

A Case for helping the Working-poor:

Duane Warden "Rich and Poor in James..."

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Commendable as giving alms to the destitute is, the Law of Moses has considerably more to say about God's insistence that justice be extended to the working poor. Those with the resources were to open wide their hand to lend to the poor who worked the land (Deut 15:7-11). Israel's judges were to refuse the bribes rich men could pay. Poor people, ignorant as they might be of the law, were to receive impartial justice (Deut 16:19-20). No one was to take his tools from a poor working man (Deut 24:6). Further, if one exacted security, he had no right to invade the privacy of the poor man's home or to keep what he had over night (Deut 24:10-14). Moses, like James, insisted that the poor man be paid his fair wages (Deut 24:14-15; James 5:4; cf. Lev 19:13). Never was an Israelite to defraud his poor neighbor by taking advantage of his ignorance. Just weights and measures offered protection for the working poor (Lev 19:36; Prov 11:1; Amos 8:5)... Because most political issues have economic implications, the message of James concerning the rich and the poor can be helpful for Christians who want their political choices to be Biblically informed. The message of James is at least this: Christians are to be a people whose sympathies and influence are to be for economic and social justice for the working poor, for the uneducated, for the disenfranchised of the societies where they live. Christians ought to favor public policy that allows people who labor to have some reasonable share in the goods and services their labor produces. James is on the side of the poor. He is more concerned that the laborers in the field receive their wage than in defending an abstract principle of free enterprise economics...

There is a tendency to confuse Christian responsibility toward the indigent poor and responsibility toward working poor. The indigent poor benefit from individual charitable acts. They need the necessities of life to be given to them. **The working poor have other needs. Rather than charity, they need empowerment.** Christians can feed the hungry, but improvement in the lot of the working poor often requires changes at the structural level of society. Let us grant that, at the personal level, and at the level of congregational priorities, evangelical Christians have a fairly good record for supplying necessities for the indigent poor. They have manned food and clothing banks, contributed laborers for soup kitchens, and offered martyrs in violent neighborhoods.

Where evangelical Christians have shown less courage is in supporting the working poor at the structural level. Evangelicals have contributed to the poor with one hand, and with the other they have raised their economic and political voice in favor of systems that often lock the poor into subsistence wages. What is worse, they have excused their lack of interest in institutionalized injustice by reasoning that the working poor are somehow responsible for their poverty.

There are large numbers in our society who scrape by, working in fast food stores, picking fruits and vegetables, and cleaning the filth of other people. They work hard, but they enjoy disproportionately few benefits from their labor. When these people, millions strong, stand on one side of a political or economic question and those who control large blocks of capital stand on the other side, it is to be said to the chagrin of evangelical Christians that more often than not they have stood on the side of those who possess the capital. **The religious conservative has become the bedfellow of the political right. Evangelicals in large numbers have bought into a broad-based political agenda authored by those who benefit from cheap labor, an agenda for which Biblical support is dubious at best.** On the whole, evangelicals' sense of institutionalized social injustice has been somewhere between mediocre and non-existent.

When Christians stand against the exercise of political power by government, by default they leave power in the hands of those who control wealth. Rather than imposing a sense of guilt on Christians by appealing for charity or calling for a self denying life style, a better approach is to teach believers that a Biblically informed political stance favors policy which gives the working poor resources to claim a more equitable share of the products and services a society produces. Rather than bringing used clothing or a Christmas dinner to the poor family who trim the grass at the golf course, rather than degrading the family further by reminding them of their dependence on charitable handouts, a better course is to favor a higher minimum wage so that no golf course will be at a competitive disadvantage when it pays its employees more fairly. Patrons will pay more for golf and the poor family will have earned its bread. Charity is not the answer any more than are governmental handouts. The answer is to revise the structure of the economy so that the poor share more equitably in its resources.”