

ON SOCIAL JUSTICE (SAINT BASIL THE GREAT)

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None of us likes to be told to change his life. No doubt this was true for cavemen, and it is even more true today, when unfettered individual autonomy is the idol of the age. But for each and every person, Christianity means you must change your life. No exceptions, and the change demanded is very specific across multiple axes, not the vague requests found in heresies such as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. In modernity, where money is the marker of all things and consumption the goal of life, few demands of Christianity are harder than that of extreme charity—the distribution to others of personal wealth. Nonetheless, Saint Basil the Great is here to tell us what we are to do with our riches; let us be attentive.

Saint Basil (330–379) is one of the greatest Christian saints. He came from a rich, socially-prominent, and influential family. It was also a family with deep Christian roots—his grandfather was a martyr, and both his parents were saints, as well as several of his siblings. Saints seem to have been strewn all around in those days, even if the average person was not different from today. Basil contributed not only to the creation of cenobitic (communal) monasticism, of which he was a major driver, but he also led the way, both practically and intellectually, in the care of the poor and needy. Among other achievements, he founded the world’s first public hospital, the Basiliad. Like his contemporary, Saint John Chrysostom, he preached often, and some of those sermons were recorded as they were delivered, from which this book comes.

The Church Fathers often spoke and wrote on societal matters, including those related to wealth, and *On Social Justice* is a type of companion piece to Chrysostom’s *On Wealth and Poverty*. The title chosen for this compilation is unfortunate, however, and likely to alienate many potential readers. Saint Basil does not use the term “social justice”; either the translator or the press chose the term for a new translation of four of his sermons, all tied to the theme of charitable giving. The choice is unfortunate because “social justice” in modern parlance is almost always code for demanding unlimited compliance with Left desires, from the mutilation of children to organized theft to line the pockets

of parasites to inviting millions of alien invaders to a country. The Left uses the term to avoid the simple word “justice,” because that has well-understood parameters within Christianity, and Western thought in general, none tied in the least to Left political demands. Tacking on “social” is a way to infinitely expand Left claims, while cloaking their noxious desires as moral imperatives.

But once past the title, the book is very much worth reading. These four sermons were delivered by Basil around the year 369, when a great famine struck Caesarea, where Basil was a priest (and later bishop), having left behind the monastic community he had founded. The central point of discussion, from which most of his thoughts flow, is the story of the rich young man, found in all three Synoptic Gospels. In short, a wealthy young man came to Christ and asked what he should do to obtain eternal life. Christ responded that, first, the man must follow His commandments, and once that was done, he should, “if he would be perfect,” sell what he had and give the proceeds to the poor. The young man “went away sad, for he had many possessions.”

This is, to put it mildly, a challenging Scriptural passage, and has occasioned much exegesis from the Fathers of the Church, covered in detail in the very good Introduction written by the translator, C. Paul Schroeder. The basic division has been between those who view this command as a “counsel of perfection,” something desirable but not necessary for salvation, and those who view compliance, at least at some substantial level, as not optional. Saint Clement, and the early Fathers, tended to view the passage as a command not to be attached to worldly goods, rather than a literal command to wholly dispense with worldly goods—that is, a command to live a life in Christ, not one of worldly passions. In other words, their reading was primarily metaphorical. With the rise of monasticism in the third and fourth centuries, an alternate view came to the fore, which read the passage literally, at least for monks.

Saint Basil took a different approach. Rather than focusing primarily on the internal spiritual struggle of the young man, and by extension of any man with possessions, he reads the passage through the prism of what Christ elsewhere said was the second greatest commandment—“Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you live in luxury, very broadly defined, while others lack necessities, you are violating this “mother

of all commandments.” Therefore, in Basil’s view, whether monk or layman, Christ’s injunction applies fully to you, and is a command for everyone, not advice. This seems like a perfectly plausible reading, although I do note that given that Christ’s first command to the rich young man was to obey His commandments, Basil’s reading makes Christ’s second command to the young man repetitive. In any case, Basil’s claim is not that every man must fully impoverish himself. Rather, it is that everyone must have enough, and in practice, this means that variability in wealth in a Christian society should be low. Basil’s is a call for voluntary wealth equalization among Christians. “If we all took only what was necessary to satisfy our own needs, giving the rest to those who lack, no one would be rich, no one would be poor, and no one would be in need.”

This theme is explored across all four sermons. What strikes the reader most of all about these homilies is their practicality and their immediacy. All of them could be given to any group of Christians today, without material modification. The first sermon is titled forthrightly—“To the Rich.” (It’s not clear where the titles of the sermons come from; I doubt if they were given by Basil.) The saint notes the “discord of [the rich young man’s] motives,” in that Christ did not offer him toil, or dangers, or risks such as anyone would take to cure an illness, voluntarily undertaken with the goal of earning the priceless reward of eternal life with Him, but rather a “smooth road, without pain or exertion.” Who would not take such a sweet deal? Buy low, sell high (not that Basil uses that phrase). But the young man was “distant from true love” for his neighbor.

No reader can be in doubt that Basil is addressing him, directly, whether a man of the fourth century or a man of the twenty-first. Basil personalizes his admonitions, referring mostly to “you” rather than “the young man.” He uses no abstractions—Basil is nothing if not hard-hitting (and this was his personality in life generally; he was a very in-your-face type of man). If those who were wealthy had love, they would long since have lost that wealth, having given bread to the hungry and clothes to the naked, parented orphans, and so forth. Everybody spends for a feast, many will spend much gold for a horse, yet most of us will not spend to obtain eternal life, even when what is offered is the type of bargain you would jump on if it were for food or a horse.

As does Chrysostom, Basil states that, in essence, anyone who has more than he needs has stolen from the poor. He is careful to note that the problem is not extreme examples, such as the rich man in the parable of Lazarus, who consumed heinously and gluttonously with no regard for others. (That is the parable around which Chrysostom's *On Wealth and Poverty* revolves.) Instead, the more common problem, one that applies to everyone, is that the Devil "suggests innumerable spending opportunities." Most who are wealthy carefully plan and apportion their wealth, allocating amounts for current spending, for emergencies, for investment, for their children, and so forth. Such behavior seems to us prudent and wise, but in Basil's view, it is still often, or mostly, theft. You do not know your future needs, but you do know that others have current needs. Basil is most of all critical of those who literally bury money against emergencies. "And I think that when it comes to this, as you are burying your wealth, you entomb with it your own heart. 'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'" Nor does it make any sense to wait until your end is near; you may never get a chance to execute on your plans, and those eager for an inheritance are likely to frustrate your wishes.

Aside from the theology and admonitions, it is interesting to the reader that Basil describes the spending of the rich in detail—"thousands of carriages, plated with bronze and silver"; "they wear bridles and belts and garlands all of silver and spangled with gold." "Their houses are made with all kinds of translucent marble, some of Phrygian stone, some of Laconian or Thessalian tile, which keep them warm in the winter and pleasantly cool in the summer." Given his origins and social status, Basil is obviously speaking of things he has intimate familiarity with and which his audience can viscerally grasp.

Yet Basil is clear that despite what he sees as easy, most find giving up their wealth much harder than other forms of piety. They say (in a very modern turn of phrase), "What quality of life will there be if everyone sells all and forsakes all?" At points Basil seems to regard the desire for wealth as a type of mental illness—not just the obsession with keeping wealth, but with adding more. "They have every reason to be happy and rejoice in their prosperity, but instead they weep and wail because they fall one or two degrees short of some other super-wealthy individual." (Moderns incorrectly think it is some new discovery that people view

their level of wealth not in the absolute, but in relation to others they know, or know of.) Aside from lack of love, wealth destroys the holder. At best it distorts his relationships and his perceptions, and makes his life a mockery of what it could be. Thus, Basil ends this sermon on a practical, even secular, note—in all these sermons, he balances spiritual commands with such practical advice, suggesting that one can improve one's life both now and later, simply by following Christ's command.

The next sermon is "I Will Tear Down My Barns," the title, of course, coming from Christ's parable of the rich man who goes to sleep well-satisfied with his wealth, and planning to tear down his barns and put up bigger ones to store the crops that overflow from his current barns, but who dies that very night. Basil begins by noting God's forbearance, and how the rich man's land "produc[ing] abundantly" manifested His patience and goodness. But He was disappointed in this rich man, who refused to share, a sin Basil here compares to gluttony. "In everything you see gold, you imagine everything as gold; it is your dream when you sleep and your first thought when you awaken."

In this sermon, Basil is more focused on commanding action than in the first, perhaps because famine had actually taken hold of the region. "At this very moment, what prevents you from giving? Are not the needy near at hand? Are not your barns already full? Is not your heavenly reward waiting? Is not the commandment crystal clear? The hungry are perishing, the naked are freezing to death, the debtors are unable to breathe, and will you put off showing mercy until tomorrow?" He then turns to specifics. "Come now, distribute your wealth lavishly, becoming honorable and glorious in your expenditures for the needy. . . . Do not enhance your own worth by trafficking in the needs of others. . . . Do not make common need a means of private gain. Do not become a dealer in human misery. Do not attempt to turn the chastisement of God [i.e., the famine] into an opportunity for profit. Do not chafe the wounds of those who have been already been scourged."

Basil paints a terrifying picture of a poor man and his family, and by implication a terrifying picture for the man who will not share, who is responsible for the plight of the poor man. Everything the poor family has is worth only a few pennies, but worse, they face choices such as deciding which child to sell to the slave-dealer, so the family can avoid starving to death. "Should I choose the eldest? But I cannot bear to do so,

since he is the firstborn. The youngest? But I take pity on his youth, as yet untouched by tragedy. This one looks just like his mother, that one shows aptitude in his lessons. Curse this helplessness! . . . And while the parents come with tears streaming down their faces to sell the dearest of their children, you are not swayed by their sufferings.”

Powerful stuff. Yet it also shows something that is very different about Basil's time than now, and it is a difference of quality, not of degree. Nobody in America is poor in the sense that Basil meant it. In part this is due to the overall wealth of our society; in part it is due to the vast social safety nets set up in all Western countries since the nineteenth century. Still, there are disparities of wealth, and people who need food and shelter—or could use better food and shelter than they do have. But would Basil be as exercised about those disparities as about the much worse ones he saw? It's a fair question. True, outside America, there are much greater disparities, though as a result of advances in food production made by the West, nearly all actual starvation in the modern world, such as the 1980s Ethiopian famine, is the result of deliberate political action.

The third sermon is “In Time of Famine and Drought.” The famine now definitively is upon the land, and Basil makes repeated explicit references to it. He interprets this as God chastising the people “to turn us back to the right way,” the result of “the multitude of our sins.” And the worst of those sins has been that “we do not share what we receive with others.” He dwells at length on the terrible physical manifestations of starvation, and concludes “How many torments does the one who neglects such a body deserve? . . . For whoever has the ability to remedy the suffering of others, but chooses to withhold aid out of selfish motives, may properly be judged a murderer.”

He then complains his audience is inadequate in number, despite the desperate need to turn to God. “Is this what you call prayer and supplication? The men, except for a few, occupy themselves with commerce, while the women assist them in the service of Mammon. Few there are who have gathered to pray with me, and those who have come are drowsy, yawning, peering around incessantly, counting the minutes until the cantor finishes the verses, until they are released from church and the duty of prayer as from a dungeon.” He contrasts the Ninevites with the people of his own parish. “Such is the repentance of those who

are entangled in sins. We, on the other hand, commit sins fervently, but repent in a slack and half-hearted manner.”

When things are going well, everyone finds it easy to be grateful to God, but when things turn bad, they “bitterly inveigh against God as against a debtor in arrears, instead of composing themselves like servants addressing a displeased master.” This is the wrong approach; the Christian should use this time to strengthen his faith. “Sorrows try the soul as fire does gold.” Thus the poor can profit from their poverty; it is not all bad. But most of all, those who have more (and not only the rich) must share “to remedy the common distress.” And continuing his practical line of approach, perhaps afraid that his audience, shellshocked by his outrageous demands, might do nothing instead of everything, Basil declaims that doing something, anything, is far better than doing nothing. “Consider yourself to have two daughters: the enjoyment of this life, and the life to come in the heavens. If you do not want to give everything to the better cause, at least divide your possessions equally between the immoderate child and the prudent one.”

Finally, we get “Against Those Who Lend at Interest.” Here Basil’s target is, actually, less the rich, though they do get it good and hard. Rather, it is anyone who takes advantage of the poor to benefit himself. He takes his injunction from Psalm 14, which begins “O Lord, who shall dwell in Your tabernacle?” and among other answers, lists “He [who] does not lend his money at interest”—although this is far from the only place in Scripture that usury, traditionally defined as any lending at interest, is condemned. Very explicitly, Basil is concerned with lending to the poor for necessities, those who “turn the misfortune of the poor to their own advantage and reap a bountiful harvest.” Christ commanded that we should loan money to others (Matthew 5:42)—but without interest, for “Do you not know that you are taking in an even greater yield of sins than the increase of wealth you hope to receive through interest?” Lending at interest to the poor is the opposite of philanthropy; it is misanthropy.

Borrowing, however, whether at interest or not, is a very bad idea, the Saint tells his congregation, again turning to practical, temporal concerns. At first, the borrower feels flush, but very soon his life is wracked with worry, he “loathes the days as they hasten onward towards the appointed day of repayment.” Basil distinguishes between borrowing for

necessities and borrowing for an increase in spending ability. “Borrowing is the origin of falsehood, the source of ingratitude, unkindness, perjury. . . . Now you are poor, but free. By borrowing, however, you will not become rich, and you will surrender your freedom. . . . It is the sign of an infantile mind not to care for oneself with the resources that are available, but rather to partake of something clearly and undeniably harmful while trusting in unseen hopes.” The poor man (and here Basil must mean not the man on the verge of starvation, but one just getting by) does not worry, while the rich worry constantly—as does the debtor. “[A]nything is preferable to borrowing.” Get a job. Beg. Whatever it takes. “We may observe, moreover, that it is not those who are truly deprived who come to procure a loan, since the creditors have no confidence in [such debtors’] ability to repay; most borrowers are rather people who devote themselves to unconstrained expenditures and useless luxuries, those who serve the passionate desires of women.” Ouch. “I have beheld a terrible spectacle: children of free birth being dragged to the auction block on account of the debt of their parents.” Don’t be that person, says Basil.

In an unexplained aside, Basil says “‘But many,’ someone will say, ‘have become rich by taking out loans.’ Many more, I think, have ended by fastening a noose for themselves.” That’s certainly true, but Basil does not say the mechanism for this hoped-for increase in wealth. Given that he seems unaware of the idea of borrowing money for investment, in the modern sense of raising debt capital, I’m not sure what he’s thinking of. Gambling, perhaps. Most commercial “investments” in the ancient world were forms of partnerships; there were no joint-stock companies, and as far as I know, little borrowing to raise capital in the sense we understand it, though there must have been some loans for business purposes.

This raises an important point about Basil’s sermons. We often believe we have insights the ancients lacked. Usually this is false, but occasionally it is true. We understand economics better than they did, and our society is organized in ways that Saint Basil could not have contemplated, especially in business. In Basil’s time, most economic relations were zero-sum, and when they were not, they were far less complex than common transactions today. For example, Basil does not really distinguish between paying craftsmen and burying gold; both

are wastes of money and evil acts. He objects that if a man marries a woman who loves money, she will spend it on “stonecutters, woodworkers, mosaicists, painters.” But that’s actually not necessarily bad; if she doesn’t, who is going to employ craftsmen? Somebody has to do it to have a functioning society. Along related lines, a fully-leveled society of the type that Basil seems to regard as the ideal is also a society that produces very little overall, including excess wealth that can help the poor. Someone has to produce the value, and whether we like it or not, they won’t do it without incentives. On balance, we’re better off if people work hard to produce value to get rich, and then they distribute that directly and indirectly, with part of that distribution being purchase of beautiful and useful items.

Basil seems to, occasionally, grasp this point, but mostly he glosses over it, or does not see it. For example, speaking of the man with the barns, he suggests that distribution of wealth, like a well-used well, increases productivity in some unspecified way. At the same time, however, sometimes he suggests not that the rich are only rich because of God’s beneficence, a Christian truism (God is the but-for cause of anything good that happens to us), but that they stole. “They seize common goods before others have the opportunity.” This may be true in some cases, but a more subtle understanding of economics makes clear it’s not true all the time. At the same time, Basil seems to imply that the rich are merely stewards, if they distribute wealth, however gotten. The rich are to “receive the reward of benevolence and faithful stewardship, while the poor are honored for patient endurance in their struggles.” The reader is a little confused if the rich are thieves or stewards.

Nor does the saint contemplate that some people are poor because of their own bad choices. As Chrysostom says, one should not inquire overmuch into why a person needs charity, or whether and to what degree he really needs charity. Yet the rise of state-sponsored charity over the past 150 years has greatly expanded the division, always existing, between what the Victorians called the deserving and the non-deserving poor. Discernment is required in how one should give charity, in a way that was not true, or perhaps simply less true, in Basil’s time.

Another matter that Basil does not discuss is how to select objects of charity. To his listeners, the objects of charity were obvious—their actual neighbors, whom they saw in the streets of Caesarea. (This meant

both Christians and non-Christians; the emperor Julian the Apostate famously complained that Christian charity, given to both Christians and non-Christians, made pagans, who did nothing of the sort, look bad.) Even if they had wanted to, or it had occurred to them, they could not distribute charity to those in, say, Rome or Antioch. Today, we can give charity to anyone we please, anywhere in the world. Should we prioritize our own communities, our own cities, our own nations?

It seems quite obvious we should; our primary duties are to those in our immediate community, for practical reasons (such as that we can more easily identify those in need) and also because it is much harder to love abstractions. Moreover, we often owe specific duties to those immediately around us that we do not owe to everyone. This implies that charity should not generally be directed outside the country, or even, usually, outside our own towns and cities (and in any case the vast majority of charity to foreigners is demonstrably wasted, when it is not actually of negative benefit to the recipients). It also implies we should work vigorously against our societies admitting migrants, who depress wages of the working class, thereby increasing poverty of those already in our community, and who also destroy the social fabric of our societies, turning high-trust societies into low-trust societies. No doubt many of those people want to come here because they believe they will be richer here than in their native lands; but we have no duty to facilitate this desire—none at all. In fact, it seems to me that working for the importation of millions of migrants to America, as many “charities” do, notably the enormously powerful and very destructive so-called Catholic Charities, is a gross violation of Christ’s cardinal commandment of charity, of love for our fellow man, cleverly camouflaged as adherence to Christ’s command. Its real drivers are a toxic combination of Left doctrine, which aims to destroy all societal bonds and create fully atomized man; Left hopes that migrants will add to their political power through new voters and vote fraud; and misplaced maternal emotions from legions of childless women unfortunately allowed to influence American public policy. Real charity would be aggressively working to prevent any more migrants from arriving, and to deport those already here.

You may wonder why I, a rich man, am not talking about what Saint Basil’s sermons mean for me personally. But I already talked about that

subject when discussing Chrysostom's *On Wealth and Poverty*—a book that, fortunately for me, is probably a little less hard on the rich than this one is. Basil's prescriptions, to be sure, are neither Christian nor Orthodox doctrine, and as I say, many of the Church Fathers take a more relaxed approach toward the rich than either Basil or Chrysostom. We should all agree, however, that every rich person, which is most of us, can do more to give alms than he does. That's probably the best place to start; no need to come up with anything more complex than that. As with so many moral commands, we know what to do; we just don't find it easy.