

Is Christianity Compatible with Capitalism?

Isaiah 58:1-9; Luke 6:20

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

Shout out; do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

² Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments;
they want God on their side.^[a]

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.

⁴ You fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator^[b] shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and God will say, “Here I
am.”

[Jesus] looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

This morning, I want us to ask a big question. There are lots of big, important questions we *could* ask this morning:

- What is the best flavor of donut?
- Is there a right way to load the dishwasher?
- Is every Taylor Swift song *basically* the same?

But those are not the questions we will ask. I want to ask something less controversial. I want to ask is the way of Jesus compatible with a capitalist economy?

It’s the kind of question that’s SO big that we don’t bother even asking it. It sits there among us, the elephant in the room. Occasionally, we glance at it, it glowers back at us, and we turn away and hope someone else will deal with it. But for the next 15 minutes, I want to hold this question in front of us. We should not be afraid of big, complicated questions. Every week we ask, “is God real?” At the very least, we can ask, “Is the economic system that defines our material reality compatible with the will of that God?”

Where to begin? Let's briefly define some terms. Economics is from the Greek word "oikos," which means "household." Economics is how we get the material stuff of daily, household life—like donuts, dishwashers, and Taylor Swift playing her similar-sounding song on a brilliantly-conceived device assembled from parts that were sourced across the globe. In capitalism, capital is privately held or held by corporations. Work is specialized—you don't make donuts *and* dishwashers, you make one or the other, and then donuts and dishwashers and music are all traded in what's called the free market. Capitalism is decentralized—its genius is that it allows lots of us acting on our own to still coordinate. Markets in capitalism are considered "free," but governments play a *huge* role; governments create the "level playing field" of rules: how money works, making sure banks function, and government provides a police force to protect private capital. Governments also step in to provide things that that markets don't provide or the few things we still consider public goods: like water and roads. That's capitalism.

Capitalism is *awesome*. No economic system the world has ever seen releases the productive capacities of human beings like capitalism. Some of you are going to start thinking I'm a shill for the American Enterprise Institute. I'm not. The motive to make profit inspires people to ingenuity and hard work; capitalism is dynamic and responsive to human wants and needs. As a force for eradicating poverty, no ideology in the history of the world has been more effective than capitalism.

What's not to like? Why even raise questions about capitalism in a church on a lovely Sunday in January? Well... it's his fault. We raise these questions because today is MLK Sunday. And Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. asked lots of questions about capitalism. No question was better than, '*Why are there forty million poor people in America?.*'

It's a good question. In the year King returned to Atlanta from Montgomery, 1959, the national poverty rate was an alarming 22.4%. In Alabama and Georgia, it was 30-50%. King's question hasn't out of date, either. Last year 37 million of our neighbors made less than the equivalent of \$26,500 in a year for a family of four.

King wanted to know why this deified economic system is fine with some of us remaining poor. The point of an economy is to distribute material goods that people need to survive. Why do we abide by a system that allow so many of us to go without basic needs? '*When you ask questions about poverty,*' King said, '*you begin to question the capitalistic economy.*'

We celebrate Dr. King for demanding that our nation's laws treat every person the same, no matter the color of our skin. But law in America is not just about civil rights—American law is designed to protect property rights. In America, laws protected the owners of capital; and guess who makes the laws? owners of capital. To achieve real justice, King knew you had to change the law, and you also had to challenge the legitimacy of those who own the capital.

The founders of our American system drew heavily from the Englishman John Locke, who wrote, in his 2nd *Treatise of Government (1680s)* that *every person owns the labor that comes from their own bodies*. It's a cool idea, but if you take it seriously, it means that white people spent 300 years looting the property of black people. We built wealth, we built institutions to

perpetuate wealth, we wrote laws and tax codes that protected and increased our wealth, we prevented laws from being passed that would re-distribute even ill-gotten wealth, and we wrote zoning laws that make sure the wealthy lived only with other wealthy folks, ... and the poor... well, hey, it's a free market. Good luck. In America, you can get a seat on the bus and you can drink from the water fountain and you can even get to vote, but King knew that if you didn't start poking around in economic system, there would never be justice.

King was somewhere between a social democrat and a democratic socialist. He never articulated his economic policy because it would have been politically untenable. But his approach to economics is distinctly Christian. The US Constitution never says that we have a right to a basic standard of living. But Dr. King thought that the Bible and God did.

Justice and wellbeing for the poor is the primary Biblical economic principal. The prophets rail against exploitation by the rich. Ancient Israel wrote rules for community life that require forgiveness of debts, require leaving the edges of the fields unmown so those who are poor can always eat, and require care for those on the economic margins—the widows and the orphans. God comes to Moses in the Burning Bush—why? Because God hears the cries of God's people in our oppression, God comes to deliver us to a land flowing with milk and honey. The Exodus is about economic liberation. Jesus shows up and the very first sermon he gives quotes Isaiah: "I've got good news for the poor"—that good news is not that when you die, you go to heaven (although you will); the good news is that if you are poor, God sees you and loves you and that in the Community of Jesus followers, God is creating a model for the world in which those who have been hurt and hungry and homeless are brought from the margins into the middle of the community. The Good News in Jesus is new life in which we leave behind our sin—including the sin of economic injustice and the sin of letting any neighbor go hungry.

The Bible shows us over and over people who love God and who, because we love God criticize and transform economic systems that make some people rich and leave others poor. The Bible also says that the people of God model alternative economic arrangements in which resources are shared.

In the church, we must criticize an economy that provides an overwhelming stream of clients for the free fridge, for DCM, DEAM, IAH.

The first thing we must do is name poverty what it is: a manmade evil. Poverty is not natural or inevitable. It is a choice we make. It's a bad choice.

We have to see capitalism for what it is. It is a powerful, dynamic economic system that is easily perverted and corrupted. Capital tries to extract as much value as possible from workers and give as little as possible in return. That's not moral. In that kind of system, followers of Jesus have an obligation to be on the side of workers. That means that we

- Insist on living wages and good benefits
- Protect the rights of immigrant workers
- Supporting unions, which give workers the power to negotiate for their own wellbeing

The church has to continue to be a powerful advocate for the social safety net. There are some goods the market will not or can not do.

- There's no reason for anyone in any community to be homeless or hungry.
- The market stinks at making homes affordable. The government has been eroding support for affordable housing for decades. To be fair, the government gives generous housing support every year: to rich people in the form of the mortgage tax deduction.
- The market is terrible at providing healthcare when there's a profit motive. The closing of Atlanta Medical Center is a prime example. Everyone should be able to go to a doctor when we're sick. Period.
- I think the church should be advocating for Guaranteed basic income.

If you and I who believe that God's will for our world is economic justice—we have to do what King did, which is fight for these things and organize to achieve them.

Capitalism is beautifully decentralized, and marvelously inventive. But something about this system seems off. It seems to distort our imaginations about what it is to be a human being. Walter Rauschenbush, the great social gospel preacher at the beginning of the 20th century said, "[Capitalism has overdeveloped the selfish instincts](#) in all of us and left the capacity of devotion to larger ends shrunken and atrophied."

- This system wants us to be selfish. It wants us to love things. It manipulates our desires.
- It asks us to justify making profits over the wellbeing of people;
- Capitalism never takes responsibility for its true costs—a company is “successful” if it can privatize its profits but socialize its costs.
- Capitalism tries to say again and again our highest goal is self-interest—that our world works best when it's “everyman for himself” and that your suffering is your problem.

That's not the world God gave to us and that's not the image of human life and human community we find in Jesus Christ. In baptism, we discover that we are Beloved, whether we produce a profit or not. At the Lord's Table, we model an economic relationship of abundance and generosity and love for one another.

We belong to the Body of Christ; our value is infinite, no matter our productivity. In God's world, our relationships with the earth and with each other are to be defined by love, compassion, dignity, and justice—it's what we see in Jesus. Jesus didn't count the cost of love and say, “it's too much.”

In the letter to the Ephesians, in the great appeal to our unity in Christ, the writer says, “So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”

We are members of the *household of God*. In our economic life—in all parts of life—may we love each other as members of one family.