

# God's Economy

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Recently our infatuation with money has been shaken severely

Our faith in the purveyors of a good return for our investments decimated with failing companies leaving people destitute while the managers of these funds live in luxury and beyond the reach of the law.

Our love affair with consumption and spending beyond our means is shaking the very structures of western democracies and financial institutions. Iceland declared bankrupt, Greece and Spain struggling to balance the books with the EU having to bail them out. America borrowing \$700 billion to cover subprime mortgages.

## JUNK MAIL

We are surrounded by a constant stream of advertising on TV, the paper, pamphlets, radio , music with the need to update to the latest ..... at an ever increasing rate as technologies advance exponentially and fashion trends make things obsolete . As nations and individuals spend more than what they are earning with credit cards maxxed out, bills not being paid, and mortgages being foreclosed.

## CELL PHONE

Consumption means ever more resources are needed and a lot of them are being sourced from poorer countries with few ethics and a lot of corruption. This means shortcuts are made to cut costs and environments are decimated by multinational companies with few ethics and little accountability. In Nigeria \$400 billion of the oil money that was meant to be in Nigeria's coffers completely missing while local fishermen's means of living is decimated by oil spills. Some of the minerals we need for our cell phones and computers are mined in the Congo and provide funding for gun's for warlords. There is very little distance between our consumer items and the unethical sourcing of resources, exploitation, cultural erosion and the abuse of the environment.

Over the last year and a half especially I have felt really concerned about the effects of consumption and exploitation as it has been played out on the individuals in our communities, our regions our country and the world and this has lead me to the big question for today's sermon –

What are Gods thoughts on economics?

To do this I have explored our history as a people with God as seen in the creation, the creation of a new state for the Jewish people and the rules created to make a just and fair nation and then the new covenant and kingdom bought in by Jesus.

In creation we see an abundant God a generous God who expresses himself in creating a bountiful and beautiful garden. God makes us in his image to share in the joy of his creation and inviting us to be co-creators and caretakers of this World. We are teammates with God and through working together we could grow in our relationship with Him, others and our environment. It's interesting that our relationship fell down with the best marketing tool of all time – creating a want – but you could have more....if only....what if....In the most beautiful environment of all time we wanted more and fell.

So when the Jews came to setting up a new state and nation as a nation under God we once again get to see the economics of God. It will be interesting to explore the shape of this society, particularly to the rules around the distribution and use of resources.

References: [Leviticus 25](#) and [Deuteronomy 15:1 - 11](#)

The first thing God emphasised was that the people of Israel were to always remember that they too were once aliens and strangers in a strange land. That the land was Gods and that they were his tenants. That as God had looked after them so they had to look after and care for aliens and strangers.

As a nation Israel was made up of tribes, clans and family groups and when claiming their land it was to be divided out according to the size of the tribes first and then divided by casting lots so that there was no favouritism or unfairness in the allotment of the land.

The land belonged to a Tribe and a clan rather than an individual and that could not be sold but was a resource for that community forever. The land was a means to making a living and as such protected its people from poverty and destitution. It was a contravention of God's law to have individual ownership.

The land itself was to be looked after and every seven years was not to be cultivated. The people could eat what it produced that year but could not cultivate.

If for any reason a family needed some money for their land it was to be leased and the leasee would pay for the lands use up to the fiftieth year – the year of Jubilee at which time the land had to be returned to the original owner. If the owner or his family were able to buy back the land they paid out on how much time was left in the lease. These laws were created so that people would not be caught in the poverty cycle.

The land was also to provide for the aliens, widows and orphans. On harvesting their crops the landowner was to not go over it a second time but to leave what was left to the aliens, widows and the fatherless. The landowner was to leave the edges and the corners of the fields as well. Every third year a third of the tithe was to go to the Levites, aliens and widows.

In the covenant of God and the people of God, property and its definition cannot serve the rich and the powerful, for that would justify the greed of the political and economic powers and therefore threaten the full and secure life of the people.

When it came to money when loaning to the poor you could not charge interest and when selling food to the poor you only charged at cost. Every seven years people were to be released from their

debt. If someone has to sell his labour he has to be paid a fair wage and at seventh year he has to be released with some stock and some grain etc the use of dishonest measurements was illegal

When it came to labour servants were to be paid a fair wage. On the Sabbath everyone was to have a day of rest a day off. In the seventh year labourers were to be released if they had sold their labour they were to be released back to their clan and to their tribal land. I would imagine that also every 7th and the 50<sup>th</sup> year when the fields were to lie fallow that labourers would have less work to do.

God's economics meant that the people did not have to be caught in a cycle of poverty as their right to their land was imbedded in the law and that they had access to finances that were not going to burden them with ever increasing debt. Land is a heritage not a commodity. The people in the land were charged through the law to not only to look after the poor in their own tribes and clans but also the alien and the widow and the orphan's. This created a community that was aware of its social and economic responsibilities to their own extended families, clan and tribe and to the poor and alien in their communities as well.

Economic justice is not merely the undoing of injustice and exploitation. It is the liberation of the slaves and the protection of the poor and others who are robbed of their economic means to enjoy a full and whole life.

It is interesting to note that Samuel when Israel pleaded to have a King was very upset and warned the people of Israel that this could mean that a monarch may then claim the right to take their most important resource their land of them. Farther down the track this proved to be true when 125 years after David's accession Omri came in to power. Omri had decided to follow another religion Baal. Within that religion was the concept of private ownership of land which meant rulers and the rich could build up big landholdings that could generate private wealth. Ahab, Omri's son wanted a very special vineyard but it was owned by Naboth. When approached with the offer to buy the land into private ownership Naboth said he couldn't as it was his inheritance to be handed down to the offspring of his family and that it was not his to sell. Jezebel, Ahab's wife was extremely angry at the refusal and told Ahab to slaughter the family and take the vineyard after all wasn't he the King and didn't the rules in the worship of Baal encourage private ownership. Naboth and his family were murdered. God's prophet's Elijah and then Elisha opposed the Baal system and within 50 years the whole of Ahab's family were wiped out.

Unfortunately this period left a lust for land within the people of Judah and the belief systems attached to the worship of Baal a Phoenician import remained attractive. Later Micah prophesied the fall of Judah.....I would make you desolation.....For .....They covet fields and take them away by violence: and houses they take away: so they oppress a man and his house even a man and his heritage.

Israel's betrayal of the Sabbath day of rest became a central complaint of the prophets. Isaiah charged the leadership with robbery because they were storing up wealth in the presence of community need, something God expressed anger at when the Jewish people tried to collect more manna than they needed when journeying to the Promised Land. Amos accused the commercial classes of regarding the Sabbath an obstacle to market profiteering and of treating the poor as an exploitable class rather than guaranteeing their gleaning rights. Hosea laments that allegiance to international trade had replaced Israel's allegiance to God's economy of grace.

In the end the people of Israel were taken in to captivity to Babylon because they had not allowed for the day of rest on the Sabbath and the land lay desolate (rested) for seventy years.

We leave the Old Testament with the Prophet's re-iterating God's vision for a just and fair society. Indeed some people would still be practicing Sabbath redistribution but the dream for its full return weighed on the prophet's hearts and are expressed vividly by Isaiah

### Isaiah 58

Haunted by Isaiah's words we move to the New Testament. Our new relationship with God is birthed in a humble stable. Immediately Gods grace is revealed in a vulnerable baby who left all the riches and safety of heaven so that we could know the heart of God. Jesus learnt the Hebrew Scriptures and his heart recognised his call. He felt so passionately for the poor the oppressed – so much so He used Isaiah's words to announce the beginning of his active ministry

### Isaiah 61.1-2 Luke 4:16-22

The Spirit of the Lord has taken control of me!

The Lord has chosen and sent me to tell the oppressed the good news, to heal the broken-hearted, and to announce freedom for prisoners and captives.

This is the year when the Lord God will show kindness to us.

This scripture is about the Year of Jubilee when all debts are cancelled and people were restored to their inheritance. It is hugely significant that Jesus started his ministry with these words as He was indicating a call back to the values that God had expressed in setting up the Jewish nation. Every human being has value in the sight of God and has the right to God's plentiful resources. In coming to earth Jesus bought a new vision to Sabbath economics. This was to be the reshaping of our hearts

Love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your might and love your neighbour as yourself.

Who is our neighbour?

In Luke Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan in response. Our neighbour is those in need. This reflects Gods expressed desire for the poor and alien to be looked after as seen in the Old Testament.

Jesus takes this further in Mathew 25 by saying

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you visited me.

I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine you did for me.

These are incredible words that place unbelievable value and dignity on all of humanity. Every one of us is sacred. Everyone carries the sacred image of God and as such is Christ's brother, or sister.

In line with the stories of the storing up of manna and Isaiah's prophesy about the rich storing up wealth Jesus continues this narrative with one of his own story of the rich man planning around creating more and more barns in which to store up grain. Implied in this is the making of exorbitant profits when selling in a drought year because of a shortage. The rich man had no thought for those who might be in need.... rather the opposite, that when grain was short he could make more money out of other's need thus securing his own wealth at the expense of others. The thought of securing his own wealth had made him blind to the needs of others. Jesus finishes this cautionary tale by saying that very night his life was taken away from him and a warning to others about storing up for themselves rather than being rich toward God.

In a similar vein Jesus tells the story of this rich man who had a poor man named Lazarus at his gates who was dying. Lazarus was an ugly sight with sores all over him and interesting enough the rich man's dogs looked after him but not so the rich man who pretended not to see his need. Lazarus died and went to heaven where he had no more lack. The rich man died and went to hell where in torment he recognised his hardened heart and greed had led him and cried that Abraham should warn his 5 brothers so they didn't end up in the same place. The good news of God's abundance and his expectation of redistribution threaten the rich man. The rich man had become blind to the rights of others and the sacredness of all. The beggar had a name and sadly because they dehumanised themselves the rich men in Jesus stories have no names.

All around him Jesus saw a society that valued the rich, the wealthy and those who had political and religious power. He recognised that the ruling class were always going to be tempted to be seduced by money and power. Jesus came to bring a new kingdom, a kingdom where rulers are servants, where everyone is sacred and the poor have a name, where contribution back to the community is more important personal gain.

Mathew 5 and 6 talks about God's upside down kingdom with the wonderful beatitudes and finishing with Jesus saying we are not to focus on store up treasure on earth because we cannot serve both God and money. He goes on to tell us not to worry as we have an abundant God who looks after the birds and clothes lilies in splendour. He goes on to say we need to seek his kingdom first and foremost. Faith in God becomes the source of freedom from our self centeredness and the need to acquire and freedom to and for God's covenant to the people.

Jesus ushers in a new kingdom to be practiced here on earth as it is in heaven. Levi the tax collector recognised this and denounced his Tax collecting and threw a party, before following Jesus. Zacchaeus invites Jesus for lunch but before he has him around he recognises he needs to first practice substantial economic redistribution!!!

Stewardship then is the responsibility before God and the people to secure the full and whole life of the people. Talent is to be used to secure both one's own life and to serve God by serving the people for their full and whole life. Our vocation and calling, brought about by diligence and hard work is first and foremost a dedication of one's work and possessions to God and to the service of one's neighbours.

In Acts Jesus leaves behind a group of followers who have taken his word of redistribution seriously

“All the believers were of one mind. No one claimed any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought them to the apostles feet , and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.”

I love this quote from C.S.Lewis who comments on the rewards of following God’s call to redistribution

“Indeed if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires , not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.”

### **References**

After creating a framework and timeline for the sermon I looked for articles of interest online and found this really neat one:

Covenant with the Poor: Toward a New Concept of Economic Justice, by Yong-Bok Kim  
<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=93>