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A Biblical Answer to Poverty, Anne Rathbone-Bradley

Transcription By Megan Wangerin

Anne Rathbone Bradley the vice president of Economic Initiatives at the Virginia-based Institute for Faith, Work, and Economics, the George and Sally Mayer Fellow for Economic Education and Economics, a visiting professor from Georgetown University, and an affiliate scholar at Acton Institution delivered a presentation at Concordia University Wisconsin's Liberty, Virtue, and Economics (LVE) Summit to give a biblical prospective on poverty. The following is adapted from her presentation given September 20, 2019.

I've never been in a room full of professed Christians who disagree that we have a call to care for the poor. That's pretty uncontroversial. Really, regardless of your denomination or what church you attend, this just kind of goes without saying. The problem is that we all tend to be very vociferous and really disagree on how we do that...so I want to talk a little bit about that, I'm going to be very explicitly doing that as a Christian economist. So, I'm coming to this first as a believer with an understanding that truth comes through a proper understanding of scripture. Capitalism is not something that can be found in the indices of the bible, by finding a verse and going directly to it. I do think the principles can be found in the bible, the idea of capitalism and communism, and what it is Christians should advocate for is revealed in Scripture. Good economics starts with the understanding of the human person. As Christians this is given to us in Scripture. What type of societies allow us to live into what God wanted us to do and be, including care for the poor?

(Boris Yeltsin was the first Russian president post-Soviet Union and falling of the Berlin Wall. The image on the screen [shown at the LVE summit] shows, Yeltsin on 9/16/1989 at a grocery store). Yeltsin was visiting current president (at the time) George Bush and is shown the Johnson Space Center in Houston, TX. These are very diplomatic things done on diplomacy tours, but he is unamused. He wants to see "something he really cares about, something real." Yeltsin asks Bush to take him to a grocery store. They go on an unscheduled tour of a local Randall's. Yeltsin paces up and down the store seeing all the groceries that are there to buy. It is not there for the Politburo or the American ruling class but for the common American. Yeltsin wrote about this in his autobiography.

In a grocery store Yeltsin was profoundly impacted and says, "If the Russian people knew of this, surely they'd revolt." The comment is raw and pure. The Russians just went through 80 years of central allocation of economic resources. That man, Yeltsin, is a product of that environment, but think about him. He is the president. He's powerful. He has money. He has resources. He has exploitative power, not just legitimate power. Presidents are used to receiving things on command. They have minions. Most of us do not have those things. Yet, Boris Yeltsin cannot commandeer a grocery store. Both overwhelmed and depressed as he watches people put things in the cart and continue shopping, not excited or overly expressive about it. He thinks, why are they not jumping up and down about how amazing it is? Those typically in an airport are crabby about the time it takes to get through the processes or how long it takes to get where you need to be. They should be excited about the opportunity flying has. People get somewhere they would not be able to get in a short time via a metal tube.

A market has the power to deliver to ordinary people goods that would be difficult to procure on one's own. Boris Yeltsin brings back grocery stores to Russia. He is overwhelmed and confused, not knowing how to do this. How to get it done. But he knows the absence of a market makes people poor. It makes poverty and exclusion persist. Economic principles can be drawn from Scripture where a good foundation must rest, where some key pieces of economic principles appear and come out naturally. Christians have a corner on the market of this truth by coming from a biblical perspective of what God designed and desires. I'm not a theologian but I've worked with them closely to explore this.

Think of Creation in Genesis as more than just a linear 7-day creation story and what is loaded in it. Christians draw purpose and vision and have a glimpse at the image of Shalom -God's peace- from it and how they fit in. Take it seriously and look at the lessons that can be learned. How does the call to work require good economic thinking and freedom?

Economic freedom is required to live out God's vision and purpose of us as humans. The morning panel declared humans will always be human beings. This is the starting point of any society that gets constructed. Utopia will never be attained. I remember my economics professor used to say, economics puts restraints on our utopia.

Genesis 1:26-28 is God's purpose for creation. Humans are the image of God...We are His masterpiece. He master engineered and architected us. We cannot create in the same way God can, something out of nothing, but we can create. That is where we get passion and our jobs from. We are instructed to be fruitful and multiply.

Think about if someone assigning one with babysitting, walking a dog when they are out of town, or shoveling snow. It's something they ask one to watch over when they're on vacation. The job is to take care of, to preserve it. If bad things happen, call the police, call the fire or whatever one needs to do, but they're not asked to renovate the house. They are not told to construct an addition to the house. That goes above and beyond the duties of preserving. The Hebrew word for to serve, 'abad' is an active word to holy preserve. Think of what it means to serve one another. What kind of society induces greedy people to think about their fellow human beings? This is the overarching question in political economic thought. It's not an easy thing to do but is what we are called upon to do. How do we work it? How do we unleash our human creativity and what God has given us?

We serve each other in the marketplace, but that's not the only place. Vocation is much broader than our job. Individuals serve God in all aspects and dimensions of who they are. Through the family, their church, their community, and the body itself. Jonathan Pennington, a theologian, writes well on the idea of Shalom as an end goal. Shalom translates into peace, but peace is a simple definition. It is only the absence of conflict. Shalom goes above in concept and is more than just English 'peace.' Shalom is God's creation working the way it is supposed to.

Flourishing historically is measured in human health; it is something we have not particularly been good at. It is only until recently that longevity and healthier lives have persisted. Strength, fertility, and longevity are harder to attain in poverty. Material wellbeing and health are a part of human flourishing. It is not the only part, but it is a component of human flourishing. Material wellbeing allows us to make advances in our longevity and advances in human health. What do we want for those living in the poorest parts of the earth? We want them to have material possessions that let them live longer, healthier, lives. This is a controversial issue because we want them to go from being poor to being rich, which lets them have agency. Agency needs material wellbeing.

Material wellbeing for agency in human flourishing is found in Jeremiah 29:7. The story of Jeremiah is one of prosperity. Prosperity is not following everything God says and becoming the next Bill Gates, but the responsibility to take the gifts from God. We are to make the best of the gifts and to serve others with them. Jeremiah was a letter that preaches prosperity to people taken into exile. Jeremiah 29:7, "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile; if it prospers you prosper." We cannot prosper if our cities are immiserated and dying. Biblical prosperity is mutual. Its teachings say we rely on each other to prosper; here we can start thinking about what we are after. What kind of society allows us to engage in mutual rather than exploitative prosperity? Scripture says we need to be after mutuality not exploitative prosperity. We should not be using the word prosperity if it was gained by exploitative properties and not mutual means. This is an extension of the human person and God's creation.

We are all unique. Humans share a lot of similarities physiologically but are all given unique sets of gifts. Children are learning from a young age that they can be whatever they want to be. In reality, it is not how that works. You can be anything God created you to be in which a range exists. I can work at becoming a professional pianist all I want, but people would pay me not to play.

Humans are subjective. Everybody has different interests and sets of likes and dislikes. Coming up with a policy argument that pleases everybody is extremely difficult because we're subjective. This is the case when it comes to things, we care about most like healthcare. The argument for healthcare is being looked at wrong. We all want healthcare to be more accessible and affordable for everyone. At the root of healthcare, it's noncontroversial but the way it is achieved is. Having a human anthropological truth that what someone wants at ages 20, 40, and 75 are entirely different needs to be crafted into the healthcare debate.

Humans are intentional. Bastiat's The Law says humans are not windup toys. Nobody programs us in the morning and sends us off to do things. We are purposeful and have desires. We have whims and preferences that are deeply seated in us that we cannot even articulate like being in front of the refrigerator after doing grocery shopping and realizing you do not like anything in there even though you did the shopping. If we cannot describe how we feel and why we feel the way, we do on our preferences, how will we plan around this? This reality must be respected; this is how God created us, with purpose, not as robots. When we live into the purpose and integrity, seeking God's will for it we can be part of Shalom.

Adam Smith, a moral philosopher, is seeing the world change during the industrial revolution unfolding. He is called the father of modern economics because he knew the truth about human anthropology. He knew humans have ordinary affairs and need incentives to think of the *common good*. We need more than just a good person to be a senator, they need some incentive to do good. Humans act on self-interest. God created self-interest for a reason. Self-interest is not sinful in and of itself but can quickly turn to sin and greed. Sacrifice can result from self-interest such as saving a child from an accident. How do we transform the ordinary human being to care and not act on self-interest every time? How will human nature be understood and used for more outwardly thinking? We all agree we are mandated to help the poor, but we don't all agree on how.

In addressing a solution on how best to care for the poor, anthropological considerations must be merged with economic realities and thought. Economic realities exist. The first economic reality is that something cannot be created out of nothing. Humans love "free" but nothing is "free." Most things are paid for in time. Time is the most precious asset a human has, which God calls for us to be good stewards of. The second economic reality is we have limited gifts and abilities. Flourishing cannot happen alone. We are relational and need each other, which is why comparative advantage exists. We should produce things that we can produce at relatively lower costs than other people. We can do a lot of things, but it does not mean we are good at them. This is why we need specialization. Specialization frees up time constraints. If we must do multiple things to survive, we will not be as good at one or both. Adam Smith figured that out with development economics that is the cornerstone of trade as a nation. We need each other. The last economic reality presented is that humans respond to incentives. For a prosperous society where we serve each other, we need to be induced to do so. Walmart is induced to help people save money to live better, but it is not from self-nature. Clean water, food, shelter, and healthcare is needed for poverty alleviation. Sam Walton was not a saint who knew about people and their lifestyles. We do not know him personally to benefit from it. He helped people get groceries to rural communities introducing big box stores to them. This was accomplished with large economies of scale.

Everyone has a mind and heart that wants to play a part in aid for the poor. We cannot just run around doing things hoping it sticks. Resources that are available to us are scarce and limited. We need to bring trade to those who live in poverty. Those who live in poverty do so because they were excluded from Adam Smith's widening circle of trade. Poverty is personal for Christians. Water collection is accomplished in developing parts of the world such as sub-Saharan Africa with a mom and daughter. To collect water, they walk 4 miles each way and carry a dirty container that has water. It may be up to 45 lbs. 45lbs is the maximum amount airports let a suitcase be before they get the heavy sticker and assessed a higher charge. Water collection that is being done in desolate parts of the world, is back breaking calorie intensive work and it is completed on less than \$2.00 a day. They run out of calories before they run out of income. In America it costs very little time, calories, and income to purchase bottled water at a grocer. The African woman collects the water and it takes all her time. Her water is free whereas our bottled water is not. Free things tend to be the most expensive things you will ever procure. A price system helps ration scarce resources and it makes them more abundant. What do we want for the poor? We would like for her to be at Walmart and purchase goods. Her purchasing goods frees up her time, she will be able to teach her kids, develop new skills and a hobby which will allow her to make money. Trade is the key here, which is not done by us.

As believers, we should not make sure they just have more money, but also the hope of Jesus and vocational/skill training. These come from helping them materially through these conditions. In 1900 world longevity was 42 and a little higher in the Western world, U.S. and Europe. Now a middle-class American has a 50% chance of living to 100.

We were born in a time in history where we do not have to worry about something our ancestors did.

We did not do anything to do this we just were born into it. So how do we extend that to others... Economic freedom is a really great way to empirically assess the health of a nation... When we measure economic freedom as economists, it is data driven. Countries are scored from 0-10 on economic freedom from free to least free. These include intellectual property rights which can rest in Scripture in the 10 Commandments, levels of regulation and how difficult or easy it is to open a business and secure a line of credit to do so, the size of the government relative to its people, the soundness of the currency and monetary policy, and the freedom to trade internationally. Trade widens the circle of people that may be relied on. Venezuela scores lowest as a nation on least economic freedom, 30 years ago it was a thriving democratic country that was wealthy where one would go on a family vacation too. This scale is an empirical way to see which societies are escaping poverty and doing so rapidly, but also reveals the possibility that if we are not in the right institutions that respect humanity and human anthropology that rests in Scripture, then we can lose economic freedom like Venezuela. The population is immiserated, and the population is figuring out how to get out of it. There's no guarantee of economic freedom.

A society can have economic freedom and lose it or have little economic freedom and gain it. This must be thought of with inclusive opportunities for the poor. We don't just need to think about this globally but can also think of it in our cities and communities. How are people excluded? What are the vulnerabilities? How do we bring an economic approach to thinking about and serving our fellow human beings?

Trade empowers people to live into who it is that God created them to be. To do that and really help people is relational, not just writing a check. You cannot help someone out of addiction who is in a shelter by giving them a check, meal, water, or healthcare. You must walk with them. You need to be beside them.