



EMBRACING ECONOMIC LIBERTY: A COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE AND MERCY

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It must be remembered that 95 per cent of the peace, order, and welfare existing in human society is always produced by the conscientious practice of man-to-man justice and person-to-person charity. When any part of this important domain of personal virtue is transferred to government, that part is automatically released from restraints of morality and put into the area of conscience-less coercion. The field of personal responsibility is thus reduced at the same time and to the same extent that boundaries of irresponsibility are enlarged.¹

When you ask people if they believe in freedom and liberty, everyone will say yes. Moreover, when you ask people if they believe that the presence of justice and mercy are marks of a good society, you will get a positive response. However, when you press them to explain what they mean by this, you will be surprised by the variety of answers. The purpose of this paper is to explore the meaning of liberty, justice, and mercy, especially as they relate to economics. In the course of this exploration it will be shown that embracing free enterprise and economic liberty promotes human dignity and provides the institutional structure in which justice and mercy will most likely flourish. By contrast, trusting government coercion alone to promote the good society is most likely to lead to despotism and tyranny, which undercut human responsibility and destroy society's original object.

BEARING THE IMAGE OF GOD

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he

*created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion..."*²

In the opening chapter of Genesis, Moses told his readers that God had made everyone, man and woman, in His image. But what does it mean that we bear the image of God? Theologians have written extensively about this subject. First, it means that human beings are like God in some sense. Human beings possess a mind and self-awareness. Thus, we are capable of gaining knowledge about the world we inhabit. In addition, we are moral and possess an inherent sense of right and wrong. Furthermore, not only do we possess our bodies in a living form, but we possess a spiritual dimension. These things set human beings apart from every other living creature, since it is assigned to mankind alone to possess a spiritual nature. As a result, mankind engages the world in ways that animals never will. There simply is no history of animal philosophy. Throughout the Scriptures, God is revealed as a spiritual being; thus the presence of a spiritual soul in every human being is an attribute connecting every person to his creator. Since God's knowledge is complete, human knowledge is possible even though it is always incomplete.³ While these attributes are pertinent to any discussion of what it means to bear the image of God, one aspect of the image of God is especially applicable to the realm of political economy. The attribute of personal sovereignty is foundational. God created man to take dominion and to rule the world. As the ultimate Sovereign of creation, God granted to mankind the right to rule His creation.

That someone would bear the image of God was a common idea at the time Moses wrote Genesis. As Edward Curtis observed, "References to men as images of god in Egypt and Mesopotamia show that, while occasional reference to others is found, the king was the focus of the idea in both cultures."⁴ The claim was that the king was responsible for understanding God's will and for using his power to direct the people to accomplish God's will in the world. By telling everyone that they bore the image of God, Moses elevated all people to the level of sovereignty that had been assumed for only the king. Moses told his audience that all men and women, literally everyone, were kings and queens. This idea was radical. Such a statement marked a significant advance in establishing the worth of the individual human being. Consider the context in which Moses penned his words. The nation of Israel had been enslaved by the Egyptians and put to forced labor. God called Moses to deliver the people out of bondage and lead them to a promised land. To escape Egypt and reach the promised land, the people would have to depend on God, rather than on Pharaoh and his assertion that he alone bore God's image. In a real sense, Moses demystified government. Moses was pointing out that people were meant to be self-governing. That is, each person was to determine God's will for his life and carry it out in the pursuit of an overarching goal of taking dominion over the cosmos and reproducing more images of God within it. Prior to the fall, there was no need for an institution of state government. That is not to say that there were no authority structures, but only that there was no need for an institution that we call state government.

In order to accomplish his or her purpose, each person has to engage the environment. To achieve a self-defined end, the individual has to acquire the necessary means by accumulating the materials and resources at hand and directing them to the accomplishment of the goal. In this sense, all human beings act with purpose. They use the resources they have acquired to accomplish their ends. Moreover, since human beings are created in the image of God and possess creativity, we can imagine ends far beyond what we can accomplish with our current stock of resources. Our imagined goals give rise to the concept of economic scarcity.

At first we are inclined to discount the reality of scarcity. After all, God originally put Adam and Eve in a garden where all their needs were met. But He did not tell them to stay there. Instead, He instructed them to take dominion over the whole world and turn it into a garden. They were going to have to choose what they would do at any moment. We still make similar choices. Since we can never accomplish all that we can think or imagine with the resources at hand, we must make choices. This is the meaning of economic scarcity.

Scarcity is a basic environmental condition of living on this planet. To deal with it, each person must practice economy. To put it another way, each individual is required to employ his limited means frugally if he is to achieve as much as possible. In addition, each individual must choose which of his many ends is the most important and then allocate resources to achieve the most valued purpose. “Scarcity is not a problem to be solved once and for all; it is a continuing reality.”⁵ It is simply an established feature of the created order which requires human beings to work to accomplish their ongoing ends. There is no final destination to the dominion mandate. Its continuation is indefinite. As a result, every individual choice to use resources in one way precludes using those same resources another way, and every choice involves a cost. Economists refer to this as opportunity cost.

The study of economics is the study of how people go about defining and achieving their ends in a world marked by scarcity. Economics examines the ongoing process of man’s interaction with the world. One of the first questions in the study of economics is “How does one acquire the means to achieve his ends?” Let us reconsider the beginning of creation. Our first parents were initially placed in a garden filled with a wide variety of vegetation producing all manner of fruit. The garden served as a point of reference for what the entire world could be. Work was necessary; if the man and woman were hungry, they had to pick the fruit of the trees. Initially the means of production were held in common, with the exception of one’s own labor. If anyone was hungry, he could simply find a tree or bush with produce and pick its fruit and eat it. The resulting means to end one’s hunger became his personal or private property.

The process of interacting with nature inevitably leads to tension and the possibility of interpersonal conflict. As people multiplied on the planet, they competed with one another for the resources which were naturally provided. What happens when one person goes out to seek fruit from a familiar tree, only to find that someone else has come along and picked it clean? How will he respond? Looking for another tree to find more fruit will take time and energy, and he may not look forward to the search. If he is antisocial, he may blame those who got to the tree earlier for causing him the additional expenditure of effort to find new fruit. In our modern vocabulary, this situation is called “the tragedy of the commons.” That is, when resources are held in common, they tend to be over-utilized.

The situation is not necessarily tragic, however, if the people involved maintain the right attitude. As long as the resources are held in common, anyone is free to acquire the fruit of the tree. Once it is picked, the fruit becomes the property of the person who picked it. So what would be the right attitude of the person frustrated to find no fruit on the tree? He has many options. Since the dominion mandate is to fill the whole earth and subdue it, he can move on to another area where there are fewer people and less competition. Or he might try to cultivate his own orchard, thereby securing a more plentiful supply. If he is successful, the resulting orchard will be his own private property and will no longer be part of the

commons. The orchard becomes like already-picked fruit. What we call today the *tragedy of the commons* is a tragedy only because we refuse to adequately respect the rights of others. The *tension of the commons* ought to lead naturally to the further development of private property as man exercises greater dominion over the cosmos. As such, “All economic activity entails the use or transfer of property.”⁶

This truth leads to another important point. Suppose you could consume only what you were personally able to produce. You would not live very well. Take something as simple as a ham and cheese sandwich. If you had to produce all the ingredients in that sandwich by yourself, it would take at least a year of effort. Just to produce the bread would require you to find or grow the wheat, harvest it, mill it into flour, and cultivate a source of leavening such as sourdough; you would also need to build an oven. Then there are the long processes needed to produce the ham and the cheese. If we had to act as solitary producers, even simple things would be beyond our reach. This is why we engage in trade with one another. Trade greatly enhances our economic well-being. It binds our lives together as we serve the interests of ourselves and others.

Trade is mutually beneficial because the division of labor results in greater output. By dividing among ourselves the tasks of any productive endeavor, we greatly enhance our total production. Think of the many thousands of people involved in various production processes that produce all the ingredients for ham sandwiches. Farmers grow wheat and sell their wheat to millers. Millers grind wheat into flour and sell the flour to bakeries. Bakeries bake bread, and so forth and so forth. The fact that people can focus on producing one thing helps everyone. What we find in market exchange is that people specialize their labor services and engage in voluntary trade. People not only achieve their individual ends, they also fulfill the desires of others.

Ludwig von Mises captured the workings of market exchange well when he wrote, “Liberty and freedom are the conditions of man within a contractual society. Social cooperation under a system of private ownership of the means of production means that within the range of the market the individual is not bound to obey and to serve an overlord. As far as he gives and serves other people, he does so of his own accord in order to be rewarded and served by the receivers. He exchanges goods and services, he does not do compulsory labor and does not pay tribute. He is certainly not independent. He depends on the other members of society. But this dependence is mutual. The buyer depends on the seller and the seller on the buyer.”⁷

Another advantage of the division of labor immediately becomes evident. Not everyone is equally gifted. While there are productive gains to be made from dividing up tasks, there are vast differences in people’s talents. Disparity of ability gives rise to comparative advantages, which result in additional trading opportunities. A comparative advantage exists when someone has a lower opportunity cost in the performance of a task relative to someone else. That is, what one person must give up to engage in some particular productive activity is less than what someone else must give up. The person with the comparative advantage does not have to be better at the task than the potential trading partner; that would be an absolute advantage. The only thing necessary for the possibility of trade is a lower opportunity cost. As the cost of executing trade decreases, trade increases, and trading possibilities abound.

There are, then, two economic ways of acquiring the means to achieve our ends: production and trade. Since trade is the exchange of one good for another good, it requires us to produce something valued by others. Voluntary exchange requires us to serve the interests of others if we are going to pursue our own purposes and goals. Profitable enterprises create wealth. Such profits are evidence of mutually beneficial trade. Alternatively, losing enterprises destroy wealth and provide evidence that resources are being squandered.

Beyond the two economic ways of acquiring means, there are two non-economic ways of acquisition. They are non-economic because they rely on the redistribution of someone else's production and do not add any output. First, you can steal what you want by taking something from someone else by force or fraud. This action is inherently unjust; therefore we need to explore the issue of economic justice. The second non-economic means of acquisition is charity. You can receive what you want as a gift from someone else. Although charity can be misunderstood and perverted, there is no injustice in it; therefore we need to explore the concept of economic charity as well.

THE MEANING OF ECONOMIC JUSTICE

The root from which theft proceeds is discontent with the portion God has allotted, and therefrom a coveting of what He has withheld from us and bestowed upon others.⁸

Everyone desires to live in a just society. But what does that mean? A commonly accepted definition of justice is *the virtue of giving everyone his due*. Justice involves the impartial application of laws. The laws themselves must be of the sort that can be impartially and universally applied. Given human nature and the mutual benefits of voluntary exchange, economic justice requires respect for private property, which in turn implies a commitment to free enterprise. If free enterprise, along with its institutions of private property and mutually agreeable exchange, is economic and a part of the natural order of things, why do we face so many economic problems? The answer is simple: Sin. By disrespecting God and His natural order of things, Adam and Eve brought sin into the world. From that point forward, all people have been born into the world with a sin nature. We naturally tend to disrespect not only God, but each other as well. We even disrespect ourselves. In passing judgment on Adam and Eve, God cursed the ground. As a result, nature no longer cooperates with us as we seek to take dominion over it. Nature even works against us. Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados, floods, droughts, and wildfires all disrupt our economic efforts by bringing destruction and ruin. Nevertheless, in passing judgment, God did not leave mankind without hope. He promised to bring redemption, and He set up a sacrificial system to remind mankind of His promise. Two important themes in the Scriptures are the issue of justice and righteousness (which people fail to uphold) and the issue of God's mercy, grace, and redemption (which He is bringing about through the course of human history).

The failure of mankind is told through countless examples both in the Scriptures as well as in recorded human history. For example, Cain's murder of his brother Abel aptly illustrates the progression of sin; it also points to our hope for redemption through the sacrificial system instituted by God. On the economic front, embedded in the story is the continuation of the created order and economic achievement. Cain became a farmer growing vegetables, while Abel became a rancher raising sheep. Their specialization

provided the opportunity for mutually beneficial trade. In his jealousy, envy, and pride, Cain did not value Abel enough to respect him and his property. When God rejected his offering, Cain, acting on his sin nature, apparently blamed Abel and murdered him. Abel valued God's promise, but Cain did not. Obeying his sinful passions, Cain dealt unjustly with Abel and lost God's spiritual and economic blessings.

Our sin and the perversion of our desires create all sorts of problems for us. The sinful passions of jealousy, envy, and greed often motivate us to acquire our economic means in a non-economic way. That is, we steal what we want from others. We try to obtain the means for achieving our ends by taking it from others by force or fraud. In free enterprise, people trade freely with each other for the things they desire. Coercive force and deceptive fraud undermine such trade and tend to destroy the free market and liberty. They also hinder our ability to take dominion, because theft is based on the redistribution of existing output and cannot be generalized. In other words, you cannot base an effective economy on theft. If everyone is trying to live as a thief, there is nothing to steal, because there is nothing produced. It is clear that economic justice requires a healthy respect for, and adequate protection of, private property.

Then how can we best protect and promote respect for private property?⁹ This question is immediately related to a sound understanding of the role of government in society. All people live their lives in conjunction with all other people. By nature human beings are capable of thinking, planning, willing, and acting. Our human attributes are part of bearing the image of God, and as we have already seen, people must be free to act. Purposeful action is appropriate behavior for human beings as long as it is carried out in ways that respect the coequal rights of others. Therefore the best form of government is self-government. As long as each individual acts in a way that fully respects the rights of others, harmony and cooperation result. As John Locke put the matter in his second treatise on government, "The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges everyone: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions."¹⁰

The ideal which Locke described has not been humanity's general experience. History offers ample evidence that some people have abused the rights of others in order to gain their own ends. Anyone who makes a close examination of his own life will discover that he has abused other people to some degree. "As an infant, man is observably self-centered, concerned only with his own desires and gratifications. Only slowly, and often painfully, does the child learn more sociable and thoughtful behavior, and if enlightened self-interest replaces self-centeredness as an adult, considerable progress has been made. In truth, man is subject to strong emotions, to fits of temper, may become violent, aggressive, and destructive. . . . It is these potentialities in the nature of man . . . that make [state] government necessary."¹¹

Human nature's tendency to disregard others raises obstacles to taking dominion and building civilization. How can mutually beneficial human action exist when people do not respect each other's property rights? To adequately address this question, we must more deeply explore the nature of human action. While it is true that people do not fully respect the rights of others, it is also true that they do not violate such rights absolutely and continually. That is, people do not behave as badly as they possibly could. If people behaved as badly as possible, no trade or social interaction would ever be possible; the desires of all people would compel them to continually trample on each other's rights. The result would be a world of

uninterrupted conflict and warfare as each person fought against all others to achieve his own ends. The world would be hell itself. If a perfect world of self-government has not been mankind's general experience, neither has absolute depravity. The real world falls somewhere in between the two extremes. Human experience is sometimes better and sometimes worse. For example, in the last hundred years the American experience has been by no means perfect, but it has been far better than that of Russia.

Given that life in the real world falls somewhere between paradise and hell, we can reasonably ask which factors will move us closer to paradise. It is clear that a community moves nearer to paradise only when the people in the community freely choose to recognize and respect the coequal rights of others. Without this volitional and individual choice, no such movement toward paradise will occur. One of the most important institutions in this regard is the family. One reason America has fared better than Russia is America's historical regard for the family. While the commitment to family life in America today appears to be fading, traditions die hard, and the benefits of even a memory are long lasting.

Consider the following example. Human beings are moral creatures whose choices matter. We are all born with a conscience of right and wrong, and our conscience can be either cultivated or squashed. Jennifer Roback Morse wrestled with the implications of conscience in her lecture "Putting the Self Into Self-Interest: An Economist Looks at Values."¹² She recounted some of the difficulties her family encountered rearing her son, who was adopted from a Romanian orphanage. Many of his difficulties stemmed from the way he was treated as a baby. Morse recalled her early efforts to help her son:

A short time ago, I attended a conference for parents and professionals who have a responsibility for Eastern European adoptees. At the conference, one of the mothers remarked, "My son was fed like a hamster." Perhaps that seems like a strange thing to say, but all of us in the audience that day knew exactly what she meant. For many of us have children who were fed by a bottle wired into place in their cribs. Our children were fed, and indeed raised, with minimal human contact.¹³

Morse went on to explain the difficulties such children have adjusting to social situations. They lack the ability to trust others in any significant way. They tend to withdraw into themselves and act in antisocial ways that harm their actual and potential relationships. They tend to be manipulative and calculating in order to gain whatever advantage they can, even at the expense of others. In short, they tend to disregard the interests of other people. As Morse learned of these tendencies in such children, she asked, "Who is this child?" She answered her own question:

Why, it is *homo economicus*: the person who considers only his own good, who is willing to do anything he deems it in his interest to do, who cares for no one. All of his actions are governed by self-interested calculation of costs and benefits. Punishments matter, loss of esteem does not. He does not self-monitor, so he can always find some opportunity to evade the rules. As to his promises, he behaves opportunistically on every possible occasion, breaking promises if he deems it in his interest to do so.¹⁴

Morse came to recognize that she and her husband had their work cut out for them if they were going to overcome these damaging impulses in the life of their son. She realized that the tendencies could be

overcome only by love, which meant applying discipline when discipline was needed, compassion when compassion was needed, and affection when affection was needed. She recognized that all the traditional aspects of good parenting would be needed to overcome her son's lack of trust and lack of affection for others. Because he had been abandoned from the start, such trust was alien in her son's life.

Because of original sin, children will not naturally respect the rights of others. Parents can give numerous examples of how their children are willing to violate others' rights to gain what they want. Parents must patiently and steadily use their position of authority to help their children develop the self-discipline necessary to get along with others. Some parents accept this task more readily than others, some are more gifted than others, and some have better insights than others. Parents will be more or less successful in promoting children's self-government. Unfortunately, some parents abdicate their responsibility and look to others to do what they should do themselves. Teachers and schools, pastors and churches, and even marketplace interactions can remediate and reinforce or undermine and destroy the efforts of parents, but these institutions cannot replace the family. When the family structure of a society breaks down, that society is heading for trouble.

The extent that parents are successful in helping children toward self-government will largely determine the extent to which the free market flourishes. Human beings make their choices on the basis of their highest affections at the moment of choice. An adult reared in a loving home, who has been taught the virtue of working to achieve his ends and the evil of stealing from others, will not consider stealing someone else's property even if he has the opportunity to do so. A person who comes to understand the general demands of justice will not be a threat to others. He will be a person who can be trusted. Such people are typically reared in good family circumstances where the parents take an active role in their lives. While some people develop self-discipline apart from a strong upbringing, it does not generally happen. Dysfunctional families tend to beget dysfunctional and antisocial human beings. The economy cannot thrive in such an environment, but despotism and tyranny can thrive there.

We now come logically to the issue of institutional government. In any society there will always be people who are more antisocial than the general population and whose activities can undermine civilization. When their excessive transgressions against others go unpunished, society breaks down. Therefore, the purpose of government is to punish antisocial behavior. As the Apostle Paul observed in Romans chapter 13, government exists to punish wrongdoers. Notice that the punitive function of government is limited and negative. In the case of economic justice, government should protect individual property rights by punishing thieves, adjudicating against fraud, enforcing voluntary contracts, and providing for national defense. For the most part, government action can be confined to state and local areas, although some issues will rise to the national level. We need to be careful not to expect more from government than government can realistically deliver. Government cannot right all wrongs or supposed wrongs, it cannot change the inward hearts of the people, and it most definitely cannot provide economic provisions for the people under its rule. Government action is always coercive; that is, government uses force to accomplish its ends. When we appeal to government action, we must always ask, "When is it appropriate for government to use force?" The answer is simple: it is lawful to use force for adequate self-defense.¹⁵

The force of government can be used to defeat its own purpose. Since one method of stealing from others is by force as opposed to deception, and since all government action is accomplished by force, what

prevents someone from using the force of government to steal what he wants from others? As the Psalmist laments, “Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who frame injustice by statute? They band together against the life of the righteous and condemn the innocent to death.”¹⁶

History is filled with examples of government authorities using their power to oppress and rob the people they were supposed to protect. They have accomplished their misuse of power in a wide variety of ways, all of which provided special privilege for some at the expense of many. Partiality in the law, bribery in adjudication of disputes, business subsidies, bailouts, protectionist tariffs, licensing agreements, and the monopolization of industries and commerce are all examples of the abuse of governmental power. In order to get away with this sort of theft, rulers must promote the illusion that they are benefactors of society. They must make people think that government is providing the economic means to the achievement of the ends people want. Nothing could be further from the truth, since government as an institution is dependent upon the produce of others to fund its existence. When people look to government to provide them with the means to their ends, they are asking the authorities to steal their economic wherewithal from their fellow citizens and are engaged in the most immoral sort of behavior imaginable. Under the guise of legalities, those with the most political clout use governmental coercion to steal from those without such influence. To engage in such coercion is to call good evil and evil good. Mankind is never more like Satan than when we practice this kind of foolishness.

THE PRACTICE OF ECONOMIC MERCY

*True religion can make no peace with a false philosophy, any more than with a science that is falsely so-called; a thing cannot possibly be true in religion and false in philosophy or in science. All methods of arriving at truth, if they be valid methods, will arrive at a harmonious result.*¹⁷

Economic justice is tied primarily to the rule of private property law, but what about economic mercy? Shouldn't people be disposed to grant relief to neighbors who are suffering economic deprivation? These are important questions. To answer them well, we must first consider the nature of mercy. Mercy involves the benevolence of a person's heart which prompts the person to overlook wrongs committed against him. It is also the nature of mercy to show another person unmerited favor. A merciful person is compassionate toward others, which means he is willing to suffer with someone else. Merciful actions always involve a voluntary choice. There is no such thing as forced charity or forced mercy. If one person is forced to suffer with another, then an abuse of power has occurred.

In order to succeed in the abuse of power, evil must attempt to present itself as light. In the case of consolidating power and using it for despotism and oppression rather than for legitimate self-defense, rulers often pretend that they are the charity workers in society caring for the least fortunate even as they oppress them and destroy their fortunes. It is paramount, therefore, to present and to defend an accurate definition of economic charity.

What is charity? In Paul's discourse on love in 1 Corinthians 13, the word *charity* is sometimes used interchangeably with the word *love*. Paul affirms that the key to all just action, as well as all charitable action, is love. One way to put the matter is that charity or mercy is denoted by a voluntary sacrifice

motivated by love. Based on this definition, economic mercy amounts to one person voluntarily giving another person one of his own possessions out of love for that other person. Genuine charity must be volitional. True charity on the part of the giver must be motivated by love. Mere outward conformity falls short of the target.

In this world we see all sorts of voluntary giving that does not rise to the level of charity because it is not motivated by love. Jonathan Edwards wrestled with this issue in his essay, *The Nature of True Virtue*.¹⁸ Edwards reasoned that true virtue lies in a benevolent love for God. Virtue is not any particular act, but rather a disposition toward ultimate being. Such love is bound to affect outward actions, but outward actions may be deceptive and may only appear virtuous. Edwards meticulously pressed this idea to its logical conclusion, noting that loyalty and outward love in a robber band falls far short of the love of being in general, and only love of being can rise to the level of true virtue. Since God has the power of being in and of Himself, true virtue can extend only from a person's benevolent love of God. Such love results in both just and merciful actions. Anything else falls short.

Indeed, the Bible says that all human action falls short. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away."¹⁹ Outward conformity to a moral code is insufficient to prove that a person is just and merciful, since justice and mercy are matters of the heart. The person's underlying motive is crucial. Externally adopting and living by the right laws cannot bring a person into an ongoing relationship with a holy God, since the person's actions inevitably fall short of virtuous perfection. Nevertheless, the Scriptures do call people to participate in both just and merciful human actions as a response to the charity of God in Christ. This is possible only in that Christ's love for the Father and for the Holy Spirit rises to the level of perfect virtue.

The legal code and the operation of state government can secure a degree of outward conformity to matters of just behavior only by punishing the worst forms of aggression by one person against another. Government cannot mandate charity, or it would destroy the definition of charity. A law which requires people to be charitable essentially uses force to take what rightfully belongs to one person and give it to one to whom it does not belong. In a 1952 essay on the subject of charity, Russell Clinchy observed:

The original concept of charity as an expression of love, now appears to have been replaced by a concept of government-guaranteed security. One possible explanation for the development of this concept of charity may be that so many people felt that personal responsibility in the dispensing of charity was too slow and inadequate. Thus they chose to move into the speedier method of the use of public funds. . . . But the method chosen was uncharitable because love was replaced by force. The spirit of charity was debased to "public welfare," and the shift from personal responsibility to grants by the state was on. . . . The element which gives meaning to charity is personal consideration and responsibility, but that element is lost when the edicts of the state are substituted for the voluntary decisions of persons.²⁰

Coercive actions by the state also undermine the possibility of authentic community. The nineteenth-century French economist Frederic Bastiat, in his book *Economic Harmonies*, wrote that "All men's impulses, when motivated by legitimate self-interest, fall into a harmonious social pattern."²¹ If this sounds like a

disregard of personal moral duty, a fuller assessment of Bastiat's statement proves otherwise. The study of economics has progressed along the lines of affirming Bastiat's words. Civil liberty is the condition in which individual people are free from subjection to the arbitrary dictates of others and in which the laws of society restrain people from violating others by force and fraud. If people are largely constrained to act within the context of civil liberty, they will tend to live in greater harmony. People are left free to pursue their ends by voluntary contract. While some ends will be more achievable than others, and some people will prosper more than others, the general trend is toward economic progress and the opportunity to develop more authentic communities. Hardships will still come, since the market by necessity changes and evolves as new discoveries are made and as values change. Still economic progress will be the general rule, and no man will be allowed to arbitrarily dictate and force others to work for his private interests.

Today many moral philosophers fear that such human interaction in the market, ruled by self-interest, is inherently unjust. They worry that while economic freedom with its free enterprise system does produce prosperity, it also undercuts morality. To put it another way, a modern assumption is that the private interests of people are forever antagonistic to one another. If our material interests are forever at odds with our own spiritual interests, and our own individual interests are forever at odds with those of other people, then the only solution is to coerce people to do what is right. If the fundamental problem is sin in which we all share, who among us is qualified to use force to accomplish the goal? If individual interests are always at odds with the general interest, no human institution or human being is fit to resolve the problem. Those who think this way embrace forced poverty as an ideal. To carry the idea to its logical conclusion, one would have to embrace the forced destruction of all mankind. This is perhaps the chief reason why all experimental forms of socialism end in violence and murder.

Modern moral philosophers have substituted the Kantian notion of virtue for the older Christian understanding of virtue. As C. S. Lewis wrote:

If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.²²

We live in a fallen world, and people fall far short of perfection. No one can deny the presence of evil. The question is, under what circumstances is evil self-limiting? In this world people suffer. All suffering is ultimately the result of sin. We can suffer because of our own sin, because of the sin of others, or because of sin in general. In terms of economics, people can suffer for many reasons. Some causes of suffering may need to be remedied by the punishing acts of government or by the merciful acts of others; however, some suffering may be a useful signal that prompts the sufferer to change his behavior. As Bastiat observed:

Society is composed of men, and every man is a *free* agent. Since man is free, he can choose; since he can choose, he can err; since he can err, he can suffer. . . . Now, all error breeds suffering. And

this suffering either falls upon the one who erred, in which case it sets in operation the law of responsibility; or else it strikes innocent parties, in which case it sets in motion the marvelous reagent that is the law of solidarity. The action of these laws, combined with the ability . . . of seeing the connection between cause and effect, must bring us back, by the very fact of suffering, to the path of righteousness and truth. . . But if evil is to fulfill this purpose . . . the freedom of the individual must be respected.

Now, if man-made institutions intervene in these matters to nullify divine law, evil nonetheless follows upon error, but it falls upon the wrong person. It strikes him whom it should not strike; it no longer serves as a warning or a lesson; it is no longer self-limiting; it is no longer destroyed by its own action; it persists, it grows worse, as would happen in the biological world if the imprudent acts and excesses committed by the inhabitants of one hemisphere took their toll only upon the inhabitants of the other hemisphere.²³

When someone is suffering because of his own sin, benefactors should intervene only with prudence and wisdom. If their actions facilitate the continuation of the behavior which caused the suffering in the first place, their aid may promote the faster decay of the person and increase his suffering. When we appeal to state intervention to eliminate all suffering, we promote greater degradation and the downfall of civilization. Individual responsibility is replaced by an entitlement mentality where an individual believes that others owe it to him to relieve all his suffering, regardless of whether his own actions caused the suffering. J. Gresham Machen saw this situation coming as state welfare grew during the 1930s. In his book *Christianity and Liberalism* he wrote:

The whole development of modern society has tended mightily toward the limitation of the realm of freedom for the individual man. . . . It never seems to occur to modern legislatures that although “welfare” is good, forced welfare may be bad. In other words, utilitarianism is being carried out to its logical conclusions; in the interests of physical well-being the great principles of liberty are being thrown ruthlessly to the winds. The result is an unparalleled impoverishment of human life. Personality can only be developed in the realm of individual choice. And that realm, in the modern state, is being slowly but steadily contracted. . . . When one considers what the public schools of America in many places already are—their materialism, their discouragement of any sustained intellectual effort, their encouragement of the dangerous pseudo-scientific fads of experimental psychology—one can only be appalled by the thought of a commonwealth in which there is no escape from such a soul-killing system. . . . The truth is that the materialistic paternalism of the present day, if allowed to go on unchecked, will rapidly make of America one huge “Main Street,” where spiritual adventure will be discouraged and democracy will be regarded as consisting in the reduction of all mankind to the proportions of the narrowest and least gifted of the citizens.²⁴

Despite Machen’s warning, Western societies have aggressively embraced the policies of state welfare as the means to achieve human ends. Unfortunately, rather than relieve suffering, these policies produce more hardship. As more and more people abandon their responsibilities, they increasingly behave like spoiled children. No matter what is provided for them, they demand more and call for more aggressive intervention. Various romanticists and socialists point to imperfections everywhere as sufficient reason to

extend government coercion. Bastiat wrote, “Demagogic leaders have told the common man that he is entitled to much more than he is getting; they have not told him the less pleasant truth that, unless there is to be expropriation—which in any case is only a temporary resource—the increase must come out of greater productivity. Now all productivity requires discipline and subordination; the simple endurance of toil requires control of passing desire.”²⁵ Economically, the only means of providing such increased goods is to expropriate them from others. State welfare policies thereby undercut the productive efforts of others and are destructive of the general welfare. You can steal and redistribute the produce of others only once. Abandoning liberty undercuts the economy and hampers the potential for genuine charity. It also erodes one of the means by which people recognize their own failings. If a person cannot see his sin, how will he ever repent of it?

In *The Law of Love and the Law of Violence*, Leo Tolstoy got to the heart of the matter when he admonished his readers:

Understand then, all of you, especially the young, that to want to impose an imaginary state of government on others by violence is not only a vulgar superstition, but even a criminal work. Understand that this work, far from assuring the good of men, is only a lie, a more or less unconscious hypocrisy, and is always hiding the lowest passions.²⁶

THE PARABLE OF THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*²⁷

Jesus told his disciples a parable about a vineyard owner who hired some workers at harvest time. The parable provides an excellent illustration of the connection between justice and mercy. The familiar parable and the context that prompted it are recorded in Matthew 19:16—20:16. A wealthy young man approached Jesus and asked Him what good deed he needed to do to have eternal life. Jesus responded with a question of His own. He asked the young man why he was asking Him about what is good, since the Scriptures teach that only God is good. At first glance Jesus’ question seems strange, but it makes sense. Jesus wanted to clarify just to whom the young man was speaking. Since Jesus was God incarnate, the young man was asking God what good thing he needed to do to earn eternal life.

Having clarified who He was, Jesus moved on to address the question by telling the young man that he must keep God’s commandments. In response, the man asked which ones. Jesus answered by immediately moving to the second half of the Ten Commandments, which deal with interpersonal relationships, prohibiting murder, adultery, theft, lying, and coveting. The young man had a high view of himself. He believed that he had always treated people justly in every respect. So he asked what else he needed to do. Jesus then went to the first half of the Ten Commandments. As God incarnate, Jesus could command the young man to do anything. If the man was to keep the commandments, he would have to obey. So Jesus told him to sell everything he owned, to give away the proceeds to the poor, and to come follow Him. The young man could not bring himself to do that and so left the scene dejected.

Jesus' disciples had stood by watching this interchange and were astonished by Jesus' response about selling everything. No doubt Peter thought about his home in Capernaum where they sometimes stayed. He had not sold it. He probably also thought about his fishing boat. Likewise, James and John no doubt still held an interest in their family's fishing business and likely received funds from it regularly. To own fishing boats in that day would have made them at least upper middle class. The brothers had not sold this interest. While the disciples were indeed following Jesus, they had not sold everything to do so. Peter, being the bold one, appealed to his own actions. He claimed to have actually left everything to follow Jesus.

Realizing the disciples' failure to rightly discern the gospel and His purpose, Jesus increased their anxiety by telling them that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter God's Kingdom. Evidently the disciples were more uncomfortable than ever, because they immediately asked who could be saved. At this point Jesus told them the parable of the workers in the vineyard. The vineyard owner recruited workers to harvest his grapes throughout the day. He initially found workers early in the day and agreed to pay them a day's wage for their labor. Throughout the day he went out to find other workers, telling them that he was willing to pay the going day's wage. There should be no doubt that these later workers expected to be paid only a fraction of the day's wage, depending on when they began working. However, at the end of the day the owner paid everyone a full day's wage. If you had worked only part of the day, but still received a full day's pay, you would know that you got more than you deserved. But if you worked all day and received only what you bargained for, then you received what you justly deserved. The parable is about justice and mercy. Some workers in the vineyard received mercy and grace, while others received only justice.

The point of the parable was to instruct the disciples that there was nothing they could do to merit God's favor. If they thought they could merit it, as the wealthy young man thought he could, then they were destined to damnation and would get only what they deserved. Fortunately, that was not going to be the case for them. Jesus was going to earn a righteous standing before God the Father for them and pay the price for their sin by His atoning sacrifice on the cross. That was and is the Christian message of good news. It was something they did not deserve, and it is something we do not deserve. If anyone thinks he is rich in his own righteousness, then he has either too low a view of what righteousness requires or too high a view of his own performance. Either way, God's condemnation is justified.

One important point in the parable that is relevant to our discussion is that the choice to show mercy to some and not to others rested with the gift giver and not with the gift receiver. Charity is always a voluntary act on the part of the giver. It cannot be otherwise. Jesus made that perfectly clear when he ended His story by pointing out the complaints against the vineyard owner made by those who received only the agreed-to wage. The owner replied that he had the right to be generous to whomever he chose because he was giving away what was his to give. Economic charity must remain a matter of individual choice. For those who put their trust and faith in Christ's atonement for their sin, God does call them to practice charity toward others as an act of faith. Their generosity flows naturally from their faith.

The voluntary nature of genuine charity has been increasingly lost in Western culture as the social reform movement has spread. In his book *The Flight from Reality*, Clarence Carson examined the nature of the social reform movement.²⁸ The fundamental assumption of the reformers is that social cohesion can best

be accomplished by legal means. In fact, the term *social justice* was and remains a call for government action. The movement was and is based on a utopian vision. In the United States the most common label the reformers used to refer to themselves was *progressives*, although they have also called themselves liberals.

The reform movement was inspired primarily by Marxism and other utopian concepts which became popular during the nineteenth century. Underlying all socialism is a commitment to naturalism. Naturalists believe that nature is all there is and that the world must be understood as a series of cause-and-effect relationships with no outside intervention. In the naturalistic view, even human action is reduced to the level of determinism. Naturalism is either atheistic or pantheistic, but it cannot be theistic. To adopt naturalism, it is necessary to reject the traditional Christian religion which undergirds Western civilization. Karl Marx hated religion and the institutions it spawned. Thus he hated private property, the division of labor, government, and virtually every aspect of social life that existed within the Christian worldview. Under the strong influence of Hegelian collectivism, he aimed to overthrow it all. As Clarence Carson correctly observed, “The appeal of Marxism lies in the fact that it justifies and sanctifies the release of the demonic urges in each of us. It justifies and sanctifies hate, envy, the love of power, the bent to destruction, the desire to set everything right (particularly others), and the vague and unfulfilled longing of man.”²⁹

While the intellectual development of progressive ideas was laid in the nineteenth century, their political advancement took place most aggressively in the twentieth century. Woodrow Wilson was one of the first U.S. presidents to promote progressivism. To further his reform agenda, Wilson had to ignore or obfuscate the U.S. Constitution. The Constitution is founded on principles of natural law; by contrast, the social reform movement embraces legal positivism aimed at transforming society. Wilson rejected the idea that all people are created by God and are individually gifted and important. He argued that the Founders were ill-informed, that they held a primitive view of life, and that they could not have known of the new evolutionary view that people are merely animals and part of the herd. As Wilson put it in a 1912 campaign speech:

The trouble with the theory is that government is not a machine, but a living thing. It falls, not under the theory of the universe, but under the theory of organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton. It is modified by its environment, necessitated by its tasks, shaped to its functions by the sheer pressure of life. No living thing can have its organs offset against each other, as checks, and live. On the contrary, its life is dependent upon their quick cooperation, their ready response to the commands of instinct and intelligence, their amicable community of purpose. Government is not a body of blind forces; it is a body of men, with highly differentiated functions. . . . There can be no successful government without the intimate, instinctive co-ordination of the organs of life and action. This is not theory, but fact, and displays its force as fact, whatever theories may be thrown across its track. Living political constitutions must be Darwinian in structure and in practice. . . . All that progressives ask or desire is permission . . . to interpret the Constitution according to the Darwinian principle; all they ask is recognition of the fact that a nation is a living thing and not a machine.³⁰

Wilson’s statement has profound implications. He set aside virtually all political thought associated with the rise of Western civilization. He embraced Hegel’s dialectic with its focus on the rise of state power to

achieve unity. It is obvious that this sort of thinking is highly arrogant. How can government officials possess the insight to govern when they deny the possibility of such knowledge among ordinary people? Wilson reduced the natural rights of the individual person to nothing and attempted to make everyone subservient to government. This is a declaration of war against the individual. It presumes that tyranny and despotism will result in beauty and utopia. Today Wilson's ideas serve as a rationalization for those who hold political power to do anything they like as long as they appeal to the concept of the public good.

One of the saddest aspects of the social reform movement is how it has been spread by supposedly Christian churches. Those at the forefront of this push had to alter the Christian message and reduce Christianity to a mere call for social change. They tried to baptize Karl Marx and socialism, even though socialism cannot be squared with theism. The view of mankind held by those who advocate collectivistic planning is that people are only smart animals who need to be herded in the "right" direction. Their view is a reversion to an ancient pagan view of life. If any concept of God remains, it is a pantheistic view which reduces God to an impersonal force.

The success of the social reformers over the course of the last hundred years is due primarily to the spread of irrationality among the populace. The naturalist worldview has so many contradictions that if its advocates want to advance their cause, they must inhibit people's ability to think systematically. Toward this end, the American public school curriculum has been significantly altered and gutted of its focus on developing young students' clarity of thought. As a result, more and more Americans have shed the knowledge that there are fixed principles which establish limits to successful human action. Lacking such principles, people are easily influenced by the reformers' irrationality. Americans increasingly accept the premise that society, as well as individual people, can be shaped and reshaped in an endless variety of ways without being damaged. They no longer recognize that the nature of ultimate reality is unchanging. They have become more and more willing to abandon the truths of the ages for the latest political fashion. Our citizens are pestered by an endless series of utopian plans calling for greater governmental power and control to address humanity's ills. One of the biggest lies in the modern age is that human rights extend to the consumption of certain economic goods such as education and health care. Since scarcity is a fact of life, such an argument means that some people have the right to force other people to bear the cost of what they wish to consume.

Social engineers believe they are capable of seeing above the crowd. They believe they can remake society by implementing their plans through governmental means. To do so, they must reduce the value of any particular human life to a statistic. Such beliefs deserve nothing less than our full and complete condemnation for being the pure evil that they are. To affirm this conclusion, one needs only to examine socialism over the last hundred years. The history of socialism demonstrates the devastation caused by such thinking. Instead of heaven on earth, the self-proclaimed gods of social reform have brought about hardship, suffering, and the deaths of over a hundred million human beings. Reformers continue to pursue their utopias despite the mounting evidence that their reforms are failures.

Nobel Prize winning economist Friedrich Hayek understood the danger of social reformation. In his book *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*, Hayek vigorously attacked the idea that human nature could be remade and human institutions restructured for utopian purposes. In destroying the reformers' arguments he stated:

So, priding itself on having built its world as if it had designed it, and blaming itself for not having designed it better, humankind is now to set out to do just that. The aim of socialism is no less than to effect a complete redesigning of our traditional morals, law, and language, and on this basis to stamp out the old order and the supposedly inexorable, unjustifiable conditions that prevent the institution of reason, fulfillment, true freedom, and justice.³¹

As the French statesman Frederic Bastiat wrote:

[Socialist writers] base their various theories upon one common hypothesis: They divide mankind into two parts. People in general . . . form the first group. The writer, all alone, forms the second and most important group. Surely this is the weirdest and most conceited notion that ever entered a human brain!

In fact, these writers on public affairs begin by supposing that people have within themselves no means of discernment; no motivation to action. The writers assume that people are inert matter, passive particles, motionless atoms, at best a kind of vegetation indifferent to its own manner of existence. They assume that people are susceptible to being shaped—by the will and hand of another person—into an infinite variety of forms, more or less symmetrical, artistic, and perfected.

Moreover, not one of these writers on governmental affairs hesitates to imagine himself . . . as this will and hand, this universal motivating force, this creative power whose sublime mission is to mold these scattered materials . . . into a society. . . .

Socialists look upon people as raw material to be formed into social combinations. . . . Moreover, even where they have consented to recognize a principle of action in the heart of man—and a principle of discernment in man's intellect—they have considered these gifts from God to be fatal gifts. They have thought that persons, under the impulse of these two gifts, would fatally tend to ruin themselves. They assume that if the legislators left persons free to follow their own inclinations, they would arrive at atheism instead of religion, ignorance instead of knowledge, poverty instead of production and exchange.³²

Currently, the only beneficial reform would be to restore the law to its proper domain and to depose the reformers of their power. If the power of government is restricted to punishing the worst cases of wrongdoing, then a degree of justice will prevail. The result will be a community where greater peace and order is maintained. Frederic Bastiat understood this when he admonished the reformers of his day, “Ah, you miserable creatures! You who think that you are so great! You who judge humanity to be so small! You wish to reform everything! Why don't you reform yourselves? That task would be sufficient enough.”³³

The social justice movement spawned in the later nineteenth century gave us neither justice nor mercy. To the extent that the Christian church has accepted the movement, it has abandoned the central message of the gospel. Christians need to recall that the issues of justice and mercy intersected at the cross of Jesus Christ. On the one hand, the incarnate Son of God came and lived a purely just and perfect life in this world. He was perfectly self-governed in His human nature. On the other hand, He willingly sacrificed Himself on the cross as a just payment for the sins of the people He came to save. A fundamental part of

that act was that it was purely voluntary on His part. No one forced Him to the cross. In John's gospel account this is made clear.³⁴ On the night they came to arrest Him, Jesus asked the mob whom they came to get. They answered that they were there to arrest Jesus of Nazareth. He responded, "I am he." At that point they immediately fell down to the ground. As God, Jesus demonstrated His absolute power over them. Then He asked the question again. When they answered the same way, He allowed them to take Him. His second response was that of the man. By living a life of perfection and then allowing the mob to sacrifice him on the cross, Christ earned a right standing before God and was in a position to apply the atonement to whomever He chose. This is the gospel, and true followers of Christ will imitate His work in this world.

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