



LIVING WAGE

A SIX DAY DEVOTIONAL



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

www.commongood.org.za

Common Good is a certified non-profit and public benefit organisation
NPO 062-229-NPO | PBO 930026077

LIVING WAGE

As we will see in the scriptures in the next few days, Christians cannot be part of a system that perpetuates the cycle of poverty in a family. Christ calls us to so much more. Whilst the term 'living wage' is not in scripture, God is not silent about this. Old and New Testament, in all the genres of His word, we read of His heart and the standards to which he calls his people to in their employment relationships. We are to be liberators, freeing others into flourishing.

This devotional is aimed primarily at Christ-followers who employ others in their personal capacity. It is an attempt to bring the voice of scripture to bear in exploring why paying a living wage is an issue of faith. This is not an economics devotional, or a 'how to' guide, nor does it prescribe the specific rate of pay for your context. There are many other great resources that do that. Instead, it draws together God's intent for this big topic and its implications for our faith and actions. We say: before you pull out your calculator to determine how much you should pay the person in your employ, listen first to God's heart on the matter.

Let's look at some definitions:

- 'Minimum wage' is what the government has stipulated as the lowest amount an employer can pay without breaking the law. In January 2019, this was set at R20 per hour, or R3500 per month.
- 'Living Wage' is a wage that is enough for a family to live comfortably without having to struggle to meet their basic needs. In other words, a living wage considers the various costs of living that the worker has when determining the rate of pay. According to a [2015 study](#), 95% of people employed in domestic services are paid less than a living wage.
- A 'just wage' brings in a moral component of pay. A just wage is that which would be accepted by a reasonable worker, should they have the freedom to accept or reject it. In other words, does the quality, nature and quantity of the work match the pay, in the opinion of reasonable workers in that field?

It is easy to take advantage of unemployed people in South Africa, knowing that the unemployment rate coerces people to accept wages that are below what they can live off. It seems that there will always be someone who will 'take the job' at the rate being offered. Whilst they may have said yes to the salary offered, it is still exploitation. They accept the amount even if they are not delighted by it.

If we give this matter prayerful thought, we will recognize that no matter how frugal or well-disciplined these workers are, their employment continues to keep them living under the poverty line. They simply cannot provide for the daily or basic needs of themselves and their dependents. This can lead to making unwise financial decisions, making use of loans at exorbitant rates just to get through the month. The cycle then continues.

As you read the verses and the devotional material, you may feel a range of emotions. Pay attention to that: what is God saying to you? What is he highlighting? Why is this text uncomfortable? Ecclesiastes 12 concludes with giving a visual picture of God's wisdom: "The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one shepherd" (Eccl 12:11). Goads are sharp sticks that are used to 'poke' cattle as they are being directed. Whilst the initial prodding is painful, it is far less painful than what would happen if the cattle were not directed away from danger.

We trust that through these scriptures and devotional materials you may be challenged. Not condemned or guilty, but taught, rebuked, corrected and trained in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). Paying a living wage, or a just wage, is a worthy ideal to pursue, even though there are practical issues that will need attention, discernment and wisdom. Read His word with the heart knowing that God wants the very best for you and will supply wisdom to you to make the right next steps as a response.

Journey with us over the next few days as we explore the heart of our heavenly Father and his call to us.

The Common Good Team

PS: If you are looking to grow in your understanding of Biblical justice, have a look at the Justice video by the Bible Project: <https://youtu.be/A14THPoc4-4>. This will help you have a biblical framework on which to hang the texts that we will be exploring in this devotional over the following week.

commongood

DAY 1

5 "Suppose there is a righteous man [Heb: tzaddiq] who does what is just [Heb: mishpat] and right [Heb: tzadeqah]. 7 He does not oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked. 8 He does not lend to them at interest or take a profit from them.

Ezekiel 18:5, 7-8a

In this passage we read of two words that are used to describe justice. One is *mishpat*, which refers to justice: treating people equally, having no unfair bias, giving people what they deserve (either punishment or their rights). It is a legal sense of justice. The other word that is used is *tzadeqah*, which is translated as 'being just'. Powerfully, it is a word that is also translated as 'righteous'. Righteousness is being right with God and being committed to being right in all other relationships in life. Normally when we think of righteousness, we think of private morality, or commitment to bible study. Instead, *tzadeqah* invites us to see that our righteousness is expressed in our day-to-day living and our relationships marked by fairness, generosity and equity. In this passage, we see a combination of not oppressing (being innocent) and blessing others. Righteousness means community life with all relationships (with God, others, self, the rest of creation) well ordered, filled with his shalom (peace), and all things flourishing as God designed them to be. The righteous person is one who contributes to such life.

Doing justice is inconveniencing yourself for the sake of the person who is often valued less: encapsulated in the biblical quartet of widow, orphan, foreigner and poor. Injustice, on the other hand, is all about keeping my stuff for my comfort. Stated another way, the righteous ones are willing to disadvantage themselves for the sake of others and the community. The unrighteous, or wicked, is willing to disadvantage others and the community for their own benefit.

When we think about the topic of paying people a living wage, we start first by locating this within our faith. It is an issue of righteousness before God. If you are in Christ, you will be moved towards issues of justice and fairness. Your righteousness is intrinsically linked to your relationships with others. Read how the Apostle John connects these things:

"17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth".

1 John 3:17-18

This *tzadeqah* (righteousness) is not a matter of a legal code to obey in order to be right before God. Rather, it is being in right relationship before God that moves us to pursue that righteousness in all areas of our lives – even when it costs us something. Even if it means cutting into our comfort levels to pay someone fairly and justly. To claim to be righteous before God, but not be working towards the righteousness of God expressed in community relationships, would cause the Apostle John to ask if the love of God is in you. Righteous people contribute towards God's intended state of perfect beauty, peace and wholeness in all things – including the relationship you have with employees.

REFLECTION

- What does it mean to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness (Matt 6:33) in your employment relationships?
- What does it look like for you to be righteous in your relationship with people who work for you?

SOURCE MATERIAL

- <http://breshears.net/2012/11/21/justice-summary/>
- Generous Justice – Tim Keller; Chapter 1

DAY 2

13 "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." 14 The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. 15 He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight."

Luke 16:13-15

The topic of paying a living wage naturally raises the question of money. As the statistics tell us, 95% of domestic employees in South Africa earn less than living wage. For this reality to change, there are many employers who need to re-prioritize their spending. Before we get to calculating exactly how much we should be spending, let's first get a sense of what Jesus taught on money.

In Luke 16, as well as Matthew 6, we discover that our hearts and our money are linked. Where our treasure is, there our heart will be also (Matt 6:21). What we spend our money on reveals what we love and what we trust. Jesus speaks into these topics not because he wants more money from us. No, he owns it all, he doesn't need our money. He wants our hearts.

Talking about living wage shines a spotlight onto our own hearts: what do we deserve? What lifestyle do I deserve? It also makes us think: what does my employee deserve? It can surface hard questions to answer: why do I feel I deserve this, while he/she deserves less? Do we believe we deserve a certain standard of living, even if that means we do not fairly pay those in our employ? Do I believe I deserve certain quality and types of food to keep healthy, whilst someone else doesn't deserve that food?

When we are unwilling to change our spending patterns in order to be righteous before God in our employment relationships, we reveal what we truly trust and love. What are those things that 'you can't live without'? Do you believe the person working for you should also not live without those same things? Why?

These weighty topics are partly why Jesus proclaims how hard it is for rich people to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 19:23-24). Giving up the luxuries of riches comes at a cost that many Christ-followers cannot bear. They treasure their wealth over being right before God.

Jesus could see the hearts of the Pharisees (v15). God can see our hearts, the way we treat our money, the way we may treasure it over paying fairly. He knows our hearts, our means and those particular things that we need to let go of in order to honour him. In making him our true treasure, our hearts will follow him, and our budgets will follow suit.

Treasure Him, seek first his Kingdom and righteousness, and prayerfully consider what he has entrusted to you financially as you discern what is a living wage. Ask him for wisdom in how to honour him with your means.

REFLECTION

- What is your treasure? Do your spending patterns match that?
- If Jesus was the one managing your budget, what do you think he would change about it?

DAY 3

14 Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. 15 Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin.

Deuteronomy 24:14-15

When we look at God's law for the nation of Israel, as given through Moses, we read something of God's heart. We learn about God's nature by looking at the kind of laws he wants his people to follow. God's people are to live in line with God-ordained laws, as it is a reflection on who he is.

Tucked away amongst many other laws is this profound instruction to the people of God. God put this law in place because of the nature of the human heart: people who have the power to take advantage over others for personal gain will typically take advantage. The LORD recognizes this and instructs his people otherwise. In God's people, you should not advantage yourself to the disadvantage of others.

This instruction helps us to see that God's people are not to be those who pocket extra income whilst one's employees cannot put food on their table, or a roof over their heads. To do that would, by definition, be profiting at the expense of another's wellbeing. This, as v14 describes it, is taking advantage of a hired worker. Unless you, as an employer, cannot put food on your own table, you have an obligation to pay your workers at least enough to provide for their own basic needs.

We can draw out a few principles of this law: pay fairly, pay on time and don't manipulate things to your own favour. The poor and needy (those at the bottom of the economic pyramid) typically do not have the power to negotiate with the employer and take what is offered, whether or not they can afford it. Verse 15 reminds us that this is a sin issue, not a cashflow issue.

When we look at the 10 commandments, we also see how we are to keep the Sabbath. Not only God's people, but all the people that work for us are to observe the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-12). Whilst we are to discern how we best maintain good rhythms of work and rest; the question must be asked: how much leave and rest do we give those who work for us? How can we ensure a healthy life-work rhythm for long term flourishing? Do we have a contract that is shaped by the labour law? Do we adhere to God's law for those in our employ?

DAY 4

1 Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. 2 Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. 3 Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. 4 Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. 5 You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.

James 5:1-6

The half-brother of Jesus does not mince his words for rich Christians. For those believers coming out of Judaism, they would have heard the echoes of the law of Deuteronomy 24, which we covered yesterday.

James outlines a few things against these employers: they were hoarding and failing to pay workers whilst living in luxury and self-indulgence. Like in other parts of this letter, this is strong language. Some rich people were hoarding whilst their workers were crying out against them. And this complaint was not merely between employer and employee. These cries reach the ears of the Lord Almighty.

James also points out the tragedy: the very thing that these rich people were hoarding, will rot, be eaten by moths and corrode (echoing Jesus in Matthew 6:19-21). What they have accumulated at the expense of these workers will testify against them. What they have stored is evidence of a heart estranged from God. All of it will be taken away, leading them to weep and wail. James draws our attention to this Jesus Kingdom principle: Those that have the power and wealth to oppress those without power and wealth will face down the God of justice.

Many times, 'rich people', as named by James, hide behind an excuse, 'I can't afford to pay a living wage'. They point to a cashflow constraint, without looking at what they have stored up. They have chosen to spend their money elsewhere, whether it is in policies, investments, subscriptions and so on. Those things, in and of themselves, are not evil. But when they put us in a financial position where we pay an exploitative wage, something will have to shift. James warns us: the whole of our lives is under the light of Christ. Our spending patterns, the debts we are paying off,

DAY 5

Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.

Proverbs 14:31

The book of Proverbs is a wonderful book, capturing a range of wisdom literature. Many times, the wisdom is captured in a couplet, unpacking one truth in two different ways. Sometimes the two lines are seemingly contradictory or affirming again the same truth with a different image. In this case, we have two truths in contrast with each other, underlining a core truth that we are to allow deeper into our hearts.

So far in your grappling with the topic of living wage, have you asked yourself the question: am I paying someone a monetary amount that effectively keeps them in poverty? Am I paying 'the going rate', without interrogating whether this is an amount that brings freedom or oppression? It is a hard truth to swallow but paying someone below a living wage is enslaving them to a life of poverty. It is oppression.

Let's go back to the proverb: Keeping someone in the cycle of poverty shows contempt for God. Why is that? How are the things connected? Well, it is right there in the word used for God: 'Maker'. Of all the names that Solomon could use for God, he chooses "Maker". Every person you employ bears the image of God. They are his creation. This imbues them with inherent dignity, worth and honour. Before they lift a tool, they are worthy of your attention and respect. So, when someone oppresses the poor, they are essentially taunting and showing contempt for the One who made them. Our treatment of a child of God reflects our view of God himself.

The contrasting statement shines a different light on this truth. When we are kind to those in need, we honor God. We honor their Maker. When we treat with dignity, respect and love those who bear the image of the Maker, we honour their Maker. Working to break the shackles of poverty in a person's life is one way in which we can honor our heavenly Father.

As you grapple with how much to pay the person or people you employ (or are planning to employ), consider how you can honor this person's maker. An attitude of trying to get away with paying as little as possible shows contempt for your heavenly father. An attitude of trying to do more than the minimum and actually be kind to this person, is a way to honour your Heavenly Father.

DAY 6

21 They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22 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 work of their hands. 23 They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them.

Isaiah 65:21-23

In several places in the Old and New Testament we see a description of the new heavens and new earth that is coming. This passage in Isaiah 65 is one of those. It describes a future reality that awaits the faithful. These new heavens and new earth have beautiful descriptions and fills one with hope. This is the Kingdom that is coming.

In looking at this description we see what work will be like. We know from Genesis 3 that when sin entered the human story, work became frustrated. Work is not a result of sin, as Adam was tending to the garden before the fall. The fall, however, made work harder, less fruitful and more tiresome. So, when we read of the new heavens and the new earth, the Kingdom in all its fullness, we see that sin no longer has its curse on us.

This impacts work in a few ways:

- Work will not be frustrated – people will build their own houses, and live in them (not building for others, whilst not having a house of their own)
- Similarly, farming will yield fruit for their own satisfaction, and not only that of others
- Work will be fruitful – God's people will long enjoy the work of their hands. This is a beautiful picture of how no labour will be undignifying or demeaning.
- God's people will not bear children doomed to misfortune. What a powerful image. There will not be children who are doomed to less than fullness of life because they were born to a particular family or community.

Now, jumping forward to the prayer that Jesus gave his followers to pray. Early on, Jesus tells his followers to pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). When we pray that his kingdom would come, we are asking that the new heavens and new earth break into our reality. We ask that the way things are in heaven would shape the ways things are done on earth. We are asking the King to usher his new heaven and earth in our time.

In your employment relationship, when you pray 'your kingdom come, your will be done', you are, in some ways, asking God to move you into action. You are praying that you would be one who is contributing towards the kingdom breaking into this person's life. You are praying, in part, that those beautiful images in Isaiah 65 would become real in this life, and not only the next. You are asking that you would be part of seeing that flourishing come through how you pay, how you treat them and how you bless them.

Working for a Christ-follower should be a beautiful experience. As we grow in our faithfulness to Christ, it will flow into all areas of our lives, including our working relationships. Our employees will feel loved, be given grace and truly cared for. Your care for those in your employ should be a witness and picture of God's love. Those in your employ should have fruitful labour, being able to build their dignified shelter, eat the fruit of their labour (read: nutritious food) and enjoy the work of their hands.

REFLECT

- What is in your control to do in your employment relationships that will bring more flourishing and fruitfulness?
- What are some action steps that you can take to apply what you have learned so far?

commongood