

## The Optimistic Christian

# No, Jesus Was Not a Welfarist

**It can reasonably be argued that Jesus would not point to the results of five decades of welfarism in America and say, "Do more of that."**

By [J. E. Dyer](#), April 10, 2011

Roger Pilon of the Cato Institute made a noble effort on Thursday to [parse the question](#) "What would Jesus cut?" Some Christian groups have applied the question to the federal budget, a topic about which a lot of people suppose that Jesus would have an opinion. Pilon makes good points about the story of the Good Samaritan and Jesus' distinction between God's realm and Caesar's. But I found the emphasis in this passage off-kilter:

*Americans are a generous people. They will help the less fortunate if left free to do so. What they resent is being forced to do good—and in ways that are not only inefficient but impose massive debts upon their children. That's not the way free people help the young and less fortunate.*

I would put it differently. The key clause in this passage—"What they resent is being forced to do good"—fundamentally misstates the proposition:

Americans do not, in general, suppose that government policy should be made on the basis of what they do and do not resent. We resent having to stand in line at the DMV, but most people understand that their resentment should not outweigh the importance of properly licensing drivers. "Resentment" is not at the core of libertarian or conservative arguments against certain types of public assistance policies.

Nor do the arguments start from the premise that "good" is what those policies are doing. Instead, the whole point is that institutionalizing public welfare entitlements through the political process is *not* the charity of love and compassion, and is *not* necessarily doing good.

Welfarism as a state policy fails in every case to achieve the public purpose for which it is routinely implemented: to "reduce poverty." If poverty is what makes welfare programs necessary, the expansion of welfare programs over time indicates that as they increase, so does poverty.

Numerous studies have demonstrated, moreover, that welfarism [correlates strongly](#) to teen pregnancy, single motherhood, fatherlessness, truancy, low educational attainment, health problems, drug involvement, and violent crime. Using public revenues to sustain a subculture with these features is not something we are bound by Christian principles to accept as a form of "doing good."

As Timothy Dalrymple wrote in his own [commentary](#) on this issue, Christians differ on the extent to which government should involve itself in relieving affliction and distress; some say not at all, others (probably a majority) do see a proper role for government. But many who agree to a government role dispute the notion that institutionalized welfare programs are a means of relieving distress. These programs come invariably to be viewed, in both political and practical terms, as an enduring entitlement rather than a remedy for temporary distress. They become the basis for a dysfunctional lifestyle perpetuated across generations. It can reasonably be

argued that Jesus would not point to the results of five decades of welfarism in America and say, "Do more of that."

Moreover, charity, in the Christian concept, is defined through the attitude of the giver, not through a material accounting of the need. This is not a rhetorical dodge; it's a central precept of God's kingdom. God doesn't actually need our "stuff." He can make stuff appear out of thin air and distribute it any way He pleases. Jesus demonstrated that when he pulled a coin for his temple tax from the mouth of a fish (Mt. 17:24-27).

Instead, God wants our hearts aligned with His. His great project isn't changing the world around us; it's changing each of us, one by one. This understanding, as a source of vision for the betterment of mankind, is unmatched by anything achievable through public spending. It doesn't mean that temporal governments should do nothing to assist those in distress, and it doesn't mean Jesus would repudiate public assistance programs. But it does mean that fealty to the teachings of Jesus can't be measured by how eager we are to tax each other to provide public benefits.

I think this issue is, for Christians, one of the "[disputable matters](#)" I wrote about a few weeks ago. What we know for sure about compassion for the poor is that God wants each of us to exercise it personally. We know that every time Jesus spoke about dealings with the poor, he spoke exclusively in terms of the heart attitudes of those who have the capacity to help the poor, to ignore the poor, or to heap burdens on them.

Jesus ultimately leaves us free to make societal decisions about welfare and social programs by exercising our individual opinions through voting and representative government. Our questions about what Jesus himself would do are usually misdirected, I think. If he were walking the earth today, he would eat with the poor, feed them miraculously, encourage them with his teaching, heal their ailments, warn them about their own heart attitudes and their obligations before the Father, and go to the cross for their sins and ours.

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