

August 31, 2025

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Ezekiel 34:1-4, 17-22 & 1 Corinthians 11:17-26

The Economics of Justice: Greed

We are in the second week of our worship series exploring the economics of justice. Last week I focused on how our individual behaviors of envy, coveting, and idolatry translate into patterns of injustice. Across the four weeks of worship, we are going to shift back and forth between the individual and systems level of analysis. This week we bridge these two by looking at the sin of greed.

We were set up nicely for this shift by the Prayers of the People that Ewen shared last week. He opened the prayer sharing how our misuse of the resources of creation is a sign of greed and shared “We have interpreted the words subdue and dominate to mean exploit, destroy, to bring forth the greed in us, and our subjection over others.” Ewen reminded us that our coveting for more and more occurs not only on the individual level, but also represents our corporate sin, as “we as communities and nations, take land, forest, minerals, and water which is not ours. We allow the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer.”¹

We heard this kind of systemic condemnation in our passage from Ezekiel that Keith just read, a passage where God judges the rulers for the way their greed has hurt the people. Our passage from 1 Corinthians is likewise a passage of judgement. It is judgement on a church community for the way their greed is corrupting the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Hear now these words from the Apostle Paul from 1 Corinthians 11:17-26

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you proceeds to eat your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have households to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new

¹ Ewen Todd. Prayers of the People, PCO Service of the Lord’s Day. August 24, 2025. Online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDD1197bRsw>

covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

When I planned out this worship series on the economics of justice, I had not intentionally planned for the topic of “greed” to be the focus for Labor Day Weekend. However, the hand of the Holy Spirit was afoot and it turns out this is a fortuitous calendar timing to address greed, for it was an underlying component of the origins of the Labor Day holiday. For many of us, Labor Day has come to symbolize the end of summer and one last chance for a three-day weekend away from work and school before the busyness of fall sets in. The holiday was created by the labor movement in the late 19th century and became a federal holiday in 1894 – a pretty old holiday by U.S. standards.

The late 19th century in America was known as the Gilded Age – a time of rapid industrialization and economic expansion; a time when the rich got richer at the expense of the workers producing the goods. It was an era of both immense economic growth and incredible inequality. Working conditions were unsafe, particularly for poor and immigrant populations working in the nation’s mills, mines and factories. There were few restrictions on the maximal number of hours employees had to work, nor on the age of employment, with children toiling alongside family members in the factories, earning just a fraction of what adults earned. As a consequence, labor unions formed and became more active in protesting the unjust treatment, organizing rallies and strikes to demand better treatment. On September 5, 1882, 10,000 workers took unpaid time off to march from City Hall to Union Square in New York City, holding the first Labor Day parade in U.S. history. This led to the idea of a “workingmen’s holiday,” celebrated on the first Monday in September.²

I think the people in first century Corinth would have appreciated a Labor Day holiday. And I think the Apostle Paul could feel some vindication with the Labor Day holiday in the letter he wrote to this church. He opens this passage with some pretty damning words: “Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.”

It is not for the better, but for the worse. What were those Corinthians doing to get Paul’s undies in a bunch? For the early church, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper or the taking of the Eucharist was the central act of worship. And it was most often celebrated in the context of an actual shared meal of the gathered community. This pattern was found across the various populations of Jesus’ followers, across a diverse set of ethnic and geographic climes.

As you might imagine, the homes that hosted the meal were, more often than not, larger homes of the wealthier class and the church service somewhat resembled a dinner party. According to New Testament scholars M. Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, the dining

² History.com Editors. Labor Day. <https://www.history.com/articles/labor-day>

rooms in these homes, typically “held eight or ten persons, the adjoining atrium forty or fifty more. It was absolutely “normal” in such settings that those of higher status received privileged places and better food in the dining room, while slaves and those of lower status ate in the atrium.”³ They compare the normality of this scenario to what we regard as normal when we fly, with first-class flyers getting better food (or any food) compared to those in economy class with pretzels and peanuts.

While there was a distinction on the location of the dining, Boring and Craddock note that these Eucharistic meals were intentioned to be “radically egalitarian” in that “slaves and masters, rich and poor, men and women all ate together as an expression that they were one body in Christ.” So what is Paul upset about in Corinth?

Often the custom was for each person to bring something to share – a big potluck - and the contributions were pooled to make a common meal. But in the church at Corinth things had gone sadly wrong as William Barclay shares in his commentary: “In the Church there were rich and poor; there were those who could bring plenty, and there were slaves who could bring hardly anything at all. In fact for many poor, [this meal] must have been the only decent meal in the whole week: But in Corinth the art of sharing had got lost. The rich did not share their food but ate it in little exclusive groups by themselves, hurrying through it in case they had to share, while the poor had next to nothing.”⁴

Boring and Craddock remark that the Corinth church was “transferring the understanding of social relationships normal in their culture into the life of the church, without realizing that the very event they were celebrating – the death and resurrection of Jesus - had made everything new.”⁵

It is no surprise then that some of the harshest language Paul uses in his letters is in this passage. He accuses the Corinth church of having contempt for God by the way they practiced communion. He says, “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you proceeds to eat your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have households to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!”

In my mind I can hear Paul sneering at the Corinthians in his letter. You want me to praise you because you are coming together to share the Lord’s Supper. Ha! Think again. You are not getting applause from me - instead I’m going to call you out for showing contempt on your

³ M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock. The People’s New Testament Commentary. Westminster John Knox., 2009, p533.

⁴ William Barclay. The Letters to the Corinthians. Revised Edition. The Westminster Press., 1975. p101

⁵ M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock. The People’s New Testament Commentary. Westminster John Knox., 2009, p533.

fellow siblings in Christ by upholding a worldly culture rather than the culture of Christ. Paul then goes on to tell them how the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated. These words, which we call the Words of Institution in our reformed tradition, are the words I share at the communion table each time we celebrate the sacrament, as we will do next week.

While there are many meanings associated with the Lord's Supper, an important one is that it points backward towards the inclusive meals that Jesus shared with his disciples and the greater community. This meal has been shared throughout history, across thousands of years, of people of all types gathered to receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation. The Lord's Supper also points forward to a time when all will be reunited around that table in the actual presence of the Lord – the great banquet which awaits us, “where there is food, drink, and fellowship for all.”

Boring and Craddock remind us that the act of communion points outward toward the whole church, “a reminder that discipleship is not Individual and Christian life is not just congregational. As there is one body, one church, one faith, one hope, one baptism, so there is one loaf and one table for all.” And that partaking of this meal also points inward as it is a time for personal examination. This self-examination is to see that the Lord's Supper “is celebrated in a proper manner and does not degenerate into a casual and empty ritual, a secular dinner party, or a meal that emphasizes the distance between the rich and the poor, and thus violates the unity of the church.”⁶

This is what Paul was calling out the church in Corinth for – emphasizing the difference between the rich and the poor. Their practices violated the unity of the church. The wealthy could arrive early, get the choicest seats and the best food and drink. After all they had others to do their work for them. Those who were laborers arrived later, after a long day of work. They were tired and hungry and they were shunted aside. And the Apostle Paul is having none of it. If we are to be “one body in Christ” then we are to be “one body.” There is no place for divisions based on wealth and working status.

Paul's condemnation of behavior of the wealthy reminds me of Thorsten Veblen's classic *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, that I read in a sociology class in college. Veblen's thesis is that the “modern” industrial society is driven by the need to out-do others through displays of wealth and status. Hello Corinthian Church!

Long before the rise of social media influencers, Veblen coined the term “conspicuous consumption” to describe how the wealthy purchased unnecessary, costly items and services primarily to display their wealth and status. The conspicuous aspect translated to their leisure as well, where the ability to engage in sports, games, arts, and reading rather than productive work and labor was a sign of wealth and power. Veblen critiques how this drive for status leads to waste, as resources are channeled into non-essential goods and activities that serve

⁶ Ibid, p534

only to enhance the owner's prestige, not the community's welfare.⁷ The writer of the Old Testament book Ecclesiastes nailed this sentiment in the quote I shared in the words of preparation in the bulletin. "The lover of money will not be satisfied with money, nor the lover of wealth with gain. This also is vanity." — Ecclesiastes 5:10

In essence, for Veblen, greed isn't simply about accumulating more wealth; it's about the competitive, status-seeking behavior that leads the wealthy to prioritize displays of power and leisure over productivity or community benefit. Or for the church in Corinth, greed was about showing off your privilege and power by getting the best food and drink at the expense of leaving little for those came late because they were working. It is the divisiveness and the status element of keeping others in their lower place that is at the center of greed.

When I read Veblen's book in college, I remember being struck by how much in common 1880's had with the 1980's. The movie "Wall Street" came out in 1987 the year I graduated from college, with the famous tirade uttered by Micheal Douglas portraying insider trader Gordon Gecko: "The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right, greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all of its forms. Greed for life, money, love, knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind, and greed – you mark my words – will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the U.S.A."⁸

So here we are in 2025, living in a world where too many think that greed is indeed good. That greed will indeed save us. That conspicuous consumption is something to be valued and prized. That acquiring more and more at the expense of others who have less is a value to be celebrated. The injustice of greed is not that the rich are accumulating goods because of their hard work. Rather the injustice of greed is due to this wealth being generated or enjoyed at the expense of those who have less. This is the sin. We have separated the body of Christ. It is no longer "one body."

And yet the Lord through Ezekiel tells us that there will be judgement for this greed: "Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged, and I will judge between sheep and sheep." Paul echoes these words: "...do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!"

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Theory_of_the_Leisure_Class;
<https://moglen.law.columbia.edu/LCS/theoryleisureclass.pdf>

⁸ https://www.reddit.com/r/80s/comments/1aoqnx6/greed_is_good_speech_gordan_gecko_michael_douglas/;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVxYOQS6ggk>

Ezekiel and Paul raised these warnings and admonitions to call the people to repentance. To change their ways and turn to God. Paul was calling out individual greed and Ezekial was calling out the greed of rulers – the systems of power. We live in a world where both of these are present. Our individual greed and our societal greed bring harm to our neighbors near and far. So we repent, remembering that repentance has two faces. The first face is to turn away from our sinful behavior, our behavior of envy, coveting, idolatry that pushes us to want more and more, to be greedy at the expense of others. Our sinful behavior that encourages companies and the government to acquire more and more at the expense of others who have less. And the second face of repenting is to turn toward to God, remembering that we are called to be “one body in Christ.” That status doesn’t matter. That the God of justice called all to not just be invited to the table, but to have their voice and contribution welcomed and celebrated. This is what the economics of justice looks like. The words of Confession of Belhar⁹ call us to this action and I invite you to rise in body or in spirit as we affirm our faith with a portion of this confession:

We believe

- that Christ’s work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;
- that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God’s Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;
- that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted;
- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways; in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another.

⁹ From the Confession of Belhar, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Part 1. Book of Confessions; Office of the General Assembly. 2016; (10.3)