

# AGAPE-GENEROSITY—“CHARITY GIVES ITSELF RICH”

Mt 6:1-6; Lk 19:9; I Thess 3:6-5; Eph 4:28; Prov 6:6-11, 21:25-26; Ps 68:5

## I. CONTENTMENT CLUE: SIMPLICITY FREES US (cf. I Tim 6:6-8)

- A. To T.S. Eliot, Christianity is: “A condition of complete simplicity / Costing not less than everything.”
- B. Says Thoreau: “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail.”

## II. GENEROSITY KEY #1 (for me, taking John Wesley’s “Use of Money” sermon prescription)

### A. Gain All You Can (cf. Lk 16:9; II Thess 3:6-5; Eph 4:28): honest work good, enriching the *commonwealth*

1. Without harming one’s own mind or body (virtue of temperance)
  - a. Physical: avoid excessive hours, unnecessarily dangerous tasks
  - b. Spiritual: guard against neglecting spiritual priorities (taking “time to be holy”)
2. Without violating the law (natural, divine, positive), doing harm to one’s soul
  - a. Natural/Divine laws such as not stealing, coveting
  - b. Just human laws, including taxes, property use
3. Without harming one’s neighbor (financially, physically, spiritually)
  - a. No enticing schemes (Ponzi schemes, investment “opportunities”)
  - b. No harmful employment practices (hours; working conditions; money)

### B. Save All You Can (cf. Prov 6:6-11)

1. Preserve, maintain, exercise productive talents & save assets—doing maximal good as long as possible
  - a. A long life, well-lived, enables wise, sustained charitable activities (whereas rash giving diminishes)
  - b. Understanding the nature of economics & banking (deposits/loans) and stock investments important: money saved enables others to flourish as they borrow for houses, start-up enterprises
2. Accumulate nothing (or little?) purely for display i.e. “pride of life” (Veblen’s *conspicuous consumption*)
3. Devote nothing (or little?) to superficial “delicacies” in food, raiment, etc. (prestigious restaurants?)
4. Train children (and others, including parishioners, benefiting from instruction—e.g. Dave Ramsey) to be industrious & self-reliant, but leaving them no (or small?) fortunes

### C. Give All You Can (cf. Mt 6:1-4; Prov 21:25-26)

1. Only? after rightly providing for self, family
2. Consider yourself God’s steward with regard to all possessions (e.g. “tend” Garden/resources)
  - a. Acting obediently in accord with God’s will (prompted by Spirit re personal calling)—thus at times “extravagantly” as did woman anointing Jesus’ feet with perfume
  - b. Acting wisely with regard to God’s stuff (remembering not to waste or wrongly distribute)
3. Tithing (N.B. actual O.T. prescriptions) embraced as biblical/reasonable guideline

## III. GENEROSITY KEY #2 (for us, addressing needs of surrounding world—borrowing historians’ outline of FDR’s New Deal!)

### A. Relief: Help the Helpless/Needy/Poor/Widows/Orphans (Ps 68:5; James 1:27)

1. Compassion (feeling with) hurting world, opening heart to the less-fortunate
2. Action (doing right for) needy by giving alms, supporting charitable agencies (N.B. Mt 6:1-4)
  - a. Prayerful attention to both others’ needs & personal resources (hopefully leads different Christians to support different charitable endeavors)
  - b. Prudential evaluation of others’ predicament, crafting best solutions, empowering trustworthy caregivers—studying, consulting, knowing “NO!” may be most appropriate

### B. Recovery: provide ways for needy to recoup losses, earn their own way without assistance

1. Training unemployed for employment: teaching how to garden rather than giving vegetables
2. Providing opportunities for needy to work: rich tradition of Church-sponsored industries (cf. Marvin Olasky’s *The Tragedy of American Compassion*)

### C. Reform: attend (both as individuals and as the Church) to social-political realities/opportunities

1. Education: Church’s ancient concern for education—primarily by proclaiming the Gospel, then carefully explaining Christian/Biblical Ethics anchored in Revelation re God and man
2. Business: applaud worthy entrepreneurs & craftsmen; support healthy legal/regulative milieu; establish, in needy areas, “cottage industries” supervised by committed Christians, small-scale loaning agencies
3. Finance: protect the innocent from usurious schemes; encourage wise investment

### ***THE POVERTY OF NATIONS***

While teaching Ethics in the 1970s I often used, as a supplementary text, Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in a Hungry World*, thinking Sider surely knew more than I and properly assessed the issues he addressed. Two decades later, Sider announced that though his biblical perspectives were defensible his economic positions had been skewed by his misunderstanding of free market economics. Thus it's good to consider a book I wish I'd had in the '70s written by a fine theologian (Wayne Gruden, PhD, University of Cambridge, now teaching at Phoenix Seminary) and a skilled economist (Barry Asmos, PhD, now serving as a senior economist at the National Center for Policy Analysis) titled *The Poverty of Nations: A Sustainable Solution*. Blending their expertise, they seek "to provide a sustainable solution to poverty in the poor nations of the world, a solution based on both economic history and the teachings of the Bible" (p. 25). They provide a richly-documented and amply-illustrated treatise, engaging and understandable for anyone concerned with rightly alleviating poverty in our world.

Asmos and Gruden first focus on the right "goal" to pursue: increasing a nation's GDP, which means producing valuable goods and services. Though popular programs for redistributing existing goods (through taxation or apparently benevolent "aid" programs, or "debt-relief" subsidies for poor countries, or "fair trade" crusades allegedly helping poor coffee farmers, or printing more money) may momentarily appear to reduce poverty, ultimately such endeavors do little to improve economic conditions. Depending on donations is not God's ideal for human life on earth. "God's purpose from the beginning has been for human beings to work and create their own goods and services, not simply to receive donations" (p. 72). Certainly there is an important place for charitable assistance and governmental "safety nets," but real economic development requires wealth-creation through the creativity of a people adding to their community's goods and services. In short: "Producing more goods and services does not happen by depending on donations from other countries; by redistributing wealth from the rich to the poor; by depleting natural resources; or by blaming factors and entities outside the nation, whether colonialism, banks that have lent money, the world economic system, rich nations, or large corporations." Only one objective should prevail, the "primary economic goal" of "continually producing more goods and services, and thus increasing its GDP" (p. 106). This is best done through a free market economy.

Rightly defined: "A free-market system is one in which economic production and consumption are determined by the free choices of individuals rather than by governments, and this process is founded in private ownership of the means of production" (p. 131). The authors carefully distinguish between the free-market system they support and the "crony" or "state" or "oligarchic" forms of capitalism they reject. In particular, to function rightly, the free-market requires the "rule of law" that extends to political and business elites as well as ordinary folks. Poor countries almost always have poor (i.e. corrupt or incompetent) leaders! Property must be protected, contracts and deeds must be upheld, and harmful products must be banned. A free-market cannot work amidst anarchy, so good government is essential. And the free-market also needs a stable currency and low taxes to encourage the development of goods and services. Various aspects of free market economics—specialization, trade, competition, prices, profits and losses, entrepreneurship—are explained and defended. "The genius of a free-market system is that it does not try to compel people to work. It rather leaves people free to choose to work, and it rewards that work by letting people keep the fruits of their labor" (p. 133).

Neither one person nor any bureaucracy guides the free-market economy—the collective wisdom of countless individuals making choices enables it to work well. This meshes well with the Bible's celebration of "human freedom and voluntary choices" (p. 188). Sustained by a free people the free-market works! "With no central director or planner, it still enables vast amounts of wealth to be created, and the benefits to be widely distributed, in every nation where it is allowed to function. No other system encourages everyone to compete and cooperate, and gives people such economic freedom to choose and produce, and thus enhances prosperity. Slowly but surely, countries around the world are seeing the win-win nature of a free-market system" (p. 184).

There is, furthermore, a moral as well as economic component to the free-market. By encouraging individual freedom and responsibility, free markets recognize the intrinsic dignity of persons created in the image of God who create the goods and services basic for human flourishing. Taking care of oneself, acting in one's self-interest, must be distinguished from covetousness. As Brian Griffiths says: "From a Christian point of view therefore self-interest is a characteristic of man created in the image of God, possessed of a will and a mind, able to make decisions and accountable for them. It is not a consequence of the Fall. Selfishness is the consequence of the Fall and it is the distortion of self-interest when the chief end of our lives is not the service of God but the fulfillment of our own ego" (p. 208).

## *JUST GENEROSITY*, by Ron Sider

“My years of academic study and activist engagement have taught me . . . First, you have to know more than biblical norms, and second, you must dare to specify concretely what should be done. The Bible does not say a word about whether we should raise the minimum wage or adopt a particular proposal for universal health insurance. We must combine solid, sophisticated socioeconomic analysis with normative biblical principles of justice if we are to formulate wise, effective social policy.

“I have also learned—sometimes from painful personal experience—that good Christians don’t always get their politics right” (p. 14).

“I will argue that there are four broad causes of poverty: structural causes [e.g. loss of manufacturing jobs]; personal decisions and misguided behavioral patterns [e.g. single-parent families, drug abuse]; sudden catastrophes [e.g. auto accidents, disabling diseases]; and permanent disabilities [e.g. blindness, old age]” (p. 36).

“People are made both for personal freedom and communal solidarity. The God who cares so much about each person that the incarnate Creator died for the sins of the whole world and invites every person to respond in freedom to the gift of salvation demands that human economic and political systems acknowledge and protect the dignity and freedom of each individual. Any economic order that denies economic freedom to individuals or reduces them to a factor of production subordinated to mere economic goals violates their individual dignity and freedom” (p. 52).

“Fair procedures are certainly at the heart of biblical justice. Scripture frequently demands honest courts unbiased toward either rich or poor . . . . Equally clear is the insistence on honest weights and measures for fair commercial exchanges . . . . Without doubt these two types of justice—which scholars sometimes call procedural justice and commutative justice—are biblical imperatives.

“But is that all? According to the biblical perspective, is distributive justice (the fair distribution of wealth, resources, and power) satisfied as long as the procedures are fair, even if many people are quite poor and others are very rich?” (p. 55). **[N.B.: Sider’s “distributive justice” is better termed “redistributive justice” since “distributive justice” generally refers to such things as life, liberty, property. Re-distributing wealth (e.g. income) or power is basic to socialist thought.—G. Reed]**

“Under Yahweh, however, each family had their own land. Israel’s ideal was decentralized family ‘ownership,’ understood as stewardship under Yahweh’s absolute ownership” (p. 62).

“Justice demands that every person or family has access to productive resources (land, money, knowledge) so that have the opportunity to earn a generous sufficiency of material necessities and be dignified participating members of their community. This norm offers significant guidance for ways to shape the economy so that people normally have the opportunity to earn their own way” (p. 67).

“Religious institutions are—along with the family—the most influential components of civil society” (p. 85). “Harvard economist Richard B. Freeman discovered that the best predictor of whether young black, inner-city males would escape the syndrome of drugs, crime and prison was church attendance” (p. 85).

“Because the best single predictor of whether a child will suffer the agony of poverty is whether Mom and Dad are married. Marital status is a better predictor of who will become poor than education, race, neighborhood, or family background.

“The data is [stet] stunningly clear. Children in one-parent families are eleven times more likely to experience persistent poverty than children in two parent families” (p. 121).

“One of the most important ways to promote economic justice today in industrialized nations is to be vigorously pro-family” (p. 129).

“Quality education is the best way to empower the poorest, most disadvantaged children” (p. 156).

## THE TRAGEDY OF AMERICAN COMPASSION

Since 1965 the U.S. has spent trillions of dollars fighting the “war on poverty” launched by Lyndon Johnson. But “poverty” persists, apparently sinking ever deeper roots as fertilizing monies are applied to abolish it! Most of us, if we’d been investing in a speculative enterprise which went bankrupt, would stop investing, however passionately its board of directors presented their pleas. Illogically enough, the architects of the welfare state still insist that more money is needed to bail out a bankrupt system! Good sense, one would think, would say enough’s enough and find something better. That’s basically the argument of Marvin Olasky in *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, blending ample research with readable prose.

As the book’s title indicates, “compassion” in America has taken some “tragic” turns, devouring the very people it allegedly helps. The word means to “suffer with,” thus personally identifying with and caring for persons who have needs. But recently “compassion” has come to mean “feel for” victims of inequitable social systems. As used the media, it’s become “a synonym for ‘leniency’” (p. 196) and justifies everything from grade inflation to trivial sentences for murderers to massive punitive awards in civil cases. Similarly, people living in poverty no longer have “needs” but “entitlements.” Rather than asking for help, they’re encouraged to demand their “rights.” Such rhetoric reflects a major shift in America’s moral tradition, turning away from the Christian understanding of man as innately sinful to a humanistic belief in his essential goodness. An acknowledged sinner confesses his “needs” and asks for help, but a self-esteem-full secularist demands “entitlements,” arguing he’s a victim of his environment.

To help us understand these developments, Olasky takes us on an instructive historical survey. From 1620-1900, Americans demonstrated what Alexis de Tocqueville described as “‘compassion for the sufferings of one another’” (p. 219). They followed the call of the Gospel, as understood by John Wesley: “‘Put yourself in the place of every poor man and deal with him as you would God deal with you’” (p. 8). Yet they refused, following Cotton Mather, to subsidize sin by tolerating idleness: “‘Don’t nourish ‘em and harden ‘em in that, but find employment for them. Find ‘em work; set ‘em to work; keep ‘em to work’” (p. 9). Such guidelines, rooted in Scripture, prompted the formation of thousands of benevolent associations, designed to help those in need. They implemented programs such as that designed by Thomas Chalmers (the great Scottish theologian) in Glasgow in the 1820’s. His effort, “described as ‘thoroughly Christian in its severity and its generousities’” (p. 25), effectively cared for the needy and reduced poverty-related problems in his parish. As Olasky sums up Chalmers’ program, “four key principles” stand clear. First, discern the difference between laziness (“pauperism”) and real need (“poverty”). Second, resist government programs which encourage pauperism by discouraging personal discipline and self-help. Third, to help those in poverty Christians must become personally involved, for the poor need much more than material assistance. Fourth, those who take no responsibility to escape poverty must be abandoned to suffer the consequences of their decisions.

Thus most “compassionate” Christian associations followed a “tough love” agenda. Understanding the depravity of man, caring Christians refused to be manipulated by the con-men ready to live by others’ labor. Many charitable organizations had wood-lots next to their campus, insisting that able-bodied men cut wood before getting assistance. The wood was subsequently delivered to poor widows. They sought, by careful investment of time as well as resources, to discern the “truly needy” and provide “charity” in appropriate ways. Their “compassion” sought to free men and women from their predicaments, not to dole out enough benefits to make them comfortable in their deprivation. The success of such endeavors impressed observers such as Jacob Riis, whose *How the Other Half Lives* illustrated the misery of tenement-dwellers in New York. Despite many problems, Riis wrote: “‘New York is, I firmly believe, the most charitable city in the world. Nowhere is there so eager a readiness to help, when it is known that help is worthily wanted; nowhere are there such armies of devoted workers.’ Riis described how one charity group over eight years raised ‘4,500 families out of the rut of pauperism into proud, if modest, independence, without alms.’ He noted another ‘handful of noble women . . . accomplished what no machinery of government availed to do,’” rescue 60,000 street kids (pp. 100-101).

Importantly, these charitable organizations openly called people to God. Volunteers felt they were, above all, on soul-saving missions—giving material assistance was simply part of the project. Without God’s assistance, little hope was offered the alcoholic, the drifter, the unwed pregnant woman. Today’s governmental welfare agencies have effectively eliminated God as a source of help in dealing with addictions or climbing out of poverty. But the poverty question is ultimately a theological question, as Olasky makes clear. When secular thought prevailed, the Christian approach to “charity” was swept aside. “Bad charity drove out good charity” (p. 127). So now it’s time to reinstate the good! There’s a way that worked, Olasky insists, and if government turned over “welfare” to charitable organizations real “compassion” could be restored to the fabric of American society. Whether or not Olasky has the solution I’m not sure, but he at least shows one that did quite well for 250 years. He also documents that the one we’ve followed for 100 years has tragically failed. So at least it’s time to explore some alternatives!