wage to provide for themselves and their loved ones.

The federal government should encourage families to stay together and care for each other. Government should also encourage individuals, churches, and charities to help those who cannot work. By following proven biblical principles, the masses can be lifted out of poverty.

The Bible has the answers. Care for the poor is our responsibility (individuals, families, churches, and charities). If we ignore these principles and practice man-centered, government-run socialist programs, we will only perpetuate the problem we claim to be fighting.