

Bible Study 2: Redeeming our Economics

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Introduction...

If there is one thing we are all thinking a lot more about these days, it is money.

The Global Financial Crisis has sent us all in a spin. Whether it's worrying about the depreciation of our superannuation, watching the rollercoaster of share prices on the stock market, our concern over exuberant executive bonuses in the light of poor corporate financial management, or simply what we might have to sacrifice this month to pay off our credit card bill – we are all affected by the current financial climate.

Many reports of the current financial climate have caused not only uncertainty but also fear among us. And the passage below is useful in highlighting care for the poor in our own land. But what about the world's poorest?

At World Vision, we are seriously concerned that although many Australians are finding it tough at the moment, there are many around the world finding it much tougher!

Question for discussion...

1. *How have you personally been affected by the financial crisis? How would you suspect people in developing countries are being affected?*

Read...

If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.

Deuteronomy 15:7-11

Reflect...

In this Old Testament passage, we read of the 'poor man among' us and hear of a principle not frequently considered: the Hebrew Year of Cancelling Debts. I can imagine many of us would be open to it if we were offered a mortgage cancellation or a free and complete loan repayment every seventh year! The concept of cancelling debts is especially difficult to accept if we are in the position of the lender or creditor.

Our friends at Jubilee Australiaⁱ (the Christian movement that drove the successful Jubilee 2000 campaign) have continued to raise the issues around debt. Their concern is that often, Governments lending to developing nations, do so with the condition of high interest rates. Many borrowing nations have become indebted to the point of five times the original amount given in foreign aid. It seems hypocritical to be offering financial assistance not out of compassion or charity, but for profit! Economist Jeffrey Sachs has dubbed it "belt tightening for people who cannot afford belts".

The problem of developing countries being trapped in debt is not insurmountable. For a reality check - in 2008 the total developing country debt owed to wealthy countries and institutions was US\$3.3 trillion. This is around the same amount that was raised in a matter of weeks by US and European governments to bail out their banks and financial institutions in the recent crisis.ⁱⁱ

Leviticus 25:35 reads "If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself...you shall maintain him... You shall not lend him your money at interest, not give him your food for profit". Lending for gain is opposing the essence of Jubilee.

Jesus himself endorsed the 'Year of Jubilee' when he announced his ministry in Luke 4:18-19ⁱⁱⁱ where he read out Isaiah 61:1-2 in the synagogue. Even the word 'Jubilee' conjures up a sense of celebration. We can recognise the joy and relief the cancellation of our own debts would bring. This is why it is important to recognise God's call to bring justice to our national and international economic systems. Brian McLaren in his book 'Everything Must Change' encourages us to respond in three ways:

1. Seek to help the poor through generosity
2. Call the rich to generosity
3. Improve the system – that is, to make our financial systems equitable^{iv}

In Deuteronomy 15 we read a request from God to be generous to 'the poor among us' and not to be 'tightfisted' but 'openhanded'. Being generous and openhanded with what we have, especially in financially difficult times, assists God's plan of redeeming those in poverty – and ourselves.

Questions for discussion...

- *How would you categorise yourself, tightfisted or openhanded? In what ways could you be more openhanded to the poor – both in your local area & in your world?*
- *Can you think of someone who "owes" you something? How would you feel by cancelling part of their debt in the spirit of Jubilee?*
- *For your church, how could you be a voice of generosity to those in poverty? What things would need to change or be added to make your church a place recognised for its generosity and celebration (Jubilee)?*

Prayer...

Lord, help us to be generous with what you have given us and openhanded to the poor among us. You are so generous in your own nature. You give us all we need and for this we are so grateful. Help us to learn from your giving spirit, so we may give more to those who need it and therefore participate in your redemptive work.

Amen.

Action...

Help World Vision support communities affected by the economic crisis

World Vision is aware that although we are feeling the financial pinch, so too are the people in the poorest nation's of the world. The cost of food has multiplied (in countries like Zimbabwe, up to 3 trillion per cent increase) and made it difficult for those in poverty to access enough food to live. In fact, over 1 billion people on the earth today are now struggling to afford one meal a day.

Take up the **Family Challenge** and sponsor a child. The challenge is simple; each Australian household sponsors one child in need. More than ever, thousands of children are in need of sponsorship. If your household can sponsor a child, please visit www.worldvision.com.au/ChildSponsorship or call 133 240.

World Vision's **SEE Solution's** program is another way to help financially. This program supports practical and innovative social and economic empowerment projects. Projects that provide people and communities with the support, tools and training they need to work their way out of poverty and into self-sufficiency. Visit www.worldvision.com.au/OurWork/Solutions/SEESolutions

For further reading, visit Jubilee Australia at www.jubileeaustralia.org

ⁱ Jubilee Australia is working to expose the root causes of poverty and injustice, particularly in the Asia Pacific. Jubilee's work involves exposing past corrupt and unprofitable development projects, especially those leading to illegitimate debts; monitoring Australian sponsored investments in the Asia Pacific; and working with the global Jubilee movement to advocate for a fairer international financial and economic system. Jubilee Australia emerged out of the successful Jubilee 2000 Drop the Debt Coalition.

ⁱⁱ Briefing Sheet. Jubilee Australia. 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

^{iv} Brian McLaren. Everything Must Change. Thomas Nelson, 2007. p246.