

UNDERSTANDING THE WEALTH & POVERTY GAP
A PEEK THROUGH THE LENS OF JUBILEE-SABBATH
Jason Phelps, NTS Tom Nees Social Justice Award

Introduction

Poverty is a global issue, with staggering effects worldwide. Regardless of specific economic level, the poor are excluded socially, almost to a rule. My past experience as a missionary in inner-city St. Louis guides my primary concern with America's poor. Of course, America's poor are not the "extreme poor" of the bottom billion, over 70% of which reside in Africa. Therefore, I also researched global poverty; if Jubilee and Sabbath speaks to poverty in my own backyard, it must also speak to poverty worldwide as well.

Understanding Poverty: The Scope, Pillars & Problem

The poverty of the world is discussed by experts in levels. The lowest level is called "extreme poverty," referring to those who struggle to eat daily, and live without clean drinking water, access to medical care or education, roads connecting them to urban centers with jobs and resources, etc. Of the 7 billion people on our planet today, Paul Collier, Professor of Economics at Oxford and former Director of Development Research at the World Bank, estimates 1 billion enjoy unprecedented affluence. The next 5 billion are on their way to a similar affluence. However, the bottom 1 billion experience a reality more akin to 14th century medieval times – plagues, civil war, ignorance and lack of resources – *but* in the midst of the 21st century technological reality.¹ There is a growing chasm not only between the top 1 billion, but also the top 6 billion, with the bottom 1 billion experiencing a completely different world on the global scene.

While scholars agree America's poverty is a different poverty from the "extreme poverty" of the bottom billion outside our borders, the gap between the wealthy and the poor is just as present. In America today,

- One percent of the nation's population controls 42 percent of the nation's resources.
- Five percent controls 72 percent of the resources, leaving 95 percent of America to divvy up only 28 percent of the resources.
- The richest 1 percent has an annual income of \$1.3 million, while the average citizen lives on \$33,000.
- Over the last 20 years, the top 1 percent's income has increased by 33 percent, while the other 90 percent has remained mostly static.

In fact, the Census Bureau estimates, as of 2011, around 50 million people are in poverty in America.² When those who are considered to be "low-income," around 97 million people, are

¹ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

² Travis Smiley and Cornel West, *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*, (New York: SmileyBooks, 2012), pp. 15-18. Also, Edward Royce, *Poverty and Power: The Problem of Structural Inequality*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), pp. 1-14.

added to those in “poverty,” the estimates place 48 percent of the US population in poverty or low-income situations.

We must understand not only that the divide exists between the wealthy and the poor, but also the traps contributing to the divide, and the problems created as a result. At least four major traps must be addressed in extreme or generational poverty. One is *social or political conflict*, including civil wars and genocide, but also racism, sexism, mass incarceration and the like. Second are *natural resources*, where the presence of oil or athleticism, for example, deflects attention from the economic situation. Third, the presence of *bad neighbors* land locks an entire nation in poverty, or even families in the “ghetto.” Finally, *bad governance* in a small area, which includes corrupt officials, politicians and societal leaders who abuse the poor for their own gain.³

These four traps are important to help us understand poverty globally and locally. These traps are not completely different, but also leave room for the unique qualities of each context to be applied. Now that we’ve seen the divide and the traps, what is the problem being created and supported in our global and local realities?

German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, states, “The opposite of poverty is not wealth, but community . . . Persons become persons only in community, and a human community exists only in personal relationships.”⁴ The problem of the wealth/poverty divide is not economic inequality or even survival, but separation and disconnection. Poverty disconnects us one from another, and ultimately from God. Even experts in world economics implicitly realize this, “The main feature of the societies in the bottom billion was *divergence*, not development.”⁵ In the 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus* by John Paul II he states, “The poor are poor not because they are exploited by the rich. The great problem is not exploitation but marginalization. With some exceptions, . . . *the poor are poor and getting poorer because they are excluded, or exclude themselves, from the circle of productivity and exchange.*”⁶ Poverty affects people in many ways, but some of the most destructive ones are exclusion, violence and loss of freedom. The poor are stripped of freedom and excluded from participation in society or community, often by means of violence.

With an understanding of our world’s reality, the contributing traps and the resulting problem, we turn to our main question. What does God’s Jubilee concept in scripture say about how we should view and approach this world, in particular those without, the excluded and forgotten?

³ These have been slightly adapted from Paul Collier’s *The Bottom Billion (ibid)*. Also see, Richard John Neuhaus, 2007. "THE REALLY POOR." *First Things: A Monthly Journal Of Religion & Public Life* no. 176: 65-66. Academic Search Elite, EBSCOhost (accessed January 8, 2017), p. 65.

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, kindle ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), loc. 3569-3600.

⁵ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 10.

⁶ As told by Richard John Neuhaus, 2007. "THE REALLY POOR." *First Things: A Monthly Journal Of Religion & Public Life* no. 176: 65-66. Academic Search Elite, EBSCOhost (accessed January 8, 2017), p. 66 (italics added).

Jubilee & Sabbath

The clearest description of Jubilee is found in Leviticus 25; here, Jubilee and Sabbath are intrinsically linked together. The Sabbath, the Sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee are all tied together, creating one rhythm given by God to *create* and *protect community* in Israel. I will argue for the Jubilee-Sabbath practice as a spiritual discipline, or a sacrament, having political results.

We'll begin where the rhythm began, with the Sabbath. On the Sabbath, everybody rested from work for the whole day, including animals and the land. Yet, Sabbath was not merely about resting from work – it was a day consecrated to God for the purpose of reconnecting us back to God. The Sabbath was not to be the connection, but only a guide, an opportunity, reminding us of our need to connect with God and with one another in community. Sabbath disrupts the interruptions of a society that can so subtly disconnect us from God.

The Sabbatical year extends the holy disruption into an entire year. During the Sabbath year, people were not to sow their field or prune their vineyard. Everything was to rest. Yet, people still needed to eat to live. So, a foundational practice of the Sabbath year was that all were welcomed to join together to glean from the fields during the year. It did not matter who owned the land and crops, all were included to benefit from whatever the land produced that year. The picture is animals, slaves and owners, all together picking food to eat. Barriers building between owners, workers (lit. slaves), animals and the land can only build for six years. Then, all must come back together to share in the truth that life is meant to include the other. Life is good when we have a community where we all pursuing one another's good – including our animals and our land. A reflection of the very nature of God and his creation patterned after his image.

After seven Sabbath years (49 years), the next year (the 50th) was a proclamation of jubilation announced by a ram's horn, proclaiming freedom through restoration and release. The meaning of the Hebrew word for jubilee (*yobel*) is “bring back” or “send back solemnly or abundantly.”⁷ People who had lost land and resources resulting in selling their labor to live, were restored back to their families and the management of their land. When we see the connection with the Sabbath Year, a “kind of solemn homecoming together with liberation from value or previously mentioned economic disadvantages” is understood. “It is a ‘freeing, freedom of movement.’”⁸ Therefore, if hard times had disconnected you, Jubilee brought you back. It reconnected you, and was thus called a year of release or freedom!

The Role of Kinsman-Redemption (the Goel)

Another very important component to the Jubilee/Sabbath rhythm of life was the “*goel*,” the kinsman redeemer. This concept appears 15 times in Lev. 15, and 48 times in other contexts (like Ruth for example), making it an important part of the society or community that God intended. The *goel* refers to family law best translated “kinsman-redemption.”⁹ The practice of kinsman-

⁷ R.G. North, “*yobel*,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 6, ed. David E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1990), p. 3.

⁸ North, p. 3.

⁹ Shear, p. 25.

redemption was vital to Jubilee/Sabbath laws as it sought to maintain social life within a tribal context on a day-to-day basis.¹⁰

Kinsman redemption was for when or if a land-owning Israelite fell on hard times and needed to sell their land. It was the responsibility of the wealthier relatives (clan members) to purchase land, or purchase it back if someone outside the family/clan had already purchased it. If the situation became so dire that the poorer family member had to sell themselves, the kinsman was to redeem them by bringing them into the service of their family as a bonded laborer, even if that meant buying them from another tribe or family. The very real and possible scenario existed that a few wealthy individuals or families could own the majority of land, and even people.

Jubilee and Sabbaths laws safeguarded the massive accumulation of wealth by a few, at least from being generational accumulation. These rhythms and laws were societal practices continuing the everyday kinsman-redemption practices. Essentially, Jubilee, Sabbath and kinsman redemption understand the land, labor and resources to exist for community, not hierarchy or status. Every 50 years, a particular culture and context was brought back to a place of general equality so all could be reconnected. Without ongoing kinsman-redemption, Jubilee loses its emphasis on community and family. These practices sought to protect relationships by protecting every person's freedom within the community.

One of the major philosophical conflicts our world has with Jubilee, Sabbath and kinsman-redemption is ownership. The Jubilee-Sabbath practices do not harmonize with our unchecked world that values possession over personhood. We'll explore the concept of ownership next through the lens of Jubilee-Sabbath.

Ownership

The principles and practices of Jubilee will always seem to be an idealistic impossibility if we do not wrestle with the concept of ownership. Instead of "owning," Leviticus 25 uses the term "holding" (*qāhuzza*). People were able to sell their labor and their crops, but not their land or themselves for God already owned them.¹¹ Therefore, "Leviticus 25 is punctuated by foundational theological statements concerning the land and the people. . . . [it] cannot be owned because God already owns it (v. 23). Israel possessed it only by gift, their inheritance as members of a divine-human kinship system."¹² The laws of the Sabbaths and Jubilee are held together by understanding that holdings were not sold in a proper sense, but leased.¹³

In fact, Jubilee-Sabbath practices confront narratives of ownership. To own something means to possess it, whether land, animals, houses, or people. Jubilee calls for the release of those things. A culture prizing ownership creates a society where value is extracted from possession rather than personhood. When the good life (happiness, blessedness, etc.) comes from what you possess rather than who you are, then the more one possesses the more one is truly

¹⁰ Helmer Ringgren, "ga'al" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Vol. 2*, ed. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1977), pp. 351-352.

¹¹ Kawashima, pp. 380-383.

¹² Shead, p. 22.

¹³ Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) pp. 2149-2151.

blessed or happy. Unfortunately, I've not experienced many people who grow in the amount of their possessions as well as their ability to release those possessions at the trumpet call of God.

Without a stop-gate to curb the lies of ownership, society can develop whole structures valuing ownership over personhood. For example, monetary value can be assigned to people, not their labor or skill, thus opening the door for people to be owned (slavery). These systems and cultures widen the divide separating those who own and those who are sold, the wealthy and the poor.

Ownership can make violence acceptable. If I have an equal right to own something, whether be oil or land, and owning that would substantially make my life better, then obtaining it by violent means is justifiable. The lure of ownership creates poverty. The four traps of poverty – conflict, natural resources, bad neighbors and bad governance – come from people seeking to own what in their own estimation is rightfully theirs, or will make their lives better. Ownership justifies taking things, a reality any parent of young children can attest to. Jubilee-Sabbath practices release ownership of things to God, releasing the need to secure things at the price of other's lives.

One of the biggest problems with ownership is that it attaches us to things over our attachment to God and others. When wealth can be accumulated and used as a resource for status and happiness, then we attach our love and desire to possessing those things. The culture of ownership is characterized by consumerism and materialism. There is never an amount that is enough, because with the increase comes an ever-increasing abundance of status. For example, the highest paid person at a company also gets the largest bonus. If we were to pay based on necessity for life, how would we redistribute our pay scale? Perhaps Jubilee doesn't call for an overhaul of paying people for their output, but rather Jubilee-Sabbath practices seek to lessen the gap between the top and bottom of a work place.

Abandoning "ownership" is not an appeal for socialism, or communism. Jubilee-Sabbath rejects the narratives of ownership more than the word. "The motive clause in Lev. 25.23, 'all the land belongs to me [Yahweh]' (which could originally have been Canaanite and referred to Ball), does not mean that private ownership was either excluded or unrestricted, but rather that property relationships among individuals were to be so regulated that all, rather than just a few, could live in true freedom."¹⁴ What the Jubilee-Sabbath practices offer us is not so much a law of anti-possession, but a philosophy of possession. Practically we may ask today, "Can I own a car, or do I always lease?" or "Can I own a house or only rent?" Jubilee-Sabbath philosophy doesn't prohibit us from owning property, it *orders* our loves. By practicing a Jubilee-Sabbath life, we seek to love God with our entire being, our neighbors, ourselves and even creation. Thus, our "citizenship" belongs to a whole different realm, our ownership or possession is always at best a '*tenantship*'. In other words, *we do not properly own, we only hold what God owns.*

The Development of Jubilee in Isaiah

As time progressed and the society of Israel developed, a call for the Lev. 25 life of Jubilee, Sabbath and kinsman-redemption is renewed in the prophets. Isaiah is a good example. Isaiah 35 likens God's redemption of the poor, the lame, and the blind to creating a garden in the desert. Abundant life is pictured as a flourishing gardens filled with streams of water. Isaiah's picture

¹⁴ North, p. 5.

includes all. Everyone was welcome to come and live in this community. “It is not just return from exile that gives cause for such joy; indeed, joy cannot be everlasting (35:10) unless it flows from sabbatical harmony of relationships. In other words, there is arguably already a hint of jubilee in the new divine redemption that Isaiah describes so joyfully.”¹⁵

True Jubilee is still true Sabbath in Isaiah. A life of Jubilee-Sabbath is precisely what Isaiah 58 calls for. However, what is pictured is not meaningless spiritual disciplines or practices, done only for our own good. Jesus would eventually elaborate on this point when he called people to a righteousness surpassing that of the Scribes and Pharisees’ (Matt. 5.20). Merely following laws as means of securing our own good (legalism) excludes others who don’t follow our laws. This disposition (sometimes under the guise of ‘holiness’) leads to separation and disconnection. If Sabbath and Jubilee practices are to be consistent with Jesus’ call for righteousness, then they too will need to be practiced in ways aiding reconnection with God, others, ourselves and all of creation. Isaiah calls for this in chapter 58. The results of a Jubilee-Sabbath life is offering food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, clothing the naked, satisfying the needs of the afflicted (Isa. 58.7-10). A true Jubilee-Sabbath life is inclusive of all, and it is rightly ordered and connected to community and God.

Jesus and the Jubilee-Sabbath Life

Jesus too calls for the Jubilee-Sabbath life when he reads from Isaiah in Luke 4.16-20. Jesus uses the word “release” (*aphesis*, v. 18), which is from the LXX and connects Isaiah 58 and 61.¹⁶ Interestingly, *aphesis* does not reappear in Luke’s account until after Jesus’ resurrection, begging the question about how “release” and Jubilee are connected to Jesus’ resurrection. What does this mean for our understanding and practice of Jubilee?

Jesus’ and his Jubilee announcement is connected to every aspect of Jubilee and Kinsman-redemption, Sabbath day and year, and eschatological hope. Jesus proclaims freedom to the excluded – those without, left-out and forgotten. Healing the blind, lame and lepers; men, women and children; Gentile or Jew – all were included by Jesus in the life of the Kingdom. The life of Jubilee-Sabbath that Jesus lived included any who desired to participate. Not only did Jesus’ life and teachings seek this, but Jesus also sought to free all to participate in his kingdom (the life of the Divine and Triune community) by giving his own life to free people (John 3.16-17).

A life of Jubilee-Sabbath looks like the cross, but in the light of the resurrection. In other words, we give our lives to include all who are disconnected so they may fully and freely participate in the Triune community of God with us. We do this, not simply to do what Jesus did, but because we have the hope of Jesus’ resurrection. Death is not the final word.

Actually, it *should* not be the final word. Unfortunately, too many know nothing greater. When I lived in St. Louis we ran a basketball ministry at the inner-city non-profit where we served. Each night, after playing basketball, we’d stop and talk about Jesus, the Bible and life. One of my good friends posed a question to group of 16-18 year-old boys, “What would y’all do, if I said I’d give you \$1,000 today or \$1 million in five years?” After the initial skepticism of trying to figure out if it was an economics trick question, they each said they’d take the \$1 million. All except one kid, who had already been in jail a couple of times. “Shoot,” he said, “I’d

¹⁵ Shead, p. 26.

¹⁶ For a more detail on this point see, Shead, p. 31-33.

take dat \$1,000 today! And so would all y'all! None y'all know if you gonna be here tomorrow, or next week. I never thought I'd see 21 years ol'. Brotha, I'd take dat money!"

The reality of the finality of death is better understood in the hood, much more than a reality of the hope of resurrection. A life of Jubilee-Sabbath is an organic fruit growing out of a life of hope. When death is the more known reality, we believe we own things and have to own things. If we don't we may lose it, and if we lose it life would be much worse than if we can secure it. Thus, we stockpile, hoard, compound, increase, secure, make safe all kinds of things...all under the guise of stewardship. We, the Church, exclude others from leadership and even the community because they don't secure our things. We move the location of our meeting space and even our homes because of "safety," education, and employment. All these choices are made because "God doesn't ask us to risk our families." Placing ourselves in situations considered dangerous is not wise. The Greeks agree (1 Cor. 1.18-25). Yet, God did all of these with his Son. Jesus chose to do just this, and called it life.

Can we really know the "eternal kind of life" Jesus talks about without death? Can we really "own" things? Imagine life without ownership, not even owning our very lives; we are free! We are free to *be* the freedom to everyone, doing whatever it takes; offering freedom to prisoners, the blind, mute, lame, to Africans in extreme poverty, to Americans in poverty, to anyone who we may call neighbor. We do this through our love for the other. A life of hope loses nothing for we own nothing. All is gain when we return to relational connections, which are the essence of what binds our reality together. Not because it feels good, is economically rewarding or builds a successful church congregation. It is all gain when we fully and freely include others to participate in our communion with God. We continue to deepen our love for God with our entire being, and our love for our neighbor, ourselves and our world (Matthew 22.37-40). This is the very essence of Jubilee and Sabbath.

Jubilee & the Traps of Poverty

We now can see that God's Jubilee-Sabbath forms people, and communities of people, to address the wealth/poverty divide and all its traps. Jubilee calls the church to go to those trapped by *conflict* – genocide, high homicide rates, and mass incarceration. A life of Jubilee is a life of peacemaking. We must seek peace politically and globally, but it starts in our neighborhoods. We must go to the places and people whose lives are surrounded by conflict and learn how to seek peace. We can listen to, stand with and sometimes speak for those who are attacked and unjustly accused in our world due to the weight of their bank account, the color of their skin, the gender they identify with or their sexual preference.

A Jubilee life addresses the natural resource trap. Whether it is calling attention to the abuses of people overseas in the diamond trade, oil or even palm oil trade, or in our American inner cities where many black kids are forgotten. Having undereducated people keeps costs down at restaurants and certain stores, having a natural resource of people who aren't "qualified" for high wages allows us to underpay people for menial labor jobs to serve those with a substantial income. Jubilee notices those who work the jobs that are underpaid. Personally, if we see them as our neighbors, we would tip better at restaurants, give handouts to people more often or pay employees better. Basically, we would release the resources we have been gifted by God to others, and not abuse others in veiled attempts to own their resources.

The third trap of poverty is being landlocked by bad neighbors. This coincides with being locked in civil wars and such. In Africa, some of the poorest countries do not get much or any aid sent to them because their neighbors steal it before it can get there. Likewise, they cannot go outside to trade with others because of their neighbors. In inner city America, many good people who are in poverty are simply surrounded by many other people in poverty. There is little interest or knowledge how to change any situation, especially in generational poverty, and with the absence of those who aren't poor. In fact, if someone has skills that can benefit the community and contribute to leading them out of poverty, they are encouraged to leave. Jubilee calls us to enter these communities. Jubilee is incarnational. It doesn't deplete communities of their best people. It becomes a part of neighborhoods that are ignored and overlooked, or even feared. Jubilee calls us to literally love our neighbors.

Jubilee is also a call to the church to speak out against bad governance. Many today have become more vocal about how our government has misused welfare and healthcare for the poor. This is great. However, a great example of Jubilee is Jesus' critique of religious leaders and the religious institution. Telling people they can give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God gives power back to the people (Luke 20.20-26). If it belongs to God, and not the religious institution, then why worry so much about things? There are many implicit practices in our religious institutions that exclude people from our communities. Jubilee intentionally practices opportunities to discern our community's love and inclusion of others. Jubilee asks the question whether we are empowering people to be free, or enabling people into serving a machine.

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