



“PROPHETS AND PROFITS”
SCRIPTURE: DEUTERONOMY 4: 1-2, 6-9; JAMES 1: 17-27
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
September 2, 2018

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Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

4:1 So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.

4:2 You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you.

4:6 You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!"

4:7 For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him?

4:8 And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

4:9 But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children—

James 1:17-27

1:17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

1:18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

1:19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;

1:20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

1:21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

1:22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

1:23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror;

1:24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.

1:25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act--they will be blessed in their doing.

1:26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.

1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Never mind the fact that he talked to himself, lived with his widowed mother basically his whole life, and was a hypochondriac. Adam Smith, the Scottish philosopher, was also a devout Presbyterian.¹

You may not realize it, but your life has been deeply impacted by this eccentric man who was a pivotal figure in the Scottish Enlightenment of the 18th century—and it's not because you are Presbyterian, it's because you are an American.

Smith's most famous work, *The Wealth of Nations*, was published in 1776—he was writing as the birth pangs of this nation were underway... the Boston Tea Party, the Battles of Lexington and Concord all happened in 1775. He was a close friend with Benjamin Franklin. Thomas Jefferson was deeply impacted by Smith's economic theories.

Many consider Smith the philosophical father of modern capitalism—and the person who inspired the most powerful critique of capitalism in the work of Karl Marx.

We don't know much about Adam Smith—about a year before he died he convinced one of the executors of his Will to destroy all of his notes and letters—only 173 letters and seven essays survive. So, we don't have a lot of insight into this man who has impacted us so deeply—this man who gave narrative and moral philosophy to the capitalist economy that defines our every day lives.

The quick version of Smith's economic theory is this: human beings are motivated first and foremost by self-interest. The passions that define our self-interest are unconsciously checked by what he called the "inner man" or an "invisible hand." This invisible hand functions within us and the economy "without knowing it, without intending it, [in order to] advance the interest of the society."

Being a good Presbyterian, Smith believed this "invisible hand" was the work of the Creator. And so he had great optimism that an economic system driven by self-interest could result in a robust common good as well.

The invisible hand assured, for instance, that a wealthy person's self interest would lead them to use their wealth for production, to increase their wealth. So, there emerges a need for workers, and then, in turn, fair wages to keep workers engaged and opportunities to gain wealth to keep workers motivated.²

And this optimism born of the Scottish Enlightenment's confidence in human capacity for reason, for scientific fact, and even for sympathy³, lies deep in our collective American psyche—and so we are generational disciples of the belief in the profit motive's capacity to somehow, mysteriously fuel a just economy.

The "invisible hand" or the "inner man," Smith asserted, will mitigate our excesses. This defining perspective bears more scrutiny. When we excavate this deep narrative, the primal story of us—when we speak it out loud in 2018, in this sacred space, this space where we hear God's voice calling us to the work of justice and healing and truth telling—this Labor Day weekend, no less, a weekend that since 1894 has been set aside to honor the achievements of American workers and how workers and labor movements have fueled our American economy. When we speak Smith's theories out loud in this social context, how does it sound?

Before you answer that question, remember the voices of others of our ancestors—the prophets of our Hebrew forbearers, the prophets who followed Jesus, the prophets who continue to call us to see and hear hard truths.

Deuteronomy speaks to us from a past gripped by uncertainty and oppression. The people of Israel were in a perilous situation—forced from their homes, from their sacred spaces, from all that they knew. Their future was uncertain. And in such traumatic circumstances it is a real temptation to turn away from values toward survival instincts.

This text sounds the clarion call for the people of Israel to remember what they've been taught, to remember the law, the moral instruction they have received. Their

obedience to God's law should not depend on where they are or what is happening. It should come from deep inside them—the law should be written on their hearts.

James speaks similarly of the “implanted word” as the only pathway to human righteousness—God's Law must not be just heard—it must be embodied. We can't just be hearers of the law; we must be doers of the law—every part of us—our eyes, our ears, our hands, our hearts.

The gap between the wealthy and the poor was a problem in James' community—there were accepted practices of deferring to the wealthy and scorning the poor. James rejected these norms and exhorted Jesus followers to remember their roots—the prophets who challenged the stark stratification between the wealthy and the impoverished.

For James this exhortation was about how those with resources, used their resources—their land, their money—how they paid their workers, how they supported those who were the most vulnerable in society.

James reminded the faithful that economic justice was not a choice, but an obligation of God's law and that amassing wealth through the oppression of another is condemned in our scriptures.

Which brings us back to Adam Smith and his optimism about the capacity for self-interest and competition and the “invisible hand” to generate a common good that provided for all people.

Smith was writing in the nascent stage of the industrial revolution. In fact, one of his Scottish intellectual friends, James Watt, refined and revolutionized the steam engine, which began the rapid transformation of industry in the late 18th century and 19th century.

In the midst of all these rapid economic changes, the mythology of the “invisible hand” lulled Western society into a story of economic prosperity that benefited all—even though the story of both our national and the world economy has been much more complicated and the common good often difficult to locate: chronically poor living conditions for workers, extremes of economic disparity, child labor, chattel slavery, and migrations of workers forced by everything from kidnapping and violence to desperation and government manipulation are also a part of our economic story.

Adam Smith perhaps did not account for how the “inner man” or that “invisible hand” can sometimes sound eerily like the voice that tells us what we want to hear. Perhaps he didn't account for things like implicit bias, white supremacy, the

commodification of human bodies, and technology rendering meaningful human labor increasingly obsolete.

Perhaps he could not foresee the extreme concentrations of wealth that define the 21st century in the US. Just a few months ago a new economic study showed that the wealthiest 1% of American households own 40% of the country's wealth. And the top 20% (an average net worth of \$3 million) of American households own a sobering 90% of the country's wealth.⁴

All of these things impact how our economy actually functions and its capacity to truly serve the common good—and all of these things call on people of faith to remember something about ourselves that can easily be obscured by the conflicting narratives that have formed us—prophets and profits are not on equal footing. Profits cannot be our god. And as difficult as it may be to accept, the prophets must be our guide.

We cannot call ourselves Christian and not engage in our economy with an embodied, active, and engaged commitment to economic justice. Prophets and profits do not have equal status—and we are called to active pursuit of social justice even when it is not in our self-interest.

Not that long ago, my family and I were a very different part of the American economy than we are today. American Football is a billion dollar business and there is a stark wealth gap kept in place inside the industry by many factors. In the collegiate game that gap is secured by an unpaid labor force—there is an enticing narrative to prop it all up: the mythology of amateurism and the virtue of playing for the love of the game.

While players are working long hours, sustaining serious injuries, and generating billions for universities, conferences, and athletic companies, some coaches are making millions and other coaches are making lots of money by any standard of measure.

For many years we had ways of justifying it in our minds. The young men were getting a college education, John worked long hours as a coach and deserved what he was paid, we shared our resources with others who had less than we did—there were lots of ways we told ourselves it was acceptable, even virtuous.

But if you pray for God to be with you, then you've got to accept all that God brings to your life. And as we learned more about the realities of revenue college sports—players sign away their rights, players don't have money for food, injured players are abandoned by their universities, players are not free to take meaningful classes, the causes of traumatic head injuries are denied and even covered up. In the midst of this complicated reality, God's prophetic voice convicted us more and more.

Our faith could not just be words, we had to act. And when we acted, when we used our voices to call for economic justice, it cost us. Fighting for economic justice in college football was not in our self-interest. In fact, it was contrary to our self-interest. And by many measures, we came out on the losing end.

When it came down to it, what drove our decision was not the economy, but the community. It was not guilt, but our relationships with the young men who pour their hopes and dreams into a sport that regards them as nothing more than a commodity.

So, this Labor Day weekend, we as Jesus followers are called again to hard truths—not so we can feel guilty, but so that we can be stirred to actions that provoke economic justice in our community, in our country, and in our world. Our collective consciousness is a chorus of conflicting narratives—and there is no easy way through the economic challenges of our time. And we are reminded again at this Table of Christ’s call to justice, mercy, radical welcome, healing, and love.

If an eccentric Scottish Presbyterian could convince the world that self-interest generates the common good, then we Presbyterians of the 21st century can help the world be wise to the limitations and even harm of our ancestor’s dream. We are his offspring—and we are the logical people to remind the world of a more honest lesson, what Jesus’ taught us—self-interest cannot save the world from human excess, but love can.

Thanks be to God.

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Adam-Smith>

² <http://www.sath.org.uk/edscot/www.educationscotland.gov.uk/scottishenlightenment/scotland/index.html>

³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scottish-Enlightenment>

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/12/06/the-richest-1-percent-now-owns-more-of-the-countrys-wealth-than-at-any-time-in-the-past-50-years/?utm_term=.f5ae687c6f07