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God's Design for a Societal Safety Net



U.S. national debt clock, 2006.

ONE OF THE MOST VOLATILE POLICY issues of our times relates to a fundamental disagreement as to how a nation should approach entitlements. Entitlement programs now devour the majority of the U.S. federal government's budget. What you know too is that that the nation is now nearly \$20 trillion dollars in debt and growing rapidly at an uncontrollable rate.

What do the Scriptures have to say about such allocative decisions and policy? In a pre-political sense, how can the Bible be used to inform the Public Servant in this regard? Does God speak to this issue? I believe the answer is a resounding "Yes!"

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Weekly Bible Studies

CABINET: 7:00 AM Wednesdays Mornings. Location Undisclosed. *Light Refreshments Served.*

SENATE: 8:00 AM Tuesdays, Rotating Offices of Senators. *Hot Breakfast Served.*

HOUSE: Capitol H324: Monday or Tuesday Evenings after First Votes Back. *Dinner Served.*



MEMBER QUOTE

Jeff Denham

U.S. Representative, California



“I ATTENDED THE Capitol Ministries Bible study in Sacramento for years while in the California State Senate and now that I am in Congress, I attend the Members Bible Study.

“I believe it’s important for lawmakers to be involved in a serious Bible study. Faith is important, especially when you are away from home, your community, and your family and you are being pulled in many different directions. You are also making decisions that will affect generations to come. Having Scripture you can rely on keeps you grounded and balanced and gives you a biblical foundation upon which to make those decisions.” **cm**

—U.S. Representative Jeff Denham, CA

I. INTRODUCTION

IN FACT, THERE ARE SO MANY passages that relate to the subject of *God’s Design For A Societal Safety Net* that one can build a Societal Safety Net theology from them. What follows my attempt to do that.

If you have sat under my teaching ministry for any length of time you know that I believe God ordained five institutions for today’s world, each with specific, God-ordained purposes. I call this study *Are You a Pentetutionalist Or A Tritutionalist?* Those are my crafted words that describe the historic belief of three ordained institutions with my theological conviction that God has ordained five separate institutions in this period of biblical history. The foundational understanding of institutional specificity of purpose has proven to be very helpful in teaching sometimes complex subjects from Scripture: especially when it comes to complex policy issues such as this. From this basis of thinking, the question can be posed: From a cursory study of Scripture in this regard, which institutions have carried the God-given responsibility for building a societal safety net for those in need? In answering that question, these five institutions will come necessarily and vividly into play.

II. SEVEN NT PASSAGES PERTAINING TO THE CONSTRUCT OF A SOCIETAL SAFETY NET

A caveat is in order before plunging into the following various passages that serve to inform us regarding the mind of God on this matter: It is important to approach this discussion through the lens of the NT only. This is because God has clearly separated the Institution of Civil Government from any and all sacerdotal responsibilities per the clear instruction of Jesus in Matthew 22:21; the Apostle Paul in Romans 13:1-8; and the Apostle Peter in IPeter 2:13-14 in

the time in which we live. We are not living in the times of theocratic Israel wherein Civil Government and Sacerdotal responsibilities are both contained in and conducted by the same institution. Accordingly, to examine OT passages in this theological quest would only muddy the waters and be confusing to any a quest for perspicacious conclusions. Accordingly, I will limit this exercise in theological construct to passages outside of a theocratic economy.

A. 2Thessalonians 3:6-12

This passage is fundamental to the beginning of our study; it provides the foundational starting point, revealing whom God has assigned to be the primary caretaker for providing life’s basic necessities for living. Notice verse 10 in this regard: ***If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either*** states Paul to the believers at the Church of Thessalonica. Note the whole of the passage and context:

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.



This passage was and remains instrumental and informative to what is commonly referred to as the Protestant Work Ethic. Stemming from the Reformation and the rediscovery of such pertinent and informative passages in the Scriptures, this idea of hard work and providing for one's self have become historic cultural constructs in the American culture and way of life; the ethic of personal responsibility is a major pillar in the explanation of America's quick rise to productivity, prosperity and economic prowess.

Note that this passage under study is not set as a suggestion. Rather Paul is making an imperative command to be personally disciplined to meet your own needs! This passage serves to inform us of the following:

**IN GOD'S MIND THE FIRST
SOURCE OF PROVISION
RELATIVE TO MEET THE VARIOUS
FORMS OF PHYSICAL NEED
IN A GIVEN SOCIETY
IS ONE'S SELF**

Apart from those with genuine needs due to birth defects, war injuries, disease, developmental disabilities, etc., how many live in poverty because they are not *willing to work* or *willing to work* hard enough? In attempting to diminish the unmet needs of a society, this basic truth must not be overlooked by the Public Servant in his policy formation. At the risk of sounding unloving, a father in the Institution of Marriage, a family in the Institution of the Family, nor a government in the Institution of Government should bear or be led to think they bear the responsibility to meet the needs of the individual who lives in an *undisciplined manner*, who does *no work at all*, who is not *willing to work* or be *willing to work* hard enough. Proverbs 10:4 echoes this principle: *Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, But the hand of the diligent makes rich.*

Furthermore, each *individual* in society

should *work hard* enough to have an abundance to give to others who are in genuine need. States Proverbs 22:9 in this regard, *He who is generous will be blessed, For he gives some of his food to the poor.* Paul and Solomon are both preaching that it is better to give than receive (cf. Acts 20:35).

The biblical pattern is for one to *work hard*. Genesis 2:15 states the concept, that in the mind of God *hard work* has always been His intent for those whom He created in His image:

Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.

This is God's original design for man. God wants him to be responsible for *cultivating* and *keeping* or maintaining the earth. Such are normative activities for mankind even before the Fall, per Genesis 3:17-19. Post Fall, part of the curse by God on man for his disobedience includes a seemingly heightened scale and necessity relative to *hard work*; the curse means in part that man will now *toil* in labor:

*"Cursed is the ground because of you;
In toil you will eat of it
All the days of your life.
Both thorns and thistles it shall grow
for you;
And you will eat the plants of the field;
By the sweat of your face
You will eat bread,
Till you return to the ground,
Because from it you were taken;
For you are dust."*

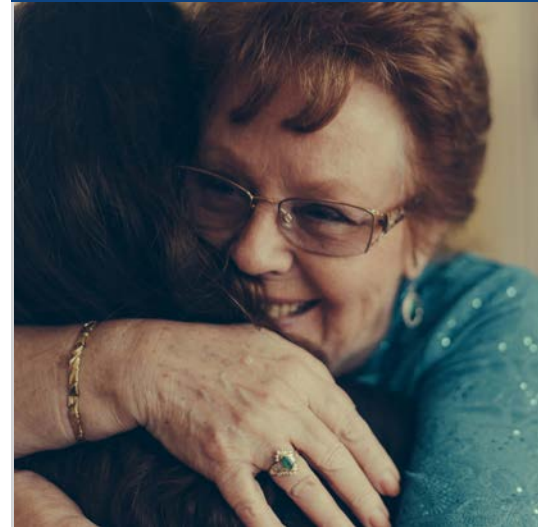
Given the condition of man combined with the command of God to work, Public Servants must be wise and take these realities into mind when crafting policies that could do for man what God intends for man to do for himself.

To unload a man of his responsibilities

♥ VERSE OF THE WEEK

1 John 3:17

Whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?

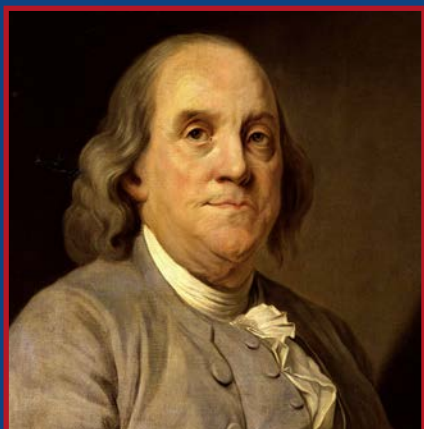


We, as individuals, families, and churches, are part of God's plan to meet the needs of the poor in a fallen world.





Benjamin Franklin



"I am for doing good to the poor, but I differ in opinion of the means. I think the best way of doing good to the poor, is not making them easy in poverty, but leading or driving them out of it. In my youth I traveled much, and I observed in different countries, that the more public provisions were made for the poor, the less they provided for themselves, and of course became poorer. And, on the contrary, the less was done for them, the more they did for themselves, and became richer."

— Benjamin Franklin, signer of the Declaration of Independence; diplomat; printer; scientist; signer of the Constitution; Governor of Pennsylvania.

Benjamin Franklin, *On the Price of Corn and Management of the Poor*, November 1766.

to take care of himself and to work hard enough to be able to give something to someone else who is truly in need is to take away a part of the man's intended esteem. It is to diminish him, not help him!

AGAIN, IT IS GOD'S DESIGN THAT THE INDIVIDUAL BE THE FIRST MEANS OF PROVISION FOR HIMSELF AS WELL AS OTHERS WHO HAVE GENUINE NEEDS

Wise is the policy maker who understands this design of God — and incentivizes, not replaces — personal responsibility and behavior in this regard.

B. I Timothy 5:3-16

This is the most insightful NT passage that reveals the mind of God and His intended pecking-order of institutional responsibility relative to meeting the needs of others, even though the context relates to widows in the Church per se. Nonetheless the passage is very informative as to how God views the matters this study is discussing. Herein revealed (through the lens of providing for widows in the Church) is the order of catch basins if you will, as they relate to who is responsible in God's eyes for meeting the needs of others who are truly needy.

Honor widows who are widows indeed; but if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God. Now she who is a widow indeed and who has been left alone, has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day. But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives. Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of

his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, having a reputation for good works; and if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, and if she has devoted herself to every good work. But refuse to put younger widows on the list, for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married, thus incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge. At the same time they also learn to be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention. Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; for some have already turned aside to follow Satan. If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.

Again, as you see, verses 3 through 16 specifically relate to caring for believing widows, but the principles communicated via the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul are transcendent of believing widows: Not only in terms of a broader application to others (in addition to widows), but in terms of non-believers, outside of the Church, who are needy (per 5:8a, which will be examined more specifically, momentarily).

Studying these first two passages in our outline together, reveals that providing provisions for the genuinely needy is first one's own responsibility. We are as individuals, to provide for our own family members: *but if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own*



family and to make some return to their parents. Civil government should not be tasked with taking care of the needs of individuals when an individual family member or members can step up. Individuals and other family members are to take care of their own blood lines; to refuse to take care of your family members is akin to asking your neighbors to take on your personal responsibility.

In the flow of this passage, if the children or grandchildren for legitimate reasons are in no position to meet their grandmother's needs, then the duty falls to other members of the Institution of Marriage and/or the Institution of the Family. This is evidenced by the now less particular language later in the passage (wherein children or grandchildren are not mentioned specifically as the first priority for a catch basin: *But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

The final catch basin one can glean from this passage is the Institution of the Church which is to step up to the plate and take care of the needy. Notice this in the final verse: *If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.* Paul is stating that the Church is the final catch basin and should not be tapped until other upstream resources are considered and utilized for meeting these kinds of needs.

Exhaustively, since all of the explicit and direct passages in the NT (here in this study) regarding helping the truly needy relate to the responsibility of believers, one could argue that these passages only relate to the Church, and should not be applied to secular society in general. 1 Timothy 5:8a is most pivotal in countering this view. Why? This small passage facilitates the assimilation and incorporation of unbelievers into

one's broader understanding. Notice the concluding phrase in this passage states, *is worse than an unbeliever.* Why is this glimpse so profoundly important?

For a believer to fail to take care of the needy in his own family makes him or her worse than an *unbeliever* who knows the right thing to do!

The familial duties for provision are written by God on the consciences of unbelievers too! Namely, unbelievers understand via their God-wired conscience (cf. Romans 1:19-20; 2:15) that they have a personal responsibility to care for the needs of their own family — and for that matter others outside their family. It's inherent! All that to say this:

1 TIMOTHY 5 REVEALS SOCIETAL SAFETY NET PRINCIPLES THAT ARE INTRINSICALLY UNDERSTOOD BY ALL. THESE PRINCIPLES ARE WRITTEN ON OUR HEARTS! AS SUCH THEY SHOULD BE TAKEN INTO CONSIDERATION BY ASTUTE POLICY MAKERS.

Herein is God's design for not just the Church's safety net, but for a societal safety net for the whole of a secular country!

Further Scriptural evidence of the applicability of this catch basin concept to the whole of a country is the additional perspective that Paul states in Galatians 6:10. This particular passage seems to indicate that all believers should care for the poor outside of their own believing church community: *So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.* (cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:13; 1 Timothy 6:18). Believers as individuals and as bodies (churches) are tasked with the responsibility of meeting other's needs. This is an important distinction worth mentioning at this point because the same charge is

James Madison



In 1794, when Congress appropriated \$15,000 for relief of French refugees who fled from insurrection in San Domingo to Baltimore and Philadelphia, James Madison stood on the floor of the House to object saying:

"I cannot undertake to lay my finger on that article of the Constitution which granted a right to Congress of expending, on objects of benevolence, the money of their constituents."

— James Madison, signer of the Constitution, author of The Federalist Papers; framer of the Bill of Rights; Secretary of State; fourth President of the United States.

James Madison, 4 Annals of Congress 179, 1794.





James Madison



“Government is instituted to protect property of every sort; as well that which lies in the various rights of individuals, as that which the term particularly expresses. This being the end of government, that alone is a just government which impartially secures to every man whatever is his own.”

— James Madison, signer of the Constitution, author of *The Federalist Papers*; framer of the Bill of Rights; Secretary of State; fourth President of the United States.

James Madison, *Essay on Property*, 1792.

nowhere to be found in terms of the Institution of the State being responsible for the same, an important point at the conclusion of this study.

What follows is more of the mind of God as it relates to how the needs of the poor are to be taken care of in a fallen world.

C. Acts 6:1-6

This narrative passage from the early church is illustrative of the principles and teaching found in 1 Timothy 5. The believing widows (most likely qualified widows per the criteria of 1 Timothy 5) were to be cared for by the Institution of the Church. This is in keeping with the hierarchy of 1 Timothy 5: God's fourth catch-basin for caring for the poor; the first being (1) children and grandchildren; (2) other family members; (2) other resourceful widows; (4) the Church.

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

What is said in this passage about the Church taking care of the poor is

exegetically speaking, a very qualified responsibility (cf. 1 Timothy 5:5, 9, 11, 14). Furthermore, again, what is said explicitly about the Institution of the State taking care of the poor is nowhere to be found in all three of the passages we have examined thus far. Bolstering this point is theologian Wayne Grudem. In his study of pertinent passages relative to our subject he states,

“I AM SURPRISED TO DISCOVER THAT FEW PEOPLE SEEM TO REALIZE THAT THESE VERSES SAY NOTHING ABOUT CIVIL GOVERNMENT OVERCOMING INDIVIDUAL CITIZENS’ POVERTY!”

Nowhere in Acts 6, nor elsewhere in the NT, is the State deemed responsible by God to meet the needs of the genuinely bereft.

D. Romans 15:25-26

But now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.

In this passage, Paul is taking a gift from several Gentile churches and giving it to the Jewish Church of Jerusalem — specifically to the poor therein; this is indicative and synonymous with his 1 Timothy 5 instruction, in that case, to the Church at Ephesus. Further note in regards to the corporate Church and its role with the needy, Acts 2:44-47:

And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of



heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Wherein Acts is a historical narrative, not necessarily intended as instructive (likened to the epistles) the book records events that actually happened in the Church. Could it be that the over-zealousness (vs. 2:43) of congregants led to some wrong decisions (*and they began selling their property and possession . . .*) that would later lead to the poverty in the Church as evidenced by what Paul is stating he did in Romans 15:25-26, i.e. that Paul was taking a contribution from two Gentile churches *for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem?* The events of Romans 15 occurred after the events of Acts 2.

All that to say, an important aside to our study, Acts 2 should not be understood as a theological basis for economic Socialism. Combined with Romans 15, this passage serves to illustrate precisely the opposite: The fruits of Socialism, the possession of little or no personal property, means it is more difficult to meet your own present and future needs — as well as the present and future needs of others who find themselves in difficult circumstances.

Conclusively, Romans 15:25-26 serves as additional biblical evidence of churches helping the poor in other churches. Combined with Paul's instruction to the church at Galatia (6:10), wherein again he states, *So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith* is prima facie biblical evidence, the specific, overt mention of the fourth tier of a God-intended societal safety net, that the Institution of the Church is commanded by God to take care of the needs of the poor. Important to our conclusion, no overt mention of the Institution of the State is in view here.

E. Galatians 2:10

Romans 15 is not the only passage that indicates the need of other churches to help the poor in Jerusalem. Galatians 2:10 serves the same purpose:

They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.

Paul is being compelled herein also to remember the poor at the Church in Jerusalem, albeit something that he *was eager to do*. This serves as more evidence of a fourth-tier of provision intended by God in His fabrication of a societal safety net for a nation.

F. James 1:27

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

To *visit widows and orphans in their distress* is euphemistic language, evidencing again the first-tier responsibility of a societal safety net: for individual believers to help those with genuine needs. There is no mention of the Institution of the State taking on this task.

G. 1John 3:17

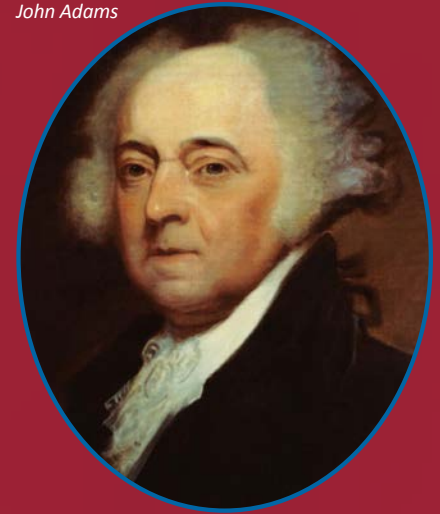
But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?

This is yet another passage strongly admonishing believers to meet the needs of the poor. This passage seems to include, first, second, or third tier responses to such needs.

III. CONCLUSION

There is a design in Holy Writ relative to a biblically informed construct of a societal

John Adams



"The moment the idea is admitted into society that property is not as sacred as the laws of God, and that there is not a force of law and public justice to protect it, anarchy and tyranny commence. If 'Thou shalt not covet' and 'Thou shalt not steal' were not commandments of Heaven, they must be made inviolable precepts in every society before it can be civilized or made free."

— John Adams, second President of the United States; signer of the Declaration of Independence; judge; diplomat; one of two signers of the Bill of Rights.

John Adams, *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, 1787.





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safety net for those in genuine need. Short of the ability for one to provide for himself, God's order of catch-basins is for *individuals* to help others. Closely related to that is helping the poor via the Institutions of Marriage and Family. Lastly, the responsibility falls to the Institution of the Church — but only at such a time as the others prerequisites have fallen short of meeting those need; only then does the need become the responsibility of the Institution of the Church.

IMPORTANTLY, THE INSTITUTION OF THE STATE IS EXPLICITLY ABSENT: IT IS OUTSIDE THE PERVIEW OF GOD'S ORDAINED MEANS OF PROVISION FOR THE TRULY NEEDY

Inefficient and ineffective results are always the outcome whenever any of God's ordained institutions attempts to hijack the responsibilities of another. The wise Public Servant always poses the question as to which God-ordained institution is specifically commissioned by Him to achieve a purpose. The wise Public Servant realizes God has not ordained His Institution of Government to be the end-all for every need that surfaces. Far from that, He has ordained five separate institutions, Civil Government being only one of them in order to accomplish His will in a fallen world prior to His Second Coming. Specific in this regard, one cannot expect the State to effectively and efficiently meet the needs of society's bereft any more than one can expect the Institution of the Family to manufacture automobiles (the responsibility of God's Institution of Commerce) or Commerce to raise children (the responsibility of the Institution of the Family).

God has ordained and provided other more efficient and effective means, catch basins if you will, to meet the genuine needs of others in a fallen world so that ideally no one ends up going down stream in society. In summary those catch basins in their order of the priority of first response are:

The HIERARCHICAL ORDER of GOD'S SOCIETAL SAFETY NET

1. Meeting one's own needs
2. The Institution of the Family
3. The Institution of Marriage
4. The Institution of the Church

May God use this study to shape your thinking in these areas of importance to our nation. **cm**

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