



**You Get a Car ... Everyone Gets a Car!**

**Leviticus 25:8-17 & Acts 4:32-37**

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This morning is our final Sunday in our “Let’s Get Political” worship series. We’ve started this year off with an intentional focus on the political conversations that will dominate our nation in this General Election year. We began with a call to engage in such political conversations with grace and peace, and to avoid unnecessary quarrels. We then looked at what the scripture says about immigration, and how we treat immigrants. And we looked at what the Bible says about our call to care for creation, and how that plays a role in any conversation about climate change.

When I sat down to plan out this worship series last fall, I tried to discern which topics of major political concern to include. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, I tried to select topics that were clearly addressed in the Biblical text, and that had multiple points of connection in the scriptures. There were some topics I intentionally left out, which I just don’t think are clearly discussed in the Bible. That’s not to say the Bible has nothing to help us think on those topics; I do think there are some Biblical connections that could offer thoughts on other major issues (such as gun control, abuse of power, critical race theory, and international affairs). Yet, trying to stick as close to the Biblical text as possible on topics where there is great disagreement in our modern society, I felt called to focus on these three topics: immigration, climate change, and today’s focus on socialism.

I know, I’ve said a buzz word that will be triggering for some. *Socialism*.

Let me unpack this word a bit, in hopes that you’ll at least give me the next 15 minutes to speak on *how* the Biblical story addresses socialism.

First, let’s define the word. Google offers a few different definitions, but, pulling from the Oxford English dictionary, the first definition offered says that socialism is, “a political and economic theory of social organization which advocates that the means of production, distribution, and exchange should be owned or regulated by the community as a whole.” It is the first two words here, focusing on “political,” where we usually find the crux of the issue with this word. For those who disagree with the idea of socialism, the primary concern is that the word carries with it the history of Marxism, in which socialism is the first step in overthrowing capitalism in route to communism.

Last week I named that the Bible is not a scientific textbook. This morning, let’s clearly echo, neither is the Bible a *political* science textbook. ... Let’s see how well you were paying attention last week. The Bible wasn’t written as a poly-sci textbook. The Bible is a story of God as

recorded and told by God's people. It is first and foremost, if not exclusively, a story about faith and faithfulness.

To approach the Bible as a text about faith and faithfulness in regards to the topic of socialism, we must first move past our knee-jerk reaction to our modern understanding of socialism as a government mandated system. I'm not sure I'd agree with anyone who says that socialism, as a government-mandated system, is affirmed by the Bible. If anything, the Biblical text is anti-any type of government-mandated system. Though it offers that governments may be necessary from time to time, the teachings of the Bible don't offer affirmation for any system or empire that tries to usurp God's authority. Remember when Jesus wandered in the wilderness, even he was offered to hold power over the empires of the world, and refused. The power of God is above and beyond all empire, so any empirical system that exists to control or usurp God's authority is against the will of God.

So, for whatever connection exists between the Bible and socialism, it's not talking about socialism as a political system.

That said, the rest of that definition from Google is not far off from the Biblical invitation. The working definition of socialism I'm leading with is, "an economic system in which the means of production and property are owned by God, and are managed by the community of faith."

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With that definition in mind, let's look at our two Biblical texts for this morning, coming from Leviticus and Acts.

Our text in Leviticus 25 follows our reading from last week, which talked about providing the land a sabbath rest every seventh year. Picking up in verse 8, it indicates that after seven rounds of the land-sabbath (so every 49 years), the land shall be given a double sabbath. Every fiftieth year shall be a year of jubilee. In that year of jubilee, just as in every other land-sabbath year, "you shall not sow, or reap, or harvest." But the year of jubilee is more than just a double land-sabbath, during the year of jubilee, there's an economic shake up in land management. The text offers, "you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family."

Think about this - this is a pretty *radical* policy. The land itself was to be given back to the original family of original inheritance, and anyone who had become a slave or servant was released to go back to their family. Everyone who had debts – land or labor – had those debts forgiven. "The 'release' [from such debts] is to be comprehensive, and includes both a return of real estate and the release of debt-slaves."<sup>i</sup>

Just let this policy sink in ... and remember, this is being offered by God to Moses, who is going to tell the people of Israel that this is the way *it will be* once they arrive in the promised land.

This story isn't being made up by a desperate disciple in hopes of reclaiming the land they lost in a gambling blunder ... this is God speaking about how the people Israel should operate once they have arrived in the promised land.

Every 50 years, the land goes back to the original land owner, and all slaves are released.

Now, it doesn't take a shrewd real-estate investor or labor manager to realize this kind of policy would be deeply upsetting to those who had bought land or slaves. "If within the specified period of time property that has been sold or mortgaged always reverts to the original owner's family, how then can one ever really engage in purchasing activity? Who would be so stupid to invest money in real estate if property acquired cannot remain in the possession of one's family?"<sup>ii</sup>

Verses 13-17 deal with the practical challenges of this kind of economy. There are some guidelines offered to ensure that there is economic justice even in the year of jubilee. But the bottom line remains the same – the land goes back, debts are forgiven, slaves are released. All of this is done to honor the relationship of God to creation, which is where we ended our conversation with last week, coming in verses 23-24. As a reminder, those verses tell us that all of creation belongs to God, so we are only ever foreigners and tenants of the land.

For the year of jubilee to make any sense at all, there must be a deep faithful understanding of creation as belonging wholly and fully to God. Even when we "buy" land – we are really just renting it, leasing it, as a tenant for a term, for the land belongs not to the purchaser, but to God. As Dr. Ephraim Radner states, "What *is* clear is that both Sabbath and Jubilee years regularly place rich and poor in the same position as to the source of their sustenance, who is God alone."<sup>iii</sup> Dr. Radner continues, poor and rich "learn complete and utter dependence upon God, which is the practical purpose of the laws." (Remember, the Bible is a text about faith and faithfulness ... this economic policy falls under the framework of faithful living because it sets our relationship to God in right order.)

This text comes in Leviticus, one of the foundational texts designed to govern the life of the people of God. There is no empire, king, or president who is elected to enforce such an economic system. This is not a political system, as we understand politics in America today. For such a practice to work, it requires everyone in the community to have a deep and utter faith in God as the provider and sustainer of all life.

It is this same belief – that in God as the provider and sustainer of all life – that is the foundation of our text in Acts 4.

The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the earliest Christian Church. Acts begins with the story of Jesus' ascension, and the gifting of the Holy Spirit. It then offers story after story of the early church's expansion around the Mediterranean Sea. Our text today, coming in Acts 4, falls fairly early in the narrative of the church's expansion.

Our scripture in verses 32-37 explains the economic relationship of the faith community. Verse 32 begins, “No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” The foundational mindset for this type of economic system mimics that of Leviticus: there is deep belief that all things are the property of God, and therefore, no individual gets to hold personal claim over tangible possessions.

To reiterate, this text is not installing a political system to govern the community. The text does not say that “everything they owned was held in control by a central governmental agency.” The whole premise of this economic system is built upon a deep trust that God would provide all that is necessary for everyone in the community to life – to live abundantly – to live faithfully. “The apostles hold all their goods in common so as to better witness to the resurrection of the one they called Lord.”<sup>iv</sup>

And what happens when we align our economic system with the faithfulness that comes in the witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Picking up in verse 34, we read, “There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as they had need.”

Consider the stark contrast this model of the early church presents to the Marxist vision of socialism. The premise of Marxism and political socialism is that the production and wealth of a society is held in common under the control of a political elite. There is a governmental agency responsible for taxing and distributing, and it has to do this because the population has set itself up into multiple camps, which are defined by wealth – or a lack of wealth. So, from a purely political socialist mentality, the wealthy are taxed and those tax dollars go to those with less wealth. In this political system, the wealthy feel cheated, because someone else is taking away their money.

The underlying frustration in this system comes from a toxic relationship with wealth. “Money is somehow linked with our idolatrous attempts to secure immortality for ourselves.”<sup>v</sup> We work as hard as we can, and save as much as we can, to build up stockpiles as big as we can to ensure we’re able to live a life that is filled with the fanciest of ideals. For anyone to tax our wealth or take from our stockpiles, much less to use those taxed funds for providing for those who have little or no wealth, seems unfair considering the amount of labor we’ve put in to secure such high living for ourselves.

But this isn’t the vision of Acts 4. In fact, it’s about as far as you can get from living according the example of the early church. Notice in our text today, there is not government mandate or financial tax rate that determines how much of your wealth is to be given up. There’s no central agency coming after you to take your money away at all.

The witness of the early church is one in which every person is of such deep and devout faith that there is no need for an external agency to be involved to ensure the health and well-being of the community. In this text, we’re told that those who had land and houses sold what they

had and brought the proceeds of the sale and gave the funds to the apostles – to those leading the church. The funds were then used to provide for those who had need, so that ultimately, no one would have need.

The mentality of the early church was one in which no one sought to build up stockpiles of wealth for themselves. There was no attempt at sheltering wealth from the church. There were no foreign bank accounts to shield reserves against taxation. There was no attempt at securing an individual's accumulated wealth, because as long as there were people who had need in the community, those who had any extra gave it up willingly and without prompting. The health and well-being of the community took a priority over any personal claim to wealth and superiority.

The community was gathered in one mind of unity, so much so that they thought nothing was 'one's own,' but all was held in common with the body.<sup>vi</sup>

I said this a few weeks ago, and I will reiterate – I'm not a political wonk. My education and my experience are not in setting up public policy that is enforced by a governmental agency. My work is focused on faithful living, with an allegiance to one vision: the kingdom of God, where faithfulness drives our way of life.

With that in mind, as I read and understand the Biblical text, I don't think the call of God, or the witness of Christ, or the teaching of our scripture leads us to insist upon some political system of socialism that requires the wealthy to give up their wealth to support the needs of the financially poor. And yet, it seems clear to me that the invitation to faithfulness as spoken by God and witnessed in the early church is that the wealthy *will* give up of their wealth to support the needs of the financially poor. They will do this, not out of coercion or force by some empirical agency, but out of a deep trust in God to provide, out of a deep concern for the well-being of the community, and out of a right understanding of ownership around land and production.

Our text does not offer a blueprint for political science education, but it does offer a glimpse of the glory of God revealed when a community is enlivened by the Spirit, and the result is that no member of God's created humanity experiences need. Instead, in such a space, we're told that life was ensured for all – life abundant, life in community, life in the light and the love of Christ. This is the hope of the kingdom; it is the vision of God for creation. May we claim our place among the chronicles of our faith history, to live and witness to God in this place, at this time, as we proclaim the glory of God in all the earth. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Erhard S. Gerstenberger. *Leviticus: A Commentary (The Old Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

<sup>ii</sup> Gerstenberger.

<sup>iii</sup> Ephraim Radner. *Leviticus: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: BrazosPress, 2008.

<sup>iv</sup> John C. Holbert. "Holding All Things in Common: Reflections on Acts 4:32-35." April 8, 2012. <http://patheos.com>.

<sup>v</sup> William Willimon. *Acts: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>vi</sup> Holbert.