

Sermon: “Redistribution: A Righteous Response”

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Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2:37-47

In 1974, the R&B group named The O’Jays gave us the soulful hit, “For the Love of Money.” This song artfully adapts 1 Timothy 6:10 in a rhythmic warning about the pursuit of money. It rightfully observes, “For the love of money, people will lie, Lord, they will cheat. For the love of money, people don’t care who they hurt or beat.” Then it ends with an appropriate challenge: “People! Don’t let money, don’t let money change you!”

Hearing that song’s challenge afresh for Pentecost, I wonder if we as Christians in the United States have allowed money to change how we read and hear the words in Acts 2.

Our lectionary reading for Pentecost is Acts 2:1-21, yet I wonder if the lectionary contributes to our avoidance of money in that chapter by stopping at verse 21? What if we read the entire chapter? Would we allow the last paragraph to challenge us?

When we read in verses 44-45 that the new believers had all things in common because of monetary redistribution, do we quickly dismiss it as a distinctive miracle in the early church, like the tongues of fire in the previous verses?

Now, to be sure, there are unique aspects in Acts 2. These first believers are in a specific short-term setting created by their travel to Jerusalem for Pentecost. Still, we should not move too quickly past the fact that monetary redistribution was a

critical component of the believers' righteous response on that historic day. In fact, this description of economic exchange as a spiritually inspired expression of faith is simply one iteration of a larger biblical theme. The Bible teaches us that God requires monetary redistribution.

We see this in the prophets, when they proclaim that worship without redistribution was worthless. Isaiah 58, for example, condemns religious ritual accompanied by economic oppression: the people's fast days are exercises in self-absorption and economic exploitation. He exclaims, "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers" (58:3).

Like Isaiah, Amos conveys God's command to cease worship until justice is achieved: "Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:23-24).

Jesus also demands redistribution. In Matthew 25, Jesus specifically identifies himself with those requiring assistance, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me" (25:40).

In Luke 4, Jesus announces that the good news is for the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (4:18-19). By employing terms for the economically disadvantaged, Jesus proclaims an economic reversal, echoing his mother's words from Luke 1, where Mary declares that God "has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty" (1:53).

In Luke 19, Jesus meets a rich tax collector named Zacchaeus. As Jesus prepares to visit his home, Zacchaeus offers half of his wealth for the poor and fourfold restitution to anyone he has defrauded. Apparently, without Jesus even mentioning it, this repentant believer understands monetary redistribution as an indispensable aspect of his faith.

In Mark 10, Jesus again requires redistribution, as he directs a rich man to sell his possessions and give to the poor (10:17-22). In response to his disciples' bewilderment, Jesus elaborates, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (10:25). Despite later attempts to alter Jesus's meaning, he tells us plainly what he intends, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible" (10:27).

These examples show us that Jesus repeatedly calls for monetary redistribution. Nevertheless, one might still be tempted to say that this emphasis was unique to Jesus's ministry and not necessarily something that extends to the believer in Christ's church.

Yet, in 2 Corinthians 8, when the apostle Paul asked believers for money to assist the poor, he, too, invokes redistribution. In fact, he is quite explicit. Paul contends that those who have resources should share with those who do not so that there may be equality (8:13-14). He supports this point with a citation from Exodus 16, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little" (8:15).

James's letter is another example of believers being warned about the unjust results of inadequate redistribution. After he warns against sinful favoritism to rich oppressors (2:1-13), James gives a fiery denunciation of the rich who have kept back workers' wages by fraud. He says that their riches have "rotted," their clothes are "moth-eaten," their "gold and silver have rusted," and they have nourished their hearts "in a day of slaughter" (5:1-6).

In Revelation 18, the Roman Empire's riches are poetically paralleled with sexual immorality to persuasively present them as sinfully secured (18:3, 9). Accordingly, the empire's wealth stands under divine judgment; it will be instantly snatched away. Kings, merchants, and sailors will then mourn the empire's economic evisceration. As the author describes this destruction, he utters a command of escape for believers, "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins" (18:4).

The persistent presence of monetary redistribution in the Scriptures is undeniable. We see it proclaimed by the prophets. We see it taught by Jesus. We see it emphasized by the apostles.

In addition, the biblical authors often contrast wealth and poverty in terms of oppression, justice, and neglect. Isaiah 58 calls out oppression. Amos 5 calls for justice. The least of these in Matthew 25 are neglected. Jesus says in Luke 4 that he is anointed to preach good news to the poor and oppressed. James 2 and 5 refer to the rich as oppressors. Revelation condemns imperial wealth as ill-gotten gain.

Surely, these motifs in Scripture require our re-examination of how we read and hear the description of Pentecost in Acts 2. If we truly endeavor to follow the Holy Spirit's leading, we must not sidestep the message conveyed by monetary redistribution on that holy day. We must repent of our tendency to favor the rich over the poor. We must stand corrected by James 2 when we read Acts 2.

Once we honestly acknowledge the importance of monetary redistribution in God's word, we must also confess the complications involved in applying it in our modern world. How should it be implemented in our congregations? Is it a call for redistribution from one church to another in our denominations? Is it a principle that should be expanded to public policy positions? Is it a guide for how we view taxes in our society?

I expect no consensus on these questions, but we should certainly concur that the biblical witness requires that they be asked. Indeed, asking these questions is itself a spiritual exercise. It helps us resist the temptation to be unquestionably overwhelmed by the crass materialism surrounding us.

This is all the more important when we remember that the greatest threat to the Christian witness has been unexamined enculturation. Tragically, we know of too many examples of the powerful requiring more of the vulnerable than they do of themselves.

We have seen this when believers read Jesus's demand for self-denial in Mark 8. Instead of slaveholders or segregationists or sexists seeing themselves in Jesus's call to take up the cross, they applied it to those under their control.

It is a sure sign of sinful interpretation when the powerful, who could change circumstances, employ the Bible to encourage the vulnerable to endure their oppression in those circumstances. Sadly, we see it again when leaders rationalize our nation's unmatched combination of wealth and poverty.

Repeatedly, the poor are blamed for their conditions and the rich are presented as paragons of virtue. You would think that the Bible's passages about wealth and justice have been simply deleted. We proceed as if they do not exist.

Let us repent of our comfort with self-satisfying rationalizations. Let us re-read all of Acts 2 with fresh eyes. Let us ask one another what it means to obey Paul's command, "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2).

Let us ask that God will stir us by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Let us pray with the words of this simple hymn.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

Break me, melt me, mold me, fill me.

Spirit of the Living God, Fall afresh on me.