

Greed & Oppression of the Poor

(An Every-Verse Method study)

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(All Bible quotes from the NRSV, unless otherwise noted)

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I know what most people are thinking as they approach this study: “I already give to the needy, so I don’t need to examine all of the greed and oppression verses in the Bible. I get it, already!” Or, “Yes, yes, I know I need to give more, but must I endure a whole study that’s going to guilt me into it?”

The reason you need to read this study is that it’s about so much more than personal giving. Most of the Bible’s greed and oppression verses are intended to influence other parts of our lives, such as our business dealings and even our politics. We Christians tend to let greed and oppression issues take a back seat to issues that we think are more important. And that’s a mistake. I’m about to present to you an overwhelming number of verses that prove it.

The Bible contains so many verses that address greed and oppression of the poor that I will not analyze them all, but I will relate as many of them as possible to modern-day scenarios. I have divided these verses by subject and will begin with a brief analysis of immigration. I will then follow with an examination of every verse that addresses greed, greed of the poor, interest, oppression, God’s judgment of the oppressors, and taxes.

Immigration

Exodus 22:21, “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”

Context: Included in a listing of various laws.

Exodus 23:9, “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”

Leviticus 19:33-34, “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

Leviticus 25:35, “If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens.”

Context: Chapter 25 addresses the year of Jubilee as well as mercy on the poor.

Ezekiel 22:7, “Father and mother are treated with contempt in you; the alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and the widow are wronged in you.”

Ezekiel 22:29, “The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and the needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress.”

Context: Ezekiel prophesies against Jerusalem.

Zechariah 7:10, “...do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.”

Context: God appeals to his people to act righteously rather than fast.

Analysis: The Bible’s first oppression verse (Exodus 22:21) strikes at the heart of an American controversy. God expected His people to show kindness to immigrants and to let them live among them as long as they followed the law. God’s reasoning: the Israelites were aliens in Egypt, and they were oppressed by the Egyptians; therefore, they were to have empathy for aliens and treat them as they would want to be treated. God hates oppression, not only of His own people, but of all people.

The most common argument that Christians make regarding these immigration verses is, “I’m okay with immigration; it’s illegal immigration that I hate.” So what does the Bible say about illegal immigration? It says nothing, because there was no such thing as illegal immigration in Israel or in any other country. Throughout history, earthlings

have been able to settle anywhere on earth they wanted. So what we really need to ask ourselves is, “Is it right to make immigration illegal? Does God give us the right to keep the needy away from our prosperity?”

I’m not going to present a definite answer on that. These are complex issues that involve national security, overpopulation, the need to keep track of people in case they commit crimes, and the nation’s responsibility to protect its citizens from incoming criminals, such as kidnappers and drug dealers. However, we must obey God and show His compassion and mercy toward immigrants and avoid the “It’s mine, and you can’t have any,” attitude that so many of us exude.

Greed

Deuteronomy 17:17, “And he [the king of Israel] must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself.”

Context: God provides guidelines for future kings of Israel.

Analysis: Even the king of Israel was to avoid materialism.

Proverbs 23:4, “Do not wear yourself out to get rich; be wise enough to desist.”

Context: Proverbs don’t really have a context. Most of them were written by King Solomon, and each one is usually unrelated to the verses preceding and following it.

Analysis: Many Evangelical Christians subscribe to the politically conservative belief that there’s no such thing as working too much, that the person who works 15-hour days, six or seven days a week, is the kind of righteous person who makes America great.

God disagrees. It’s a sin for us Christians to be slaves to business success. That’s not to say we shouldn’t work hard when we work. But we must realize that God didn’t put us here to get rich and to meet the world’s requirements for success. Rather, we need to put relationships and serving God, neither of which pay money, ahead of worldly business.

Proverbs 23:6, “Do not eat the bread of the stingy; do not desire their delicacies;”

Analysis: The eating of bread mentioned here is reminiscent of Jesus’ warning to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Jesus, of course, cleared up His disciples’ confusion by explaining that He was warning of their teachings. Therefore, this proverb is similarly a warning against the teachings of the stingy.

Christians today often love the teachings of the stingy, many of which blame the poor for their poverty and credit the wealthy for their successes.

Proverbs 28:22, “The miser is in a hurry to get rich and does not know that loss is sure to come.”

Analysis: Misers are not generous, so they resist helping the needy. This proverb tells us that those of us who are devoted to pursuing riches will lose them in the next life or, very possibly, in this life, so it’s vain to devote ourselves to the pursuit of riches.

Ecclesiastes 5:10-11, “The lover of money will not be satisfied with money, nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity. When goods increase, those who eat [‘consume’ in the NASB] them increase; and what gain has their owner but to see them with his eyes?”

Analysis: This is why trickle-down economics—in which the wealthy voluntarily pass their economic gain down to the workers and consumers—doesn’t work. When the wealth of the wealthy increases, the wealthy desire even more wealth. In fact, people at all income levels fail to be satisfied with increased prosperity.

This verse also addresses the pointlessness of buying expensive mansions, cars, clothes, etc., which provide no more tangible benefits than ordinary houses, cars and clothes. All we can do with these over-priced items is look at them or hope that others will look at them and be impressed.

Ecclesiastes 5:13-17, “There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to their hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture; though they are parents of children, they have nothing in their hands. As they came from their mother’s womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing

for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands. This also is a grievous ill: just as they came, so shall they go; and what gain do they have for toiling for the wind?"

Analysis: We are often fascinated with the fall of the wealthy, from people who strike it rich and lose everything, to seemingly brilliant businessmen whose ventures nose-dive amidst the shifting winds of the economy. This Bible quote reminds us how fleeting wealth can be, and what a waste it is to work our lives away in order to acquire it, since we can't take it with us when we die.

Matthew 6:19-21, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Context: This is one of Jesus' various teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

Luke 12:33-34, "Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be."

Context: This quote caps off Jesus' instructions to His disciples not to worry.

Analysis: Yet again, the Bible reveals how is easy it is to lose earthly riches and how it's far better to focus on things of eternal value.

Today, we may not worry so much about thieves, moths and rust, because we have insurance to restore our losses. But those worries have been replaced with concerns about losing one's home due to job loss or losing all that one has ever worked for thanks to medical bills from an illness or injury.

Matthew 6:24, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Context: This is one of Jesus' various teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. This same quote also appears in Luke 16:13.

Analysis: Having worked in corporate sales for fifteen years, I've often had to choose between serving God and serving wealth. Nearly all corporations deceive

potential customers through their marketing and sales tactics, because they will do whatever it takes, and hurt whoever they have to hurt, to reach their financial goals. The rallying cry of most sales executives is, “We must hit our numbers at any cost! No excuses!”

A recent example of this is the mortgage industry from approximately 2005-2007. When the housing boom cooled off around 2005, the mortgage bankers were unwilling to lower their sales objectives. Like almost all corporations, they raised their sales quotas year after year, never satisfied with their wealth, threatening to fire managers who failed to achieve them. Therefore, managers created a new way of obtaining lots of business—offering adjustable rate mortgages to those who couldn’t afford to buy a home and convincing them through aggressive sales pitches that they’d be able to refinance when the interest rates went up after two years. Some sales reps failed to inform their borrowers altogether that their rates would increase.

These companies and their employees placed their love for their true master, wealth, ahead of God’s law, and multitudes of unsuspecting people lost thousands of dollars.

Matthew 13:22, “As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth chokes the word, and it yields nothing.”

Context: Jesus explains to His disciples the parable of the sower. In this parable, a person spreads seeds upon the ground, yet most of the seeds fail to produce plants because of various conditions. Jesus then likens these natural obstacles to obstacles in life that keep us from being productive in serving God.

Analysis: For many years I thought this parable’s message is that having wealth keeps us from doing God’s will, because we spend our time enjoying the pleasures money buys rather than serving God. However, I’ve since realized that even the working poor have no time to serve God, because they must work their lives away in order to barely pay the bills. So not having time to serve God isn’t the sin here.

Rather, it's the "lure" of wealth that chokes the word, not wealth itself, according to Jesus. In other words, it's the greed, deception, and taking advantage of others that angers God.

Matthew 13:44-45, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

Context: These verses are included in a chapter full of parables and metaphors.

Analysis: This is the first of Jesus' quotes in which he mentions selling *all* of our possessions. That makes most of us uncomfortable, myself included.

Matthew 19:21, 23-24, "Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me... Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you it will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'"

Context: A wealthy man had approached Jesus with the question of what he must do to have eternal life. Jesus told him to obey the commandments, but the man was not satisfied with that answer. So Jesus told him to sell everything he had and follow Him. The man then walked away disappointed, because he was wealthy. Also see Mark 10:17-27 for a repeat of the same story.

Analysis: In the *Divorce* study, I distinguished between a sin and an imperfection. That theology applies here as well. We do not sin if we fail to give away all of our possessions. But, according to this story, we have a shot at obtaining perfection if we do.

Why is it so hard for a rich man to enter heaven? It's probably a combination of two things, one of which I've already mentioned: people usually obtain wealth by sinful means. The second reason is that wealth is a source of pride, and pride is one of the biggest sins in the Bible (see the study on *Pride, Arrogance and Judgmentalism*). The wealthy usually credit themselves, not God, for their success and believe themselves to

be more deserving of its benefits than the poor. Also, those who grow up wealthy, or easily acquire wealth, rarely have merciful attitudes toward those who don't, because they blame the poor for their poverty. If our friends and family live a life of ease, we lose touch with those who struggle to support their families. Those who have not experienced or witnessed the struggles of the poor lack empathy and, therefore, neglect the needs of the poor.

Luke 3:11-14, “In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with him who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do? He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations, and be satisfied with your wages.’”

Context: These quotes are from John the Baptist. He would go on to baptize Jesus.

Analysis: These verses can be difficult to apply to modern American life. Thanks to our society's wealth and organizations like the Salvation Army, few people lack clothing. Likewise, thanks to food stamps and school lunch programs, as well as food charities like Philabundance, few people go hungry. (May God bless those who created these programs.) Similarly, American soldiers don't threaten people for profit, and the CPA's and the IRS don't take more than the law allows.

While I usually take the opportunity to chastise Christians for how we fall short of God's will with regard to money, this time I just want to give thanks for the fact that we live in a country that grew up on Christian values. We've achieved a lot of what God wants in a society. Yes, greed still reeks havoc and the poor still suffer, but our society is not as cut-throat as the Roman Empire, and our poor are much better off than the poor in biblical times.

Luke 12:15, “And he said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’”

Context: Jesus responds to a man who asks Him to force his brother to share the inheritance with him. Jesus then follows this quote with a parable about a rich man who was unable to enjoy his wealth, because he died before he could do so.

Analysis: The man in this story expects Jesus to scold his brother for keeping more than his share of the inheritance. That sounds fair, doesn't it? Much to his surprise, Jesus chooses not to scold the man's brother for being unfair, but warns this man who made the request not to obsess over money. To Jesus, the relationship between brothers is of greater importance than fair distribution of money.

Luke 19:8-9, "Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.'"

Context: Jesus was headed to Jericho, and Zacchaeus was so eager to see Him that he climbed a tree for a better view. After Jesus requested to stay with him, the man repented, as we see here.

Analysis: Thanks to this verse, we may now wipe the sweat off of our collective brow. Zacchaeus only gives up *half* of what he owns, and Jesus appears to be content with that. Jesus rejoices not over the giving of money, but over Zacchaeus' repentant heart.

1 Timothy 6:5-10, "...and wrangling among those who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. Of course there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. And in their eagerness to be rich, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains."

Context: Paul instructs Timothy on running a church.

Analysis: Verse 10's revelation that some have left the church in their "eagerness to be rich" suggests that wealth is often obtained by means contrary to biblical teaching. Yet today, many American Christians see wealth as God's reward for good behavior, and they tie faith and prosperity together into an anti-biblical theology.

God's call to us is to be content. That doesn't mean we may never try to improve our financial situation; the desire to do so is not true greed. It means we must be satisfied with what we have when financial gain is only possible through sinful acts that "plunge people [others] into ruin and destruction," like those committed by banking executives who sold people investments designed to fail and then bet against them on the short market.

2 Timothy 3:1-2, "You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money..."

Context: Paul warns Timothy about a future increase in sinfulness.

Analysis: Loving ourselves and loving money go hand in hand. When we love ourselves more than others, we make our desires our priorities, and then we seek money at the expense of others, and spend it on our pleasures rather than on the needs of others.

Hebrews 13:5, "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'"

Context: The writer of Hebrews gives various instructions to the Jewish Christians in the last chapter of this letter.

Analysis: This call to contentment emphasizes the fact that our relationship with God is of greater importance than our financial status.

James 1:9-11, "Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat, and withers the field; its flower falls and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away."

Context: This quote appears to be unrelated to the messages preceding and following it.

Analysis: The Bible is pretty hard on the rich, and it makes every attempt to destroy their arrogance and prove them to be no better than others if not worse than others. Unfortunately, many conservative American Christians today see the rich as heroes who create our jobs, yet the Bible never speaks of them in this light, even though the rich were employers in biblical times just as they are today.

1 Peter 2:16, “...for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the father, but from the world.”

Context: Peter warns against living by our fleshly desires rather than by living as God desires. The next verse states that the world is passing away, but those who live by God’s desires live forever.

Analysis: Wealth is temporary. Not only may we lose it in this life, but we are certain to lose it when we move on to the next life.

Greed of the Poor

Exodus 23:2-3, “You shall not follow a multitude in doing evil, nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert justice; nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his dispute.”

Context: This is one of many laws that follow the 10 Commandments.

Analysis: This verse opposes lawsuits in which groups of poor people attempt to steal from the wealthy by making false claims.

Today, winning a big lawsuit is the new American dream. Thanks to the growing popularity of victim mentality, we blame others for our problems, especially when they have money that we desire. We sue corporations for accidents resulting from our own negligence. And we sue the government and school districts for their employees’ mistakes and, in turn, sue our neighbors, since the government and schools are funded by taxes which we all pay. Not all lawsuits are evil, but we may only sue with just cause and honest testimony.

Proverbs 30:15, “The leech has two daughters; ‘Give, give,’ they cry. Three things are never satisfied; four never say, ‘Enough.’”

Analysis: While the Bible opposes oppression of the poor, it also denies the poor permission to demand unnecessary handouts. The poor must do the best they can and not develop the attitude that society owes them a living.

Proverbs 21:25-26, “The craving of a lazy person is fatal, for lazy hands refuse to labor. All day long the wicked covet, but the righteous give and do not hold back.”

Analysis: Those who work hard and are generous please God, while those who are lazy and desire riches disappoint Him.

Interest

Exodus 22:25, “If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them.”

Leviticus 25:36-37, “Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. You shall not lend them money at interest taken in advance, or provide them food at a profit.”

Context: God instructs the Israelites to treat family members who fall on hard times as they would a resident alien.

Deuteronomy 23:19,20, “You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent. On loans to a foreigner, you may charge interest...”

Ezekiel 22:12, “In you, they take bribes to shed blood; you take both advanced interest and accrued interest, and make gain of your neighbors by extortion; and you have forgotten Me, says the Lord.”

Context: Numerous, unrelated laws are listed in Exodus 22 & Deuteronomy 23. Ezekiel 22 prophecies against Jerusalem.

Analysis: Israelites were not to charge interest when lending to one another. Charging interest to one’s own countrymen for necessities and consumer products does

nothing to benefit the national economy. It only makes the rich richer and the poor poorer. It's the rich who have the excess money to lend, and it's the poor who lack funds and need to borrow. Over time, as the poor continue to pay interest, their limited income is transferred to the rich who collect that interest.

Does this mean that we should eliminate charging interest in America? First of all, doing so would be a tremendous shock to our economy and would probably collapse it. The country would have to have been set up as interest-free from its inception. Second, these passages only address lending to those in need, not those who seek to buy non-necessities despite lacking the money to do so.

By modern American standards, God's rules on interest are unfair, because the lenders lost real dollars if inflation increased while the debt was owed. Lenders were only to lend money as a charitable act, not as an effort to profit from those in need. God expects the rich to make sacrifices for the poor, because He wants the poor to enjoy a quality lifestyle, since they too are created in His image.

Matthew 25:27-28, "Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents."

Context: In verses 14-30, Jesus tells the parable of the talents in which a man gave three of his servants money to invest for him while he went away, and when he returned, the two men to whom he had given the most returned the money with interest, while the man who had only been given one talent had buried it in the ground and returned it without interest. Verses 27-28 are the man's response.

Analysis: Most Christians interpret this parable as a directive for us to use our God-given gifts (talents) to serve His purposes. We follow this interpretation, because the word "talent," which once described a monetary denomination, now means *ability*. I won't dispute this interpretation, because serving God with our abilities is a good idea. But let's not ignore this parable's literal interpretation.

When we make money and desire to give more than the required 10%, we should invest the money and grow it for God's purposes, rather than turn around and give it right

back to Him. If Christians had done this over the centuries, the money available for ministering to others would be exponentially more than it now is.

So why haven't Christians invested for future giving? Many have avoided it because they believed that Jesus' return was imminent. They didn't invest in the future, because they didn't believe in a future. That's one of the dangers of proclaiming that Jesus will return within the next few years or decades (the other danger is that people will lose faith in Jesus when He fails to return within the predicted time).

Oppression

Exodus 22: 22-24, "You shall not abuse any widow or orphan."

Context: Various laws are listed in this section on Exodus.

Analysis: Why are widows and orphans so special? Because, along with aliens, they had no inheritance in the land. In Israel, men inherited land from their fathers as they became adults (they did not have to wait for their fathers to die like we do today). As women reached adulthood, they left their fathers' lands to live on their husbands' lands. On these lands, people grew their food and built their homes with the resources of the land. So this inheritance of land gave young Israelite families what they needed to survive. It's quite different from our society in which young people venture out on their own lacking both food and shelter and having to earn enough money to obtain it.

Widows, orphans, and aliens, however, could not share in Israel's inheritance, and therefore, lacked proper food and shelter. That's why God so frequently calls the Israelites to look out for their interests.

Exodus 23:8, "You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right."

Context: Various laws are listed in this section on Exodus.

Analysis: Bribes still exist today, but are illegal. They've been replaced by campaign contributions from those who seek to influence politics to their own benefit rather than the benefit of the common good.

Ezekiel 18:5,7, “If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right...does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment...”

Context: This quote ultimately ends with God promising life to someone who is this righteous.

Analysis: This passage calls for a righteous man to be both passive and aggressive in his righteousness. In other words, he must avoid oppressing and robbing others, but he must actively help those lacking food and clothing. Too many times, we base our righteousness on what we don’t do and fail to balance it with charitable actions.

Leviticus 25:39-40, “If any that are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of jubilee.”

Context: Chapter 25 addresses the year of jubilee as well as mercy on the poor.

Analysis: Bankruptcy was non-existent in ancient Israel. If someone owed a debt greater than they could pay, they had to sell themselves into slavery. Here God requires that fellow Israelites receive better treatment than slaves would have received, and that their debts be forgiven in the year of jubilee, which occurred every 50 years.

Deuteronomy 5:14, “But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.”

Context: The Ten Commandments are reiterated in Deuteronomy. This time, God explains why the Sabbath is so important for the people.

Analysis: The penalty for breaking the Sabbath was death. Most of us judge the death penalty to be far too harsh for such an act, because we think of the Sabbath in terms of our own decisions to work. However, as we see in this verse, God prohibits work on the Sabbath primarily for the sake of others. Throughout history, workers and slaves have been forced to labor seven days a week—wasting their lives away while suffering

physical exhaustion. God hates this oppression so much that He required the maximum penalty for those who imposed it upon others.

This is why Jesus would later say, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” God didn’t create the Sabbath day laws or any other laws for His direct benefit; He created them for our benefit, so that all of His children may live a quality life instead of a miserable one.

Deuteronomy 15:7-8, 11, “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be... Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’”

Context: Chapter 15 begins by requiring that the Israelites grant a remission of debts every seven years—yet another one of God’s commands of mercy toward those in need.

Analysis: This mercy toward the poor, while not well-defined in terms of percentage of income, was mandatory for all of God’s people who had more than they needed.

The question we need to ask ourselves is whether God is calling for personal or government-enforced charity. Here in Deuteronomy, God gives laws to the nation of Israel. These are not suggestions on how individuals should behave; these are requirements for how an entire nation *must* behave. So we can conclude that God forced the nation of Israel to force its people to share their wealth. How they carried this out is not entirely known.

Deuteronomy 23:15, “Slaves who have escaped to you from their owners shall not be given back to them. They shall reside with you in your midst, in any place they choose, in any one of your towns, wherever they please; you shall not oppress them.”

Context: Numerous, unrelated laws are listed in this portion of Deuteronomy.

Analysis: These are likely to have been slaves that escaped from other nations. They were to know a better life among the Israelites. It's likely that many of them came to love God as a result of this compassion (that is, if the Israelites actually obeyed this command).

Deuteronomy 24:14-15, “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.”

Context: Numerous, unrelated laws are listed in this portion of Deuteronomy.

Analysis: Nobody does this today. In the sales world, some companies delay commissions as long as possible so that the payroll expense will be pushed into the following quarter and the resulting numbers will deceive potential investors into believing that the company is more profitable than it really is.

Psalms 10:2, “In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor—let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.”

Context: The psalmist beseeches the Lord to bring justice upon the wicked and rescue the oppressed.

Analysis: Out of our arrogance, many of us blame the poor for their poverty. We then credit the wealthy for their success and regard them as righteous, and thus, we join the wealthy in schemes to keep the poor in their poverty. Should Christians continue to support the wealthy at the expense of the poor, more and more of us will be “caught in schemes they have devised,” and join the poor in their poverty over time.

Psalms 12:7, “‘Because the poor are despoiled; because the needy groan, I will now rise up,’ says the Lord. ‘I will place them in the safety for which they belong.’”

Context: In this psalm, God comes to the rescue of the poor.

Psalms 14:6, “You would confound the plans of the poor, but the Lord is their refuge.”

Context: King David laments of all the evil in the world.

Proverbs 11:24-25, “Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water.”

Proverbs 13:23, “The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice.”

Proverbs 14:31, “Those who oppress the poor insult their maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor Him.”

Analysis: How do we insult God by oppressing the poor? Many politically-conservative Christians say that those who are smart and work hard achieve financial success, while the poverty of the poor results from their laziness and stupidity. As for laziness, many hard-working people struggle to support their families. And as for being smart, we can't all be Einstein. If we were born too stupid to figure out how to get rich, we are as God made us. Does the Bible tell us that less intelligent people should struggle to survive as punishment for their stupidity? If God gives us our smarts, skills and lucky breaks, we have no business being arrogant toward those who receive a less lucrative package of abilities from Him. When we blame the poor for their lack of intelligence, we insult God for making them as they are.

Proverbs 19:17, “He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his good deed.”

Analysis: This verse brings to mind Jesus' statement, “As you've done it unto others, you've done it unto Me.” As I've previously stated, God creates rules not for His own direct benefit, but for the benefit of His children (which is all people, not just the ones whose beliefs match ours). Yet, somehow, according to this verse, God benefits when we love others well, especially the needy.

Proverbs 21:6, “The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a snare of death.”

Analysis: When we Christians think of committing sins with our speech, we tend to think of using bad words. But the Bible shows us here (and in many other passages)

that lying to gain wealth and take advantage of others financially is a far greater sin of the tongue.

Proverbs 21:13, “If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard.”

Analysis: In our modern society, where exactly do we hear the cry of the poor? Those of us who live well, live in areas where there are no poor. And even when we walk or drive through an impoverished area, it’s rare that we hear people cry out.

Yet the poor do make their voices heard in our society, but in an organized fashion. They organize politically to cry out for money to pay for health care. They organize into unions to cry out for fair wages – wages that provide food, clothing, shelter, basic enjoyment (yes, having some pleasure in life is a necessity), and a respectable share of their company’s profits. Yet many of us ignore and oppose their organized efforts, because we believe that those who fail to prosper in the land of opportunity deserve their poverty, and those who prosper in the land of opportunity shouldn’t have to share.

But remember that opportunity is only opportunity. Opportunity combined with hard work doesn’t assure prosperity. Many try their best and still come up short. The formula for prosperity is hard work, plus opportunity, plus God-given ability, plus knowing the right people, plus luck (changes in market conditions, etc.). Only hard work is within our control, the rest is beyond any person’s control; therefore, we must not arrogantly close our ears to the cry of the poor in our country. Much of their suffering is beyond their control.

Proverbs 22:9, “Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.”

Proverbs 22:16, “Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss.”

Analysis: How does a person enrich oneself by oppressing others? One way is to make employees work too many hours, thus depriving them of the quality life that God desires for all people. We live in a culture, even a Christian culture, which smiles upon those who work too hard. Christians have their favorite Bible verses that call for hard

work and responsibility, but they overlook passages like this one that warn of working people too hard.

When we work too hard, we fail to have the quality relationships with others that God desires, and we find no time to serve Him, because we devote our lives to serving our employers instead.

Proverbs 22:22, “Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate.”

Proverbs 23:10, “Do not remove an ancient landmark or encroach on the fields of orphans.”

Proverbs 28:3, “A ruler who oppresses the poor is a beating rain that leaves no food.”

Proverbs 28:27, “Whoever gives to the poor will lack nothing, but one who turns a blind eye will get many a curse.”

Analysis: Altogether, we have eleven Proverbs opposing oppression of the poor. Anything addressed eleven times in a single Bible book must be one of God’s top priorities. We can no longer allow other issues to take precedence over this one. This is far more important than worries about gay marriage, creationism, alcohol consumption, secular music, etc.

Proverbs 25:21, “If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink.”

Analysis: Jesus’ teachings were often based on the Old Testament. His command to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44) may have been inspired by this verse. Taking care of the needy is of greater importance than loyalty to our causes. It doesn’t matter if they believe what we believe politically or religiously. What matters is that they live a quality of life that anyone created in God’s image (which is everyone) deserves.

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3, “Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead, who

have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.”

Context: King Solomon shares his God-given wisdom.

Analysis: Does this mean that we should encourage abortion, because the never-born are better off? Of course, not! However, this verse teaches us that suffering oppression in this life is worse than being dead or never having been born. Therefore, politically active Christians need to adjust their priorities accordingly.

Isaiah 1:17, “...learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

Context: This verse is part of a vision Isaiah had concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the years prior to Babylon’s conquest of Judah. It commands the Jews to behave as God had always desired.

Analysis: If we American Christians have a political calling from God, this verse reveals it. It’s not simply enough to personally avoid hurting others. This passage calls us to rescue the oppressed from the harm of those who oppress them.

How do we do that?

Do we kidnap them from their workplaces and take them somewhere nice?

No.

This verse commands us to plead their cases, to defend their causes. Only politically-oriented action will accomplish this. It’s a sin for us to neglect their causes.

Luke 4:18, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free...”

Context: Early in Jesus’ ministry, He read this quote from the book of Isaiah in the synagogue and proclaimed that this prophecy had been fulfilled in Him.

Analysis: Some might argue that this quote refers to the poor in spirit, but there’s no evidence for that. The “good news” to which Jesus refers is that God’s supports the poor and opposes their oppressors.

James 2:5-6, “Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?”

Context: All of chapter 2 addresses the sin of favoring the rich over the poor.

Analysis: It’s unlikely that the rich oppressed Christians by taking them to court to sue them over money, since Christians probably had little of that. Instead, the rich probably made false accusations against Christians because they hated them for supporting the needs of the poor over the desires of the wealthy.

James 2:15-16, “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”

Context: All of chapter 2 addresses the sin of favoring the rich over the poor.

Analysis: Contrary to what many Evangelical Christians believe, life on this earth does matter. Notice that neither this verse nor any other verse requiring us to help the needy says that we should do so for the sake of converting them to the faith. We are to help the needy...period.

James 5:4-6, “Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.”

Context: Verses 1-3 also warn the rich, but do not address specific sins.

Analysis: Holding back wages is a sin that many Christians think is impossible to commit in modern America. But let’s think for a minute what happened when these laborers were hired. They were told they would receive a certain amount of money for a certain amount of work, yet once the work was performed, they failed to receive all of what they were promised.

Having spent over 15 years of my life working in sales, I'd have to say that the majority of employers deceive potential sales reps about the income they will likely earn. This is easy to do since sales reps are paid, at least in part, in commissions. A set income cannot be pre-determined, so recruiters exaggerate the amount a given rep is likely to earn. So the reps wind up earning less than they were told for the hours they work.

The inverse of this is when an employer accurately tells potential employees what salary they will receive, but fails to inform them how many hours they will have to work to receive that salary. When the employer overworks salaried employees, this too is stealing wages.

1 John 3:17, “How does the love of God abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

Context: Love for others is a dominant theme in 1 John. John encourages Christians to make sacrifices for others, much like Christ made the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf.

Analysis: Both James and 1 John call us to action in helping the poor. Prayer, worship, and preaching the gospel are essential to the Christian life, but should not take so much of our time that we fail to serve the needs of others.

God’s Judgment of the Oppressors

Isaiah 3:14-15, “The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of His people: ‘It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?’ says the Lord God of hosts.”

Context: Isaiah prophecies against Judah (the southern kingdom) during the time period in which Israel (the northern kingdom) was under siege by Assyria.

Analysis: One of two things is happening here. Either, the wealthy vineyard owners are underpaying their workers (and God is saying that the workers deserve more

of the spoils), or the nation's leadership is taking from small, local farmers and hoarding the spoils to support their luxurious lifestyles.

Some might see the latter explanation as one that opposes taxation. But, as we'll see later, there's a difference between taxes that take from the wealthy to help the poor and taxes that take from the poor to enrich the wealthy, as these taxes do.

Isaiah 5:8, “Ah [‘Woe to’ in the NASB], you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!”

Context: Isaiah prophecies against Judah (the southern kingdom) during the time period in which Israel (the northern kingdom) was under siege by Assyria.

Isaiah 10:1-2, “Ah [‘Woe to’ in the NASB], you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!”

Context: Isaiah prophecies against Israel.

Analysis: Notice that God addresses politics as He rebukes those “who write oppressive statutes.” I'm unaware, however, of any civilizations that have passed laws requiring the wealthy to oppress the poor. It's not what the law *commands* that oppresses the poor; it's what the law *permits*. Allowing business and legal practices that make life harder for the working class is the sin of which this verse speaks.

Isaiah 58:3, “‘Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?’ Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.”

Isaiah 58:6-7, “Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”

Isaiah 58:9-10, “Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of

the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”

Context: Isaiah prophecies against Judah.

Analysis: Verses 3-9 demonstrate that God turns His back on nations that neglect the needs of the poor. Some Christians say that the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 are evidence that God is turning His back on the United States. They may be right. It may not be the sins of the non-Christians (such as homosexuals) fueling God’s anger, however, but the sins of the Christians who oppress the poor. Remember, it wasn’t the World Gay Center that fell; it was the World Trade Center. If this disaster was indeed God’s punishment on America, it was our business practices He was judging, not the sexuality of non-Christians.

Jeremiah 5:28-29, “They have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things...?”

Jeremiah 6:6, “For thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Cut down her trees; cast up a siege ramp against Jerusalem. This is the city that must be punished; there is nothing but oppression in her.’”

Context: Jeremiah prophesied to Judah during the years prior to its fall to Babylon.

Analysis: Notice that, in chapter 5:28-29, God wants the wealthy to “make” the orphans prosper. He denies the wealthy the right to do whatever they want with their money and power. When they assume such a right, God’s punishment follows.

Amos 2:6-7, “Thus says the Lord, ‘For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way.’”

Amos 4:1, “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, ‘Bring something to drink!’”

Amos 5:11-12, “Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.”

Amos 8:4, “Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring ruin to the poor of the land...”

Context: God speaks against the sins of Israel and goes on to promise a day of judgment upon it.

Analysis: We’re seeing an abundance of verses in which God promises wrath for His people who oppress the poor. Will we American Christians experience this wrath? Will oppressing and neglecting the needy, while supporting the wealthy, be acceptable as long as we do it in Jesus’ name?

Ezekiel 16:49, “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and the needy.”

Context: Ezekiel is prophesying against Jerusalem.

Analysis: This is yet another example of God infuriated with a nation that fails to care for its poor.

Daniel 4:27, “Therefore, O king, may my counsel be acceptable to you: atone for your sins with the righteous, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed, so that your prosperity may be prolonged.”

Context: Daniel interprets the dream of Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar.

Micah 2:2-3, “They covet fields, and seize them; house, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. Therefore thus says the

Lord: Now, I am devising against this family an evil from which you cannot remove your necks; and you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be an evil time.”

Context: Micah prophecies judgment against Samaria and Jerusalem.

Analysis: Here the word “covet” again applies to the desire to acquire someone else’s property.

Unlike portable objects, houses and lands are immovable. To take them requires a political or financial scheme. In modern times (at least up through 2008), this scheme might involve a loan to someone who’s unlikely to be able to keep up with the payments, or even an Adjustable Rate Mortgage in which the lender knows that the borrower will be forced to foreclose when interest rates rise, thus allowing the lender to seize the property and sell it at a profit in the event that prices rise after the loan is issued.

Many people support schemes like these by placing all blame on the borrower for wanting and borrowing more than they can afford. But I know from both sales experience and being the target of mortgage industry sales pitches that mortgage sales reps twisted numbers in order to deceive potential homeowners into borrowing more than they could afford. The mortgage companies didn’t care if the people couldn’t pay (because they sold the mortgages off to be bundled into securities); they only cared about the size of their commissions—the bigger the loan, the more they earned. Granted, in the end, this wasn’t a scheme to take property, but it was a scheme to run up prices, earn big payouts, and earn additional refinancing income when the rates adjusted on the ARM’s, all at the expense of unsuspecting individuals. Either way, it’s an example of oppressing “householder and house, people and their inheritance.”

Malachi 3:5, “Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear Me, says the Lord of hosts.”

Context: Unhappy with the behavior of the Jews during the decades following their return from Babylon, God promises future judgment upon Israel again, but this time, through the coming of Jesus.

Analysis: How are “hired workers” oppressed in their wages? It’s possible that their promised wages were withheld, but businesses that practiced such things probably had trouble recruiting workers after a short time. It’s far more likely that these businesses oppressed their workers by paying them too little.

As Americans, this makes no sense to us, because we’re taught that it’s right, as well as “just good business”, to pay workers as little as the free market will allow. The goal of any supposedly efficient business is to minimize the cost of labor in order to maximize profits. In such a world, there’s no such thing as paying a worker too little; if an employer’s compensation for a particular job is below that job’s market value, then qualified workers will find “fair” wages elsewhere and the job will never be consistently filled.

But this passage indicates that God holds a different set of values. Maybe workers deserve more than being paid as little as the free market will permit. Maybe they should be paid wages that reflect the value of the workers’ contribution to their employers’ success. Or maybe they should be paid enough to afford food, shelter, clothing and basic enjoyment of life, since they’re of great value, being created in God’s image.

That’s not to say that businesses struggling to survive are guilty of sin when they pay workers low wages. But when corporate executives and investors earn several hundred times as much as their employees, who are paid as little as the market will allow, they violate God’s words in this passage.

Matthew 25:41-46, “Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they will also answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you? Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Context: Jesus explains that on Judgment Day, He will separate the righteous from the evil. The righteous will receive eternal life, while the evil will face God's wrath.

Analysis: In the Old Testament, God brings wrath upon the nation of Israel for their neglect and oppression of the poor. Jesus' ministry, on the other hand, focused upon individuals rather than upon a nation.

We who oppress and neglect the poor will suffer eternal punishment. Many Christians might argue that we receive forgiveness for this if we believe in Jesus, but that's only if we repent of this behavior and try to turn away from our sin. Remember, in **Matthew 7:21**, Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my father in heaven." Jesus makes it clear that mercy on the poor is a vital part of God's will. Therefore, it's a requirement for eternal life.

Luke 6:24, "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep."

Context: Chapter 6 is Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount. Some will argue that this is a different sermon, because verse 17 says that Jesus came down to a level place. However, many mountains have level areas, and the text does not say that He came off the mountain. Also, the events that follow the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew follow this sermon as well.

Analysis: Are all wealthy, full, and happy people going to hell? Probably not. Here, Jesus warns the wealthy that their prosperity on earth will one day end, and that if their prosperity results from oppression of the poor or causes neglect of the poor, they will be the ones suffering for eternity.

Acts 5:1-5, "But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the Apostles' feet. 'Ananias,' Peter asked, 'why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold,

were of the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!’ Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard it.”

Context: See Acts 4:32, 34.

Analysis: Why did Ananias and Sapphira lie? Were they required to sell their property and give all the money to the church, or had they promised to do so in an attempt to impress others? I guess we’ll never know. It’s enough to make us wonder whether all Christians must sell their homes and give the proceeds to the church. There are, however, biblical references to Christians owning homes, such as **1 Corinthians 11:22** in which Paul says, “Do you not have homes to eat and drink in?” So we need not jump to a rash conclusion based on this example.

Taxes/Redistribution of Wealth

Leviticus 19:9, “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.”

Context: Numerous, unrelated laws are listed in this portion of Leviticus.

Deuteronomy 24:19-21, “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.”

Context: Numerous, unrelated laws are listed in this portion of Deuteronomy.

Analysis: Imagine not only farmers, but manufacturers as well, having to allow the poor to walk away with free goods. Do you think they would cry that it’s unfair? You bet they would. We could argue that verse 9’s command is the equivalent of paying taxes, since it’s nationally mandatory for all farmers and benefits the needy. Yet many Christians whine about having to do that, too. We argue that our sharing with the poor

should be voluntary rather than be required by the government. But the Bible shows us here that God *required* His nation to share with the poor.

Leviticus 27:30, “All tithes from the land, whether the seed from the ground or the fruit from the tree, are the Lord’s; they are holy to the Lord.”

Context: Chapter 27 instructed the Israelites on which things were to be set aside for the Lord.

Analysis: A “tithe” is ten percent of one’s income. This tithe was, in reality, a tax, because it was mandatory for everyone. While the tithe is said to be the Lord’s, that just means He determines who should receive it. Many Christians follow this command today, but on a voluntary basis. They contribute *after* paying taxes. But for the Israelites, the tithe *was* their federal tax.

Deuteronomy 14:22-23, “Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. In the presence of the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.”

Context: The second half of chapter 14 addresses tithing.

Analysis: This is known as the Festival Tithe. The fact that God required a feast is further proof that He wants His people to have some enjoyment rather than continually suffer to impress Him.

This tithe was not for ministry, but for the common good. Since a tithe is a percentage of one’s possessions, those who have more pay more. The poorest people paid the least in God’s taxation system, but benefited the most.

Today, our government follows a similar model. If it needs to raise taxes for the common good, the rich pay the most, because it’s the rich who hold most of the nation’s wealth. Whenever politicians call for lower taxes, they aim to lower them for the rich at the expense of the common good.

Deuteronomy 14:28-29, “Every third year you shall bring out the tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat your fill so that the word of God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.”

Context: The second half of chapter 14 addresses tithing.

Analysis: God calls on the Israelites to look out for those who have no land. In early Israel, people received land through inheritance. Those who had land could grow food and build a home. Those who didn't have land had to rely on the generosity of others. This law is the equivalent of a tax on property owners for the benefit of the poor.

Today, many Christians believe that taxing those who have more than enough and redistributing it to those who don't is evil. To say so is to say that God is evil, because, as we see here, God is the creator of a national, mandatory, systematic redistribution of wealth from the prosperous to the poor.

Some will say that such redistribution is unfair, but God is far more concerned with everyone living a quality life than He is about fairness. Fairness isn't a major principle promoted by the Bible, but God's love is.

Deuteronomy 23:24, “If you go into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in a container.”

Context: Numerous, unrelated laws are listed in this portion of Deuteronomy.

Analysis: Notice how this verse addresses not the poor who have no property, but neighbors. In order to be someone's neighbor, you must own land, so this verse addresses land owners—people who weren't totally impoverished like the widows, orphans and immigrants were. God required them to share with one another, at least in terms of satisfying their own hunger. (He also allowed trespassing. The idea that a person can't even walk on the land God created, because you now own it, is anti-biblical.)

Again, this is unfair, because one neighbor may have a bigger and more fruitful vineyard than the next. And maybe that's because one neighbor is more talented than the others. Most modern American Christians would say that the man who is more talented and more fortunate (and maybe even harder-working) than his neighbors shouldn't be

forced to share with them, because fairness dictates that he gets to decide what to do with anything he produces or earns.

But that's not how God sees it. God proves here that He desires a society that mandates sharing. That's not to say that God is a communist, but neither is He a right-wing American capitalist who takes property rights to the extreme.

Malachi 3:8-10, “Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In your tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflow blessing.”

Context: God continues to express displeasure over His people's behavior.

Analysis: Here God is furious, not because individuals failed to make voluntary, charitable donations, but because the nation failed to collect its taxes (tithes). The food needed to provide for the Levites (who were government workers, since Israel was a theocracy), to provide for the poor, and to create enjoyment for the common good (the festival tithe) had not been collected; therefore, people created in God's image suffered. They were robbed of what they deserved. And, as Jesus said, “As you've done it unto others, you've done it unto Me.” That's why God accused the Israelites of robbing Him by failing to collect the tithes.

Matthew 6:24, “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Context: This is one of Jesus' various teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. This same quote also appears in Luke 16:13.

Analysis: I'm listing this passage again here among the tax verses, because so many Christians are obsessed with avoiding taxes to the point that they oppose God.

Yes, it's difficult to see a significant portion of our paychecks go to someone other than ourselves. And, yes, the government doesn't spend all tax money wisely. But we must not let our love of money harden our hearts and distort our theology.

In recent years, I've heard an increasing number of Christians say, out of their hatred for paying taxes, that a national, mandatory redistribution of wealth is evil. But since God created a national, mandatory redistribution of wealth for ancient Israel, anyone who says that redistribution of wealth is evil says that God is evil.

Some might argue that our secular government doesn't have to do it God's way. But when we vote, our only choices are to vote for God's way or Satan's way. While I've never read the Satanic Bible (for fear of being possessed), I've read commentary on it. And its message is basically, "Do what you want. If you want to help others, that's fine. But if you want to put yourself first, that's fine, too." Satan is pro-choice all the way, whether we're talking about abortion and adultery or money and business. God is never pro-choice. He requires that we put others needs on the same level as our own. If we're going to be politically involved, how can we not vote to do it His way?

Right now, conservative Christians are following the master of greed, obsessed with hoarding more money to themselves and hateful toward those who long to see all people created in God's image enjoy at least some quality of life.

Matthew 17:24-27, "When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, 'Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?' He said, 'Yes, he does.'" And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, 'What do you think Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?' When Peter said, 'From others,' Jesus said to him, 'Then the children are free. However, so that we do not give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me.'"

Context: This passage appears to be unrelated to those which precede and follow it.

Analysis: The temple tax was required of all adult Jewish men. It was needed for temple upkeep. In this story, Jesus does not oppose it, thus proving that He does not oppose taxation for the sake of the common good.

Jesus' remark that the "children are free" implies that He should be free from paying it since He is the Son of God. Nonetheless, He pays it so as not to give people a reason to oppose Him

Acts 4:32, 34, "The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned land 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."

Context: The Gospel catches on quickly and with great enthusiasm as the disciples begin to preach it.

Analysis: This scene horrifies American Christians who see pure capitalism as gospel, because we have in these verses the early Christian equivalent of a commune, and a commune-inspired economic system is communism.

Should we practice communism in an effort to emulate the early Christians?

Not necessarily.

First, let's look beyond modern economic systems and examine the principals involved. The intent of these actions was to ensure that "there was not a needy person among them." This has always been always God's desire. The solution was that everyone in the community would give up what they had in order for this intent to become reality.

Today, our society in America is wealthy enough that we don't have to give up everything to help those around us. But we also lack the right to keep our wealth to ourselves.

2 Corinthians 8:13-15, "I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair

balance. As it is written, ‘The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.’”

Context: Paul attempts to inspire the Corinthian church to give to less fortunate churches by referencing the overwhelming generosity of the Macedonian church.

Analysis: The last sentence of this quote allows for some to have much and for others to have little, so it does not support communism in which all people earn the same. It does, however, support a system in which the wealthy give up excessive wealth so that the poor may enjoy a quality lifestyle. In fact, all the Bible’s greed and oppression laws were given to the Israelites for this purpose. If God desired a system like this for His nation, should we not desire such a system for ours?

Why do so many Christians promote a different system, in which the wealthy have exceedingly great wealth, far beyond what any person can enjoy, while the majority of citizens work their lives away while struggling to survive, and then it’s up to the whims of the wealthy to determine who will receive charitable donations? Is it not better to have a system in which those with exceeding wealth are forced to share it in order to lighten the suffering among *all* those in need? God thinks it is.

Galatians 2:10, “They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.”

Context: Paul recalls meeting Jesus’ disciples at the council of Jerusalem (see Acts 15) in which they approved of his ministry.

Analysis: Jesus’ disciples could have asked many things of the Apostle Paul, but they asked only one: that he support the cause of the poor. All leaders of the early church were in agreement on this issue. Anyone who claims to be a Christian today must share the same priority.

We’ve just reviewed 96 Bible quotes that oppose greed and oppression of the poor. None of the other subjects we’ve covered received this much biblical attention. Even adultery, fornication, and homosexuality (which we haven’t covered) are only addressed a combined 64 times (approximately) in the Bible.

Despite the Bible's emphasis on greed and oppression of the poor, most churches have opted to have other priorities. According to *Compassion Magazine*, a publication from a Christian charity (Compassion International) focused on releasing children from poverty, "Nearly half of all Christians went to church last year [2007] without hearing a single sermon about the poor or the biblical mandate to help the poor."

Wow! Half of all churches ignore the most frequently addressed sin in the Bible! Why don't they have time to address one of God's greatest priorities? Many of them are too busy addressing man-made religious rules or emphasizing theologies built upon solitary Bible verses. Other churches have the time, but demand that their congregations donate to the church rather than to the poor. Also, many churches tend to be one-dimensional. One church will focus nearly every sermon on evangelism. The next church will hype Christ's imminent return, week-in and week-out. Another church will repeatedly preach that Christians must take political control of America. Yet others talk about nothing but sexual immorality. Some of these topics, like evangelism and sexual immorality, must be addressed at times, but not to the extent that the majority of God's biblical message is ignored.

Why do we oppress the poor?

The other half of the churches, those who heed God's mandate to help the poor, usually address the needs of the poor in foreign lands. Indeed, some of these people are so poor that they struggle to find adequate food, clothing, and shelter. They exist in such great numbers because they live in politically unstable lands, in which the sins of the greedy and violent go unchecked and basic human rights are neglected. Many Christians (although not enough) are compassionate toward them and donate money. Unfortunately, providing financial support is all that most of us can do. We are powerless to change their governments and economies, since we can only vote for political changes in our own country, and yet it's government and economics that can have the greatest long-range effects. Giving money only helps temporarily, but fails to address the underlying problems that cause the poverty.

It's when we vote here in America that many of us find ourselves on the wrong side of God's will regarding oppression. We support oppression of the American poor

and working class for two reasons, the first of which is that many American Christians have wealth and seek to protect it. They oppose most government spending that helps the poor and working class, because they hate to see their tax money distributed among others. They're jealous of the poor for the mercy tax rates that they enjoy. They wish that they could enjoy those rates too, but without having to be poor to do so.

The other reason is that many Christians believe that republicanism aligns perfectly with the values of Christianity. As we've seen throughout the Bible, republicanism and God's word oppose one another more often than they agree with one another on the issues of greed and oppression of the poor. Republicanism promotes its oppression of the poor by instilling in its members a set of values that I call the *Principles of Oppression*.

Principles of Oppression

The Principles of Oppression don't sound oppressive. That's because many of us have been raised to embrace them as values supported by God Himself. But they all have two things in common: they are unbiblical, and they serve as a rallying cry for those who oppress the poor and the working class. Let's examine each of them:

1. Fairness

Throughout the years in which I attended conservative Protestant churches, countless Christians have told me that our taxation system, which takes from the wealthy to make life better for the majority of Americans, is unfair and, therefore, anti-Christian. Yet, as we look back at Leviticus 25:35 (requiring support for aliens and kin), Isaiah 58 (requiring homeowners to take the homeless into their homes), Matthew 19 (requiring a wealthy man to give his wealth to the poor in order to be perfect) and all the Old Testament taxation (tithing) verses, we see that God's laws require mercy over fairness when people are in need. Fairness isn't a Christian value as much as mercy is.

This statement holds true not only in the Israelite law, but on a personal level as well. Take a moment to read Luke 15:11-32 (due to its length, I will not quote it here). In this parable, a son leaves home, wastes his inheritance, falls into financial ruin, comes back to his father, and his father accepts him with open arms and even throws a party

celebrating his return. The other son, who had behaved all along, thinks his father's response is unfair, so he bitterly resents both his father and his brother (remember that the money spent on the party, as well as provisions for the misbehaving son, likely came from what would have become the obedient son's inheritance, because any money spent by a parent results in a diminished inheritance for his or her children). Had the father been fair, like his obedient son had wished, he would have treated the returning son as a slave rather than as a son, because that's what he deserved for behaving irresponsibly, and because the behaving son deserved his full inheritance. The father does the right thing according to Jesus: he chooses mercy over fairness, just like God does when He forgives us.

This parable teaches us that fairness isn't always consistent with Christian values. That's not to say we should favor one person over another. But when people are in need (as is the wayward son in this parable), fairness fails and mercy prevails. God requires that we Christians apply this principle on a personal level, and we have no reason to deny this principle on a political level, since God has applied it there as well.

Higher taxes for the wealthy?

I've frequently heard Christians argue how unfair it is that the wealthy pay so much more in taxes. I've heard it said that our progressive tax structure is the equivalent of stealing from the rich. To determine the extent to which this is true, let's take a look at the 2007 tax brackets for income and Social Security/Medicare (FICA) taxes as they apply to a person whose filing status is single.

From	To	Tax Rate (deductions & exemptions excluded)
\$0	\$7,825	10% income + 7.65% FICA = 17.65%
\$7,825	\$31,850	15% income + 7.65% FICA = 22.65%
\$31,850	\$77,100	25% income + 7.65% FICA = 32.65%
\$77,100	\$97,500	28% income + 7.65% FICA = 35.65%
\$97,500	\$160,850	28% income + 1.45% FICA = 29.45%
\$160,850	\$349,700	33% income + 1.45% FICA = 34.45%
\$349,700	no limit	35% income + 1.45% FICA = 36.45%

First of all, many people are unaware that each bracket applies to every person of every income status. In other words, the first \$7,825 of a person's taxable income is taxed at 17.65% regardless of whether their total taxable earnings equal \$7,000 or \$7,000,000. The system is fair, because everyone gets to enjoy the mercy rates of the lower brackets.

Second, we learn from this chart that a lower middle class person who earns \$90,000 pays a total of 35.65% in federal taxes. An upper class person who earns \$90,000,000 pays a total of 36.45% in federal taxes (before loopholes), because the decrease in FICA rates compensates for most of the increase in income tax rates. So the difference in tax percentage paid between the lower-middle class and the upper class is less than one percent.

Is that what all of the fussing, whining and crying is about? One percent? It can't be. In fact, all taxable income exceeding \$31,850 is taxed between the rates of 32.65% and 36.45% (except for that soft spot between \$97,500 & \$160,850), so even the difference between the lower class and the upper class is less than four percent. Based on these numbers, nobody can argue that the upper class pays significantly more than anyone else (in fact, they often pay far less, thanks to loopholes). Our tax rates are relatively flat.

So why are Christians so upset about this progressive income tax structure? We feel this way because many of us hate to see the poor get away with having to pay no more than 17.65% or 22.65% of their taxable income to the government. We cry that the system is unfair, and that the tax rates must become perfectly flat. If we got our wish, the tax percentages of the wealthy would barely change while the poor would have to pay tax rates they could not afford. Our progressive tax structure serves one primary purpose: it provides the poor with mercy rates on taxes, because they need to spend a higher percentage of their income on necessities. Unfortunately, many of us Christians hate mercy. We'd rather see the poor suffer in the name of fairness.

Fairness is an important value, however, when we tax those who have all they need and have money to spare. So, to be fair, we must address the tax loopholes for the wealthy which enable them to pay a tax percentage lower than people at the poverty level pay. For example, dividends and long term capital gains were reduced to 15% by the

George W. Bush administration in 2001. Capital gains had been taxed at 20% before that, and dividends were taxed at the same rate as income—39.6% for the wealthy. Proponents of this move claimed that it would create an incentive for capital investing (but the wealthy spent their tax saving on other things, as I'll explain later) and improve everyone's life by creating jobs (which failed to happen). Reducing the dividends tax from 39.6% to 15%, however, is a lot more than an incentive for investing; it's an enormous tax break for the corporate wealthy who make most or all of their money from capital gains and dividends. From the time of this tax cut through 2010, living conditions for working class Americans got worse instead of better, thus proving that this tax cut for the wealthy was of little benefit to poor and working class Americans, and was of tremendous benefit to the exceedingly wealthy who lacked nothing.

Millions of American Christians supported these tax cuts for the wealthy. These are the same Christians who hate to see the poor get a tax break. Isn't this mindset the opposite of what God promotes in the Bible? Clearly, the concept of fairness has been twisted to lure God's people away from doing His will.

Is our nation a group effort or every-man-for-himself?

Some may argue that progressive income taxes that are unfair and unjust, because the wealthy deserve to keep their money, because they earned every penny of it themselves.

The question we need to ask ourselves here is, "Do the wealthy really earn it all themselves?" Could they be so successful if it weren't for all the workers who devote most of their waking hours to company success? Or more important, could they generate such great wealth if it weren't for the sacrifices of so many Americans during times of military crisis?

The American wealthy wouldn't know such wealth if they lived in a land lacking prosperity and political stability where neither armies nor police were strong enough to protect everyone. America's prosperity and safety wouldn't be so great if it weren't for those who died in battle, those who sacrificed years of their lives to fight and serve, and those who sacrificed their sons, brothers and fathers (and more recently, their daughters, sisters and mothers) in war, in police protection, in fire-fighting, and in rescue operations.

In fact, many of these people were drafted (or had their loved ones drafted) and never had a choice whether or not to make such costly sacrifices. In the end, nearly every family that's been here awhile has made these sacrifices for the common good. Yet the wealthy say, "I owe them nothing. I did it all myself."

Is it *fair* that America is only a group effort when it's the lower class sacrificing to protect the interests of the wealthy, but when the families who've made such sacrifices are in need, the wealthy need not sacrifice as little as their excess income? Is it fair that the government can draft the lives of those who have the least, but can't draft so little as the excess income of those who benefit the most from the sacrifices of the nation? Maybe it's fair, after all, that those who benefit the most from this group effort known as the United States of America are forced to share the most with their fellow citizens.

2. Free Market

Free market is the modern-day term used to describe capitalism. *Capitalism* is the ideology upon which our nation bases its economic principles. It's far superior to communism, feudalism, and socialism, because it allows supply, demand, and pricing to allocate scarce resources rather than have the government do it. Governments that have tried to oversee resource allocation and pricing have driven their people into poverty, because such a task is too large and complex to be administered effectively. It's no wonder capitalism has so many fans.

However, capitalism is a system of winners and losers. In it, every person, *theoretically*, has an opportunity for great wealth. But in its purest form, which is free from regulations and redistribution of wealth through taxation, only a small percentage of the population can achieve economic prosperity at the same time; meanwhile, the masses wallow in poverty; the winners reap extraordinary riches, while the losers struggle to survive. That's why pure capitalism is, essentially, a jackpot economy—the winners win big, but are few in number.

In the 1800's, America and Europe practiced pure capitalism. For most people, it was the economic equivalent of slavery. Even though no one legally owned anyone else, the endless work hours and deplorable living conditions of the workers rivaled those of slaves. In Europe, pure capitalism was so horrible that it inspired Karl Marx to invent

communism, which he called “the workers’ paradise.” In America, anarchists threatened to overthrow the government by means of revolution. Fortunately for America, the emergence of labor unions, government regulations, and tax-funded government assistance programs (like Social Security) afforded the working class a bearable lifestyle, so revolution was avoided.

Today, right-wing Christians lament our impure form of capitalism and wish to return to the good old days of pure capitalism. Every time someone suggests that the government regulate the harmful behavior of the wealthy or redistribute wealth to the needy, right-wing Christians cry, “Socialism!” or “Communism!” in an attempt to make anyone who opposes pure capitalism look like an evil extremist. In reality, pure capitalism is an evil extreme in which the wealthy and powerful may do whatever they want to oppress the poor. Communism and Socialism are evil extremes, too. None of these extremes is a benevolent and effective economic system, and that’s why God imposed neither pure capitalism, pure socialism, nor pure communism on His people.

[Economic Note: Some people will argue that, in capitalism, everyone can be a winner; that America is the land of opportunity where if you work hard, you can get rich.

It’s certainly true that hard work can lead to great riches. But only if it’s combined with having profitable God-given talent, knowing the right people, and being lucky (such as having the right market conditions, or being wealthy enough to have the time to develop skills. Those who lack wealth may have to work too many hours to have time to develop marketable skills).

However, it’s only on the individual level that hard work, etc. *might* lead to riches. On a national level, not everyone can be rich or close to it. Even if all Americans were to work their hardest and get PhDs, they wouldn’t all prosper. Our economy would still need as many cashiers, janitors, shelf-stockers, lawn-cutters, etc. as it does today, and during tough economic times, a significant percentage of people would still be unemployed. The only difference would be that all of these people would now have PhDs. The reality is that the majority of jobs in America are low-paying, and regardless of how hard everyone tries, the majority of people will be working-class poor.

Economic Note #2: As for the desire to return to the “good-old days of pure capitalism,” in which the government left everyone alone...well, they weren’t so great after all. From the founding of our federal government in 1787 to 1932, this nation experienced seven depressions and spent approximately 47% of it’s time in recession/depression. However, from 1933 (the beginning of the New Deal and its various programs designed to redistribute wealth) to 2008, this nation only spent 14% of it’s time in recession and has yet to experience a depression. There’s a reason we don’t do everything the way the founding fathers did—we’ve learned from their mistakes the hard way and have learned how to do it better (albeit, not perfect).]

3. Lower Taxes/Limited Government

The purpose of government is to protect its citizens from suffering. The government does this by eliminating the causes of suffering. Take law enforcement and the military, for example. Violent criminals inflict suffering upon the innocent, so the government seeks to eliminate criminal violence by funding law enforcement through taxation. Likewise, terrorist attacks and invading armies inflict overwhelming suffering upon humans, so the government spends billions to protect us from these ills as well.

Most conservative Christians support these uses of tax money to protect people from suffering. But for some reason, when it comes to protecting citizens from starvation, exposure, chronic pain and death due to lack of health care, and having their incomes stolen by the schemes of the greedy, conservative Christians cease to believe in protecting people from suffering through taxation and government regulations.

Why is this?

Why do we Christians tend to believe that the government has no business following God’s lead by creating business regulations and taxing those who have abundance in order to eliminate suffering and ensure quality living for the masses?

Reason 1: We don’t believe in mandatory mercy.

Since we Christians bury our heads in the New Testament and neglect the Old, we ignore God’s design for the nation of Israel and build our entire poverty-relief theology out of Paul’s statement to the Corinthian church in which he says, “Each of you must

give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver [II Corinthians 9:7].” Like the entire New Testament, this statement addresses individual Christians, not a government. It’s not an anti-taxation statement. Rather, it encourages those who already pay taxes to give out of their take-home pay as they see fit (the Romans paid taxes just like we do, so their situation differs little from ours). This verse lacks political value since it addresses individual hearts rather than government laws.

God’s political approach of requiring taxation and compassionate behavior for the sake of eliminating poverty is what I call *mandatory mercy*. Why did God insist upon it for Israel? Because mandatory mercy is the only method by which *all* people can be free from poverty. The *voluntary charity* solution promoted by right-wing Christians rescues only a select few from poverty, and, as a result, has never come close to eliminating poverty in any nation in the world’s history (it also failed to eliminate American poverty prior to the New Deal in the 1930’s, despite the fact that America had a much higher percentage of Christians back then than it does now). Voluntary charity is necessary, largely because most world governments fail at mandatory mercy. But voluntary charity is not God’s preferred weapon against poverty—mandatory mercy is.

Reason 2: We think voluntary charity works better.

I challenge anyone to find a nation, past or present, that took care of its poor through nothing more than individual, voluntary charity, and did it as well or better than the United States has done through forced redistribution of wealth. Ancient Israel may have done as well or better, but as I’ve already demonstrated with numerous Bible verses, God forced them to redistribute wealth.

Conservative Christians are quick to point to huge dollar figures that prove how charitable we are as a nation. According to GivingUSA, U.S. charitable donations exceeded \$300 billion in both 2007 and 2008. That sounds like a lot—until you compare it to the 2.2 trillion dollars the IRS collects and redistributes annually. Remember that almost all government spending creates jobs for working class Americans (directly or indirectly) or provides them with direct income through entitlement programs like

unemployment compensation. So you could say that the government's forced charitable donations equalled approximately seven times as much as was donated through charity.

Also, \$300 billion in charitable donations pales in comparison to the \$1.8 trillion that the wealthy invested in hedge funds in 2008 (this according to a speech by Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner as recorded in *The Return of Depression Economics* by economist Paul Krugman). Hedge funds specialize in short-selling stocks, that is, they borrow stocks from the stock-owner's brokers and trade them, so they contribute no capital investments to companies and are of no benefit to anyone.

And let's not forget the trillions the wealthy spend on mansions and vacation homes. When they buy an existing mansion, all they do is give another wealthy person millions of dollars in exchange for a house. This is yet another example of the wealthy doing things with their money that help no one. The wealthy, through stock trading, real estate purchases, etc. are simply exchanging money with each another in a financial game of king of the hill.

The truth is that the wealthy only give a small percentage of their excess wealth to people in need and to capital investments that create jobs. And most of the donations they do make go to universities, the arts, and special interest organizations ranging from the ACLU to PETA, but not to those boring poor people who need it most. Why should the wealthy (or anyone, for that matter) determine who deserves charity? Isn't it much better to have a system in place where everyone who meets a standard requirement (like being unemployed or being of retirement age) receives aid, rather than leave it up to the whims of the wealthy to determine who receives aid, how much they receive, and when they receive it?

Reason 3: Both Oppression and Mercy are immeasurable.

The Religious Right enthusiastically supports big law enforcement budgets, because the crimes of common criminals are easy to identify. If someone breaks into a home and steals \$10,000 worth of stuff, that's measurable. But if corporations fail to pay fair wages to workers so that they can never afford to own \$10,000 worth of stuff, that's considered permissible by the religious right, because it's hard to draw the line as to what wage is fair.

When corporations pay unfair wages and eliminate jobs for the sake of even greater profits, workers find themselves in need. When corporations steal from customers by lying about the products and services they sell (I've been in sales since 1993, and almost all sales reps lie, almost all advertising is deceptive, and almost all companies fail to deliver as promised at least a portion of the time), consumers find themselves in need. The only effective means of meeting their needs is through tax-funded wealth redistribution, whether it be entitlement programs or government-created jobs. It's only fair to support these programs by taxing those who have benefited from minimizing employee compensation and stealing from the masses.

That's not to say that taxation is a punishment for the oppressors. It's simply a means of ensuring that the working class is compensated for their sacrifices. The fact that taxation is not punishment, however, makes it hard for many Christians to relate to, because punishment is an easier concept to understand than taxation. If someone commits a measurable crime by stealing, they go to jail. That's a simple concept which most people can support. But if someone commits the immeasurable sin of failing to properly compensate workers, there can be no punishment, since we have no place to draw the line on what wages are livable and fair. But that doesn't mean we can't do something about it. We can still help the workers through mandatory mercy—a concept rejected by many Christians.

Reason 4: Taxes (supposedly) hurt the economy.

Some of us oppose taxation for the common good, because it takes money from the economy. However, it's not as if the government launches our tax money into orbit around Pluto, never to be seen again. Most American tax dollars (except for fooreign aid and foreign military expenditures) are spent right here in America, paying government workers, purchasing American products, and helping those in need. So the money circulates right back into our economy (unfortunately, the U.S. government has awarded some weapons manufacturing contracts to foreign companies, so not all tax money remains in the U.S.). In fact, those who receive money through something like Social Security are more likely to spend it here in America than the wealthy who are likely to

hoard it or spend it abroad, because low income people spend almost all of their money on necessities (food and shelter) which usually come from the local economy.

Contrary to what conservatives say, redistribution of wealth from the wealthy to the working class is actually *good* for the economy. This is because the economy thrives when the working class, which makes up the majority of the population, has buying power. If the working class is poor, and only the wealthiest twenty percent can afford to buy new cars and furniture, sales of these items will suffer. The wealthy will not choose to spend their excess money on extra cars and furniture—at least not to the extent that it will compensate for the rest of the population’s inability to purchase these items. Instead they may hoard their money to build a family fortune, spend it abroad buying \$10,000 bottles of champagne on the French Riviera, or use it influence politics in their favor. But they will not purchase as many consumer items as the working class will if it has the buying power to do so, and the economy will, therefore, stagnate.

Reason 5: Poverty is (supposedly) Self-Inflicted.

Throughout the 2nd half of the 1900’s, America experienced an unprecedented phenomenon: nearly all hard-working, responsible people could support their families by simply doing their jobs each day. For example, my father raised a family of five on one income during the 70’s and 80’s by working in an auto parts factory. As long as he went to work each day (and worked overtime), the family could live reasonably well.

During this period, it was usually those unwilling to work or addicted to drugs who were poor. Their poverty was self-inflicted. All of us have known and worked with people who are so lazy and deceptive that they don’t deserve employment. Many of us would rather not pay taxes that help those who choose not to help themselves, and that’s one reason why so many Christians support right-wing politics.

As the 21st century continues, however, poverty will no longer afflict only the irresponsible. It will afflict the working class as well, in part because Christian support of right wing politicians enables them to reverse the programs and regulations that brought quality living to the working class in the first place. Many Christians today fail to realize that the widespread prosperity of the late 1900’s resulted directly from the growing power of labor unions (which ensured fair, livable wages for workers in the early years,

but. I'll admit, demanded too much for workers later on), and such government programs as Social Security and Medicare (which removed the financial burden of elder care from the working class), as well as unemployment and workers' compensation.

These institutions all had one thing in common: right-wing politicians opposed them from the beginning. Had right-wing politicians always gotten their way, labor unions and government programs that ensured the working class a quality lifestyle would have been squelched at the start, leaving working class Americans in poverty, as they had been in the late 1800's and early 1900's. If Christians continue to support right-wing politics, most of us Americans will return to the poverty that our ancestors once suffered.

Reason 6: Some people abuse the system.

Many of us oppose taxation for the common good, because some people take advantage of government programs intended to help the poor. I've known of people who extracted every penny possible from government assistance programs in order to spend some or all of it on partying and expensive clothing. The wealthy hate to see their tax money pay for such things, while the working class hates to see lazy people abuse the system in order to enjoy a better lifestyle than they do. Indeed, those who abuse government programs are in sin, and our government should do all that it can to eliminate such abuses.

Fortunately, the government has taken steps to reduce these abuses. For example, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 reduced welfare rolls by approximately two-thirds by 2006. That doesn't mean abuses no longer exist, but we may at least take comfort in the fact that welfare constitutes only about one percent of annual IRS revenue.

Some argue that, because of abuses, we should eliminate these programs altogether. But we must remember that the intended beneficiaries of most government aid are children. They cannot be held responsible for their parents' abuses of the system.

While program abusers are indeed a problem, we must not allow their sins to harden our hearts toward the well-being of all people. When we insist upon massive reductions in government spending, and the resulting elimination of government programs, agencies, and regulations, we seek to restrict the government's ability to fix

problems and protect us from those who would do us harm, whether they be violent street gangs or greedy corporations.

4. Economic Growth

For those who insist upon drastic reductions in taxes and government spending, their rallying cry is that lowering taxes, especially for the wealthy, benefits everyone, because it gives the wealthy more money to create jobs, and that helps economy.

However, tax cuts like these are only beneficial when the government fails to cut spending accordingly. For example, the Reagan tax cuts of the 1980's helped the economy recover from recession, but that's because the government failed to decrease spending despite the cuts, more than doubling the federal budget deficit from 32.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1981 (when Reagan took office) to 66.1% of GDP in 1993 (when his VP George H.W. Bush left office). Likewise, a decade later, George W. Bush combined tax cuts with lack of spending cuts to raise the deficit from 56.4% in 2000 to 83.4% in 2009 when he left office (Source: FY 2011 White House Budget).

Had the Reagan and Bush administrations cut spending to compensate for the decreased revenue from the tax cuts, the economy wouldn't have fared as well, because nearly all government spending (except for foreign aid) creates jobs and income for Americans. Even if the government builds a bridge to nowhere, the money it spends on it pays American workers to build it and American companies to supply the materials, and they, in turn, pay their workers. Cuts to government spending, whether they be projects or entitlement payouts (like Social Security), cut people's incomes, which cuts their spending, which hurts the economy.

As for job creation, the Reagan tax cuts/increased spending were effective, but the George W. Bush tax cuts of 2001-2003 failed. From the beginning to the end of his first term, Bush's tax policies had created 0.0% job growth despite a growing population (source: Bureau of Labor Statistics). And by the end of his second term, unemployment numbers sky-rocketed as the economy collapsed into its worst recession in over 70 years. Bush's job growth record was the worst for any president since Herbert Hoover. But Hoover took office just as a depression was about to hit, so he had an excuse. Whereas, George W. Bush inherited a good economy (the 2001-2002 dot-com recession only

decreased GDP by 0.3%—one of the mildest recessions in U.S. history), and it took eight years of his economic policies to ruin it.

The lesson here is that cutting taxes hurts a good economy by giving the wealthy additional money to waste on short-selling stocks, gambling, vacationing overseas, and over-speculating on such things as real estate and oil futures, which in 2007-2008, helped crash the economy. The modern reality is that most wealthy people choose not to create jobs with their tax savings. They have much sexier things to do with their money.

Even when the economy has been good in recent times, however, it only seems to benefit wealthy. I've been a part of conversations with other working class people in which we had expressed concern over the fact that making a living had become more and more difficult, despite the news reports that the economy was in great shape. We'd been told that the increased wealth of the wealthy would trickle down to the working class, but it never happened.

As we learned in Ecclesiastes 5:10-11, the trickle-down effect inaccurately portrays the behavior of the wealthy. Wealthy businessmen see employees as an expense that is to be minimized, just like all other expenses. They pay their employees as little as possible and charge their customers as much as possible in order to maximize profits. That's the way the corporations work, and that will never change. Rarely does a company raise wages or lower prices because their tax bill shrank. Never in the history of the world has the trickle-down effect improved the lives of a nation's working poor.

All of this is not to say that economic growth is unimportant. We need a prosperous national economy in order to ensure quality living for all Americans. However, we must understand that economic prosperity isn't everything. Sometimes, we have to sacrifice a little bit of economic gain in order to protect people from the harmful effects of the greed that fuels capitalism. We must balance economic well-being with the well-being of all people by compromising, not by embracing extremes. God achieved this balance in ancient Israel, and America achieved this balance in the late 1900's. Let's not allow this balance to slip away in the name of Republican Christianity.

5. Freedom

A common argument of right-wing Republicans is that America is founded on freedom, and that those who impose taxation, along with government rules and agencies that prevent abuse of workers and consumers, oppose this freedom. They claim that the corporations and the wealthy should be *free* to do what they want and spend their money the way they see fit. It sounds like a good argument at first, that is, until we hold it up to the fourth Fundamental Freedom of the Christian Faith (from the Christian Freedom study)—the freedom from the harmful effects of each others sins.

Many right-wing Christians would love to eliminate tax-funded programs like OSHA so that corporations may be *free* to save money at the expense of employee health and safety. They'd eliminate the FAA so that airlines may be *free* to save money at the expense of the lives of flyers and employees. They'd eliminate the minimum wage so that corporations may be *free* to pay employees so little that they'd be unable to afford food and shelter. And, of course, they'd eliminate Social Security and Medicare so that the wealthy may be *free* from paying taxes while the working class elderly are left to die penniless or rely on their working class children to pay their expenses and health care bills while simultaneously trying to support families of their own.

What the right-wing Republicans and Libertarians really want is for the government to get out of the way so that the wealthy are free to oppress the masses while they hoard for themselves far more wealth than they could ever enjoy. That's not true freedom. That's Somalian freedom. Somalia is a country that effectively has no functioning government, so the cut-throat, unscrupulous, self-seekers profit at the expense of the innocent and the meek who have no freedom because they must hide and live in fear of the oppressors. Or, as I stated before, it's satanic freedom, where people are free to promote their own interests at the expense of others.

However, in true freedom, the kind that God's laws are designed to protect, *all* people are free from the harmful effects of the selfishness of others, so that *all* people can enjoy some quality of life. Why does God want this for *all* people? Because *all* people are made in His image and deserve better than being paid as little as the free market will allow.

We must not allow any of these Principles of Oppression to take precedence over God's messages of mercy, because when it comes to economics, principles aren't important—people are!

Beware of the Pharisees and the Sadducees

You might think, based upon my anti-Republican rhetoric, that I'm a life-long, loyal Democrat. Nothing could be further from the truth, because I've never been a Democrat. I realized at an early age that the left-wing Democrats wanted to ban all guns, encourage divorce, abort unborn children, outlaw the eating of meat, legalize all drugs, protect the "rights" of criminals, create prison environments that fail to deter criminal behavior and that serve as fertile breeding grounds for gangs, promote a victim mentality among those able to help themselves, support frivolous lawsuits, and persecute Christians. That's why I became a gung-ho Republican-at-heart in my early teens. Like millions of American Christians, I was attracted to the Republicans, because I was repulsed by the Democrats!

After registering as a Republican in my late teens, it only took a few years to realize that the enemies of God's enemies were not God's friends. As I followed Republican legislation, I noticed that it always supported the interests of the wealthy and powerful at everyone else's expense. By the early 1990's, I realized that Reaganomics had only succeeded in making the rich richer, not at improving the lives of the poor and working class, because the wealthy never did pass their excess wealth down to the workers and consumers as President Reagan had said they would (I still admire Ronald Reagan, though, despite the atrocity of Reaganomics). In 1992, I registered in Tennessee as an independent, and I remain independent 'til this day.

Unfortunately, no party fully supports the honest, hard-working, law-abiding, responsible citizens of the United States of America who weren't born with silver spoons in their mouths or with rare wealth-generating gifts, like the ability to sing or throw a football. Until such a party exists, it's unlikely that I'll join one.

We must not kid ourselves into believing that when two sides oppose one another that one of them must be on the side of righteousness. Both sides can, and often do, represent evil. Imagine being in Poland in 1939, when both Nazi Germany and

Communist Russia invaded. The Polish had no opportunity to choose their new leaders, but let's imagine that they had. Who would you have voted for? The Communist-Russian Joseph Stalin, who represented the political left, or Nazi-German Adolf Hitler who represented the political right? To cast a vote for either would have left you with blood-stained hands, because both extremists represented evil. Hitler and Stalin were ideological adversaries, just like left-wing Democrats and right-wing Republicans are today, yet both sides opposed God's will.

Similarly, in Jesus' day the Pharisees and Sadducees were feuding religious parties. The Sadducees held only the first five books of the Bible to be the word of God and denied belief in the afterlife, while the Pharisees believed in the entire Old Testament and in the afterlife, too. Jesus also believed in the entire Old Testament and the afterlife. So did He support the Pharisees? No, He didn't! In **Matthew 16:6**, "Jesus said to them [His disciples], 'Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.'" He went on to explain that He opposed not their "yeast," but their teachings.

Despite the fact that Jesus had more beliefs in common with the Pharisees than He did the Sadducees, He opposed both sides, because both sides opposed God's will. To support either party would have been the equivalent of supporting that party's oppression of others and its promotion of man-made religious teachings over those of the Bible. Jesus protected His disciples from making the mistake of believing that one of two opposing parties must align with righteousness.

I don't mean to say that we sin by belonging to either the Democrats or the Republicans, but I do mean to stress that we must discern between their teachings and God's teachings. The only way to do that is by knowing the Bible thoroughly.

It's also imperative that our loyalties remain with God. His teachings must take precedence over those of our political parties, social groups, and even our nation. Those who claimed Jesus' name during His ministry and the days of the early church did so because they believed Jesus' teachings, and they obeyed His teachings above all else. Today many Christians call upon His name, but promote and obey teachings contrary to His, such as the promotion of the interests of the wealthy and powerful at the expense of the poor. If we don't believe and obey Jesus' teachings (and the Old Testament teachings He supported), then we really don't believe in Him.