

## Why We Need Scripture in the Budget Debates

As soon as Republicans took over the House, they returned to their old strategy of trying to appear like they were prioritizing Christian values by making pious statements and quoting Scripture in speeches on gay marriage and around anti-abortion bills like HR 3 that they never expected or intended to pass. Yet as has always been the case, once “God’s Only Party” finished its symbolic bills and moved into more concrete conversations about the budget and taxes, the Republicans have put away their Bibles and turned instead to Darwinian social and economic theories to support their policy positions.

Progressives cannot continue to allow this hypocrisy to go unchallenged. As we enter a heated budget debate, we believe that one aspect of the progressive response to the Republican budget must be a willingness to discuss budget and tax policies from a moral perspective and to challenge Republicans to continue during this debate on the budget, the faith-laden dialogue that they have so eagerly embrace during this past month on other issues.

It would be a mistake for every government leader to begin using scripture to support progressive budget positions, and that is not our intention with this document. Progressives must strive above all else to be authentic and humble when and if we bring faith into the public square. On the other hand, since so many leaders can speak authentically about faith, we firmly believe that progressives should not cede the prophetic language of scripture—and its ability to inspire and frame issues in a moral context—to the other side. Progressives should not be losing on the Bible.

The language of scripture calls people to turn their attention away from selfish desire and personal gain and to focus instead on serving God and their neighbors. It is a language that speaks with moral clarity and purpose. Therefore it speaks with authority to the policy debates currently underway in our country. In short, it is a language progressives cannot afford to ignore. Our hope is that this document (which is organized by theme, with scripture passages in italics) will help its readers better understand this rich language and will serve as a resource that will assist them in the upcoming debates that will shape our country’s priorities and demonstrate where its heart truly lies.

## **The Responsibility of the Nation and Its Government to “the Least of These”**

The first chapter of the Book of Isaiah begins with the prophet cataloguing the decline of the city of Jerusalem into injustice, where its former greatness is besmirched by its obsession with materialism and wealth. It is important to remember that the prophets are speaking against the government “rulers” and the nation as a whole. The prophets are not calling for individual piety and charity but for systemic societal/governmental reform. And they specifically challenge government leaders to remember that the nation’s leaders are called to help the powerless and those in greatest need, not those with the most power and money.

Isaiah clearly states what God expects of leaders: *“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan [note: he does not say, “cut federal funding for state child services”], plead for the widow”* (Isaiah 1:16-17).

Here is what a true “Justice Sunday” should focus on: *“Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. <sup>16</sup>He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” declares the Lord. <sup>17</sup>“But your eyes and your heart are set only on dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood and on oppression and extortion”* (Jeremiah 22:15-17).

Taken together with Micah 6:8, this forms the core of the prophetic message: **To know God as a nation means to take care of the poor and ensure that justice is done on behalf of the needy:** *“He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God”* (Micah 6:8).

The following passage is the prophet Isaiah’s description of what God’s kingdom will look like. This is a statement of hope, not a condemnation of government, but it gives a very clear indication of where all those who pray “thy kingdom come” should be focusing their attention. The policy implications of this vision are obvious, and the contrast between God’s kingdom and the one our own institutions perpetuate is damning. *“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth...Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years...they will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD...the*

*wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox...they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD." (Is. 65:17-25)*

*"You seem eager for God to come near you. Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Yet is not this the kind of fasting I, your Lord, have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice...to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them?" (Isaiah 58: 2-7).*

There are obvious parallels between ancient Jerusalem and the climate in Washington that contributed to the outcome of the 2006 elections, especially when viewed in light of Isaiah 1:23: *"Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless. The widow's cause does not come before them."*

*"The Lord takes his place in court and rises to judge his people. He enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people saying, "It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses" (Isaiah 3:14).*

*"He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God" (Proverbs 14:31).*

*"If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk,<sup>10</sup> and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. <sup>11</sup> The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs" (Isaiah 58: 9-11).*

Nehemiah (who rebuilt Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile) enforces social justice through the power of the state: *"Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. <sup>5</sup> Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery...we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others." <sup>6</sup> When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. <sup>7</sup> I told the [nobles and government officials], "You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them <sup>8</sup> and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say. <sup>9</sup> So I continued, "What you are doing is not right...let the exacting of usury stop! <sup>11</sup> Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them—the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil." <sup>12</sup> "We will ... do as you say," they replied. Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised." (Nehemiah 5:1-13)*

From the New Testament: *"Mercy triumphs over judgment! What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? <sup>15</sup>Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup>If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup>In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead"* (James 2: 14-17).

Scripture sets a very high bar for public morality as well as for private behavior. Although we can easily rationalize why alternatives might be more sensible, if people are going to insist on applying scripture to the bedroom, they should apply it to the boardroom as well. The Bible leaves no room for trickle-down economics. Jesus and the Prophets do not say, "Help the widow and orphan by supporting businesses in an effort to prop up the stagnant economy"! On the contrary, when a rich young man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit the Kingdom of God ("go to heaven" in today's terminology), *"Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me"* (Matthew 19:21—note Jesus says this is what the man must do *before* he can follow Christ). The Bible's call is for direct action.

### **The Sin of Helping the Rich at the Expense of the Poor**

The debate on budget cuts, minimum wage, and tax cuts might benefit from the lesson Nathan tried to teach King David with the following story (2 Sam 12:1-5): *"There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb. Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."* When David heard this story, he burned with anger against the rich man and said to Nathan, *"As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."* And Nathan said...*YOU are that man."* Note that Nathan is addressing David in his role as king; thus what he did to the "poor man" is applicable to the behavior of leaders in their *public* capacity, not merely their private charity.

Or perhaps Isaiah's condemnation of the government leaders of his day might be more easily understood and more directly relevant to the budget debate. It is almost as if this prophet had been reading the past Bush budgets: *"Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!"* (Isaiah 10:1)

When the early Church started favoring the rich over the poor, they were firmly rebuked: *"My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. <sup>2</sup>Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. <sup>3</sup>If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," <sup>4</sup>have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? <sup>5</sup>Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? <sup>6</sup>But you have insulted the poor"* (James 2:1-6).

*"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, your sister Sodom [Genesis 19] and her daughters never did what you and your daughters have done. <sup>49</sup> 'Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy [notice that this isn't the sin we normally hear the religious right cite as the reason God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even though this is the only place in the Bible where Sodom's sin is explicitly defined – on this topic, see also the context for Isaiah's identifying the acts of Israel with those of Sodom (Is 1:9-17; 3:9-15)]. <sup>50</sup>They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen"* (the prophet Ezekiel speaking to the nation of Israel, Ezekiel 16:48-50).

As we unearth more and more information about shady deals and patronage in the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina, the words of Amos ring especially true: *"For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate"* (Amos 5:12-13).

*"Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way"* (Amos 2:6-8).

*"Should you not know justice?—you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron"* (Micah 3:1-4). Lest readers dismiss this passage for lack of modern relevance, the leaders of Israel did not cook their poor either. But both then and now, those in power preyed upon the poor, amassing vast profits by denying such things as a living wage and appropriate housing to the poor who are their brothers and sisters and are children of God.

God's command to his people: *"If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident so he can continue to live among you...you must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit"* (Leviticus 25: 35-38). This is an example of why it is always important to understand the historical context of the text...they treated aliens a lot better a few thousand years ago than we do today in this country, and God would be forced to use a different example to make this point today.

Although, some will argue that if we give more wealth to individual Christians, they will do more charity work, clearly that is not the approach called for in the Bible. But that aside, we should respond to those arguments by asking how many people gave all of their tax refund check to a charity. Honestly? And particularly the wealthy? Indeed, the Republican rhetoric to support tax cuts completely undermines any idea that the money will be freed up to help the poor – for Republicans, the tax cuts boost the economy by being reinvested (usually as capital), not by being bestowed upon the poor as private charity. Simply put, starving the social services is starving the poor. **Cutting social services is the policy option railed against by all the prophets, and it is thoroughly unbiblical.**

Other Passages:; Isaiah 3:15, 14:30-32, 26:6; Jeremiah 2:34, 20:13, 22:16, 39:10; Proverbs 31:20, 14:20; Ezekiel 18:12, 22:29; Amos 4:1, 8:4-6; Job 29:16, 31:19; Luke 6:24-26. Specifically exploiting the poor through the legal system: Isaiah 10:2, 11:4, 32:7; Jeremiah 5:28, 22:26; Amos 5:11-12; Proverbs 31:9.

### **The Blessedness of the Poor**

An underlying assumption in many Republican policies is that poor people deserve what they get. But poverty is not a sin, and it is not necessarily caused by sin. Jesus was homeless throughout his ministry. His disciples were unemployed. Elijah the prophet fled into the desert from Queen Jezebel and went homeless and hungry because of his righteousness. Although some people in poverty today are there because of choices they have made and perhaps even sins they have committed, just as many (if not more) are there through no discernible fault of their own. This is especially true of children in poor families. But regardless of cause, as the passages that follow demonstrate, God has a special place in his heart for the poor (something the Roman Catholic Church proclaimed several decades ago as God's "preferential option for the poor").

*"Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"* (Luke 6:20). Most people are probably more familiar with the Beatitude in Matthew 5:3, which adds "in spirit" after "poor." But both refer to the same people, with Matthew just making it more clear why being poor is a blessed state: The destitute poor are so helpless

that they do not trust in themselves (and thus focus inwardly) but instead must trust in God and the kindness of others.

*"The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom to the captives and release from darkness to the prisoners [not to vote against or veto bans on torture], to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn"* (Isaiah 61:1-2).

When Jesus begins his public ministry, he makes it very clear how he sees the mission God has given him and who the object of that mission is by paraphrasing the above quotation from Isaiah: *"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"* (Luke 4:18-19).

In his portrayal of the Day of Judgment (one of only a very few times that Jesus talks about the subject), Jesus told of people from all nations gathered before him, separated into "sheep" and "goats." To the "sheep" he says, *"Come you blessed of my Father, for I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me."* In their astonishment they ask, *"When did we do that?"* And he answers, *"Whatever you did for the least of these, you did it for me."* Conversely, to the "goats" he says, *"Out of my sight, you who are condemned, for I was hungry and you did not feed me...etc."* (Matthew 25:31-46). Democrats cannot ignore the centrality of loving and submitting to God throughout the Bible (all the calls to service and loving the poor stem from a love of God), but it is striking just how much Jesus Christ's description of how he will separate the saved from the unsaved differs from the criteria for judgment we so often hear from the religious right! Jesus says salvation and personal purity rest on a person's willingness to help the poor rather than the classic wedge/judgment issues emphasized by Republicans in recent years.

The other major story Jesus tells about judgment is commonly called "The Rich Man and Lazarus," in which the rich man takes no pity on the impoverished Lazarus and is damned for it. Here, Jesus points out that when it comes to how we live moral and righteous lives that are pleasing to God, we should be looking to the very prophets cited earlier in this guide, who provide us with all the direction we need: *"There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table...[both men die and Lazarus goes to heaven while the rich man goes to hell from which he pleads with*

*Abraham for relief]...But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish... And the rich man said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them' " (Luke 16:19-29).*

*"But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed" (Luke 14:13).*

Other passages on God's love for the poor: Job 5:14-16; Psalm 35:10, 40:17, 41:1, 69:33, 70:5, 72:12-14, 109:31, 113:7, 140:13. Psalms calling on God to help the poor: Psalms 72:4, 82:4, 86:1, 109:22 (Note, all of the prior passages in this paragraph use the Hebrew word "'ebyon", which is sometimes translated into English as "needy." But "'ebyon" is the word for "the destitute, the beggar, and the economically or legally distressed" and therefore "poor" is always an appropriate translation). Habakkuk 3:14; Zephaniah 3:12.

### **Wealth and Materialism**

One would think that those who supposedly care so much for the moral and spiritual well-being of their fellow Americans would not be so eager to pass legislation with the sole purpose of enabling their friends to *store up treasures in earthly places, where moth and rust destroy* (Matthew 6:19). After all, was it not Christ who suggested that we give all we have to the poor so that we can *have treasures in heavenly places where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal* (Matthew 6:20)?

If Republicans are so eager to legislate morality, perhaps they should start by doing all they can NOT to appeal to our base desire to increase our own wealth, because Jesus told us that we *"cannot love both God and wealth"* (Matthew 6:24), and as Paul said, *"the love of money is the root of many kinds of evil"* (1 Timothy 6:10).

A legislator who claims that it is impossible for him to *"check his faith at the door"* and that a literal interpretation of scripture is the ultimate guide for how government should be run would be compelled to fight tooth and nail *against* an *"ownership society."* Furthermore, this *"Christian legislator"* should never use the argument that taxes are *"your money"* that you have every right to retain possession of. After all, God created the world, and we are all merely stewards of what God has given us for a brief time (1 Chronicles. 29:14-16).

From the Law of God proclaimed to Moses: *“Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants...in this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property...the land must not be sold permanently because the land is mine and you are but aliens and tenants...if one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells property...what he sold will remain in the possession of the buyer until the Year of Jubilee. It will be returned in the Jubilee, and he can then go back to his property”* (Leviticus 25:10-28). Jubilee does not prevent commerce, but it helps prevent a strong stratification of rich and poor that results from wealth being passed down and built upon generation after generation, what we refer to today as “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” And it provides to the poor who are motivated to make something of themselves the means to do so.

Other passages: 1 Timothy 6: 6-10, 6:17-19; Chapter 2 and 4 of Acts; Luke 6:20-26

### **Countering the Right’s Pharisaical Approach to Piety and Moral Legalism**

The attitude of the religious right and Republicans is hardly new. As Jesus said to the religious and political leaders of Israel: *“Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices...but you neglect the more important matters of the Law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness...You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. On the outside you appear to people as righteous, but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness”* (Matthew 23:23-28--this theme is repeated with vivid imagery and different applications throughout the entire 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter).

The Apostle Paul’s sarcastic comments to the Corinthians in his first letter to them, especially verses 10-11, could very easily have been written for many of the powerful and wealthy leaders of the religious right and Republican Party who so confidently declare that God is on their side and that God shows his favor by bestowing wealth and power on the faithful: *“Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings – and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! <sup>9</sup>For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena...<sup>10</sup>We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! <sup>11</sup>To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. <sup>12</sup>We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; <sup>13</sup>when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world”* (1 Corinthians 4:8-13).

*“But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. <sup>19</sup>You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder”* (James 2:18-19).

*"I hate and I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your solemn assemblies. <sup>22</sup>Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. <sup>23</sup>Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. <sup>24</sup>But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!" (Amos 5:21-24)*

### **Concluding Thoughts**

First, the observation: A faithful and true use of religious beliefs to guide policy in our constitutional system of government is very difficult. Even those with the best intentions will often fall far short, and that is why our founders were so careful to separate the two. They did so not because they had lost their faith in God but rather because their faith allowed them to understand that we are all sinners, and therefore we will never be able to align our priorities and wills perfectly with God's. Elected officials can stay true to their faith without wearing that faith on their sleeves for all to see, and they would do well to heed the words of Abraham Lincoln, who sought "not that God should be on my side, but that I should be on God's." Nevertheless, some might feel that the only way to stay true to their faith is by proclaiming it to all. God calls people differently, and so we should not categorically say they are wrong to do so, but we should remind them that when they take such a stance, they place a much higher burden on themselves. And when they take such a stand, they open themselves to having their policy positions held up to the light of the very scriptures which they claim guide their faith.

Second, the challenge: If some elected officials claim that they cannot check their faith at the door when it comes to their so-called "family values" issues, then this same faith *must also* inform their positions during tax and budget debates along with all the debates on the "compassion issues." Although their "family values" issues are mentioned only peripherally in the Bible, Jesus and the prophets are quite explicit about the clear responsibilities those with power and wealth have to the "least of these," not to mention that policy decisions in these arenas have an enormous effect on families!

As we hear regularly during their speeches on abortion and gay marriage, faith and moral leadership do not allow for compromise. That may very well be, but in a like manner, throwing a few scraps to the poor and middle class cannot compensate for cuts to public services and mortgaging our country's future by running up huge deficits to pay for wars and massive tax cuts to the wealthiest among us. Any attempt to do so would be utterly inconsistent with the clear message of the Bible.

It is very hard for us as mere humans to rule as God would have us do, but if people want to try, we should challenge those individuals to begin doing so during this budget debate.

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