

Jesus on Inequality

*In this paper **Clive and Cara Beed** explore whether Jesus' sayings can serve as a basis for advocating a reduction in inequality, but without implying complete equality. Only one parameter is discussed by which inequality might be assessed, the distribution of wealth and income, called here for short, wealth. Potentially relevant texts in the New Testament expressed by Jesus are analysed with the assistance of Biblical exegetes. These texts show Jesus wanting to see inequalities of wealth reduced. Suggestions are made as to how this might be pursued in a developed economy.*

Aspects of the enormous increase in wealth in developed capitalism in the last few centuries have not followed trajectories God and Jesus require for human development. Jesus stresses the need to reduce inequality in material wealth, compared with the pervasiveness of inequality throughout history. This does not mean that Jesus was advocating a flat or even equality, but only that parameters of extreme inequality were to be modified. Jesus' teachings relate also to ways of reducing inequality. They show Jesus

constantly calling for reductions in material inequality, with the rich divesting some (and, at times, all) of their wealth to the poor. The existence of poverty was anathema to God's project for humankind.

However defined, complete or absolute equality between human beings is not possible in the fallen world. This is because people differ in natural aptitudes, like intelligence, personality, ability and strength, and in life experiences that might affect values, for example. Accordingly,

Miller suggests that 'there is no agreed answer to the question 'in what respect should people be judged more or less equal'.¹ Hicks expresses the problem that various 'currencies' exist within which equality can be construed, for example, greater equality in the distribution of income and wealth, in access to health care, and so on.² One view is that all people are of equal worth before God, who seeks to bring them to a new creation where 'basic human differences are transcended'.³ The worth of each person is equal, despite seeming

All people are of equal worth before God



Photo: freethinku.com



Heinrich Hofmann,
*Christ and the Rich
 Young Ruler* (1889),
 Riverside Church,
 New York

inequalities in what they appear to deserve. Each person is of infinite and equal worth to God and to each other. Therefore, no person is entitled to privileges over others.

Differences between people do not mean they should exist. Forrester puts it that the ‘diversity of gifts and functions does not lead to diversity of worth, esteem or status’, or power position. Everybody is not meant to do the same thing. God has not entrusted the same talents to each person. Nor does God intend each person to have the same life experiences, such as performing the same sort of work. Diversity in human characteristics is recognized even though God seeks greater equality than exists currently in various outcomes (both in biblical times and now). However, ‘worth needs to be recognized and given substance in action, in policy, in the way our society operates and structures itself’.⁴ The issue is whether inequalities as they exist are intended by Jesus to be modified toward greater equality leading up to the new creation. The argument is that Jesus does intend, even though he does not

advocate complete or absolute equality. For example, Zacchaeus would still have remained a rich man after his generous redistribution.

Jesus’ Teachings on Reducing Inequality in Wealth Distribution

Jesus constantly extols the necessity for reducing inequality between human beings in a variety of ways. One is His calling on the rich to share their possessions with the poor. Jesus is advocating a more equal distribution of wealth than would otherwise occur. Many of Jesus’ sayings in the Synoptics⁵ demonstrate this orientation, even though in each case Jesus is teaching far more than just about the distribution of wealth and relief of poverty.

Just two of these sayings from Luke are discussed here to demonstrate Jesus’ emphasis on reducing inequality. The first relates to both the time it was said, and to the present, Lk. 18:22, ‘sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor’. The second concerns Jesus’ instruction in the Sermon on the Plain, equivalent to the Sermon on the Mount in Mt. 5-7.

All the ‘sell your possessions and give to the poor’ texts work in the direction of encouraging greater equality in the distribution of wealth than would exist without Jesus’ admonitions. In Lk 18:22, for instance, Jesus encourages a certain ruler to sell all he owns ‘and distribute the money to the poor’. Tannehill suggests the need of the poor is ‘a just claim on the ruler’s wealth,’ and that the ruler’s wealth stands as a barrier between himself and God. Jesus is requiring ‘disposition of one’s material goods... for the sake of the poor’.⁶ He is also requiring it for the sake of the kingdom, for ‘the call to relinquish wealth is not to be separated from the call to follow Jesus’⁷; ‘the relevant possibility is that people with property will be changed and will demonstrate that change by sharing their wealth with others’. Jesus invites the ruler to ‘a fundamental reversal of his own status,’ for his ‘power and possessions prevent a response’ to Jesus.⁸ It is not wealth as such that is condemned, but only that which is not shared with the poor, where giving is to be made without

expectation of return or reciprocation. Lk 18:22, therefore, is about idolatry on the part of the rich ruler, and how it acts as a barrier to his personally knowing God. The text also contains the inference that if the rich ruler behaved as Jesus wanted him to, inequalities in the distribution of wealth would be mitigated in the context of the locale in which Jesus was teaching.

In Luke's Sermon on the Plain, 6:20-21, Ringe identifies the poor as 'people who are economically destitute, who can claim no power in the existing system, and who reap no benefits from it'. 'It is to such people that God's reign belongs. The blessing is part of the reversal of fortunes that characterizes God's project,' whereby greater equality in material provision will eventuate. The stress on material provision is highlighted in Lk 6:21 which 'affirms that the basic human need for food is both a specific example and a symbol of all the human needs that are met in the establishment of God's reign'. On the other hand, 'people who are rich, well fed... will also experience the alternative' (such as Lk 6:24-25).⁹ For Tiede, 6:20-21 is 'a declaration of the priority of those in need in the policy of his [God's]

reign'. Likewise, Craddock notes that 'Luke stated as early as... (1:46-55) that the arrival of God's reign will be marked by a complete reversal of fortunes for the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, the full and the empty'.¹⁰ One paradox of Jesus' reign is the egalitarian contrast between his reign in the age to come and this present age.

In His teachings on wealth and poverty in the three first gospels, Jesus identifies the poor in a relative sense. The poor are compared to the rich; rich and poor are correlative terms. The poor are those who lack sufficient material necessities to participate fully in the lives of their communities. These factors in identifying the poor still apply today.¹¹ Hoppe points out that in the Bible 'the ownership of land, political influence, and social status all made a person rich, while the poor were those who lacked these'; 'the biblical view of the poor... centers on their economic deprivation'.¹² These poor, as Jesus identified them, might have had no permanent employment, but depended on casual work, and on begging to get by. They had no assets, such as land, by which to engage in their own employment.

This understanding of the poor is identical with how poor and rich were assessed in the Mosaic Law. One family was rich in terms of property ownership (land and possessions), another poor from lack of these, with the requirement on the well-off to help the poor¹³ trending in an egalitarian direction. As in the Law, Jesus contrasts the poor with the rich, making a relative assessment of the difference between them in the context of the society in which He spoke. The benchmarks in terms of people's possessions differ between ancient Israel, 1st century Palestine, and today, but this does not stop identifying the poor on relative deprivation grounds currently in affluent societies.

To say that Jesus' assessment of relative poverty still applies today is not to focus on the absolute levels of possessions owned by the poor. It is how the poor compare with the rest of the society where they live, and particularly with the rich. It is accepted that the poor in the contemporary First World are much richer than most in ancient Israel or in Jesus' time, and richer than most Third World people today. Nevertheless, in the context of the rich societies in which they live, the



Photo: Reuters/Lucas Jackson

Rich and Poor
Fashionistas pose for photographs in front of a homeless man outside Moynihan Station, New York, after a fashion show

poor in the First World are unable to participate fully in the lives of their communities. This inability reflects in diverse dimensions. The poor achieve inferior educational outcomes, end up with 'bad' jobs (low pay, monotonous work subject to hierarchical control) or no jobs, drift into crime, including substance abuse, live in sub-standard housing, drive unreliable vehicles, periodically run short of food and cannot pay for utilities, periodically cannot afford medical and dental treatment, or paid recreation/vacations. Even though these rich-country poor are much more affluent than the poor in the developing world, Jesus' admonitions assess the poor relative to the society where they live, and require the rich to assist the poor. That the poor in all societies might have contributed in part to their own poverty through bad choices and laziness makes no difference to Jesus' instructions that they should be helped materially. No inference occurs in Jesus' teaching that only the 'deserving' poor are to be helped. Indeed, the notion of 'deserving' poor versus 'undeserving'

does not enter into Jesus' understanding of the materially poor.

The reason why God favours a reasonable, but not absolute, equality in the distribution of wealth is because He wants all people to enjoy the benefits of His good creation. Each person and family should be provided with a level of subsistence sufficient for them to participate in the life of their community. It still has to be determined what a reasonably equal distribution means. Judgment is required. If, say, the 10% richest households in a country own 44% of wealth, and the poorest 40% own very little, but are in debt instead (as occurs currently in the UK),¹⁴ we might judge this as outside the bounds of God's plans. This distribution is starkly unequal. Some unknown large number of people (not just the officially-defined poor) are denied the resources necessary to participate fully in the lives of their communities. Assessing what is unacceptable to God cannot be pigeon-holed by saying that God and Jesus never put a figure on the

reasonable/unreasonable margin. They provide the guides, explain their reasoning underlying the guides, and then let us interpret the guide or principle in the context of our own society.

Selected Ways by Which Greater Equality Could be Pursued

How could Jesus' advocacy of the rich assisting the poor to a more comfortable lifestyle be applied in the developed world? Programmes are already in train. These include welfare support for the disadvantaged, such as single mothers, children at risk of poverty, the mentally and physically disabled, and the aged. They encompass unemployment relief to the unemployed, and subsidised training schemes to assist the disadvantaged into jobs. Expenditures are made by all levels of government to enhance access to housing, nutrition, health care, education, employment and social security. Some of this is funded by higher tax rates on the wealthy, consistent with Jesus'

A Dormanstown, North Yorkshire, community training hub has launched a new workplace-focussed first aid course to help local unemployed people bolster their CVs and find work.



Photo: Local Answer, Redcar

orientation, except that He promoted voluntary not involuntary assistance.

Other ways exist for business specifically to be involved in reducing the gap between rich and poor. For example, Christians in business might be able to provide adequately paying jobs for unemployed or otherwise disadvantaged persons. This may require their retraining, but on-the-job experience could suffice. A relevant (if non-Christian) example comes from a US company making indoor/outdoor carpets, Habitat International. The CEO explained his company's success over the last thirty years, without government subsidy, because:

I hire the people no one else wants to hire. Three out of four workers have a physical or mental disability. People with schizophrenia drive forklifts next to those with Down syndrome, autism, and cerebral palsy. Recovering alcoholics, deaf employees, and homeless people cut floor runners alongside co-workers who have suffered strokes, severe head injuries, or loss of an arm. All are cross-trained on every task in the plant. We have practically no absenteeism and very little turnover. We've also seen higher production, increased profits, better morale, greater respect from the community, and better customer relationships.¹⁵

Projects like this could be undertaken by Christian business

people. Such exercises provide adequately paid employment for the disadvantaged that is a more secure way of meeting the needs of the poor than do charitable donations. In the long-term, it is a more effective way of dampening inequality. Further ways of business reducing wealth and income inequality exist. One is by reducing remuneration differentials within them. John Lewis, for example, sets a differential 75: 1, all workers benefit when bonuses are distributed. 75:1 might still seem huge, and very far from ideal, but contrasts with most public limited companies where the disparity is much greater (eg at Tesco it's more like 750:1). The 132 largely secular Mondragon cooperatives in Spain have a 30:1 limit. Explicitly run Christian businesses, like the two highly successful Dairy Food Cooperatives have identical wages for all workers.

Some Christian businesses, like those involved in the Focolare Movement's Economy of Communion, provide a percentage of profits to relieve the poor. These are voluntary changes, but legislative constraints/boundaries might be considered with regard to astronomically high salaries.

Applying to both business and non-business, UK Christians work with non-Christians in a panoply of programmes to help reduce inequality. Consider food security. People working in the food business

are in a good position to assist in these efforts. Churches are involved in organising food banks, and some in welcoming the homeless to use their churches. Donations come from businesses and individuals. Christians provide practical assistance to reduce food insecurity, evidenced by the work of the Trussell Trust, accounting for over 40% of UK food banks, and by lobbying via Church Action on Poverty and End Hunger Fast. These concerns are to the fore because nearly 1m UK people use food banks yearly. Consistent with this aim was the letter to David Cameron, signed by 43 church leaders in 2014, urging the necessity for people to get enough to eat. Secular concern has consonant interests shown by the letter to The Lancet in 2014 by 170 public health professionals. All these suggest how Jesus' instruction to assist the poor, and thereby to mitigate inequality, could be applied in the contemporary developed economy. Additional programmes exist, such as Christians Against Poverty helping people out of debt, Christian Housing Associations, and Community Land Trusts. A more comprehensive assessment of ways in which Christians could be, and are, involved to reduce inequality awaits analysis.


Conclusion

Among the richness of his teachings, Jesus advocates reduced levels of material inequality among people. He



did not propound absolute or complete equality with respect to any dimension of human behaviour of which he speaks. Differences in human aptitudes and life experiences would appear to forestall attainment of absolute equality this side of the Second Coming. Only in God's original creation intention is something like complete equality between people revealed. Jesus' propensities reflect the fallen state of humankind, but conform to the Mosaic Law and the prophets. Jesus' teaching in the present world would mean the absence of extreme

inequalities in diverse areas of human endeavour, such as in wealth and power distribution, and reduction in levels of hierarchy within organisations. 'Extreme' has no precise quantitative meaning in Jesus' orientation toward greater equality, but this does not take away from its force, for Jesus constantly advocated reduction in inequality, whatever its level. Since it appears that high measures of inequality characterise many countries today, including the developed world, it is a reasonable inference that Jesus wants these extremities modified. This is

especially so as high degrees of inequality seem to be harmful to society's social health.¹⁶ Jesus' advocacy of greater equality in wealth distribution is closely related to his admonitions to relieve poverty, for the existence of poverty was anathema to God's project for humankind. Jesus' aims to ameliorate poverty would have led to more equal distributions of wealth via the rich divesting some (and, at times, all) of their wealth to the poor. This argument does not depend on regarding wealth redistribution as a zero-sum game. 

1. David Miller, 'Equality and Inequality', in William Outhwaite and Tom Bottomore (eds.), *The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Social Thought*, Blackwell, 1994, p. 201.
2. Douglas Hicks, *Inequality and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 17.
3. Ronald Preston, 'Equality', in John Macquarrie and James Childress (eds.), *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, SCM Press, 1986, p. 200.
4. Duncan Forrester, *On Human Worth: A Christian Vindication of Equality*, SCM Press, 2001, pp. 99, 5.
5. Mt. 19:21 (= Mk. 10:21; Lk. 12:33, 14:33 and 18:22) 'Sell all your possessions, and give the money to the poor'.
- Mt. 19:24 (=Mk. 10:25; Lk. 18:25) 'Easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God'.
- Mt. 20:1-16 Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. The labourers were paid equally irrespective of their work contribution.
- Mt. 25:31-46 Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.
- Lk. 12:16-21 Parable of the Rich Fool
- Lk. 14:12-14 Invite the poor, crippled to a banquet.
- Lk. 14: 16-24 Parable of the Great Dinner; 'bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame'.
- Lk. 16:19-31 Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.
- Lk. 19:1-10 Zacchaeus' salvation.
6. Robert Tannehill, *Luke: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, Abingdon Press, 1996, p. 270; Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Eerdmans, 1997, p. 656.
7. John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34: Word Biblical Commentary* vol. 35B, Word Books, 1993, p. 887.
8. Tannehill, *op. cit.*, p. 271; Luke Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke: Sacra Pagina Series* vol. 3, Liturgical Press, 1991, pp. 277, 278.
9. Sharon Ringe, *Luke: Westminster Bible Companion*, Westminster John Knox, 1995, pp. 92, 93.
10. David Tiede, *Luke: Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament*, Augsburg Publishing House, 1988, p. 141; Fred Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox Press, 1990, p. 87.
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13. Joshua Berman, *Created Equal*, Oxford University Press, 2008.
14. The Equality Trust; The US is more extreme with the 10% richest households owning 73% of net worth : Edward Wolff, 'Recent Trends in Household Wealth in the United States: Rising Debt and the Middle-Class Squeeze – An Update to 2007', *Working Paper No. 589*, The Levy Economics Institute, 2007), 44.
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16. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level*, Penguin, 2010.



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