



Everyone Is Worthy

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There is a deep difference in worldview that divides families, political parties, and society. No, not on the issues we are often hotly debating, but on something much more fundamental. Who has a right to thrive: everyone, or just the worthy?

Some people believe each of us needs to earn all we have. Work hard and play by the rules and you are rewarded with material success: you have earned it and deserve it. But if you make bad choices and fail to do what is expected, then you likely will not do well. But it's your own fault. You do not deserve to thrive. Sometimes, if people do all the right things and still come up short, we might help them. But often not the unworthy others.

There is another view—a biblical view—that we seldom explicitly articulate. For Jesus, everyone (and today we might add, all species) is worthy, inherently deserving of their needed share of the material resources given to us by God. Jesus came that all might have abundant life (John 10:10)—not just abundant spiritual life, but abundant material life as well. Jesus told his followers to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and heal the sick. Jesus cared about the whole person. And he did not say to care only for deserving people. Everyone was worthy, including Lazarus, the poor man who spent his days outside the gate of a rich man's home (Luke 16:19–31). Jesus doesn't say why Lazarus was poor, whether he was disabled, could not find work, or had made bad choices. He just says he was poor. No judgment. Lazarus was a human being. He was worthy. He had needs that the rich man was obligated to meet.

In the United States, people have certain rights under the law; for example, free speech and the right of citizens to vote. When these rights are obstructed, we go to court to seek their protection and fulfillment. With few exceptions, these rights

are not earned and available only to the deserving. Rather, they are inherent in our personhood. But people in the United States do not have economic human rights to necessities such as food, health care, or housing. We fail to follow Jesus's mandate to provide to everyone the material resources they need for abundant life.

The right of all people to receive the things they need, without preconditions, could be realized if we made a statutory commitment to recognize, respect, protect, and fulfill economic human rights. (See the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, articles 23–26.) Without such an explicit and enforceable national commitment, many of our neighbors will continue to live in poverty. They will not have abundant life. Over the last forty years, despite a near tripling of the GDP adjusted for inflation, we have not eliminated poverty. Tens of millions flounder with unmet material needs while most of the nation's economic gains flow to people who already have plenty. Economic growth in a nation that lacks a firm commitment to equity leads to greater inequality and exacerbates environmental destruction. It fails to help those who need it most.

All we have comes from God. Surely God's intention is for God's resources to be used to ensure abundant life for all God's people and creatures. A just society is one that recognizes and fulfills economic human rights. For people who love God and their neighbors, this is an important public policy goal.

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