

FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life



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The Accumulation of Things

I remember watching an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in which Captain Jean-Luc Picard said that Earth society had overcome hunger and want and was “no longer obsessed with the accumulation of things.” In this science fiction future, technological advancement has created a world where everyone has access to the necessities of life. Poverty no longer exists. As in Isaac Asimov’s science fiction stories, many jobs are handled by robots or computers.

What would you do if you didn’t have to work in order to provide the necessities of life? If you have a job, would you continue to do it, or would you do something different? Would you volunteer your time for more worthy causes, or would you spend all your time watching television or surfing the Internet? What would you do that would give your life meaning?

These are some of the questions raised by the idea of a universal basic income (UBI). The idea behind the UBI is that every citizen, regardless of employment status, receives a government-sponsored “basic income” to cover the necessities of life: food, shelter, clothing, and utilities. Anything they earn on top of the UBI is fine, but the UBI establishes a “floor” that could, in theory, eliminate poverty.

If the idea of a UBI is new to you, you may have some objections to the idea either on principle or practicality. Shouldn’t people have to work, if they are able? How would it be financed? Who would qualify?

REFLECT:

- Consider the questions posed in this section. What motivates you to work? What would a UBI mean to you personally?

In recent years, technological and economic changes have led several world leaders to consider the idea of a universal basic income (UBI). What is UBI? What are the issues around UBI? How does our faith influence our understanding of UBI and the value of work?

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Core Bible Passages

The idea that someone might get something for little work or for nothing inspires resentment in most of us. That seems to be Jesus' intent with his famously disturbing parable of the workers in the vineyard (**Matthew 20:1-16**). Though some workers work all day in the heat and sun, others work for only an hour or so and get paid the same amount. The parable can be interpreted many ways, but it relies on the listeners' sense of merit and fairness.

Many biblical authors believe the purpose of wealth is to be shared, not hoarded. God had to teach the freed Hebrews that the gift of manna in the wilderness (**Exodus 16:4-28**) should not be hoarded. God intended people to work on workdays and rest on the Sabbath.

The Jubilee year was likewise a time to redistribute wealth (**Leviticus 25:8-55**). Some see the early church fulfilling this Scripture since they shared their wealth and there were no needy among them (**Acts 4:32-35**).

The vision of the Promised Land "flowing with milk and honey" (**Exodus 3:17**, NIV) was that its wealth would allow every person to "sit underneath their own grapevines, under their own fig trees" (**Micah 4:4**). All persons would have enough land and natural resources to sustain themselves without the fear of it being stolen from them.

REFLECT:

- What do these passages tell us about God? What do they tell us about money, land, and wealth?
- How do people respond, or how do you imagine they responded, to the instructions or lessons in these passages?

- Does money empower us to seek the work we want to do or limit us from doing it?

Diverse Political Support

The details of this policy are as diverse as the groups who have proposed it. Some fiscal conservatives like the UBI because they believe it would be more efficient than welfare programs, which parcel out resources like housing subsidies, unemployment assistance, social security, and food assistance through a bureaucracy. They also cite the idea that welfare demotivates people to look for work since benefits often end or get reduced if people find employment. A flat benefit that goes to everyone would have less effect on work motivation. Conservative proposals typically focus on reducing welfare and emphasizing social responsibility. After all, the reasoning goes, if someone saves and hustles to earn extra money, under a UBI they have no excuse for not thriving. Their decisions about how to spend or save their money are their own.

Liberal supporters tend to see UBI as a way to reduce poverty, decrease inequality, and increase freedom. By establishing a financial floor, every citizen should be able to meet their own basic needs. People would be free to find the work they want to do instead of being locked into lousy work environments or dead-end jobs. Some advocates suggest they might even be more productive if they aren't struggling with the day-to-day business of making ends meet and can actually do work they feel called to do instead of simply chasing a paycheck.

The other big area of support comes from those who work in technological fields. Many Silicon Valley CEOs and venture capitalists like the idea of UBI because they envision a future where robots and automation have replaced many jobs—even those that we might think are "safe" from automation. Self-driving vehicles threaten to replace drivers and truckers, and self-checkout kiosks are already replacing cashiers in stores and restaurants.

Some supporters see UBI as a way to address the problem of work that doesn't typically get compensated but nonetheless is important to the functioning of our society. For example, parents (especially mothers) who invest time in educating and raising socially responsible children provide one of the most important services to society, but they don't get paid for it and are often penalized economically for it. I know one homeless man who spent more than 30 hours a week volunteering at local

Will Robots Take My Job?

Some experts believe construction workers will be replaced by machines that can create 3-D printed houses and that taxi drivers and truckers will give way to robots that can drive long-haul trucks without stopping for sleep. Technological change is only accelerating. The exponential growth in computer artificial intelligence is replacing jobs even in fields once thought safe from automation, like journalists, paralegals, and financial advisers. One recent study suggests that 47 percent of all American jobs will disappear in the next 20 years and be taken over by automation.

One website simply asks the question, “Will robots take my job?” Visiting <https://willrobotstakemyjob.com/> will let you enter your occupation into a search field and will return a statistical probability that your job will be eliminated. “Cashier,” for example, returns a 97 percent probability of automation. “You are doomed,” is the helpful explanation.

Silicon Valley’s embrace of UBI may be a way of apologizing to the millions of workers who they believe will be displaced by their robotic inventions, but others see it as a cynical way to pacify the poor masses and dismantle welfare while those who own the robots and the intellectual property on technology (Silicon Valley leaders) continue to hoard wealth. Other economists believe our society will accommodate this massive change the way it has accommodated technological change in the past. After all, a century ago, most people worked in agriculture and wouldn’t have even known what a computer programmer was.

REFLECT:

- How likely is it that a robot could do what you do in life or work?
- If you could design a robot to do one task for you, what would that task be?
- How have you seen technology change work over the course of your life?

nonprofits using his skills as a master gardener and knowledge of animals. While the work he did was valuable, no one ever paid him for it.

REFLECT:

- Do you find any of these arguments for UBI convincing? Which ones do you find most convincing? Which ones seem most problematic?
- How could you test to see whether these arguments for UBI hold up?
- How could a valid list of pros and cons be tested to make sure they were informed by data and not just strong opinion?

The Protestant Work Ethic

There are two big obstacles to UBI, at least in the United States. The first is the pervasive idea that a person’s value to society comes from their productivity. As sociologists Fred Block and Frances Fox Piven point out, “Wage work has become one of the most elemental pillars of our civic religion.” Since God cursed Adam by making him toil to produce food from the ground in **Genesis 3:17-19**, work has been viewed both as a punishment and as a means of redemption. Since “hard work builds character,” harder work (for less pay) builds even more.

Likewise, in this civic religion, the failure to work or to find employment has become associated with shame in our national religion. The poor must be poor because they’re lazy—not because robots have taken their jobs or because they don’t have access to public transportation to get to work. After all, **Proverbs 10:4** says, “Laziness brings poverty; hard work makes one rich.”

But advocates of Christian stewardship point out that this is a distortion of the gospel. Robert Dickie III of Crown Financial Ministries says it’s easy for Christians to focus on “what we earn and what we own rather than for whom we work and why we work.” In our culture, we’re often identified and introduced by what we do: doctor, barista, pastor, entrepreneur. I recently witnessed one of the busiest people I know stammer when forced to identify herself by her job. Though she is a home-schooling mother and self-employed artist, the person filling out her information listed her as “unemployed.” How do we introduce ourselves after robots take our jobs?

REFLECT:

- What do our faith and culture teach us about work, motivation, and laziness?

Experiments with UBI

Some governments and organizations have already experimented with UBI. Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld ran an experiment from 1968 to 1971 for President Lyndon B. Johnson in order to test UBI for his “war on poverty.” They found that a UBI didn’t cause breadwinners to stop working. Those who worked less were mainly mothers who spent more time with their children, which in turn helped improve their school performance. President Richard M. Nixon actually proposed a UBI in 1970, though it was defeated in Congress.

Research in India found that poverty could be cut from 22 percent to 7 percent by giving every person in that country \$4 per month. Advocates point out that such a plan would also help eliminate corruption associated with their current social welfare programs.

Pilot programs on UBI have taken place or are already under way in places such as Gary, Indiana; Oakland, California; Ontario, Canada; Sao Paulo, Brazil; Nairobi, Kenya; and Finland. In all of these cases, the goal is to see if direct financial assistance (a) helps reduce or eliminate poverty and (b) affects individuals’ willingness to work.

REFLECT:

- Were you surprised that Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Richard Nixon explored the concept of UBI? Why or why not?
- What differences would you anticipate between starting a UBI program in India and one in the United States?
- Do you think you would be more or less supportive of UBI in places of extreme poverty?
- How much money do you think it would require in your community per month to raise people out of poverty?

- What motivates you to work, and what makes you reluctant to work?
- What do you think the Bible teaches us about chasing wealth, and how does it differ from what our culture teaches us?

Financing the UBI

The other obstacle is answering the question, Who pays? Some of the financing for it would come from eliminating current programs. But there’s a vast difference between a barely subsistence level UBI, which punishes the poor for being poor, and a UBI that allows for social mobility, self-improvement, and a thriving community. Merely eliminating current welfare programs might only create a UBI that’s a step above the oppressive poorhouses of Victorian England. Some proposals involve a combination of negative income taxes, child benefits, and carbon dividends to make up the difference.

Proponents of UBI generally recognize that one of the reasons poverty exists is because the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Those who have money have the ability to lend it or invest it and make more, but those who live on the edge of poverty have to pay more for the basics and get trapped in endless cycles of debt. Therefore, those who profit the most from a fully automated economy would be taxed in order to provide a basic income to those whose jobs are rendered obsolete.

Part of this also requires a mind-shift. By giving people “free money,” are we giving them handouts that create dependency, or are we investing in people as our most valuable resource? Rather than assuming the worst about people, that they’ll simply waste their time and money fueling addiction and unproductive behavior, why not ask instead, How would I spend an extra thousand dollars a month?

REFLECT:

- What do you think of the concerns about giving people “free money”? How does the source of income affect the way you view money?
- When exploring responses to poverty, are you more likely to favor measures that bring everyone to a subsistence level of income or measures that allow for social mobility? What are the pros and cons for each approach?
- Do you believe that poverty exists “because the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” in our economy? Why or why not?

United Methodist Perspective

The United Methodist Social Principles contain language on economics that would probably be considered controversial if more people knew about them, but they reflect a wide view of Christian Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Concerning work and leisure, the section titled “The Economic Community” states, “Every person has the right to a job at a living wage. Where the private sector cannot or does not provide jobs for all who seek and need them, it is the responsibility of government to provide for the creation of such jobs.” The section goes on to mention the importance of leisure time.

In the section on poverty, the Social Principles state, “Since low wages are often a cause of poverty, employers should pay their employees a wage that does not require them to depend upon government subsidies such as food stamps or welfare for their livelihood.”

In his sermon “The Use of Money,” John Wesley told Methodists to earn all they could, save all they could, and give all they could. This was rooted in the idea that all resources belong to God. Furthermore, Wesley believed all of these (earning, saving, and giving) needed to be done without harming one’s self or one’s neighbors in body, mind, or spirit. This included overwork.

REFLECT:

- Do you agree with the statement, “Every person has the right to a job at a living wage”? Why or why not?
- Why do you think the Social Principles comment on the importance of leisure time? How does that fit into the conversation about a living wage?
- How do we think about the way the government uses its resources if all resources belong to God, as Wesley claims?

Justice and Mercy

At the heart of the UBI is a question about justice and mercy. If we believe the earth is God’s and we’re simply stewards, then the way we allocate those resources is a moral decision. How do we decide which people are allowed to turn God’s trees into paper or furniture, extract God’s fossil fuels, and build computer chips for smartphones and robots out of God’s minerals?

Once we’ve used God’s resources (trees, fuel, and minerals), what do we do about God’s people who struggle to put food on their tables or educate their children? However we choose to answer those questions, our policies will reflect what we really believe about humanity, our planet, and the lordship of Jesus Christ.

REFLECT:

- Does your faith affect how you think about economic questions? How?
- If the world is truly God’s, what responsibility do Christians have to those who have nothing?

Helpful Links

- To read an article about the cost of being poor, go to <https://tinyurl.com/y9687ede>.
- To read an article making a conservative argument for a UBI, go to <https://tinyurl.com/l2zfqja>.
- You can read an article making the case for a UBI in India at <http://tiny.cc/qfr4py>.

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Leader Helps

- Keep in mind your group members and group time as you choose activities for the session.
- Have smartphones or other devices that can access the Internet available for your group as well as several Bibles and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the following prayer or one of your own:
God our provider, you rained down manna in the wilderness, fed five thousand of your closest friends with a handful of bread and a few fish, produced water in the desert, and led your people to a land flowing with milk and honey. You continue to cause food to spring up from the ground. Help us to acknowledge your generosity, and help us to reflect that generosity. Give our leaders wisdom and discernment to craft policies that are just and fair and that motivate people to do good. Amen.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of all sections of the main essay and sidebars. Use the questions in the *REFLECT* sections to stimulate discussion.
- Before reading the first section of the main essay, be sensitive to the fact that some of your group may be unemployed, underemployed, retired, disabled, or prevented in some way from doing the work they would prefer to do. The goal of this discussion is to explore what motivates people to work and what a UBI would mean to them. Depending on your group's enthusiasm level, you might even create a chart that increases in increments of \$12,000 and survey the group, asking: How many of you would stop working or work less if you received this much money for free? Why or why not?
- After reading the section "Diverse Political Support," you might find it useful to create a simple list of pros and cons before following up with the reflection questions.
- Have a Bible study. Ask the group to form teams of two or three to read the Scriptures and to reflect on the questions. Then have the teams share highlights of their discussions with the reassembled group.
- To close the session, read or sing the hymn "All Things Bright and Beautiful" (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 147) or "For the Fruits of This Creation" (*Hymnal*, 97).

Teaching Alternatives

Visit the website found in the sidebar "Will Robots Take My Job?" and explore the jobs of participants in your group. If someone has the game Monopoly, consider playing it with your group. Ask: How does this game illustrate or not the idea that "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer"?

Next Week in
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Cryptocurrencies

Cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin have been in the news lately. What is cryptocurrency, and how is it being used? What impact could the development of cryptocurrencies have on our lives? As new forms of currency evolve, how should Christians reexamine their relationship with money?