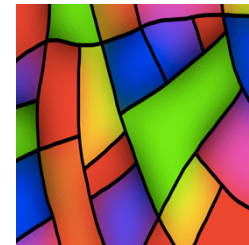


Class Meetings

A Small Group
Study Guide Series
for Collegiate Ministries

Economic Justice
A Wesleyan Perspective



Introduction to the Study

The term “economic justice” means different things to different people. For some it refers to equal opportunity, a freedom to pursue whatever economic desires one may have. For others it refers to equality of outcomes, the same provision for all. For most, perhaps, economic justice means something other than these two notions or at least something between them. This is an issue critical to all Christians, and it is at the center of discipleship. Economic justice speaks to the way we value work and things and even people themselves. For college and university students, these general concerns are certainly real. Yet the particular life-situation of students also includes the cost of higher education, the reality of student debt, the promise or disappointment of income following graduation, and the way these special concerns relate to God’s intent for human relationships. This study is not a “how-to” guide for helping students manage money, and it is not a generic collection of lessons regarding fair or unfair economic practices. It is intended as a deliberate series of reflections around the gospel and our call to value things, systems, and people according to God’s design for creation. Of course, we will do this from a biblical perspective – a biblical perspective understood through the lens of the Wesleyan tradition.

Directions to Facilitator

Because this is designed to be a study that connects people with one another, it will be important for the facilitator to remember the art of intentional conversation. In other words, these are not lessons to be delivered but dialogue for communal growth. The value of every participant will be a common theme in the overall discussion of economic justice. Therefore, room/seating should reflect an invitation for all to share, listen, and perfect ideas considered. In a sense, the “how” (process) of this study is directly related to the “what” (content).

Study Structure

If a six-week study is intended, the order of conversation might unfold as follows:

- **Week 1**—Biblical Approaches to Economic Justice (Both Old Testament and New Testament)
- **Week 2**—John Wesley’s Particular Practices around Economic Justice
- **Week 3**—Understanding the Challenge of Interpretation and Application across Time
- **Week 4**—Prevailing Assumptions about Economic Justice in Today’s Culture
- **Week 5**—A Wesleyan Model for Economic Justice Today
- **Week 6**—The Faithful Practice of Economic Justice Today



HIGHER EDUCATION & MINISTRY

General Board of Higher Education and Ministry

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COLLEGIATE MINISTRY

Study in Outline

Week 1—Biblical Approaches to Economic Justice (Both Old and New Testaments)

- Digest:** It is impossible to summarize all biblical teaching regarding economic justice in such a short study. Perhaps three emphases provide a good start to such reflection. First, a detailed consideration of Leviticus 25 and the Sabbath/Jubilee tradition will help students consider that the acquisition of wealth has limits and is embedded in a cycle of grace. Second, prophetic literature reminds us that the decay of faithful culture in Israel and Judah was often associated with predatory economic behavior. A recommitment to economic justice was associated with renewal (for instance, Isaiah 58:6-12 and Jeremiah 22:1-5). Finally, the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 6:21 tells us that our hearts belong to the people or things we “love.”
- Notes:** A close reading of Leviticus 25 (Common English Bible and other translations) will provide an opening. Reference to Hebrew word meanings can be included. Avoid trendy paraphrases if possible. The same approach can be taken with the texts from Isaiah and Jeremiah. Matthew 6:21 should be placed in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, with some attention to Greek word meanings. Clarence Jordan reminds us that the term “worship” is derived from “worth-ship.” This means that our reverence for someone or something reflects the value we believe such reality to possess.
- Resources:** In addition to the biblical texts, Wesley’s sermons “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” are helpful, especially the sermon on Matthew 6:19-23. See: *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), Vol. 1, Sermons I, 1-33: 612-631. Treatments of Matthew 6:19-23 in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995) and Clarence Jordan, *Sermon on the Mount* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1952) are very insightful.

Week 2—John Wesley’s Particular Practices around Economic Justice

- Digest:** It is easy to oversimplify John Wesley’s attitude toward wealth and need. This is so, in part, because he lived a simple life regarding such matters. However, our contemporary assumptions about economic systems were not very prevalent in Wesley’s day. We might find ourselves baffled while reading portions of Wesley’s sermon on “The Use of Money.” The well-known triad: gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can, may leave us uneasy. Did he really teach a doctrine of unremitting toil and accumulation? Did he really counsel people to lay up treasure? What does it mean to give after these earlier emphases? John Wesley did indeed generate considerable income during his life. He also employed these resources very, very carefully for God and others.
- Notes:** A close reading of John Wesley’s sermon on “The Use of Money” should be primary (*The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), Vol. 2, Sermons II, 34-70: 263-280). His sermon on “The Danger of Riches” should also be read (*The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), Vol. 3, Sermons III, 71-144: 227-246).
- Resources:** Wesley’s practice of economic justice is addressed in the biography by Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 360-370. A very intriguing example among Wesley’s writing is his 1773 “Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions.” Here he connects England’s grain shortage and a scarcity of food to the monopolizing of crops by the alcohol industry. See *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, Vol. XI, 3rd edition, (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872), 366-372.

Week 3—Understanding the Challenge of Interpretation and Application across Time

Digest: Part of the problem with understanding economic justice through the lens of John Wesley comes with the fact that he lived so long ago. **We may be tempted to make Wesley look like our latest interpretive opinions.** When students of Wesley wish to speak of personal holiness, they often neglect to appreciate the social implications of his theology. When liberation theologies were at their peak of popularity, many looked back on Wesley as a proto-liberationist. In fact, John Wesley lived during the early development of modern industrial markets. His thought did not emphasize the more sophisticated side of social structures that would come with Marxism. Neither did he endorse the unfettered capitalism of our post-Cold War world. We should be careful before we force Wesley into our categories of thinking. His teaching had its own integrity.

Notes: Depending upon which period of Wesley scholarship one chooses, one can find a variety of interpretations regarding John Wesley's approach to economic justice. Was he a kind and yet limited pietist? A liberationist? Or something else entirely? A close reading of Joshua Bloor's recent article is helpful: "Revisiting Wesley's Ethics and His Ministry to the Poor: Social, Economical, and Medical Solutions," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 50 (Fall 2015): 2, 80-95.

Resources: Examples of some interpretations from the 1980s and early 1990s are Theodore Runyon, ed., *Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981) and Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

Week 4—Prevailing Assumptions about Economic Justice in Today's Culture

Digest: Today it is common for people to tout either socialist or capitalist ideas regarding economic systems. More often than not, versions of these two opposing ideologies are pitted against one another. Many practices called "socialist" are not anything like earlier state-dominated economic power. Many practices called "capitalist" are little more than modest exchange in the marketplace. We should be wary of accepting economic principles from today's ideologues. This is one reason why the jolting perspective of the Scriptures and the unique situation of John Wesley have much to teach us. Instead of accepting the self-serving and self-righteous assumptions that dominate today's debate, we can look deeper.

Notes: Since the end of the Cold War, it has been especially difficult to live the witness of economic justice. State-sponsored socialism claimed to care for the greater good, but in practice these economic systems left the moral landscape scarred. The assumption that capitalism and freedom are one has distorted Christian economic views since the early 1990s. The critical point of this session is perhaps somewhat negative. We need to realize that our contemporary culture's obsession with the debate between socialism and predatory capitalism is a ruse and a dead end. A Christian economic ethic, faithful to the Wesleyan tradition, will chart its own way. Readings for this session include Christopher P. Momany, "Faith Lived Out: 2+2=4," *The United Methodist Reporter*, August 1, 2014, <http://unitedmethodistreporter.com/2014/08/01/faith-lived-out-224/> and Christopher P. Momany, "A Theology of Work," *The United Methodist Reporter*, June 15, 2015, <http://unitedmethodistreporter.com/2015/06/15/a-theology-of-work-commentary/>.

Resources: At the end of the Cold War (post 1989), many presumed that if state-sponsored collectivism was bad, all forms of capitalism must be good. United Methodism is an international movement, but perhaps the most comprehensive philosophical reflection related to the economic changes of the late 1980s and 1990s came from the Catholic perspective. Pope John Paul II is remembered by many as a "conservative" who resisted Polish socialism. Yet his critical encyclical at the end of the Cold War warned of the way "alienation" and abuse can thrive in capitalism: Pope John Paul II, *On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum: Centissimus Annus* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1991).

Week 5—A Wesleyan Model for Economic Justice Today

Digest: What might the theoretical framework of a Wesleyan economic ethic look like today? It will demonstrate a compassion for others and a devotion to the communal value of goods and services that many in our culture neglect. It will also demonstrate individual responsibility and personal initiative. A Wesleyan economic ethic for today will not fail to care for individuals as sacred children of God, and it will acknowledge systems and structures that get in the way of God's design. A Wesleyan ethic today will be both personal and social.

Notes: The positive theoretical principles of a contemporary Wesleyan economic ethic are articulated in *The Book of Discipline*. The United Methodist Church may be revising these Principles over the coming years, but awareness of the current statement is critical to considering Wesley's economic ethic for today. Therefore, this session will attend to a reading of Section IV of the Social Principles (The Economic Community), found in paragraph 163 of *The Book of Discipline*. It will be especially important to ask how these principles do or do not reflect the unique values of John Wesley's economic ethic.

Resources: Two recent resources on the United Methodist Social Principles are Neal Christie, *Justice in Everyday Life: A Look at the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2014) and Darryl W. Stephens, *Methodist Morals: Social Principles in the Public Church's Witness* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2016).

Week 6—The Faithful Practice of Economic Justice Today

Digest: One way we can practice a Wesleyan economic ethic is to explore and live aspects of that perspective known as the "Fair Trade" movement. This movement asks difficult questions regarding our approach to wealth, our purchasing behaviors, and the realities of labor behind our personal buying and selling. One introduction to this movement is found at: <http://slaveryfootprint.org/>. This and other sites help individuals confront the way their purchases are connected to the exploitation of others around the globe. This is by no means the only way to implement a Wesleyan economic ethic, but it is one way to clarify that which owns our hearts.

Notes: Living the Wesleyan way of economic justice should be more than implementing some laundry list of principles found in a denominational document. This witness should be both personal and social. That is why self-examination around our economic practices is so important. The "Fair Trade" movement is not simply a trend. It is one way to confront our desires and behaviors that impact the lives of others. Before this study session, all participants should take the survey regarding their "slavery footprint." This will open conversation regarding how our economic practices reflect the priorities of our hearts. Some resources to begin this conversation include: (1) Made in a Free World (<https://madeinafreeworld.com/>); (2) Free to Work (<http://www.free2work.org/>); and (3) International Labor Organization (<http://www.ilo.org/global/statistics-and-databases/lang--en/index.htm>)

Resources: The "Fair Trade" movement certainly does not exhaust the Wesleyan practice of economic justice, but it is a place to begin. This movement also has close ties to the fight against "human trafficking" or modern-day slavery. Many think of trafficking as entirely related to sexual exploitation, but so-called "labor trafficking" is a very serious problem, too. In all situations of human trafficking, people are "commodified," turned into products for exchange. Some resources to begin this conversation might include: David Batstone, *Not for Sale: The Return of the Global Slave Trade – and How We Can Fight It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) and Kevin Bales and Ron Soodalter, *The Slave Next Door: Human Trafficking and Slavery in America Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

Additional Resources

Marion Grau, *Of Divine Economy: Refinancing Redemption* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

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Disclaimer

The structure and substance of this study guide series are those of the designers and do not necessarily reflect the positions of The United Methodist Church or The Office of Collegiate Ministry of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of The United Methodist Church. These study guides exhibit each designer’s best effort to offer a reflective venue for theological and spiritual exploration of the topics covered.