Economic Injustice:

Mark 12: 28-34 and Its Social Implications Past and Present

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We live in a culture of great affluence. Christians go to elite schools, end up in jobs that pay seven (or more) figure salaries, and generally end up in the mid-upper classes of American society. A respectable number hold prestigious positions at their workplaces, from corporation headquarters buildings to academic institutions of all levels of prestige. Churches in the United States, for example, have good sound systems (state-of-the-art in some cases), marble *mensas*, Eucharist chalices and plates made of expensive materials, million-dollar buildings designed by nationally-recognized architects, and other wonderful features.

However, when the Church confronts the issue of economic injustice, what should her response be? To simply give the poor money does not solve the problem in the long term. Does the Church care enough about the issue of economic injustice? How can her members have an impact in a culture that, to some extent, participates in this? On a more personal level, can a Christian living in America drive a luxury SUV without guilt? Can a Christian living in America pursue a hobby like robot-building when many children worldwide would go head over heels for a bowl of plain rice? Can a Christian college conscientiously build a new multi-million dollar student center, knowing that those millions of dollars could help millions of families live another day (or even a year)? Basically, can a Christian live in America without contributing to economic injustice? Can a Christian live in America and still have clean hands?

In Mark 12: 28-34[1], Jesus told a questioning Pharisee that the two greatest commandments in the known Bible were to love God "with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength," and to "love your neighbors as yourself". This story was repeated in the gospels of Matthew and Luke with little variation[2]. In all cases, Jewish and Church tradition places the authorship of those two commandments in Deuteronomy 6:5 and

[1] All scriptural citations will come from the New International Version of the English Bible unless labeled otherwise.
[2] Matthew 22:37 and Luke 10:27 bear witness to these accounts.

Leviticus 19:18 on Moses[3]. While not necessarily ambiguous, the two references in the Pentateuch raise the question on loving God wholeheartedly, and loving our neighbors the same way. What does loving God require? What does loving our neighbors mean? Does loving God and our neighbors obligate us to confront economic injustice? How do these passages relate to economic injustice?

These are difficult questions, but in this study, we hope to tie together the most important commandments of the Bible, as outlined in Mark 12: 28-34, with the Christian's obligation to tackle the issue of economic injustice. We will examine what the early Church thought about issues like having material possessions, being wealthy, and the Christian's relationship with the poor. The study will close with the implications the Old Testament, New Testament, and the Early Fathers have for us today.

A study of Mark 12: 28-34, however, requires an in depth study of its Old Testament counterparts in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. We begin by looking at God's holiness in Leviticus 20:26.

The Old Testament

God's holiness is partly a distinction of His ways from the ways of local deities. Leviticus 20, for example, lists rules that prohibit bestiality and other practices. While these practices may seem alien from the modern context, many of the practices that Leviticus and the other books of the Law expressly prohibit, were indeed a part of Canaanite or Egyptian culture. This can be evidenced in Leviticus 18:3 where God commanded, "You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices." The reason behind the prohibitions to local social practices lies in the fact that God is distinct from other gods. If God is like the Canaanite god El,

[3] In fact, authorship of the first five books of the Pentateuch was attributed to Moses.

or his more famous son Baal, in the Israelites' eyes, God loses His divinity and becomes unworthy of worship. Just as God must be distinct from other local gods, His chosen people are to be distinct from other nations. In what way must His chosen people be distinct, and why were His chosen people elected to this purpose? An answer lies earlier in the Genesis narrative. Prior to sending His two angels into Sodom and Gomorrah to evaluate the cities, the LORD said in Genesis 18: 18-19,

> "Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

God's chosen people are to follow the ways of God because He has bound Himself to Abraham's people in a covenant. However, it is not simply a matter of God's faithfulness that God delivered the Israelites from bondage. God's love was also evident in the ordeal, as in no sense did Israel merit His deliverance[4]. Israel must follow His laws—the greatest of them being Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Likewise, since Christians are also chosen, those two important laws never lost their importance. The Israelites were to love God wholeheartedly, but the *Shema* makes it very clear that not only was wholeheartedness in worship expected of the Israelites, but this love is to be directed to the one and only true God. The Israelites should know who the one true God is very well—the book of Exodus forever identified the Israelites as witnesses to the many miracles performed by God. Many songs of Israel will occasionally ask the rhetorical question, "Who is like you (God) among the gods?", and the answer would be obvious—there is no one like God.[5].

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[4] Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2004), pp. 328-329.
[5] Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1 – 21:9*. Vol. 6A. *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 143.

What kind of culture was Israel to be distinct from[6]? How different are God's rules from normal religious mores in that time? Before venturing further, it must be said that many of the laws penned in the Pentateuch have their parallels in non-Jewish religions. In her chronicle of ancient Egyptian morality, Egyptologist Miriam Lichtheim records a stone tomb stela, on which some of the values in the Old Testament were listed[7]. Likewise, prevailing social mores in non-Jewish circles were not at odds with what the Israelites were commanded to follow. In fact, according to van der Toorn, in general, principles of social ethics parallel religious ethics[8]. The reason was that, unlike the ancient Greek and the Romans whose deities lived on a completely different plane than humans[9], deities in the Ancient Near East were manifestations of already existing facets of nature and human life[10].

It is there that the parallels end; thereafter, the Bible draws a sharp distinction between the God and the pagan gods. The worship of the Egyptian pantheon brings this distinction to light. The Egyptian worshippers would often bring their supplications to their deities. The gods grant these supplications because, according to Erik Hornung, the gods do not require material goods to survive. However, they do need their worshippers' responses to substantiate their existence, for the lack of a response from the worshipper denotes inexistence. In a way, both the worshipper and the worshipped have incentives to participate in this worship. Wrote Hornung,

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[6] It is important to note here that by being 'distinct', Israel was not called to simply be different. Each civilization during Israelite times was different from each other in many ways. However, Israel was to be distinct in that their worship, culture, and lifestyles were directed toward the one and only true God.

[7] Miriam Lichtheim, *Moral Values in Ancient Egypt* (Fribourg, Switzerland: University Press, 1997), p. 21. The tomb stela was erected by an official or servant of the southern kingdom's king Intef III. The stela, according to Lichtheim's translation, declared that the erector "spent a lifetime in years/ in the reign of Horus/ delighting his heart each day with all that his *Ka* desired. [The official] is a lover of good, hater of evil…"

[8] K van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia.* (Assen, the Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1985), 24.

[9] The Ancient Greek gods, for example, lived on Mount Olympus. While they certainly affected the way the humans lived by their occasional forays into human reality, there was no sense of the gods living among humans or the "pro nobeity" of the gods.

[10] K van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia.* (Assen, the Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1985), 22. Baal, for example, was the storm god that brought rain to Palestine. Since his rain brings life to plants, he was also regarded as a god of fertility.

"…gods and men acquire a common task: to maintain their existence… against the unending nonexistent." [11]

Yahweh, on the other hand, demanded the sacrifice and offering of His worshippers, not as an evidence of His existence. His existence was (and is) truth and fact regardless of whether He was worshipped or not, and this truth was verified by His great acts of deliverance of Israel from Egypt, as witnessed by both the Egyptians and the Israelites. Sacrifices and offerings were required because it was the proper response to what God has done out of His grace and mercy. As Christopher Wright puts it, "Ethical obedience is a response to God's grace, not a means of achieving it.[12]" Where the Egyptian deities were worshipped in order that their existence may not be jeopardized, the God of Israel lays down His law after His grace and mercy has been shown. According to the Biblical narrative, nowhere did God reveal His laws while the Israelites were still in Egypt—they were revealed after they have crossed the Red Sea.

From that context, it should not be surprising that there is a remarkable emphasis on the prohibition of practices throughout the laws. Egyptian idolatry, paralleled in the creation of the Golden Calf, was clearly banned[13]. Canaanite religion was just as evil, including various forms of occult practices (sorcery, witchcraft, divination, etc.), religious prostitution, physical mutilation, sexual perversion (i.e. bestiality, sexual relations with very close members of the family, etc.), and child sacrifice[14]. However, these Laws were not meant to be blindly followed. The prophet Micah provides a commentary on this matter when he writes about an "indictment"

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[11] Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt* trans. John Baines (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 214. As an aside, Egyptian "theology" posits that there are two realms: the existent and the nonexistent. The gods, being good, are in the existent realm, as are the humans. However, things that are evil, like injustice, fall into the realm of the inexistent. Thus, the gods fight hard to prevent themselves to fall into the "inexistent" category.
[12] Christopher Wright , *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2004), pp. 28.
[13] In Exodus 32, the Golden Calf is reminiscent of the Egyptian bull god Apis. Regardless, the Israelites were punished via a plague after Moses pleaded for forgiveness of the Israelites' sin.
[14] Christopher Wright , *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2004), pp. 328-329.

against the nation of Israel in Micah 6 by God. This indictment, complete with a partial listing of what God has done in the establishment if the Israelite nation (in verses 3-5), ends with verse 8 when God asks,

> "He has showed you, O man, what is good.
> And what does the Lord require of you?
> To act justly and the love mercy and to walk humbly with you God."

At this point, it must be brought up that social injustice is already something prevalent in ancient history. First of all, in Egypt, from where the Israelites journeyed from, a very small percentage of the population formed the educated elite while the rest lived simply and around the poverty line[15]. The elite had access to medical treatments (primitive by today's standards, but state-of-the-art in that era). Their education also implied that they would eventually embark on enviable careers. Of course, after death, it was the elite that were commissioned the most ornate gateways to the underworld. Later in Egyptian history, the booty from wars, fueled with materialism (in those days, the hoarding of precious metals), contributed to a growing economy. This was especially true in Egypt under the Hyksos reign. According to Jewish historian Salo Wittmayer Baron, the wealthy upper-class lords would store their hoards in large, ornate palaces. However, these palaces only house a small percentage of the population. The majority of the population live very different lifestyles. Writes Baron, "…these palaces were usually surrounded by a great many shacks of poverty-stricken villeins whose forced labor had built them.[16]" The situation in the land where the Israelites would later make their home, Canaan, was no better. According to Wright, the Israelites entered a Canaan consisting of independent city-states, each city-state having their own hierarchy, with their elites receiving the most of the benefits their

[15] John Baines, *Religion in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp.132-133.
[16] Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952) pp. 54.

society can offer[17].

Thus, it is of little wonder that the Pentateuchal laws would establish a social structure where the wealth and well-being of those in the lower echelons of society were held in high regard[18]. The Jubilee regulations, the prohibition of charging debt, and other rules were created to guard against the privileging of elites. The jubilee laws and regulations will be discussed later, but for now, suffice it to say that the calling for Israel to be holy also affects their economic life.

From such a perspective, it is relatively easy to see the social component in the command to love our neighbors as ourselves. That command was set in the context of Leviticus 19:18. The verses preceding the command, Leviticus 19: 1-17, has been a list of prohibitions, but these prohibitions constitute a general message on holy living. Unlike the prohibitions, the author of Leviticus has stated 19:18 in the affirmative in order to accentuate the importance of the message[19]. The Hebrew word for "neighbor" is רֵעַ and it can refer to a fellow-citizen or, on the more general side, another person[20]. There are some disagreements regarding the precise definition, however. Bellinger, for instance, simply defines "neighbor" as fellow Israelites[21] where Hartley loosely equates it to anywhere from a "casual acquaintance" to a "close friend[22]. While the Old Testament certainly uses רֵעַ employing those definitions, the word was used more specifically in Leviticus. Kellermann arguably offers the most useful definition of "neighbor" in this case: a member of the social community or, as Hess put it, "associated by tribal or ethnic

[17] Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2004), pp. 55.
[18] Ibid.
[19] John E. Hartley, *Leviticus.* Vol. 4. *The Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 317.
[20] Francis Brown, S.R.Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997),p. 946.
[21] W.H. Bellinger, *Leviticus, Numbers*. Vol. 3. *New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 118.
[22] John E. Hartley, *Leviticus.* Vol. 4. *The Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 318-319.

identity[23]". This definition is somewhat implied in Leviticus 19:18[24]. This word also can be found in Exodus 20:16 as part of the Decalogue. Basically, the Israelites are to love each other (within the community) as themselves. While who the "neighbor" is important, it must not be forgotten that the crux of the message centers around the fact that each Israelite social unit was not designed to be neither self-centered nor insular. John Hartley clarifies that loving our neighbors is like loving others like our own selves, "thus being worthy of one's love"[25]. Thus, in the context of the passage, "neighbor" has the possibility of not just applying to the Israelite community, but to friendly outsiders as well, given that they are observant of the rules of the Israelite community. However, unlike the Intertestamental or New Testament, רֵעַ does not include everybody the Israelites encounter.

Again, God's command to love our neighbors cannot be divorced from any social implications. This should not be too surprising because God is a God of justice, as the commentary by the prophet Micah has shown earlier. According to Baron, this idea of God's justice is not completely alien to the Israelites: "…it is easily explicable by the general heritage from primitive Semitic conceptions of God as a kind of heavenly sheikh and source of all law.[26]"

Some examples of laws regulating economic life include Leviticus 19:9, where the command requires the leaving the edges of the field[27] unharvested so that the poor can have a chance at surviving. Other Penteteuchal commandments also include paying employees their

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[23] Richard S. Hess, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis.* Vol. 3. ed. Willem A. VanGemeren. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1146.
[24] Kellermann, *The Tyndale Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Vol. 13. ed. Johannes G. Botterweck. Trans. David E. Green and Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 527. The verse, in full, states, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." Thus, it is conceivable that neighbor denotes "one of your people", a member of a community.
[25] Ibid. pp. 318.
[26] Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952) pp. 45
[27] In today's context, it would mean that farmers should not drive their wheat hoppers so that every square inch of the field has been harvested completely.

wages when pay was promised at a certain time[28]. Keen to this message was the patriarch of Milan, St. Ambrose, who delivered such a warning to the Christian businessmen of his age:

"…if you indeed, whatever type of businessman you are, deny your hireling a monetary payment that is a perishable trifle, you shall be denied the reward of heaven that has been promised."[29]

There is little point in loving our neighbors without loving the Creator of the neighbors: God Himself. The question now arises as to what loving God "with all our heart, soul, mind and strength" means. לֵבָב, the Hebrew word for the heart, has to do with the "core" of the being that the heart resides in[30]. Thus, the Israelites were to love God more than just superficially (by obeying commandments and giving sacrificial offerings), but even what makes the Israelites who they are must be dedicated to loving God. Christensen puts it in a slightly different way by describing it as mental part of our being[31]. Christensen also sees "heart" as being paired with the נֶפֶשׁ or the soul. נֶפֶשׁ has the Greek word *ψυχή* as somewhat of its equivalent in definition[32]. Interestingly, John Mark will employ the same word when Jesus cites the Deuteronomy commandment in Mark 12:28-34. Following Christensen's analysis, the soul is where the emotions lie. This is where the passions, the desires, appetites, whatever defines any person, reside. Christopher Wright's exegesis of the same passage extends the definition of נֶפֶשׁ further, by noting that the passions, feelings, and desires of people are the unique distinguishing features of humanity[33]. St. Augustine seemed to agree with this definition in his treatise "On the

[28] Leviticus 19:13, Deuteronomy 24: 14-15.
[29] Thomas C. Oden and Joseph T. Lienhard, *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*. Old Testament Vol. 3. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 189.
[30] Francis Brown, S.R.Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 523.
[31] Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1 – 21:9*. Vol. 6A. *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 143.
[32] Ibid. p. 659.
[33] Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy*. Vol. 4. *New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), p. 98. In a passage like Genesis 2:7, where נֶפֶשׁ was used, "soul" accentuates the uniqueness of Adam compared to the other created beings, who were not made in God's image.

Perfection of Human Righteousness" where he penned,

"For while there remains any remnant of the lust of the flesh… God is by no means loved with all one's soul. For the flesh does not lust without the soul… because the soul lusts carnally. In that perfect state the just man shall live absolutely without any sin… but wholly will he love God, with all his heart, with all his soul and with all his mind, which is the first and chief commandment.[34]"

The desires of the Israelites should be to love God. Their passions and even their appetites should be directed towards Him. Therefore, it should not be too surprising when Jesus declares that he is the "bread of life" from which nobody will leave hungry[35]. Finally, מְאֹד, or the strength, is closely defined as "force" or "might"[36]. Everything that the Israelites do must be for the love of God. Christensen defines it in terms of self-discipline[37], but given the communal nature of the Israelite community, Deuteronomy 6: 4-5 probably also has a community-wide implication as opposed to just a personal implication, which Christensen seems to be suggesting. Loving God with our might also requires that what was done should be done out of a love for God. Thus, there is no room for building a storehouse for storing worldly goods for worldly purposes, as the parable of the rich fool sufficiently shows[38].

One word also requires some study: "love". In Leviticus 19:18, the Hebrew word was אָהֵב. And this same word was used in the command to love God. The question remains unanswered as to what loving our neighbors "as ourselves", or what loving God exactly means. Love can encompass a wide range of emotions, from a simple expression of favor to an undeniable commitment. The significance of אָהֵב could be fathomed by surveying the attitudes

[34] Thomas C. Oden. and Joseph T. Lienhard, *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*. Old Testament Vol. 3. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 284.
[35] John 6:35
[36]Francis Brown, S.R.Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 547.
[37] Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1 – 21:9*. Vol. 6A. *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 143.
[38] Luke 12: 13-21.

towards the gods of Egypt and Canaan. In Egypt, an official was recorded to have said, as part of his praise to the sun god, "May you hear me speaking to you, turn your heart to your suppliant, no god ignores his servant![39]" This suggests that the gods were thought of not only as sustainers of life, but bringers of blessings conditionally. After all, the gods have very human tendencies. A prayer dedicated to the god Amun requests that he "lend [his] ear to a lone one in court. He is poor, he is not rich…" because the defendant may be encountering injustice in court. Further evidence for such an attitude towards the gods could be found in the dearth of prayers with confessions of sins[40]. The Canaanites, however, had a different attitude towards their pantheon. In their case, the gods, existing in the form of statues, ranged from being easily touchable (like the god of grain) to the statue being wreathed in fire (like the god of fire), rendering it untouchable. When it comes to actual worship, the understanding is that whatever people do results in different consequences depending on what the gods feel like[41]. Thus, Baal and his cohorts are worshipped because of fear, not because of love, for if the actions of the worshippers happened to offend Baal, calamity and disaster may ensue.

Thus, the power and significance of אַהֲבָה is really rooted in the holiness of God—a holiness that includes divine love. Such is the force of the opening lines of the *Shema*: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one!" Hilary of Poitiers wrote in a treatise "On the Trinity" that, based on the apostle Thomas' confession of Christ as Lord, he is giving a hint as to the monotheistic nature of God[42]. While true, God's monotheism is not enough reason for loving Him. Since holiness connotes a degree of separation, it can be said that loving God requires a commitment, not for divine gain (that translates to material wealth) nor for fear of divine cursing.

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[39]Miriam Lichtheim, *Moral Values in Ancient Egypt* (Fribourg, Switzerland: University Press, 1997), p. 54.
[40]Ibid. p. 44
[41] K van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia.* (Aasen, the Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1985) p. 41
[42] Ibid. p. 282.

An example of this love comes from God's covenantal relationship with Israel. In establishing a covenant with Israel, He effectively committed Himself to the Israelites. This necessarily involves a commitment on the part of His people, because, as Christopher Wright says, "Deuteronomy's love… shows that it is not merely an emotion. It is also a commitment to Yahweh…[43]" Because of that, Jesus has reason to say in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." In effect, what Moses declared to the Israelites could be rephrased as, "Hear O Israel… be committed to God wholeheartedly." Israel will, sadly, not be as committed to God as Moses might have hoped. Little wonder that, many years later in the book of Hosea, God compares Israel to the prophet Hosea's adulterous wife Gomer.

Before moving to the New Testament, where the crux of our study lies, it is important to survey the history of Israel. Specifically, the question arises as to how the Israelites kept the first two commandments. God's requirement of the Israelites to be holy requires that the Israelites be obedient and follow his statutes[44]. To love God wholeheartedly involves obedience, and Israel's history involved periods of obedience and, unfortunately, disobedience. Not many records on economic life in the northern Kingdom of Israel or the southern Kingdom of Judah exist, the prophets have left ideas of what economic life was during their times in their writings. In fact, they were witnesses to what was going on[45]—a reason why their woes were and still are worth listening to.

A first example could be found in the book of Ruth. Ruth is a Moabitess, a foreigner and therefore, and outcast of Israelite society. Boaz's foreman, in Ruth 2:8, reporting to Boaz about the young woman gleaning in his field, described Ruth as "the Moabitess who came back from

[43] Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy*. Vol. 4. *New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 98.
[44] Leviticus 20: 7-8
[45] Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2004), pp. 176.

Moab with Naomi." Later, Naomi's closest kinsman-redeemer would refuse to fulfill his obligation to Ruth because of possible endangerment to his estate[46]. The kinsman-redeemer was more concerned about safeguarding his interests and possessions instead of fulfilling his duty according to the law as outlined in Deuteronomy 25: 5-6. Boaz, however, put Ruth's interests above his own from the beginning. After his foreman's report, Boaz approaches Ruth, as recorded in Ruth 2: 8-9, and asks her to continue gleaning in his field. As if that weren't enough, Boaz ordered his men to even let Ruth gather from the sheaves and also to pull out some stalks from the bundles for her to pick up[47]. Boaz's fulfilling of the second commandment brought him an unseen blessing: he would be a part of King David's genealogy, and consequently, part of Jesus' genealogy.

The example of Ruth brings to light the largely agrarian economy of ancient Israel. For that reason, a person's wealth was determined by his land holdings. The land is the source of life—from it, vegetation sprouts, providing food for people and for livestock. Israel's disobedience can result in periods of drought. A notorious example of this disobedience is Ahab's reign, which was characterized as a time of great provocation of the LORD to anger. The beginnings were recorded in 1 Kings 16: 29 – 17:1. Ahab erected Asherah poles[48] and the society was following in his example. God's condemnation was brought about in the form of a drought. Ahab (and his consort Jezebel) easily violated the first commandment to love God

[46] If Ruth happens to mother his only son, then that son inherits the estate. It is also interesting to note that Deuteronomy 25: 7-11 did issue a punishment for those who refuse to fulfill their duty as brothers-in-law. No record exists in the book of Ruth about such a punishment being rendered towards the kinsman-redeemer, which could signal the Israelites' disobedience to the law already.

[47] This could be because that way, Ruth's source of food would be assured. This could signal that people around Ruth's time period were hostile towards foreign (or maybe Israelite) gleaners. Naomi later encourages Ruth to stay in Boaz's field because she might encounter that hostility in another field (Ruth 2:22). For Boaz to command his men to let Ruth gather from the sheaves (what was already harvested and packed) is evidence of him going beyond what the Law requires (Deuteronomy 24:19 only required farmers not to go back and pick up grain that was not harvested carefully).

[48] In 1 Kings 15:9, the chronicler recorded King Asa of Judah as doing what was right in the Lord. He was recorded as destroying the Asherah poles (pagan symbols of fertility)—even to the point of deposing the queen mother for making one.

wholeheartedly. His violation of the commandment to love his neighbors could be found in the situation regarding Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21.

Whether Naboth was righteous was not the point of the account. It is necessary here to briefly discuss the significance of land in Israelite context. Possession of family-held land is almost a sign of a covenant relationship with God. Here, the land is a gift by God to Israel, a gift given by grace, for Israel had nothing to merit its gifts. However, each family's plot of land was also God's gift to each Israelite family. Christopher Wright equates this land-grant to a "trust" given by God to each Israelite[49]. A parallel would be the parable of the ten minas, told in Luke 19. God had assigned a parcel of land for Naboth to care for, and thus, it is right of him to refuse Ahab's request to purchase the land from him.

Ahab's wife, Jezebel, masterminded a plan where she used her power and position to condemn Naboth shamefully for doing what was right in maintaining his ownership over his vineyard. Essentially, after falsely condemning Naboth to death by stoning, Ahab simply took over the vineyard[50]. Note that the grievous sin was the deception, the power-play, and the exploitation of a subordinate, all of which were employed in the obtaining of the vineyard. An equivalence in modern history may be the raiding of African villages by rifled Europeans and selling all the villagers to slavery in the 1700s and 1800s. While only an incident, Ahab and Jezebel met their end the same way Elijah's prophecy outlined while at Naboth's vineyard.

As noted earlier, the prophets voice what they saw during their lifetimes. In Isaiah 5: 8-24, the prophet Isaiah pronounces six woes against injustice in Judah. In Isaiah 5:8, Isaiah denounces those who "add house to house and join field to field till no space is left" and they end up being the only ones owning a huge plot of land that should have belonged to individual

[49] Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2004), pp. 90-91.
[50] Since Naboth was convicted of blasphemy, the result was his stoning and the confiscation of his land by the King.

families, resulting in people having no permanent home of their own[51]. Isaiah's contemporary, Micah, had nothing better to say. Micah 3 is harsh critique against the prevailing injustice in both Judah and Samaria. In his rebuke, describes the injustice by asking if the leaders should have served as good examples by loving good and hating evil. In Micah 3: 2-3, Micah reveals what was reality: the rulers, far from being good, were people who "tear the skin from [God's] people and the flesh from their bones; who eat [God's] peoples' flesh, strip off their skin and break their bones in pieces; who chop them up like meat for the pan, like flesh for the pot." From a literary standpoint, this passage is graphically illustrating the depths of the social injustice that has been prevailing in Israel at that time. Another contemporary of Isaiah was Amos, who wrote against the wealthy upper-class citizens of both Samaria and Judah in Amos 4: 1 and also Amos 6: 1-7.

The prophets were, to be sure, not accusing the rich because of their wealth. After all, it is conceivable that at least some of them were wealthy due to their God-given intellect and by God's blessing. It was the fact that their wealth was attained at the expense of those who were not as wealthy. Christopher Wright lists examples of possible ways to exploit the economically weak: by either charging interest via loans or the imposition of excessive taxes, or even conscription (there were no veterans' benefits)[52].

However, economic injustice could also come from the ruling authorities. King Solomon's large territory and wealth were supported by forced conscription and high taxes[53], and

[51] God has set aside parcels of land per family as an inheritance of the family that would forever be passed down and stay in the family. This regulation has been established by God in the case of Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers 27: 1-11. It is the same reason why Naboth has a right in refusing to sell King Ahab his vineyard.
[52] Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2004), pp. 170.
[53] Evidence for forced conscription can be found in 1 Kings 9: 15. We can indirectly assume the existence of high taxes. God's temple took 7 years to build, and Solomon's palace 13. The interior was overlaid with pure gold (1 Kings 6:22), and cedar was used in much of the construction. Solomon's palace, the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon (1 Kings 7:2) was built using cedar and high-grade stone. He built his wife, Pharaoh's daughter, a similar palace as well. This is all recorded in 1 Kings 7: 1-12. While King Solomon was wealthy, the wealth did not drop from the

eventually led to the separation of Israel and Judah. The Old Testament placed an emphasis on the role of national leaders in alleviating injustice. Solomon wrote in Psalm 72: 1-2:

> "Endow the king with your justice, O God,
> The royal son with your righteousness.
> He will judge your people in righteousness,
> Your afflicted ones with justice."

Recall that the Lord judged Ahab and Jezebel for their unjust taking of Naboth's vineyard. The king, of all people, should be proponents of social justice. However, that does not let the Israelites "off the hook". Isaiah 5: 1-7 is an allegory to that fact. Simply stated, the Israelites were supposed to be beacons of justice and righteousness, but instead, the Lord's vineyard yielded bloodshed and cries of oppression and distress. Thus, the Israelites were called to love God by loving their neighbors—to be just towards them as they sought justice for themselves in Egypt. The king, as their leader, must be the do the same, if not better. This has implications for today as we ponder what the role of the Christian, the Church, and the society is in the fight against economic injustice. In the Old Testament, social justice is intimately tied to the *Shema* and the command to love our neighbors. While not that intimately tied in the Intertestamental Period and New Testament, we will see that in those contexts, the Love Commandments still imply a response to economic injustice.

The Intertestamental Period

Before venturing to the New Testament, a quick foray into the Intertestamental Period is necessary to set up the New Testament context. A few linguistic, theological, and economic changes have occurred. For one, as Hellenism begins to affect Judaism, the Bible (the Old Testament, from our context) was translated into Greek. With seventy books, scholars refer to it today as the Septuagint, or LXX. It would be useful to look at how the Septuagint translates

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sky—it must have come from a combination of high taxes and tribute from conquered territories, both of which would contribute to the divided kingdom.

Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. In Deuteronomy 6:5, "love", אָהַב, has been translated as ἀγαπήσεις, the root being ἀγαπαω. לֵבָב has been translated from "heart" in Hebrew, to διανοίας. נֶפֶשׁ has the Greek word ψυχή attached to it. In Leviticus 19:18, πλησίον was used in translating רֵעַ. Most of the Hebrew-to-Greek translations were the same between the New Testament and the Intertestamental Period, so they will be discussed in the next section. Two translations, however, did not carry the same definitions in the New Testament, and for that reason, it would be constructive to examine, for now, the interesting translation from לֵבָב to διανοίας, and the significance of πλησίον.

Διανοίας is closely related to thought or intelligence, or more precisely, "thought" or "understanding"[54]. In Deuteronomy 28:28, the meaning of διανοία as "understanding" becomes quite obvious[55]. This word is found in other works of antiquity. Plato, in the *Republic,* uses διανοία in discussing the "intellect" or the "reason for the highest understanding" of people in his discourse[56]. What makes this translation interesting is that in the original Hebrew, the word for "heart", לֵבָב has been translated to mean "the core of one's being"—what makes the Israelites who they are. Why would the translators of the Septuagint translate the Hebrew word signifying "the core of one's being" to a Greek word dealing with "thought" or "understanding"? After all, Mark, in his gospel, would use the word καρδία instead of διανοία.

A possible answer lies in the fact that during the Intertestamental period, Israel was influenced by incoming Greek philosophies, largely brought about by the conquests of Alexander the Great. Greek philosophy during the Intertestamental and New Testament periods were not simply intellectual discourses on abstract concepts, but a lifestyle. In fact, in Greek

[54] Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 405.
[55] Deuteronomy 28:28: The LORD will afflict you with madness, blindness, and confusion of ***mind***. Διανοία was used for "mind" in this instance. The following verse (29) says that at noon, "[the Israelites] will grope about like a blind man in the dark" and "will be unsuccessful in everything they do"
[56] Plato, *The Republic*, Book 13, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 117.

religion, worshippers would pay particular attention to attitudes, conceptions of the deities, and rational worship[57]. At the same time, religions that do not fit into the rational worldview of the Greeks were subject to criticism by the philosophers. As a result, Judaism (and later, Christianity as well) was forced to respond by incorporating rationality into their writings, including the Septuagint. According to Behm, Philo, the prominent Intertestamental Jewish philosopher, was unsure about the importance of the heart relative to the mind[58]. Thus, it can be inferred that the Greek translation of the Hebrew "heart" did not completely encompass all that the Hebrew word entailed.

Another possible and perhaps more likely reason was linguistics: in the Intertestamental period, the Markan use of καρδία for "heart" literally referred to the biological heart at the time of the Septuagint's compilation. An example was Josephus' account of Ehud's slaying of Eglon, king of the Moabites. He writes in his *Jewish Antiquities*, "…so Ehud struck [Eglon] to the *heart*, and, leaving his dagger in his body, he went out and shut the door after him.[59]" However, the heart as a body organ was (and is) not what Deuteronomy 6:4-5 was referring to. Thus, διανοία was used instead. Later on, however, the definition of καρδία became more fluid. Writers were then free to use καρδία as the word for "heart"—the heart being the core being of a person. Interestingly, Josephus also used the more open definition of "heart" in *Jewish Antiquities*. In describing Judas Maccabbeus' routing the army of Antiochus Eupator, Josephus wrote that Judas, with "great quickness and bravery,[60]" attacked the king as he laid siege on Bethsura. While this cannot completely ensure that the original Hebrew connotations of "heart" were

[57] Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 321.
[58] Johannes Behm, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.* ed. Gerhard Friedrich. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 611.
[59] Flavius Josephus, *The New Completed Works of Josephus*. Jewish Antiquities, book 5: 193, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), p. 181. Italics are mine.
[60] Ibid. Jewish Antiquities, book 12: 373, p. 412. Some translations of Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* translate "quickness" as "heart".

carried over, the later Greek definitions of "heart" could encompass the Hebrew "heart".

So, we conclude that in the Intertestamental period, the use of καρδία would have been rather befuddling for the Intertestamental Jews and the Greeks alike since it referred to an actual organ of the body. However, the employment of διανοία suggests that to love God with all our "heart" would require loving Him with our thoughts—all that runs through our minds.

Ψυχή will, in Markan times, be defined as the life of a person. However, during the Intertestamental period, little debate exists as to what ψυχή entails. The definition of ψυχή took on the idea of the body/soul relationship explored notably by Plato. According to his *Phaedo*, the soul and the body are separate entities that make up a person. The soul is life, so therefore it cannot be the body, which dies eventually[61]. Thus, the soul is the cognitive part of the human. Only it can conceive of and understand ideas. In the spirit of the then-modern philosophy, ψυχή was defined as the thoughts, the ideas, and the intellect, all of which were associated with the soul. However, the translators of the Septuagint were careful not to fuse Greek philosophy with Jewish theology in their translating. In the Septuagint, ψυχή continues to be defined as the seat of feelings and emotions. To some extent, it could even denote "a person". To love God with all our soul, in the Intertestamental period, then, obligated the Jews, Hellenistic or not, to love God with all their emotions and their feelings—to love God with our whole person.

As discussed earlier, רֵעַ was translated as "neighbor", but from the Israelite context, רֵעַ is exclusive. In contrast to that definition, πλησίον, also translated "neighbor" is inclusive. Epictetus, in his *Discourses*, used πλησίον in his ethics on "To those who lightly about their own affairs." Given the context, "neighbor", according to Epictetus, denotes everyone who someone has contact with. Thus, while πλησίον is not applicable to everybody, it did represent more than just the Jews themselves (from the Septuagint context of Leviticus 19:18). The decision to use

[61] Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) p. 334-335.

πλησίον was not made glibly, but required some discussion. In fact, as will be shown later, this issue continued into Jesus' time, and was a topic of debate[62]. For one, quite a few Jewish theologians favored the move from an exclusive "neighbor" to a "neighbor" that includes not only Jews, but to non-Jews as well[63]. This theology could have been in full swing during the Intertestamental period with the advent of Jewish proselytes and Hellenistic Jews (Jews who were enamored with Hellenism and straddled the fine line between orthodox Judaism and Hellenistic philosophy). Thus, "neighbor" was expanded to include those people.

Since Intertestamental Judaism straddled the line between orthodoxy and Hellenism, the question of how the Jewish-Greek interpretation of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 figured into the issue of economic injustice. Any inquiry into this requires asking about prevailing ideas on friendship in the Intertestamental period. Arguably, one of the representative views of "loving our neighbors" in the Intertestamental period came from Philo, whose analysis of friendship was heavily influenced by the Aristotelian stoic school of thought. Just as Aristotle thought of a friend as a sort of alter-ego, Philo boldly equates the friend to the person who shares the friendship[64]. Philo traces his argument back to the Pentateuch, citing examples of friendship between the divine God and Abraham, Jacob, and Moses. Becoming friends of God implies becoming increasingly committed to Him, which brings up the concept of the friend almost as a loved kinsman. Thus, loving God implies a commitment to His directives, and loving neighbors connotes a commitment to the well-being of the Jews (if the thinker was a Rabbinic Jew), or of everybody (if the thinker was a Hellenistic Jew).

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[62] Heinrich Greeven, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.* ed. Gerhard Friedrich. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968). P. 316.
[63] Fichtner, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.* ed. Gerhard Friedrich. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 315. Fichtner also proposes that this is the essential bridge that leads to Jesus' extension of "neighbor" to mean everybody.
[64] Gregory E. Stirling. "The Bond of Humanity: Friendship in Philo of Alexandria." *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship*. Ed. John T. Fitzgerald (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), pp. 209-210.

Aside from the theological debates of the time, the influx of Hellenism and Roman tradition and cultures did have an effect on the economic life of the Israelites. The land of Israel continued to sustain a heavily agricultural economy. Fishing was also a sizeable industry, especially around the Sea of Galilee. The apostle Peter, for example, was a fisherman before becoming Jesus' disciple, and returned to fishing before Jesus met him on the shore. However, the economics of the time made such industries difficult to sustain. According to Scott, the typical Palestinian farmer's livelihood was almost always on the line due to government taxes (which varied frequently), religious fees, interest on loans, and other financial obligations[65]; all of which contributed to the failure of so many farms. This gave rise to a "bandit class" who consisted of disgruntled people always fighting the government and opposed to the financial institutions that contributed to the downfall of their businesses[66]. This antagonism was fueled by the rising gap between the rich and the poor. In addition, unjust business practices only exacerbated the situation. Ferguson's research suggests that:

> "The Hellenistic and Roman periods present a startling contrast between the low wages paid the poor and the great liberality of the rich. The wealthy would give to public works and respond to the needs in time of crisis, but they would not pay adequate wages.[67]"

Whether the Jews seriously practiced the love of their neighbors is not known. The economics in the transition between the Intertestamental period and the New Testament did not change significantly, if at all. Thus, it was in the economically uncertain times of the Intertestamental period when the events of the New Testament would unfold. From that context, the message from Mark 12: 28-34 will have social (or more specifically, economic) implications.

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[65] J. Julius Scott, Jr. *Customs and Controversies: Intertestamental Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1995) p. 243.
[66] Ibid. p. 244.
[67] Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) p. 85.

The New Testament

Since the context of the New Testament does not differ significantly from the context of the intertestamental period, it may be useful to begin to look into Mark 12: 28-34, addressing relevant cultural factors along the way. Earlier on (Mark 12: 1), Jesus told his audience the "Parable of the Tenants", which clearly infuriated the religious authorities. After the crowd has dispersed, those authorities sent representatives to catch Jesus contradicting himself or, better yet, blaspheming. After a question about paying taxes to Caesar (12: 13-17), and a theological question on Jewish eschatology (12: 18-27), a Jewish "teacher of the law" came by.

Scholars still debate on what his intentions were when he asked about the two important commandments. Most commentators agree that the scribe's question was sincere because of Jesus speaking positively about the scribe at the end of the dialogue, and also because, unlike his previous responses which always ended with a question, Jesus gave a direct answer to the scribe[68]. Spicq describes the scribe as a "man of good will" who was impressed with Jesus' wisdom and authority—an authority that effectively silenced the questioning teachers of the law, most (if not all) of whom were the greatest scholars in Jewish thought. Fully aware of his own intellectual excellence, his discourse with Jesus was, on a small scale, an academic exchange with someone the scribe perceived as his equal intellectually, and as someone the scribe perceived as "an eminent master"[69]. However, Jesus' intercourse with the scribe was important for a cultural (not academic) reason.

Regardless of his motives, the scribe's question poses a significant threat to Jesus' honor[70], which only made answering the question well imperative. Jesus lived in an honor-shame

[68] Craig Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*. Vol. 34B. *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001). p. 262.
[69] Ceslaus Spicq, *Agape in the New Testament* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co, 1963), p. 62.
[70] Note that Jesus was well-known and popular. To take down his honor would have disastrous consequences to his ministry.

culture, where a person's value, respectability, or worth was determined by how others see him or her. Shame, then, would be a loss of honor, where a person becomes less important in the eyes of others. Thus, he or she becomes less respectable and easily dismissed[71].

In either case, the scribe poses the question of what the greatest commandment was. This question was a common question in Judaism during the intertestamental and New Testament periods, and many prominent rabbis would be expected to have an answer for it. Hillel's response was, "What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbor: this is the whole Law, the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.[72]"

Jesus' answer was the direct citation of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18, and only in Mark's narrative did Jesus recite all of 6: 4-5. The Deuteronomy passage bears some mention because Deuteronomy 6:4-5, also known as the *Shema*, was the statement of confession for Judaism. Part of the daily life of a typical Israelite was the daily liturgy, which consists of reciting the *Shema* and the *Amidah*. These were recited in the morning and evening of every day[73].

Once again, some Greek words need to be clarified. ἀγαπαω was used both in the Septuagint (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18) and Mark used it as well. ἀγαπαω had different connotations, depending on whether the hearer or reader was Greek or Jewish. Generally, the Greeks would have interpreted ἀγαπαω as a strong preference of an object over something else. According to Stauffer, there are many definitions of ἀγαπαω. The Greeks sometimes referred to "love" as some degree of an external attitude (for example, receiving or greeting a friend). It is also used to denote preference. However, the most common definition is

[71] Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster Knox Press, 1998). P. 30. Neyrey's background applies to Mark's background as well. He refers to the same story as told in Matthew.
[72] William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark. New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). p. 432.
[73] Mark Kiley, *Prayer from Alexander to Constantine.* (New York: Routledge, 1997). p. 108.

an internal desire for something. Stauffer writes, "[άγαπαω] relates more to the inward attitude in its meaning of 'seeking after something' or 'desiring someone or something'"[74] Thus, Jesus' message to love God wholeheartedly was a call to not only seek after God, but also to desire God above all things. Loving their neighbors was a call to seek to seek out the best interests of others above their own interests.

The Jews, on the other hand, have two distinct lines of thought in relation to άγαπαω. The Hellenistic Jews, influenced by Greek thought, saw 'αγαπαω as a "relationship of faithfulness between God and man.[75]" This interpretation was motivated by the equating of "good" to "love". Josephus, aware of this tradition, described the line of kings following Solomon, commented on the fact that the succession of good and bad kings served to show "how [God] loves good men, and hates the wicked…[76]" Using the Hellenistic Jewish interpretation of άγαπαω, it becomes obvious that loving God is not passive, but active, since the love is relational. The book of Sirach[77], for example, promises blessings from God to those who love wisdom (Sirach 4: 11-13). How do believers "love" wisdom? The book of Wisdom, in Wisdom 6:17-19, shows that loving God requires the keeping of His laws. Thus, for the Hellenistic Jews, to love God is to follow His decrees sincerely. However, the Jews are not able to love without God's help. According to the epistle of Aristeas, that love is a gift of God. The Rabbinic Jews, on the other hand, hold onto the definition of love implied from אָבַה , the Hebrew word for "love", which was defined earlier

[74] Ethelbert Stauffer, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. 1. ed. Gerhard Kittel. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1964) p. 36. Stauffer also lists other Greek definitions of άγαπαω.
[75] Ibid. p.39.
[76] Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*. Book 8: 314. trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999) p. 296. 'αγαπαω was used in place of "love".
[77] Sirach is a book in the Septuagint, the version of the Bible that Hellenistic Jews may have used. Verses quoted from the apocryphal books are from the *New Jerusalem Bible*. In 4: 11-13, it is important to remember that for the Greeks, wisdom is good. Thus, God, who is good, loves those who love good—which includes wisdom.

in the Old Testament[78].

Since John Mark's gospel was written to a Gentile audience, the definitions of ἀγαπαω could be the Greek and Hellenistic Jewish definitions. Thus, Jesus' command to love God implies faithfulness, just as God has been faithful to us. Likewise, to love our neighbors implies having a preference for their interests over ours. The radical element of Jesus' command was who the neighbors are. John Mark, however, was Jewish. As a result, it is conceivable that Mark intended ἀγαπαω to imply commitment to the well-being of the neighbors. When this study discusses the economic aspects of the issue of injustice, the question of what "self-interest" means when it comes to ἀγαπαω.

Although John Mark used πλησίον for "neighbors", his interpretation of the word was not the same as the Intertestamental interpretation. Jesus himself did not show evidence of interpreting πλησίον similarly as well. Instead, Jesus' "neighbors" refers to everybody and anybody. Pheme Perkins writes, "Jesus' version [of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18] lacks any of the concern with the boundaries of the community so common in the other versions. Jesus seems to have sought to overcome boundaries which separated people.[79]" Evidence can be found in Matthew 5: 43-44, where Jesus was recorded saying, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbors and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.[80]" Thus, from the definition of πλησίον and 'αγαπαω, Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves becomes evident. To love our neighbors is not to put the interests of those who live next to us above our own interests. It is not just to put only good

[78] Ethelbert Stauffer, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. 1. ed. Gerhard Kittel. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1964) p. 41.
[79] Pheme Perkins, *Love Commands in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press. 1982) p. 21-22. In Perkins' analysis, he notes that this message is not prominent in the other Synoptic Gospels. The reason behind this could've been the fact that Mark was expressly written for a Gentile audience. In that case, Mark will have to ensure his audience realizes that loving God and neighbors is a gift and requirement that extends to them as well.
[80] *Αγαπήεις τὸν πλησίον* was the direct translation of "love your neighbors" in Matthew 5: 43-44.

peoples' interests above ours. It is to put *all* peoples' interests above ours. Jesus, in Matthew 5: 46-47 describes this love:

"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"

This love also includes the giving and sharing of our possessions with our neighbors, because putting others' interests above our own interests (to secure our own possessions) was an implication of the commandment to love our neighbors. Richard Hays writes, "To fulfill the new commandment of Jesus [to love one another] necessarily entails the sharing of possessions with the poorer members of the community[81].

This love even requires Christians to love even their enemies. Acts 7: 52-60 ,Luke's narrative of Stephen's martyrdom, could arguably be an example of this love. Prior to death, Stephen's final prayer was not a prayer of condemnation against his assailants. He had all the right to curse his murderers, but instead, he offered a prayer of forgiveness. "Lord," he prayed, "do not hold this sin against them.[82]" How exactly did Stephen get the power to forgive those who killed him? How can today's Christians have that same power to forgive those who oppose or reject them? Perhaps Jesus offers a helping hand in Matthew 5: 38-42[83]. However, the driving force behind this love is not our will to love. We cannot drive ourselves, by our power, to love everybody and put their interests above our own. However, this love, as Heinrich Greeven puts it, "not primarily act but being: being a son of God, being perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect.[84]" Loving God is similar—we are to put God's interests above our own. However, the

[81] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper 1996), p. 465.
[82] Luke 7: 60
[83] In Matthew 5: 41, for example, if someone (presumably a Roman soldier) forces one to go one mile, Jesus commanded that the person should go with the soldier two miles. Regardless of whether we are dealing with an enemy, friend, or stranger, we are to put their interests and needs above ours.
[84] Heinrich Greeven, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. 6. ed. Gerhard Friedrich. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1968) p. 317.

question of what it means to love God "with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength" remains elusive.

Unlike the Intertestamental translation of Deuteronomy 6:4-5, the word used for "heart" was καρδία was used instead of διανοια. Its meaning encompasses both the original Hebrew definition of "heart" (לֵבָב) and the Intertestamental διανοια[85]. Romans 1:24 contains this definition of "heart". In that passage, Paul shows that God gave [the wicked] over to the sinful desires "of their hearts" and the result was sexual impurity, and idolatry (v. 25), and the list of sins only gets worse. In James 3:14, James warns about harboring envy and self-interests in our "hearts". "Hearts", in the aforementioned cases, connotes a place where feelings and thoughts are stored. In another example, καρδία was used with a different definition.

In Acts 28:27, Paul cites Isaiah 6: 9-10. "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has been calloused." In this case, καρδία was used as the center of understanding. Johannes Behm elaborates further that the heart is "the source of thought and reflection.[86]" It is important to note that this "thought and reflection" is not intellectual but, rather, spiritual. As Evans put it, "The heart is the seat of spiritual life and the inner being, among other things.[87]"

A third definition of καρδία exists, and can be found in passages such as Acts 11: 23, where Barnabas exhorted the church in Antioch to "remain true to the Lord with all their hearts." Καρδία, is this case, probably does not imply a knowledge to hold steadfast to the Lord, nor does it connote a desire to hold to the Lord. Instead, καρδία is defined to be where resolves are made. Thus, Barnabas was exhorting the Antiochans to resolve to hold fast to the Lord in the midst of

[85] Recall that the Hebrew word for "heart" implies everything that makes a person who he or she is. The Intertestamental word for "heart" emphasizes an "intellectual understanding".
[86] Johannes Behm, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. 3. ed. Gerhard Kittel. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1965) p. 612.
[87] Craig Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*. Vol. 34B. *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001). p. 264.

growing persecution.

Καρδία, in summary, refers to where feelings, thoughts, and emotions dwell. There, resolves are made. The difficulty of following Jesus' command to loving God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strengths, becomes increasingly evident. To love God just with all our hearts alone requires us to be faithful to God in terms of our passions, our desires, our thoughts and reflections, and our resolutions. Our primary passion, our chief desire should be God. Our thoughts and reflections should be pleasing to God. Our resolution should be anything but to stray away from God. If καρδία is the seat of all thought and reflection, what is διανοία, then? Διανοία, in the New Testament, connotes intelligence. Plato's *Republic* helps bring life to that definition. Socrates, in the narrative, was explaining about people with certain faculties of the soul, one of them being "intellection" or reason. Earlier on, he explained how some ideas cannot be considered "intelligence" unless understood with a certain "first principle"[88]. Where intelligence was referred to, Plato used διανοία, indicating that its definition probably revolves around intelligence or reason. Thus in tandem with loving God with our whole hearts, it is clear that our reasoning and our knowledge must be pleasing to God as well.

Loving God with our hearts and minds is already very difficult. However, "soul" and "strength" have yet to be defined! Ψυχή, or "soul", has a wealth of definitions including the soul[89], a source of feelings, and the physical life. Jesus was most likely referring to the soul as the physical life of a person. In the Septuagint, Genesis 46:27 records the number of people who went to Egypt with Jacob. In Greek however, the word for "people" was ψυχή, which contextually would refer to actual lives rather than souls. Ψυχή was used in Philippians 2:30. Paul wrote about Epaphroditus, who "almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life (ψυχή)

[88] Plato, *The Republic: Books 6-10*. ed. P. Goold, trans. Paul Shorey. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). p. 116-117.
[89] In ancient Greek thought, the soul lives on past death and enters the underworld.

to make up for the help [the Philippians] could not give [him][90]". Thus, Jesus' command to love God wholeheartedly requires complete submission of our very lives in order to be at His "disposal."

The word for "strength" is ίσχυς, and uses of it can be found in some ancient Greek writers. However, in the Intertestamental period, δυναμις was the word for "strength". Δυναμις denotes capability or ability, although it was used infrequently. Δυναμαι and ίσχυς have variations that have overlapping definitions. ίσχυς denotes power, strength, and ability, where δυναμις primarily refers to capability or ability[91]. Plato, in his *Republic*, was describing the good life, used ίσχυς to embody "bodily strength[92]". Hesiod wrote in his *Theogony* about Earth's youngest child Typhoeus, describing him as someone whose "strength was with his hands in all that he did." Hesiod used ίσχυς for "strength." Both ways, ίσχυς denotes physical strength. In the New Testament, Peter used ίσχυς in 1 Peter 4: 11 where he was describing service: "If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength (ίσχυς) God provides." Thus, to put all of Mark 12: 30 together, Jesus' commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength requires us to love God with every inclination, feeling, reflections, thoughts, intellect, and everything that we do.

For today's Christians, Mark 12: 28-34 might not be controversial. However, the Gentiles who read Mark's gospel saw the command to love God differently. For one, the human-deity relationship in Greco-Roman religion was not characterized by the love described in Mark. John Mark quoted all of Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which began with the *Shema* ("Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, our Lord, is one."). Considering the fact that Greco-Roman religion was very

[90] Philippians 2:30
[91] Walter Grundmann *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.* ed. Gerhard Kittel. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 397.
[92] Plato, *Republic Book VI-X* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) trans. Paul Shorey. p. 508-509.

nonexclusive[93], it would not be surprising for pagan readers of John Mark's gospel to find the opening lines of the *Shema* to be scandalizing. Furthermore, the Roman deities were loved not because of who they were, but because of the powers they supposedly wield[94]. Thus, naturally, the Greco-Roman religions gravitated towards occultism, as magic, divination, fortune-telling, etc. are powers that worshippers were interested in. However, Jesus' commands have very different implications. Jesus' love commandments describe a love that manifests itself in self-giving action. Schnackenburg writes,

> "For believers in Christ the goal [of the commandments] could not be the visionary mysticism which at that time exerted an immense power of attraction over not a few human beings. It is not ecstatic visions that lead to communion with God, but love proved in action.[95]"

Where loving gods in Greco-Roman religions result in blessings from them, loving God results in obedience and loving everybody, even our enemies. It is a love that looks out for the self-interests of others rather than our own self-interests.

This love can be exemplified in the basic social unit of Roman society—the family. In a typical Roman family, all possessions were shared between its members. Religious observances were rarely individual, but were done as a family. Indeed, nobody in a good family must be left out of its blessings. Likewise, Christians constitute a family—nobody must be left out of its blessings. Everett Ferguson summarizes thus, "The family was the basic unit of society in all of the cultures that provide the background for early Christianity.[96]" While it may sound rosy and utopian, the reality was that the centrality of the family in Greco-Roman society excluded many from it. In around 18 A.D., Caesar Augustus issued decrees promoting marriage and stable

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[93] Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 173.
[94] Ibid. p. 174. To put it simply, the Greco-Roman worship of their deities was really a self-centered worship, the primary goal of worship was to obtain blessings from the deities.
[95] Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), p. 106.
[96] Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 72.

families. This was directed towards the "desirables" of society—those in the upper class. So much promotion went into marriage that economic benefits were accorded to married people, and at the same time, liabilities were placed to the unmarried. Ferguson reports that additional benefits were bestowed to those with three or more children. Single adults had limits on inheritance imposed upon them. Even worse, "penalties were placed on the childless; and widowed and divorced women were required to remarry within stipulated times.[97]"

Jesus' love commandments, however, obligated the Romans Christians not only to love these societal abnormalities[98], but to also to meet their needs. The Early Church took this seriously and in some cases allowed women to be involved in certain ministries within the local church[99]. We will discuss the obligations of the love commandments to the Church today in a later section of this study. For now, suffice it to say that the two greatest commandments were not meant to be an abstract set of ethics—these commandments must be done.

It is possible that we may find the two greatest commandments to be impossible to obey. After all, sin has tainted us to the point where total and complete obedience to God is impossible. As St. Ambrose of Milan put it,

"To humanity it was said, 'Love the Lord your God,' yet the love of God is not instilled in the hearts of all. Deafer are the hearts of people than the hardest rock. The earth, in compliance with its Author, furnishes us with fruit which is not owed to us. We deny the debt when we do not give homage to the Author.[100]"

However, it must not be forgotten that the same God who gave to humanity the commandments also gave humanity the power to live it out. Wrote St. Augustine, "… the

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[97] Ibid. p. 75.
[98] These "social abnormalities" include the poor and destitute members of society.
[99] Ivor J. Davidson, *The Birth of the Church*. Vol.1, *Baker History of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2004), p. 304-5. It is to be noted that the early Church gave the ministries to old widows who could not possibly remarry. Younger widows were encouraged to marry since the common vein of thought was that they were not as spiritually mature nor experienced as the old women. Of course, to be given a ministry, the widows must have some characteristics (good behavior, hospitable, humble, etc.).
[100] Thomas C. Oden and Joseph T. Lienhard, *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*. Old Testament Vol. 3. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 284.

supreme and true wisdom is in that first commandment… from this it follows that wisdom is love of God, which is 'poured forth in our hearts,' not otherwise than 'by the Holy Spirit who is given to us.'[101]" Empowered by the Holy Spirit, assured that we'll be picked up when we fall by Christ, and entrusted with two great commandments, it is in this way that Christians can exemplify God's love as witnesses in an unbelieving world.

The scribe affirmed Jesus' answer, and Jesus' ambiguous response was that he was not far from the kingdom of God. (vs. 34). Commentators have varied comments on this particular verse. For example, Hurtado simply noted that Jesus' response was a positive evaluation of the scribe. Lane, on the other hand, writes that Jesus essentially affirmed that the discussion was not on the heart of the Mosaic Law, but "a proclamation of the demands of the messianic kingdom.[102]" Evans maintains that the scribe's affirmation accentuates the orthodoxy of Jesus' message, meriting the endorsement of the scribe[103]. While all of the above certainly apply to Jesus' response, the response also brings an additional connotation: The two commandments outlined by Jesus must not only be followed, but even that is useless unless the scribe follows Jesus. Spicq writes:

"Let [the scribe] behave accordingly and he will enter into the kingdom of heaven. Meanwhile, he is not far from it, and Jesus invites him to consider himself a proselyte who 'draws near'[104]."

Jesus did not compile his own systematic theology, and as a result, the early Church was put in the difficult but crucial position to figure out the manifold implications of Jesus' teachings. It was during this period when the first definitive positions against economic injustice by the Church Fathers, namely St. Augustine and St. Aquinas, took shape.

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[101] Ibid. p. 285.
[102] William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*. *New International Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1974) p. 434.
[103] Craig Evans. *Mark 8:27-16:20*. *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), p. 267.
[104] Ceslaus Spicq, *Agape in the New Testament*. (St. Louis: B Herder Book Co, 1963) p. 66.

Before leaving this study on the New Testament, we present the socio-economic implications of Mark 12: 28-34. As discussed earlier, loving God with all our heart requires us to love God with all our will. Loving Him with our soul requires us to love him with all our lives. Loving Him with our mind obligates us to direct our thoughts and reasoning in loving Him and understanding His ways. Loving Him with all our strength beckons us to use our strength and abilities to love Him. However, this first command still remains as a field of abstract ethics, until Jesus cited Leviticus 19:18's command to love our neighbors as ourselves. Loving God requires us to love our neighbors, and loving our neighbors is meaningless without loving God. To love our neighbors is to advocate for their self-interests, regardless of socio-economic differences. This advocacy transcends academic disciplines, social strata, age differences, and other divisions in society. In his analysis of the socio-political aspects of Mark, Waetjen writes that:

> "… the commandment that is first of all cannot stand alone. It must be accompanied by a second which has equal weight… Indeed, the two cannot be separated from each other. For to love God out of a whole heart is to be free and courageous in fulfilling the will of God in our relationships with our fellow human beings and with ourself. To love God out of our whole soul is to open ourselves to actualizing the possibility and freedom of God in all levels of human society. To love God out of a whole mind is to employ all the powers of the intellect in devotion to the Creator by discovering new and superior ways of building social and economic institutions that eliminate poverty, ignorance, and disease.[105]"

Thus, Waetjen compels today's Christians to leave the bubble of comfortable ignorance and live out the love that the two greatest commandments require. Implications of this will be discussed at a later section of this study.

The Early Church

The early Church was essentially an increasingly international body, eventually comprising of people from many regions throughout the Roman Empire. However, the Church's

[105] Herman C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-political Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p.193.

first members were mainly from the lower socioeconomic classes of society. It was only after some time before the wealthier and more influential Roman citizens began to find salvation in Christ. Economically, the Roman Empire was "plagued" by the widening gap between the rich and the poor. This gap was a result of the inexistence of minimum wage laws. The wealthy aristocracy could be credited with financing the construction and maintenance of many public works and services, the incentive for such donation coming from the fact that the names of donors were immortalized on stone plaques next to the public amenity that was financed[106].

However, the workers of the wealthy landowners would be poorly paid. Ferguson notes that there was a "startling contrast between the low wages paid the poor and the great liberality of the rich… The wealthy would give to public works,… but they would not pay adequate wages.[107]" The increasing poverty could also be attributed to increase of large-scale enterprises. In the largely agrarian economy of the Roman Empire, private farmers suffered with the advent of large farming operations, since these large farming enterprises can sustain some degree of loss while private farmers need profit to survive. In Palestine, the situation was aggravated by state-controlled resources, namely wheat, oil, and wine[108]. Thus, it was difficult to find low prices on the necessities of life. As discussed earlier, banditry was a common result. Such was the economic reality of the first Christians.

However, the New Testament Christian communities banded together and shared their resources, as written in Acts 4:32. It is important to remember that each individual did not give up their belongings. They kept them, but shared them with other Christians freely. After all, nobody was (and is) better than another in the body of Christ. Conceivably, the poorer Christians

[106] As an aside, the New Testament figure Erastus, mentioned at the end of 2 Timothy, supposedly financed the construction of a road in Corinth. A commemorative plaque bearing his name is still readable to this day.
[107] Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 85.
[108] Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002), p. 73.

could have access to whatever they need from a wealthier Christian. These communities were not perfect, and as more privileged, influential citizens began to join the Church, certain problems arose, like the situation in 1 Corinthians 11: 17-22. Apparently, the community favored the wealthier brethren (who probably brought most of the food) over the poorer ones. As such, the rich Christians would eat and drink their fill, and even to excess (1 Cor. 11:21). The poor Christians would leave still hungry. Paul's harsh criticism was necessary, and he wrote, "… do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing (11:22)?" The Church was (and is) not partial towards any one person, and the Corinthians' behavior only served to undermine that principle. Later writings on economic injustice by the Church fathers would emphasize the sharing of resources and possessions, but for now, it would be interesting to discuss about the concept of friendship in the Greco-Roman contexts, since the Greco-Roman idea of friendship was more than today's idea of friendship.

Most of what scholars know about Greco-Roman ideas of friendship comes from ancient correspondence in the form of letters, some of them written by early Christians. In her survey on the contents of the letters, Evans notes a common emphasis in those letters: to be a friend in the ancient world was almost synonymous with being the person one shares the friendship with. In a letter to an official, Aurelius Archelaus, a Christian, beseeched him to regard a friend, Theon, "as if he were myself." Furthermore, Archelaus mentions that Theon "is indeed a man worthy of your affection. He left friends, property, business, and followed me, and has throughout secured my comfort… whatever he tells you about me you may take as a fact.[109]"

What is also very fascinating in Evans' analysis of friendship was also the possibility that a "friend" was, to some degree, a rank attributed to someone else. Another letter written by a son

[109] Quoted in Katherine Evans. "Greek Documentary Papyri and Inscriptions." *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship*. Ed. John T. Fitzgerald (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), pp. 195-196.

to his father referred to an incident where his friend literally had beaten him up because of unfulfilled obligations. As Evans herself noted, what was interesting in this letter was the fact that the son continually referred to his assailant as a friend in his letter[110]! Friendship, a familiar concept to the apostles and the Church Fathers, would be equivalent, in today's language, to having really close friends. In Archelaus' letter mentioned above, he was advocating for the acceptance and respect for his friend Theon—in a sense, advocating for Theon's interests. Likewise, Archelaus' witness challenges today's Christians to, in today's language, love our neighbors as ourselves and support their interests over our own.

As the Church moved from the New Testament times to the 'Sub-Apostolic Period", writings dealing with theological and ethical issues arose. This included books for catechetical purposes and for church discipline. The most famous one manual on church discipline, frequently cited by other sub-apostolic literature and only discovered in the late 1800s, was the *Didache*. The first section of the *Didache* dealt with the two "ways" life can be characterized. The "way of death" is a life that is "evil and completely cursed", and those walking down this dismal road murder, are guilty of adulterous behavior, lust, practice magic and sorcery, lie, steal, and are also guilty of "loving worthless things, pursuing reward, having no mercy for the poor, not working on behalf of the oppressed,…, turning away from someone in need, oppressing the afflicted, advocates of the wealthy, lawless judges of the poor…[111]" The author of the *Didache* did not prescribe a sentence for those on the way of death. He (or she) only left a prayer at the end of the section: "May you be delivered, children [of God] from all these things![112]" This

[110] Ibid. For the reader's peace of mind, no records exist as to whether the son or his friend was a Christian.
[111] Steve Mason and Tom Robinson, ed. *The Didache*, *The Early Christian Reader*. Trans. Michael Holmes (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), p. 650. The quotations are from *Didache 5*. What is interesting in the passage is that the *Didache* linked participation in economic injustice with what is commonly referred to as the "cardinal sins".
[112] Ibid.

small, but significant passage revealed the importance of the social injustice issue for Christians at the time—so significant it was that the author included it in a book for church discipline.

However, the Didachist also described the way to life, and the influence of Mark 12:28-34 seemed to be pretty significant in the formulation of this catechism: "Now this is the way of life: first, 'you shall love God, who made you'; second, 'your neighbor as yourself'; and 'whatever you do not wish to happen to you, do not do to another.[113]'" Didache 1:5 gives today's Christians a sense of how radical the Love Commandments can be.

Since the way of life is the way of complete submission and complete devotion to God, Christians walking on this narrow road must realize that everything they have is God's. In economic terms, what they possess is now God's private property. Thus, just like the members of a regular Greco-Roman family would ensure that no members are ever in need, God is free to ensure that no member of His Church will be devoid of basic needs. Christians were (and are) obligated to help their neighbors, Christian or non-Christian, from giving them a pinch of salt if they don't have it to helping repay debts within a tight deadline if the neighbor's family is in danger of losing its means of income! On a broader scale of things, the Church could be called to devote a significant amount of resources to help the poor neighbors in the world—money which would have been used to, say, build a beautiful church building instead.

In Roman society, the implications of the Love Commandments would have sounded completely alien, if not hilariously absurd. Romans were very protective of their private property, which was not surprising since they either have earned their wealth or inherited it from their ancestors who earned that wealth through the same legal means. As a result, since helping the poor and destitute may require a giving away of private property, the Romans saw no ethical necessity to pursue social justice. Of course, there were philanthropic efforts, but they were

[113] *Didache* 1:2

mainly for self-promotion. These efforts also brought great honors to the individual benefactor or to the family of benefactors[114].

However, contrary to what was acceptable ethics in Roman society, Didache 1:5 exhorted the early Christians to be willing to give away their possessions and resources, *and* not expect it to be returned in the form of the possession, or other favors, honors, or forms of recognition! The Didache 1:5 also encouraged the early Christians to give no concern regarding the motives of the one requesting something, because if the requestor was trying to free-ride the Christians, he or she would be answerable to that charge and be accountable for its repayment (Didache 1:5b). Even with the safety net of 1:5b, this suggestion could sound outlandish for today's Christians! We will discuss the implications of this to today's Church in the next section.

As a summary of the *Didache*'s teachings on the Love Commandments and economic injustice, Milavec writes that:

"The *Didache* is the oldest known Christian document that makes it clear that, in the act of giving, the one giving is handing over what belongs *to the Father*. In effect, therefore, the one giving acts as a faithful steward or broker who dispenses the Father's resources to those making their requests known. The unseen 'benefactor' in every instance is the Father. The Roman notion of gaining public honor or influence as a 'benefactor'[115]"

The Letter of Barnabas also contained a section on social injustice. This epistle, whose authorship is uncertain, was probably written for purposes of instructing people in Christian living. Barnabas 2:10- 3: 5 contains an exhortation to promoting charity and justice. Verse 2:10

[114] Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Faith, Hope, and Life* (New York: Newman Press, 2003), p. 184.
[115] Ibid. This summary also emphasizes the role of the Christian as a witness, testifying to God's love and providence to all.

quotes Psalm 51:17[116], and contrasts the Jewish ritualism with the proper Christian attitude to sacrifice[117]. In the context of fasting, the author quotes Isaiah 58:4-10, which was an exhortation to "loose every bond of injustice, untie the knots of forcibly extracted agreements,…, tear up every unjust contract… giving food to the hungry without hypocrisy and have mercy on the person of lowly estate". Later in the epistle, the author follows the *Didache* and describes the two "ways of life". In his analysis of those who follow "the way of light," Barnabas declared that they were those who were diligent to "love him who made you…" and to "love your neighbor more than yourself.[118]" This was an allusion to, and perhaps an interpretation of, Mark 12: 28-34 or its parallels in Matthew.

In contrast to that, followers of the way of darkness, which his "crooked and full of cursing[119]", were keen to "loving what is worthless, pursuing reward; and not showing mercy toward the poor, not laboring on behalf of the downtrodden.[120]" They were also "turning away from the needy, afflicting the oppressed; advocates of the rich, lawless judges of the poor.[121]" The epistle's author closed the description of the way of darkness with a description of those who follow it: they are "sinful through and through![122]" This contrast between the light and the darkness, loving God and all neighbors; and loving only a select few of the neighbors suggests that the Didachist posited some connection between the love commandments and social justice.

During the sub-apostolic period, social injustice was important because it posed a serious danger to unity within the Church. The members of the Church, after all, were expected at

[116] Psalm 51: 17: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise"
[117] Jay C. Treat, *The Letter of Barnabas Notes, Early Christian Reader*. Steve Mason and Tom Robinson, ed. Trans. Robert A. Kraft (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), p. 658.
[118] Barnabas 19: 2a and 5b.
[119] Barnabas 20:1
[120] Barnabas 20: 2f, 2g
[121] Barnabas 20: 2k
[122] Barnabas 20: 2l

minimum to love each other as themselves, harking back to the Old Testament command to "love your neighbors as yourself". Nowhere in the *Epistle of Barnabas* or the *Didache* did the authors condemn wealth. What they were condemning was ignoring the poor and not looking out for their interests because of their social weakness. Some apostolic writers have taken this to extremes. An example would be Hermas, who authored *The Shepherd*[123].

In the third vision, Hermas paints a picture of a lady to whom he asks a lot of questions. She shows him a vision of angels building a white tower with rectangular white stones that fit together seamlessly. Some stones were cast far away, others nearby. Some had mildew on it, others had cracks, rendering them useless. However, there were white that were rounded. Since they don't fit well, they were not used unless hewn back into shape. When asked about the meaning of the vision, the lady (who gets increasingly annoyed at Hermas) revealed that the white tower was the Church, and each of the rectangular white stones were the apostles, bishops, teachers, and other faithful Christians. Because they were one in unity, they fit together seamlessly, building a Church that seemed to be made of one stone. However, the rounded stones represent rich Christians. Although they had faith, their riches made them unfit for the Church. The solution was quite simple: the lady in Hermas' vision explains that "When their wealth, which leadeth their souls astray, shall be cut away, then will they be useful for God.[124]"

It sounds extreme, but it should not be surprising because Hermas' theology of social justice viewed riches as inherently evil. In fact, he found it exceedingly difficult to recognize that a rich Christian can be genuine. Writes Gonzalez, "Hermas's pastoral concern for the rich does not mean that he simply seeks to comfort them in their riches. On the contrary, he fills strongly

[123] This work is also known as *The Shepherd of Hermas.*
[124] J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1891), p. 414.

that riches are an impediment to salvation.[125]" His difficulty rests in his association of riches with pagan society. After all, having riches requires giving at least some attention to the businesses or pagan friends (perhaps those friends are regular customers of the business). This reeked of being yoked with the pagans and their society, which Paul warned against in 2 Corinthians 6: 14-18.

Thus, for Hermas, rich Christians cannot have a strong faith. However, rich Christians do have a purpose in the Church. Since they are spiritually poor, they must have a symbiotic relationship with the materially poor (the spiritually rich). Thus, in partnership with the poor, both the poor and the rich can have a share in the work of the Holy Spirit. This position was summarized later in *The Shepherd*. Hermas entered another vision where an angel tells him a parable about the vine and the elm tree. Simply put, the elm and the vine, by themselves, bear little fruit. However, when the vine utilizes the elm, the vine bears much fruit. The elm still bears little fruit, but a casual passerby would think that the elm was fruitful. According to Hermas:

"The rich man hath much wealth, but in the things of the Lord he is poor, being distracted about his riches, and his confession and intercession with the Lord is very scanty; and even that which he giveth is small and weak and hath not power above. When the rich man goeth up to the poor and assisteth him in his needs, believing that for what he doth to the poor man he shall be able to obtain a reward with God—because the poor man is rich in intercession [and confession], and his intercession hath great power with God—the rich man then supplieth to the poor without wavering… They both then accomplish their work…[126]"

In today's context, Hermas' suggestion sounds very outlandish. After all, if his theology was correct, then it is possible that the majority of Christians in the world are poor in their faith, including many (if not all) of the world's leading clergymen, biblical scholars and theologians! However, Hermas' point was not to avoid being rich. He was simply calling attention to the fact that the riches of wealthy Christians simply bring no joy unless they are shared with the poor, since sharing with the poor saves them from their destitution, just as Christ has saved the world

[125] Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1990), p. 97.
[126] J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1891), p. 441.

from their spiritual destitution. Gonzalez writes and extends the point further:

"To be in need is a torture, and therefore to rescue another from such conditions is to earn great joy. Not to do so, on the other hand, is a great crime, for the pain of poverty sometimes leads the poor to seek their own deaths. In such cases, those who could have helped and did not are guilty of the blood of the poor.[127]"

Hermas, however, does pose a question that will be explored later should be asked by today's Christians: could today's rich Christians help alleviate (or even eliminate) poverty? For if the answer is in the affirmative, then could they be indirectly responsible for the many worldwide who die from poverty daily?

Other apostolic fathers have written on the subject of economic injustice. However, for the purposes of this inquiry, two of the most influential Church fathers on this subject must be studied: St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine. It is important to note that being a bishop during this time period presented an interesting situation in the Church. The fact that they were educated people automatically placed them in the upper echelon of society. The empire, under the Emperor Constantine, provided the bishops with a sizeable stipend, and also delegated political authority of some locales to them in some situations. However, most of the citizenry remain below the poverty line. Geller notes that, "Most of the bishops were part of the empire's privileged 'handful' supported by and generally supportive of a social, economic, and political structure oppressive to the vast majority of people, who, overwhelmingly, were dreadfully impoverished.[128]" Gonzalez wrote that Constantinople itself was "both a city of luxury and a city of wretched poverty" where the wealthy liberally indulged on various luxuries, elaborate feasts and lived in enviable mansions. On the flip side, the vast majority of the population, who consisted of peasants displaced when the wealthy bought their land (their only means of

[127] Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1990), p. 100.
[128] Barbara Geller, "Transitions and Trajectories." *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998) p. 580.

survival). These people faced varying conditions of employment, and when work was available, it was often demeaning. They lived in unstable shacks, often several stories high. Supposedly, some of them were so unstable that they leaned on each other for structural support[129]!

At this point, it is important to realize that, contrary to common thought, the early Church was not exclusively composed of the lower echelons of society. In reality, it was a mix of the wealthy and the poor. In his analysis of the social settings of the *Didache*, Milavec writes that the members of the Church found themselves falling into one of two categories: the oppressed or the oppressors[130]. John Chrysostom himself, being the bishop of the imperial capital, Constantinople, most likely received an enviable wage like many others in his ecclesial position (maybe even compared to today's bishops or pastors!). Fortunately, the bishops were not taken by their wealth and position. Instead, they insisted on the protection of the poor, which not only gained the support and trust of the destitute citizens, but eventually, the Church became a mediator between the people and the government. In the case of St. Chrysostom, he used his money to help the poor and also to build facilities dedicated to the care of the ill and the disadvantaged[131].

Unfortunately, Chrystostom's preaching on wealth and economic injustice was misunderstood and resulted in his martyrdom[132]. For the purposes of this study, the focus will be directed towards his twelfth homily on the Book of 1 Timothy[133] where Chrysostom attacked materialism and the love of money. Along the way, he presents a small thought on economic injustice. He begins with a curious and thought-provoking presentation of the definition of a

[129] Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1990), p. 201.
[130] Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Faith, Hope, and Life* (New York: Newman Press, 2003), p. 180.
[131] Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1990), p. 201.
[132] Ibid. Supposedly, his preaching on behalf of the poor increased resentment against him by the wealthy. The Empress Eudoxa, thinking that his preaching was directed at her, eventually secured his exile to Armenia and then beyond the Black Sea. Along the way to his final location of exile, he was martyred for his support for the poor and disadvantaged. Ironically, history was to repeat itself in a similar way in 1980 with Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero.
[133] His key text was probably 1 Timothy 6: 3-10.

"good[134]":

"Money, houses, so many acres of land, crowds of slaves, loads of silver and gold? Do you call these goods? Are you not ashamed to show your face? A human being who professes heavenly wisdom, and gawking at worldly things, calling things "goods" which are of no account! If these things are goods, it follows that those who possess them must be called good. For is not someone good who possesses what is good? But, tell me, when possessors of these things are greedy and rapacious, are we still to call them good? If wealth is a good to be accumulated by greed, the more it increases, the more it entitles its possessor to be counted good. Is the greedy man good then? But if wealth is good and increased by greed, the greedier the better. You see the contradiction?[135]"

It is important to realize at this point that Chrysostom was not condemning material things, nor was he condemning money. After all, without his wealth, he would not have been able to provide services and facilities to the poor. His attacks were directed towards the hoarding of goods—the materialism that causes people to want to possess more things. He continues:

" 'But suppose he is not greedy,' you say. And how is that possible, since the passion [associated with materialism] is so all-consuming? 'Well, it *is* possible,' you say. No it is not! It is not! Christ proved it himself, when he said: 'Make friends for yourselves by means of *unrighteous* mammon'[136]"

John Chrysostom moves on to the discussion of whether wealth is bad in itself. In the Homily, he brought up Abraham and Job to illustrate what he thought of as wealth gained justly. For Chrysostom, according to the narratives in Genesis and Job, their wealth (consisting only of cattle and other livestock) was increased whenever their livestock multiply. In other words, Abraham and Job did not pillage nor did they unfairly acquire it. They simply reproduced and wealth increased, like interest given to a savings account every month. In a broader sense, Chrysostom was not abolishing private property. However, he does not let his wealthy

[134] Here, we are referring to the economic definition of a "good", which in the common vernacular, is simply a product. (i.e. paper, printer ink, books, electronics, cars, etc. are "goods")
[135] John Chrysostom, "Twelfth Homily on 1 Timothy", *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought.* ed. Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999), p. 101.
[136] Ibid. Chrysostom quotes Luke 16:9 in his evidence from Christ. However, I personally think there are better passages that pertain to this issue (i.e. Luke 16:19-31), but I defer to St. Chrysostom's knowledge and passion on this subject, seeing as he might be referring to me too in his homily.

parishioners off the hook. For Chrysostom, since God did not create rich or poor people[137], income disparities must have been gained through unjust means. His argument for that came from noticing goods and services that were shared in nature and in the city.

> "Take note, then, of God's dispensation! To humble mankind, in the first place, he has made some things common: the sun, the air, … are available equally to all as brothers. He fashioned us all with the same eyes, the same body, the same soul, the same structure in all respects, all our members from the earth, all from one man, and all in the same habitation… he made other things common, such as baths, cities, marketplaces, covered walks. And see how there is no strife over common goods, but all is peaceable![138]"

Chrysostom then moves on to argue that conflicts arise when people begin to claim things as their own. Where public places were generally peacefully regulated because of its commonality, houses, money, and other minute things were sources of arguments and quibbles. Thus, he concludes that having wealth and being a good person are contradictions, but the two disparities are remedied if the person shares his or her wealth and does not have the inclination to accumulate wealth.

As compelling a preacher he may be, Chrysostom's analysis had some weaknesses. For one, his choice of common goods to base his arguments on was biased. Mennonite economist James Halteman noted: "He picks his examples of common goods from items not scarce in his day, and selects scarce goods as evidence that people fight when private goods are allowed.[139]" As a result, he did not take into account the fact that if common property becomes a scarcity, conflict will ensue as people begin to compete over limited resources. Conflict occurs over the fact that there are only a limited amount of resources in the world, and this limited amount must

[137] Perhaps Chrysostom was alluding to Job 1:21.
[138] Ibid. p. 102.
[139] James Halteman, *The Clashing Worlds of Economics and Faith* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1995), p. 116. Basically, what that means is that Chrysostom noticed goods like carrots (for example) or services like public baths were not something to fight over. However, he also noticed other things like private estates that were a source of quibbling among people. From those observations, he concluded that if private property like estates were made public, then conflict would be resolved. What he did not realize was that carrots and public baths were not scarce goods, but there were only a few estates to go around. Scarcity generated the conflict, not the owning of private property.

satisfy the unlimited wants of the people[140].

Chrysostom closes his sermon by concluding that:

"Having property… is not a good; doing without it is an indication that someone is good. Wealth is not a good, while someone, again, who has a chance to get it and lets it go, is good… you are good, and are counted as such, in proportion to your charitable giving, while if you are rich, you are good no longer.[141]"

Does Chrysostom's theology of wealth have anything to do with the love commandments? In this case, he was careful to ensure that an assiduous following of the Love Commandments would translate into loving God with everything his parishioners did. In his homily on Genesis, Chrysostom proclaims:

"Christ looks for nothing else from you, in fact, Scripture says, than loving him with all your heart… if we sincerely love the Lord, will manage to discharge his commands and do nothing capable of angering our loved one. This is the kingdom of heaven; this, the enjoyment of goods; this, blessings beyond number, being found worthy to love him sincerely and in the manner he deserves. Our love for him will be genuine if we give evidence of great love for our fellow servants as well as for him.[142]"

St. John Chrysostom's service as a voice for the poor would cost him his life. However, he has made his mark in the question of what economic injustice is and how Christians should respond. His preaching had widespread affects, and to a certain extent, St. Augustine of Hippo agreed with his thoughts. However, Augustine does not define wealth the same way. A quick foray into Augustine's theology of wealth is appropriate before applying the lessons learned previously to the contemporary Church.

Where Chrysostom concluded that having possessions cannot be good, Augustine was not as quick to assent to that. In *City of God*, he suggests that material wealth is not necessarily

[140] The result of the imbalance between resource amount and unlimited needs and wants will create conflict because everyone will be competing against each other for this resource.
[141] John Chrysostom, "Twelfth Homily on 1 Timothy", *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought.* ed. Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999), p. 103.
[142] Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, *Mark*, New Testament Vol. 2. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 174.

evil by itself. What makes that wealth evil is when the greedy value the wealth more than justice. Augustine wrote that, "Greed is not a defect in the gold that is desired but in the man who loves it perversely by falling from justice which he ought to esteem as incomparably superior to gold.[143]"

But what does loving wealth mean? Augustine explained this by dividing material things into two categories: things that were for use, and things that were for enjoyment[144]. Things destined for use were used as a means to an end whereas things to be enjoyed are related to the user. Thus, to use things that were meant for enjoyment or to enjoy things that were meant to be used (money falls into this latter category) is perversion. This analysis begs the question of what enjoyment means. According to Gonzalez, Augustine's "enjoyment" involves finding "true and final happiness in a thing.[145]" From this definition, Augustine's conclusion about enjoyment becomes expected: God is the only one to be enjoyed, and consequently, all things are used to writes that:

"The proper use of material goods requires a clear distinction between the necessary and the superfluous… If it is superfluous, if they cannot use it directly to sustain their life in order to enjoy God, to retain it is to misuse it. This is even more true since what is superfluous to them is necessary to the poor.[146]"

From the Church fathers, we learn that wealth is not necessarily bad, but can easily degenerate into idolatry. Perhaps Clement offers a fitting conclusion to this section. For wealthy Christians living in the first-world today, his encouragement may, by God's grace, bring to light the role that the wealthy play in God's kingdom.

"Let this teach the prosperous that they are not to neglect their own salvation, as if they had been already foredoomed, nor, on the other hand, to cast wealth into the sea, or condemn it

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[143] Augustine, *City of God, Book 12 Chapter 8*, trans. Gerald Walsh, Demetrius Zema, Grace Monahan, and Daniel Honan, (New York: Image Press, 1958), p. 255. By "defect", Augustine was referring to evil.
[144] *City of God, Book 11, Chapter 25,* p. 234.
[145] Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1990), p. 216.
[146] Ibid.

as a traitor and an enemy to life, but learn in what way and how to use wealth and obtain life.[147]"

However, the Church fathers lived in a different time period with different economic situations. To apply the lessons learned would require a preliminary study of the economic situation today.

Implications for Today

Prior to studying the implications of the love commandments to economic injustice, the question remains as to what exactly economic injustice is. By definition, rudimentary economics is simply the study of how to optimally allocate resources[148] so that the self-interests of everybody are satisfied. This satisfaction does not apply equally to everyone in the world because different cultures and geographical regions have different environments. For example, the demand for ski slopes in Saharan Africa will always be zero. The demand for camels in Vail, Colorado will likewise never be greater than zero. Economic justice, therefore, is achieved when people have their basic needs satisfied in their own respective contexts. As Mennonite economist James Halteman explains, "Economic decisions… are made within the framework of scarcity. Any system must allocate limited resources among an endless list of desires in ways that are consistent with the values of the society.[149]"

People generally have lots of needs and wants, and everyone is driven towards pursuing those needs and wants. This drive to pursue the needs and wants is the idea behind "self-interest[150]". Poling goes further and adds that economics has a way of shaping and organizing the

[147] Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, *Mark*, New Testament Vol. 2. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 144.
[148] A key concept in economics is scarcity. Everybody wants and needs resources (food, water, shelter, money, etc.), but there is not enough to satisfy everybody's wants and needs for these resources.
[149] James Halteman, *The Clashing Worlds of Economics and Faith* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1995), p. 16.
[150] It is important to realize that being self-interested is different than being selfish. Being selfish implies that all needs and wants desired are directed towards the well-being of the selfish individual. A self-interested person has his own interests at heart, but those interests can be anything ranging from a toy for Christmas to eliminating poverty in Third-World countries.

desires, values, and behaviors of society[151]. Economic injustice, from this standpoint, occurs when resources are allocated to the satisfaction of the self-interests of only a group of people instead of everybody. This definition of economic injustice points out some key concepts in this study. If people have huge needs and wants (owning two cars, a mansion, and a boat, for example), and have the means to do so, they will do so at the expense of others' well-being[152]. Thus, a question to posit is: when is a want sinful? If it is not sinful, is it wrong to have unlimited wants?

When people from one country have excessive wants, it will affect many other countries. Thus, it is conceivable, in today's globalized world, for one country to be the cause of the destitution of many other countries. A good analysis of the socio-economic situation today can be found in John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society,* an important work on the strengths and delusions of economic security. Galbraith identified two kinds of poverty. There exists a kind of poverty that afflicts certain people with some characteristics—much like a disease. He referred to this kind of poverty as *case poverty*. A person with low morality, for example, could become poor by getting drunk and sleeping around. The second kind of poverty, *insular poverty*, exists when nearly everyone (or everyone) in a community is struck with poverty. In that situation, some environmental factors common to the community is the cause of poverty[153]. For this study, we will focus on insular poverty, although a quick mention about case poverty will also be in order at the end.

Before we forge ahead, some statistics will be helpful to begin an analysis of poverty and income disparities. Annually, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) publishes the

[151] James Newton Poling, *Render Unto God* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), p. 11
[152] For now, we are assuming people do not take ethics into consideration because ethics could possibly change a person's self-interests.
[153] John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1998) pp. 235-236.

Human Development Report, which strives to assess human development in many regions worldwide by looking at several factors, some of them directly related to economic injustice. To pictorially represent economic disparities between the wealthy and the poor in many countries, UNDP compared countries using the Gini coefficient. Values range from 0 to 100 and the higher the coefficient, the lower the percentage of income earned by the poorest populations in a country[154]. According to Figure 3 in the appendix to this study, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America regionally speaking, leads the world in income disparities. In Namibia, for example, the wealthy capture 70% of the nation's income. Figure 2 in the appendix consists of graphs depicting the percent of income shared by the poorest 20% of a country and the richest 20% of the country. Namibia's figures show that roughly 10-15 % of the income pie was shared by the poorest 20%. Even within the United States, the situation is not as rosy as it seems. The average income of the wealthiest 20% of the United States was $51,705 a year, and the income of the poorest 20% was only $5,800 a year[155]—barely enough to live on considering that the United States has a sufficiently high standard of living, to say the least. As a summary of global conditions, Figure 1 depicts what is commonly referred to as the "Champagne Glass Phenomenon": the richest 20% in the world earn about 82% of the world's income.

How must Christians respond to poverty and income inequality in light of lessons drawn from Mark 12: 28-34 on an *individual* level? An implication already discussed earlier in this study[156] was that loving God and loving our neighbors obligates us to elevate our neighbors' self-interests above our own—"neighbors" referring to everybody, regardless of gender, age,

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[154] Kevin Watkins, *Human Development Report 2005: International Cooperation at a Crossroads* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2005), p. 55. To clarify, a Gini coefficient of 50 would signify that the nation's wealthiest capture about 50% of the country's income. As a rule of thumb, coefficients above 50 indicate a high degree of income inequality.
[155] Quoted in James Newton Poling, *Render Unto God* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), p. 73
[156] See pg. 27

education level, or socio-economic status. The *Didache* and other early Christian literature strongly encouraged early Christians to respond affirmatively to any requests placed before them by anybody.

As discussed earlier in this study, the Jubilee Laws were declared in the Old Testament as a measure to safeguard the Israelite community from privileging the elites[157]. Paul House commented briefly on this in his *Old Testament Theology*: "The people must realize that the land belongs to God, who divides it by grace, not by merit or social standing…The people must understand that they themselves, regardless of economic standing, belong to God. [158]" Thus, whether or not the individual owners of the land were happy about it or not, each must return purchased land to their original owners after a set period of years. This protected the Israelites from inheriting poverty from an earlier generations.

Little wonder Jesus issued six condemnations of the Pharisees' hypocrisy in Luke 12: 37-52. The Pharisees, well-versed in the Torah (Pentateuch), were aware of God's Jubilee Laws and why they were instituted. However, it was clear they did not put those laws in to practice. "Now then," Jesus began, "you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness… but give what is inside the dish to the poor and everything will be clean for you.[159]" Jesus' third condemnation was that the Pharisees enjoy an elevated elite status in Israelite society. What Jesus was saying was not that the Pharisees were not humble people (although they should be), but that the Torah, which the Pharisees know full well, had guarded against any notion of elitism. After all, God was and is not partial towards the meritorious, the social elite, or the great benefactors of society. As discussed earlier, God is *the* sole benefactor,

[157] See pg. 6
[158] Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 1998), p. 147.
[159] Luke 12: 39-41

and Christians are to be agents who distribute God's private property according to His desires[160]. An implication of that was that in God's family, there is no person who is more important than another. Yet, the Pharisees, in their important places at social and religious gatherings[161] showed otherwise.

Jesus' teaching was simple. In Matthew 23:11, he simply instructs, "The greatest among you will be your servant." Note that good servants always put their master's interests above their own. In cases of insular poverty, first-world Christians cannot enjoy their suburban lives without taking into account the poor living among them—including the poor Christians. Rich Christians living in the luxury condominiums in downtown Chicago must ask themselves about how they can fulfill the interests of the poor living near the dumpsters in the alleyways the city blocks a mile away from Michigan Avenue[162]. Richard Hays, a professor of New Testament at Duke University, tells of his own wrestling with this issue, and this story should sound familiar to most Christians living in North America:

> "As a tenured professor in a major U.S. university, I live a life of comfortable affluence and relative economic security. I participate in a church and support it financially, contribute money to good causes, and do the occasional service stint in a homeless shelter. *But—let there be no mistake—such modest forms of economic discipleship fall far short of the New Testament vision*[163]."

What are some ways the individual Christian can practice economic justice? The individual Christian has very limited resources compared to that of the Church or the government. However, that does not excuse him or her from the obligation to confront this issue. In North America (and many other countries), the individual has the right to vote. In elections,

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[160] See page 36.
[161] Luke 12: 43
[162] For readers unfamiliar with Chicago, Michigan Avenue is the shopping district of Chicago, with many expensive restaurants and luxury stores selling high-end goods and services.
[163] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper 1996), p. 468. Italics mine for emphasis.

the conscientious Christian must take into account the political candidates' positions and possible solutions to alleviate economic injustice. Since the United States was and, to some extent, still is a contributor to economic injustice[164], Christian voters must take into account what the candidates' plan to do about the issue[165]. This calls into question the role of Christians in politics, and various other issues that we will not address in this study. his question leads to countless other tangents that other authors have written books on.

The individual Christian should also have the courage to reach out on a personal level to the poor in their communities. A personal account would help in this case. I live and study in the affluent suburbs of Chicago[166]. At the college, a professor had been actively involved for the past few years with street evangelism in the poorer parts of Chicago. Furthermore, for a while, he had an unemployed person who used to live on the streets share his apartment in a neighboring suburban town. The purpose of sharing his apartment was so that the person would have some shelter as he searches for a new job and gets his life back together. Here is an example of an individual Christian sharing his possessions with others, not expecting the person to ever thank him for his generosity. At the same time, the professor was able to reach out to other people living in the streets, making a difference in the lives of many people, one person at a time. It is important to know that individual Christians cannot and should not be deterred from the allusion that "one person cannot make a difference." Barend de Vries writes that in the fight against economic injustice, "many players must work together and make their own unique contribution:

[164] In the middle of the 20th century, Latin American economies and government have been shaped by a United Fruit Company (UFCO), a Federally-supported import company formed to satisfy growing demand of tropical fruits among consumers in the United States. UFCO bought plantations in many Latin American countries, displacing many plantation workers and owners. The fact that many Latin American countries have had tumultuous histories to this day could be indirectly traced back to UFCO's presence.

[165] This may require the Christian to be non-partisan in his or her voting. A Christian cannot simply vote for a candidate because he or she is Christian, or simply vote for a candidate representing a political party that "traditionally represented" whatever we perceive to be Christian values.

[166] In fact, a neighboring town was voted the best town to live in the United States.

church, community, business, labor, and government. They cannot succeed on their own.[167]"

At the same time, the individual Christian should also reevaluate his or her own consumption schedules. We have established that wealth is not bad. However, nobody needs forty sets of shoes. Nobody really needs a custom-made racecar. Does a family of five really need two houses, each one to be left empty for half the year? Ronald Sider has been particularly critical on this matter for wealthy Christians. While his criticism is valid, he maintains that a life of affluence is sinful, and the only biblical way to proceed is to live simply. He declares, "Affluence is the god of the twentieth-century North Americans, and the adman is his prophet.[168]" Even if that is true, his suggestions do not help. For example, to resist consumerism, his suggestions include resisting laughing regularly at television commercials, "developing family slogans like: 'Who Are You Kidding?' and 'You Can't Take It With You!'", making a list of dishonest ads and boycotting those products[169]. While I will not comment extensively on Sider's suggestions, it must be said that resisting consumerism and materialism requires a change in the consumerist's worldview and, perhaps, his or her lifestyle instead of just mounting a passive-aggressive taunt (or, protest) against corporate America. Furthermore, John Schneider, in his analysis of affluence and Christianity, detects a problem with Sider's "simple living" movement:

> "My complaint is that his principle… seems to leave no clear moral room for any enjoyments at all. I do not see how his occasional assertions that 'some enjoyments' are good can be consistent with the driving principles of his ethics. For a great many of his moral directives seem to embody the core principle of utilitarianism.[170]"

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[167] Barend A. de Vries, *Champions of the Poor* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998), p. 267. For now, we only list these two general examples, but the Christian is encouraged to be creative in finding ways to alleviate economic injustice in their immediate communities. Practical examples can (not necessarily must) include making friends with a low-income family or hiring people from the street, for Christians who own their own businesses.

[168] Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997) p. 191.

[169] Ibid. p. 199.

[170] John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 202. Note that Schneider follows Augustine's line of thought. See page 45-46 of this paper.

When we are commanded to put God and our neighbors' interests above our own, we necessarily submit our lives and possessions to their benefit. In other words, submitting our life to God implies enabling God to work through us. Likewise, submitting our possessions to Him involves letting God use our possessions for His glory. Thus, there is no requirement to abolish private property. In light of Mark 12: 28-34 and the issue of affluence and materialism, to love our neighbors as ourselves is to be willing to let them use our possessions to fulfill their interests. If a friend does not have a car to drive to church, a Christian is obligated to allow his or her friend to use the car, even if it is an expensive luxury vehicle.

On a more practical side, the individual Christian can always encourage his or her local church to be more active in confronting the issue of economic injustice. This brings into the discussion the role of the Church in confronting injustice. However, this discussion must take place on two fronts: the Roman Catholic/ Orthodox front and the Protestant/ Evangelical front.

Protestant evangelicals, to say the least, are on the verge of hopelessness on social injustice. Barend A. De Vries, a Catholic, writes, "…Evangelical and Fundamentalist churches are often characterized by a more right-wing orientation that pays less attention to poverty problems…[171]" This is disturbing for two reasons. The Church, after all, was supposed to be a community of believers that was characterized by love. This love must involve pursuing justice for those who did not encounter it. This is not an easy task, but this engagement needs to happen regardless. Poling writes that, "Churches must have the courage to protect the vulnerable and to confront abuse of power within the community and in larger society.[172]"

Secondly, De Vries seemed to indicate that Evangelical and Fundamentalist churches stake some degree of their identity in politics. The Church was never called to be conservative or

[171] Barend A. De Vries, *Champions of the Poor* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998), p. 213.
[172] James Newton Poling, *Render Unto God* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), p. 109-110.

liberal—she was called to be a testimony to Christ. There are some values that the Church cannot uphold—abortion is one of them. However, the Church cannot adopt a pro-life orientation and at the same time, ignore the thousands of children who die everyday due to economic injustice. Christians themselves would be hypocrites if they champion against abortion, but do nothing against international aid to the poor in Africa. The Church must respond to both situations with the same intensity.

It must be emphasized here that the local Church cannot confront any issue without its parishioners to back it. What is the use of, for example, championing for abstinence when most of the church's young people are engaged in unhealthy sexual behaviors? The Church's actions mean nothing if its members are not participating in the action. In Acts 2, the Jerusalem church was characterized by its members sharing their possessions among each other. What a witness! Thus, it is imperative that if the Church attempts any efforts to engage the world in confronting economic injustice must be met with the equal and undivided support of the Christians in its ranks.

The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, particularly the Roman Catholics, have been active in engaging economic injustice. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, for example, was world-renowned for her work among the poorest of the poor living in the streets of Calcutta, India. For this study, we should look at the life of one of the 20th Century's unsung heroes: Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero of El Salvador.

Archbishop Romero was a highly educated priest in the Roman Catholic Church. Unlike his predecessor who was active in championing for the disadvantaged in El Salvador, Romero was highly regarded by the ruling elite who had hoped for a church leader that would side with

them instead of the poor[173]. However, he quickly realized that as archbishop, he could not avoid confronting the fact that most of the country was poor, oppressed by the wealthy minority. His advocacy for the poor, and his tireless push to end the violence in the civil war resulted in his assassination. Romero ensured that in the midst of his rising popularity both in and outside El Salvador, his associations with the poor were inseparable[174].

One of the most important documents that sheds light on the Catholic engagement with justice issues was the Vatican Council II *Gaudium et Spes*[175] constitution. In the document, the council stated the foundations of their social positions:

> "God, who has fatherly concern for everyone, has willed that all men should constitute one family and treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood. For having been created in the image of God, who 'from one man has created the whole human race and made them live all over the fade of the early' (Acts 17:26), all men are called to one and the same goal, namely God Himself.
>
> For this reason, love for God and neighbor is the first and greatest commandment. Sacred Scripture, however, teaches us that the love of God cannot be separated from love of neighbor… To men growing daily more dependent on one another, and to a world becoming more unified every day, this truth proves to be of paramount importance… Man's social nature makes it evident that the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinge on one another.[176]"

Gaudium et Spes, from that foundation, exhorts Christians to be testimonies to that love for God and neighbors. There is no "double-life" for the Christian because his or her response to the Gospel obligates him or her to measure up to the implied responsibilities of the Gospel. It is delusional for the Christian to think that he or she can live as a Christian by name and shirk any social obligations. The reason for that is simple: this was embodied in the Love Commandments.

Finally, we turn our thoughts to the government. Economic injustice cannot be

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[173] The context is that in El Salvador, during the 1970s and 1980s, most of the country's resources were controlled by the elite upper-class. This group of people constituted 2-5% of the population in El Salvador.
[174] Tod D. Swanson, "A Civil Art: the Persuasive Moral Voice of Oscar Romero" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 29 no 1, Spring 2001, p. 140-141.
[175] "The Church in the Modern World"
[176] *Gaudium et Spes* II. 24

confronted by individuals alone, nor can the Church face the issue with its own resources. The individual, the Church, and the State must collaborate to seek a possible solution. According to De Vries, the State complements individual and ecclesial efforts to seek an end to the problem[177]. Ideally, the individual and the Church are fully committed to the well-being of the poor.

It is also important to understand that generosity does not only apply to individuals or the Church. It also applies to nations, as we will discuss shortly. The Old Testament provides warnings for unjust nations. Ronald Sider presents statistics on national aid[178], and the findings are quite illuminating. For one (see Figure 4), compared to other countries like Canada, Finland, and Denmark, whose giving exceeds 0.40% of their GNP, the United States only gave 0.15% of its GNP, falling 0.05% short of Ireland. De Vries laments at this lack of leadership in generosity. "In the view of the bishops, the United States must give greater priority to international development assistance, and should in this area assume leadership rather than be a laggard. It has for years been in the embarrassing position of being the richest country but making the smallest contribution to international development.[179]" This is particularly troubling because of the Old Testament implication: that the state cannot escape the responsibility of confronting economic injustice[180].

The United States, however, has a history of promoting economic injustice. Latin Americans cannot forget the difficulties the U.S.-supported United Fruit Company, otherwise known as UFCO, brought on just to ensure a constant, low-cost supply of tropical fruits to the United States consumers. Ronald Sider tells of a compelling example:

"Why don't the poor demand change? They do. But too often they have little power. Until recently, dictators representing tiny, wealthy elites working closely with American

[177] Barend A. De Vries, *Champions of the Poor* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998), p. 209.
[178] Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997) p. 31.
[179] Barend A. De Vries, *Champions of the Poor* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998), p. 210.
[180] See page 16.

business interests ruled many Latin American countries… the root causes of the violence and the war were the long-standing economic injustice and desperate poverty of the poor majority in the region.[181]"

What does the Holy Scriptures have to say to unjust nations? Micah 2: 1-5 explicitly issues a strong condemnation to either the wealthy oppressors. "Woe to those who plan iniquity," warns Micah, "to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance." What is the response? Micah 2: 3-5 says:

> "I am planning disaster against this people,
> from which you cannot save yourselves.
> You will no longer walk proudly
> for it will be a time of calamity.
> In that day men will ridicule you;
> they will taunt you with this mournful song:
> 'We are utterly ruined; my people's possession is divided up.
> He takes it from me!
> He assigns our fields to traitors!'
> Therefore you will have no one in the assembly of the LORD to divide the land by lot."

The Lord will, in other words, will humble the oppressors. He will cause their downfall. Micah's prophecy eventually came true. The Assyrians invaded Israel, and later came the Babylonians. The wealthy were dragged off, leaving Jerusalem in some degree of ruin and poverty. History will eventually repeat itself. In New Testament times, Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees' injustice towards the poor went ignored. In AD 70, Tiberius' destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent scattering of the Jews opened Israelite lands to Muslim settlement. To this day, Israel continues to struggle with the Muslims regarding the status of Jerusalem.

It is evident, then, that oppressors will face judgment from God. However, will it happen

[181] Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997) p. 182-183. In 1954, the CIA overthrew the democratically-elected Guatemalan administration because of its plan to institute land reforms that threatened lands owned (but not used) by the United Fruit Company.

to the United States? After all, the U.S. is not a Christian nation. Do the Old Testament warnings still apply? Unfortunately, they still do, and history serves as an effective witness in this regard. Injustice was common in the ancient near east, as discussed earlier[182]. The great Assyrian capital of Nineveh is, today, a grassy field. Babylon is lost in the deserts of Iraq. In more recent history, mistreatment of black slaves in the mid 19th century led to the debate on state rights, which led to the U.S. Civil War. Economic infrastructure was dismantled by the Union army during the entire war, and to this day, pockets of poverty continue to persist in the former Confederate states. Rampant imperialism practiced by European nations and the United States eventually had its backlashes. The 1993 Rwandan genocide, for example, has its causes in European imperialism. Nazi Germany's unjust massacre of its Jewish population, along with its relentless military expansion, resulted in its division. Only in 1989 did Germany finally reunite into one federal republic. Sider sums it up as such: "God destroys whole nations as well as rich individuals because of their oppression of the poor.[183]" While God may not completely eliminate the nation from the pages of history, suffice it to say that God changes whole nations in the face of injustice.

Let us learn from history and from the Scriptures and heed the cries of the economically oppressed both in the United States and outside. Christians (individually) should be careful in supporting political groups that advocate free trade without taking into account whether the free trade will require any unjust practices (i.e. taking away land from local landowners). The Church should be an active opponent to any government-sponsored "peacekeeping missions" abroad

[182] See pg 6-7.
[183] Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997) p. 55.

which was waged for economic gain[184].

Conclusion

We close this study on Mark 12: 28-34 and its implications in economic injustice with a note about the witness of the Church. In the mid 1950s, the United States supported the cruel and elite Somoza family in Nicaragua who, in 1979, was ousted. The ousting subsequently resulted in the withdrawal of U.S. troops. The U.S. government eventually returned with a force known as the Contras to return power to the Somoza family, or at least a pro-U.S. leader[185]. In all this, the Church in the U.S. remained silent.

The Church is not a perfect community, but since God has chosen to use the Church to free the oppressed and comfort the disenfranchised, we still have to keep going and, by the Spirit, strive to face the poor and destitute and reach out a helping hand. We are still called to throw off our jackets and wrap them around the orphaned street children living in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, no matter how "dirty" the children may be. This is difficult. Regardless, where secular communities organize themselves by merit and socio-economic positions, the Church as a community of witnesses must organize themselves based on the Gospel[186] regardless of merit and socio-economic status. Aristides, in his *Apology* to the Emperor Hadrian, wrote an account of what he noticed about the Christian community. May his description be the same about us as the Lord moves the Church of today to love the Lord with all her heart, with all her soul, with all her mind, and with all her strength, and to love her neighbors as herself.

"The Christians… have found the truth by going and seeking for it… They do not do to others what they would not wish to be done to themselves. They comfort those who wrong them and make friends of them: they labor to do good to their enemies… If they see a stranger, they

[184] This brings up an interesting question: the War in Iraq—was it motivated by the possibility of obtaining oil, or was it truly motivated by goodwill towards the oppressed Iraqis under Saddam Hussein's regime? This would be something to keep a close eye on in the next few years.
[185] James Newton Poling, *Render Unto God* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), p. 109-110.
[186] This would imply that there should only be one global Church.

bring him under their roof and rejoice over him as if over their own brother. They call themselves brethren, not after the flesh but after the Spirit and in God.[187]"

While there may be suffering and injustice in the world, the Holy Scriptures do not leave off with that somber note. Isaiah 51:11 says:

"Those the LORD has rescued will return.

They will enter Zion with singing;

Everlasting joy will crown their heads.

Gladness and joy will overtake them,

And sorrow and sighing will flee away."

Revelation 21 describes a new heaven and a new earth, and John describes it as such:

"Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'[188]"

Where in this world, the analysis of economic injustice leaves us discouraged, we are encouraged because we know that economic injustice will not be a part of this world forever. The Lord will come one day, and with Him will be eternal joy. What an encouragement!

But this is not a time to rest. We live in a time of great need and poverty. Justo Gonzalez writes on the Church's witness in such a time:

"If I say that I hope someday to move to Japan and to spend the rest of my days in Japan, for I am convinced that no culture is as enlightened… as that of Japan, the depth of my conviction will be judged by my present actions. If I am thoroughly convinced that what I say is true, I will begin studying Japanese. If, on the other hand, I start building a dream house in which to retire in Georgia and devote my time to studying Italian, all my enthusiastic declarations… will sound hollow… if we truly believe that our future is in the Reign of God, we shall start

[187] Quoted in Robin Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 263.
[188] Revelation 3-5.

practicing 'Reignese' now.[189]"

Just as it is not easy to learn Japanese (or any other language for that matter), it is also difficult to learn "Reignese". However, just as learning a new language never hurts the learner, being acquainted with Kingdom values will only strengthen the Christian. With that in mind, let us go and be the light of the world we were called to be. We close this study of Mark 12: 28-34 and its implications in economic injustice with a last word. In anticipation of God's coming kingdom when loving God wholeheartedly and loving our neighbors becomes an integral part of our nature, and economic injustice has no place, where "Reignese" becomes native to our tongues, we proclaim with great fervor and anticipation:

"Ἀμήν, ἔρχου κύριε, Ἰησοῦ"

"Amen! Come, Lord Jesus.[190]"

[189] Justo L. Gonzalez, *Manana* (Nashville: Abingdon 1990) p. 163,167.
[190] Revelation 22:20b. The Greek translation does not imply that 'Reignese' is Koine Greek.