

The Bible & Robin Hood

...be generous and ready to share...
(1 Timothy 6:18 – ESV)

Biblically speaking, is it the government's job to redistribute wealth? In answering that question and ones like it, we first have to realize that there is a distinct difference between the call to help the needy and the forced taxation and redistribution of wealth. Loaded terms such as “social justice” can be used by almost anyone to prop up their own ideas of “fairness” and “equity”; but what is the biblical model? Also, we could spend considerable time on matters of morality (what is) and ethics (what ought to be) within the culture and the attending Christian imperatives. While we won't touch on all of that, here is a brief look at what the Bible teaches.

Certainly, God wants us to be doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly before Him (Micah 6:8). The many commandments given to Israel relative to giving and helping (Leviticus 19:9-10, 25:35-38 / Deuteronomy 14:28-29) were there in part to insure that there wouldn't be a large class of poor people in the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 15:4). In light of those commandments and Israel's neglect of the poor we discover that God ordained their captivity (cf. Isaiah 1:10-13, 16-17, 58:6-10). In that sense, “social justice” is a biblical concept.

As a Christian, it is very clear that we should be using our wealth to help the less fortunate regardless of what the government does (Leviticus 25:35 / Deuteronomy 15:7 / Proverbs 22:9, 28:27 / Matthew 6:3-4 / Acts 11:27-30, 20:35 / Galatians 2:10 / 1 Timothy 6:17-19 / James 2:15-16). Yet it does not take a biblical scholar to read Acts 2-6 and conclude that “redistribution of wealth” in the early Church was voluntary and not a requirement for membership. We also see that common goods mean common problems.

Although Jesus has much to say about helping the poor, He does not advocate robbing from the rich to give to the poor, and says nothing about taxing the rich to give to the poor. Jesus and His disciples paid their taxes to a pagan Roman government (Matthew 22:17-22). They also paid to a corrupt Jewish religious governing body, and although our Lord questioned the validity of a particular tax (Matthew 17:24-27), He taught His followers to pay the tax anyway (cf. Romans 13:7). However, our Lord never approved any form of a progressive taxation system. The idea of forceful collection and redistribution of wealth has no support in the Bible.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 tells us we must be willing to work, to do what we are able to do and not be lazy. If someone cannot work but would if they could, they are not the problem; it is those who could work but are not willing and won't work who are the problem.

This is what can say from a Personal standpoint.

- God desires for all of us to benefit from the fruits of our labor (cf. Deuteronomy 25:4 / Ecclesiastes 3:13 / Luke 10:7 / 1 Corinthians 9:8-10 / Galatians 6:6 / 1 Timothy 5:18).
- God calls on all of us to give (wealth distribution) of our free will to the needy.
- God expects us to work and to use our resources wisely (cf. Proverbs 21:25 / Matthew 25:21 / Luke 16:10-12). We are not to give to idlers (2 Thessalonians 3:10). We are not to support or encourage lifestyles for people that refuse to work, or reward bad stewards.

This is how this would filter out from a Governmental standpoint.

- Government should encourage equal opportunity to generate wealth. Government should be able to help its citizens to get a fair income or profit from the value that they provide.
- Government should foster an environment for people to give to the needy.
- Government would be in error if it arbitrarily distributed wealth to both the idle (people that avoid work) and the truly needy (people willing to work but are incapable of supporting themselves at any given time). Government should discourage idleness. Government should not create a welfare state that supports idle lifestyles at the expense of hard-working people.

The Bible does require us to do justice. However, if we equate the gospel with the command to do justice we confuse law (what God requires) with gospel (what God has done for us). When we define social justice as equality, we automatically think of any gap between rich and poor as "injustice." Yet much of that gap cannot be attributed to injustice or malice on the part of the wealthy, but to differing skills, work habits, and such, not merely lesser opportunities. The size of a bureaucracy needed to administrate those benefits also increases as more and more "injustices" need to be addressed. Waste and corruption alone will eat away much funding.

People who appeal to the Bible to support their notion of justice do so mainly from four areas: the sabbatical year relief (Deuteronomy 15), the year of jubilee restoration (Leviticus 25), the sharing of goods in the early church (Acts 2-6), and Paul's effort to raise money "that there may be equality" (2 Corinthians 8).

But none of these really supports this notion. The sabbatical year law required suspension of payments on debts during that time because the law forbade the Israelites to work during that year; payments would resume the following year. The year of jubilee restoration is part of a law that treated land or indentured labor as collateral to secure a loan; when the loan was repaid, the collateral returned to the owner. The sharing of goods in the early church, as we discussed earlier, was voluntary (cf. Acts 5:1-9). The "equality" that Paul was speaking of wasn't about economics but of mutual service. The spiritually needy had received from the spiritually wealthy; the materially needy were to receive from the materially wealthy.

The term "social justice" is indeed a loaded phrase that has traditionally indicated a leaning toward a collective notion of justice akin to Marxism, and often this phrase is used as code language for the idea of "wealth redistribution". According to this thinking, the social justice or the "social gospel" requires a redistribution of wealth, thereby narrowing or erasing the gap between rich and poor.

But the Bible doesn't support that notion. It is being foisted on us in many different forms. One way that it comes to us today is packaged as a solution to global warming. Environmental agencies are a front to propose a massive transfer of wealth from the developed world to the developing world, and within the developed world from the wealthy to the poor.

Money doesn't solve people's money problems if they are poor stewards. Robin Hood will never be able to stop stealing when people's pockets have holes in them. One of the implications of the statement that Jesus made, "The poor will always be with you" is that we should not simply try and pay down everyone's debt, only Christ Himself can do that.