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God's Labor Laws**

Deut. 24: 14-22

¹⁴You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. ¹⁵You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. ¹⁶Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death. ¹⁷You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. ¹⁸Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. ¹⁹When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. ²⁰When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. ²¹When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. ²²Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

(Slide 1: God's Labor Laws)

“Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.” (Deut 24:18)

Refugees from a famine, the Hebrew people became slaves in Egypt -- Over generations they became a large underclass of poor workers without the political rights of Egyptian citizens.

In the middle of one of the wealthiest civilizations in the world they lived in abject poverty and oppression.

So they cried out to God about:

- unsafe working conditions,
- Unreasonable work expectations
- And unfairly low or non-existent wages

And they began to organize to try to improve their situation.

The Egyptians responded by deciding these immigrants were dangerous and decided to reduce their population by killing all the male babies. God rescued one baby named Moses and raised him up to lead his people out of oppression and injustice in Egypt and into a new way of life in their homeland.

And they spent all of their time in their journey through the wilderness dreaming about how they would run their new nation. Discerning who God wanted them to be as a people, as a nation, as citizens, as rulers.

It became clear to them that God wanted them to remember what it felt like to be poor, an immigrant, a slave, a disenfranchised worker... and to treat others the way that they themselves would like to be treated.

God didn't want them to become Pharaohs in their own land, God wanted Israel to be different.

- God wanted Israel to be a place where the poor were given a chance.
- Where a fair day's work was paid a fair day's wages.
- A place where those with more than enough would share with those without enough.
- A nation where the rule of law applied fairly to all.

Their dream was a Kingdom of God's rule.

(Slide 2: Dreaming of the Kingdom of God)

As Christians we worship this same God. The God of Israel, the God of Moses, the God of the prophets who lectured kings who failed to give justice to the poor. When God came down here, Godself, Jesus continued to teach about the Kingdom of God.

As a follower of Jesus I also dream of the Kingdom of God's rule. I pray that God's will be done here on earth as it is in heaven.

I strive to live as a citizen of the Kingdom of God in a world that does not look or act like the Kingdom of God.

So as I look at the world through Kingdom of God glasses, I'm frequently frustrated by the either/or nature of most political conversations about labor issues today.

On one side there seems to be this extreme social darwinism where the rich should be able to do whatever they want with their money. -- "Survival of the richest!"

On the other side there seems to be those who want everyone to have a "free lunch."

God does not seem to endorse either of these extremes.

(slide: God's Labor Laws

- 1. Everyone works (if able)**
- 2. Fair wages on time**
- 3. State, Church and individual support for those who can't work**
- 4. Sabbath for everyone)**

God's Labor Laws -- collected from Deuteronomy and other places in the bible would look something like this:

-- First, everyone works. Throughout the Bible -- Hebrew scriptures and New Testament, there is a clear expectation that people are supposed to work if they are able, and work diligently-- doing whatever we do as if we're doing it for God. So not a free lunch, but a fair wages for fair work.

--Second, Fair wages on time. Also throughout the Bible, there is a clear expectation that employers are supposed to pay a fair wage in a timely manner -- God does not endorse the rich getting richer by exploiting

workers, nor the rich playing games with people's earnings -- remember Enron stealing their employee's retirement benefits? That's not Kosher!

--Third, State, Church and individual support should be provided for those who cannot work. Throughout the Bible there are commands to care for those who cannot work due to age or disability, or because they have been disenfranchised by the rules of their society -- like widows who could not own property or do business in ancient misogynistic times. And the means of providing support laid out in the bible are a blend of state sponsored, church sponsored and individuals donations. For those who say taxes shouldn't support the poor -- spend some time reading Deuteronomy. And for those who would say that individuals shouldn't have to support the poor -- that's not biblical either.

- Private landowners were to offer gleaning behind their harvesters (Deut 24:19)
- The third year's tithe was designated to care for the poor and needy (Deut 14: 28-29)
- Prophets judged Rulers and governments by how well they cared for the poor (Jeremiah 22: 13-19)
- And the early Christian church set the bar for us when they shared their possessions and appointed deacons to oversee distributions to the needy. (Acts 4:32-37 & 6:1-7)

--Fourth, Sabbath is for Everyone. Everyone should have a day of rest. Everyone. "...you, your children, your slaves, your livestock, and the alien residents in your town." (Exodus 20:10)

This is the Dream for what a nation who follows God would be like.

And when the people strayed from the dream. When we forget that we are called to be citizens of the Kingdom of God, God has sent organizers like Moses to mobilize the people to work for the common good and prophets like Jeremiah to critique rulers and governments for their care, or lack of care, for the poor and needy.

And I believe that God never stopped calling people to be organizers and prophets.

People who remind us to strive to move closer to living out the dream of the Kingdom of God, where workers are worthy of their wages, those with more than enough share with those who don't have enough and we all get some rest.

Part of our history as Methodists is organizing to work and pray for God's Kingdom to come here on earth.

An original component of the first Methodist societies was a regular offering to support the poor

And John Wesley, the founder of Methodism advocated for better working conditions, an end to child labor, and was opposed to slavery.

Many of the early union leaders were Methodists and other Christians who met in church basements and sanctuaries to organize for living wages and safer working conditions in the coal mines and factories of the early industrial revolution.

(Nigel Scotland, "Methodism and the English Labor Movement 1800 - 1906
https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/anvil/14-1_036.pdf)

The United Methodist Church through our Social Principles continues to recognize and support the right of workers to unionize and bargain collectively according to our Social Principles -- and that's in ¶163b if you would like to read it for yourself.

Let me be clear.

- It is biblical for a company to be profitable, and to pay it's workers a fair share of the profits they would not be able to make without those workers..
- It is biblical for owners to enjoy the fruits of their labor, so long as their workers also get to enjoy a fair share of the fruits of their labors.
- It is also biblical for those who have more than enough to share in caring for those who cannot work.

- And everyone should have a Sabbath.

That's God's take on Labor.

Children's Message: Back to school blessing