Porters, Catapults, Community, and Justice: Augustine on Wealth, Poverty, and Property

by Kate Ward

In a continuing global recession, Christians more than ever look to their faith traditions for guidance amid the vexing issues of wealth, poverty, and property. Ministers can be sure those they serve are worried about their families’ financial security. Yet even as Christians in the well-off world struggle with layoffs and shrinking real wages, they are also called to recognize that the conditions causing their real suffering also represent unimaginable wealth to millions of world citizens.

Amid the rich tradition of Christian thought on wealth and poverty, the African theologian St. Augustine (354-430 CE) offers clear and challenging guidance. Despite his immense influence on theology from his own time until today, Christians have not often referred to Augustine on economic issues. However, particularly in his pastoral letters and sermons, Augustine criticized wealth, encouraged the poor to advocate for justice, and urged Christians to create interdependent, mutually supportive economic communities. He offers Christians a comprehensive body of thought on wealth and economic justice that links lifestyle choices to moral development, both challenging current practice and supporting action for change.

Critique of Wealth

Augustine clearly and frequently proclaimed that wealth is morally dangerous. When the wealthy widow Proba wrote to him asking how to pray, Augustine responded by warning her on the moral dangers of wealth for several paragraphs before he addressed prayer.¹ Augustine never claimed that Proba used her wealth for evil purposes. Rather, he believed that simply possessing wealth carries the risk of over-attachment to it, drawing the heart away from God.² He strongly hinted that Proba’s safest chance at salvation would be to rid herself of her wealth: “Many holy men and women have been on guard in every way against riches … and have cast them aside by distributing them to the poor, thus … storing up treasure in heaven.”³ Many Christians in the Roman Empire shared Augustine’s belief that wealth can endanger one’s virtue, even to the point of ignoring the consequences of their own virtuous practice for others’ lives. Melania and Pinian, a wealthy couple who later became Augustine’s friends, rid themselves of their wealth so quickly after converting to Christianity that they may have left many of their former slaves unable

³ Augustine, Letters, Volume II, 130, 8.
to support themselves. Augustine believed wealth contributes to the growth of evil desires: “Fear is all the more increased and covetousness is all the more unloosed according as there is an increase of those things which are called riches […] Riches, more than anything else, engender pride.”

Wealth taints so much by association that Augustine thought even a person whom others suspected of being wealthy might have an immoral attachment to goods. In *City of God* he implied that anyone tortured for their goods during the sack of Rome probably deserved it, even if they were not actually rich!

As well as increasing sinful desires, wealth can facilitate vice. For example, Augustine deplored as irreverent and wasteful the custom of wine-soaked funeral banquets, mockingly envisioning the dead burning in hell while their friends feasted. He accused a wealthy Donatist sectarian of bribing people to join her church and claimed that the higher social status of the rich inhibits their moral growth by making others less likely to challenge the wealthy about their sins. Augustine's exposure of the fact that people of privilege can and do engage in greater debauchery with fewer consequences applies tellingly to the United States today, given our disproportionate incarceration of poor and marginalized people, particularly people of color.

For Augustine, the fact that our attempts to acquire wealth sometimes fail should only remind us how useless riches are in light of salvation. He apparently enjoyed reminding his hearers about the risks of business setbacks and theft. Even arguments of saving wealth for one's children failed to strike Augustine as practical, let alone moral: “I refrain from asking: For what kind of children? Perhaps debauchery may squander what avarice has amassed.” He even taught that vice passes to children along with wealth, writing: “It may be they will be good children, they will not be dissolute, they will keep what thou hast left, will increase what thou hast kept, and will not dissipate what thou hast heaped together. Then will thy children be equally vain with thyself, if they do so, if in this they imitate thee their father.” Augustine was so vehemently anti-inheritance that he suggested parents who have lost a child should “send” the inheritance to the child in heaven by giving it to the poor as alms.

Many of Augustine's correspondents worried about a widespread doctrine that wealthy Christians could not be saved unless they gave away all their possessions. Despite his moral cautions against wealth, Augustine came to a more moderate conclusion. “Rich Christians who, although they possess riches, are not possessed by them”

---

9 *Sermon on the Mount*, 60.3-4.
11 *Sermon on the Mount*, 60.3.
12 *Sermon on the Mount*, 60.3.
can hope for heaven.\textsuperscript{16} However, Christians who remain unduly attached to wealth or, worse, expect God to enrich them “agree to give up Christ and deny Him rather than be deprived of what is dearer.”\textsuperscript{17} For Augustine, refusing to be attached to wealth and placing hope in God instead of worldly things is the safest way to be wealthy, although giving wealth away is better still. His teachings challenge Christians to focus on God and resist cultural pressure for wealth and increased material security.

**Importance of Almsgiving**

For Augustine, almsgiving is absolutely necessary for salvation and so synonymous with Christian practice that he said marriages are not Christian if one spouse opposes giving alms from the household budget.\textsuperscript{18} Augustine pointed out that Jesus does not say this:

“Come, take possession of the kingdom; for you have lived chastely, you have defrauded no man, you have not oppressed any poor man, you have not plundered any man’s property, you have deceived no one by an oath.” That is not what He said. Here are His words: “Take possession of the kingdom, for I was hungry and you gave me eat.”\textsuperscript{19}

Augustine warned of the many who led virtuous lives “but, if they had not added almsgiving, their lives would have remained fruitless.”\textsuperscript{20}

Christians of Augustine’s time took almsgiving seriously but sometimes developed theories and practices of giving that missed the mark. A woman named Ecdicia earned Augustine’s criticism for giving away much of her household wealth without her husband’s consent, nearly causing a breach in their marriage.\textsuperscript{21} Augustine told her, “You need not repent over having given your property to the poor but over not having wanted to have [your husband] as a partner and guide in your good work.”\textsuperscript{22} Augustine consistently advocated equality in almsgiving within marriage. Some Christians believed husbands should hide their almsgiving from wives in a bizarre interpretation of the biblical order “do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Mt 6:3) that assumed wives would be stingier. Augustine angrily responded, “As though only men were Christians!”\textsuperscript{23}

Augustine offered pastoral guidelines for almsgiving that are timeless enough for modern Christians to follow. He suggested that Christians make alms a planned part of their yearly or daily budget to help them stick to their commitment.\textsuperscript{24} He had clear opinions on how much to give. Jesus calls Christians to “exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees,” who gave away one-tenth of their income.\textsuperscript{25} Another suggestion responded to those who insist on saving wealth for their children. Augustine proposed they consider Christ as another child in the family and allot his share of the inheritance for alms.\textsuperscript{26} This is not only a practical suggestion but evokes a spirituality of almsgiving. Wealthy Christians should display the same daily concern for Christ, embodied in the poor, that they do for their own children.

\textsuperscript{16} Letters, 157, 34.
\textsuperscript{17} Augustine, Letters, Volume III (131-164), trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons, S.N.D. (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953), 157, 33. It is fascinating that what we today call the Prosperity Gospel was already known in Augustine’s time.
\textsuperscript{18} Sermon on the Mount, II.2.7.
\textsuperscript{19} Sermon on the Mount, 60.9.
\textsuperscript{20} Sermon on the Mount, 60.9.
\textsuperscript{22} Letters, Volume V, 262, 8.
\textsuperscript{23} Sermon on the Mount, II.2.7.
\textsuperscript{24} Expositions, 147.17.
\textsuperscript{25} New Testament, 35.5.
\textsuperscript{26} New Testament, 36.13
Augustine's sermon on the Lord's Prayer foregrounds human dependence on God and calls Christians to help the poor as we want God to help us:

No matter how rich a man may be in worldly wealth, he still is a beggar in relation to God. A beggar stands before the rich man's door; the rich man himself stands before the door of Him who is rich and mighty. Someone is begging from the rich man, and the rich man himself is begging … How is it that he has an abundance of all things? Only because God has bestowed it upon him. … If a man is not in want, that is due to the mercy of God—not to man's own ability.27

The duty to help the needy is as eternal as human dependence on God. “In order that [God] may receive [God's] beggars,” Augustine urged, “let us also take notice of ours.”28

Christians today still hear calls to help the needy in their churches, and some communities have even developed practical ways to support the poor that Augustine would no doubt applaud. The aspect of Augustine's thought on wealth that may sound more challenging to many Christians today is his firm belief that wealth is morally dangerous. Augustine believed the wealthy are more prone to vice and less given to relying on God. He challenges those of us today who enjoy any type of privilege—whether due to our education, race, social and global location, or our material prosperity—to think seriously about how this privilege might interfere with our dependence and trust in God and how we can work beyond our privileges and comforts to avoid sin and help those in need.

Poverty as Protection

It’s no surprise that Augustine promoted voluntary poverty, which remains a powerful Christian witness even in our own time. But he also defended the moral protection of poverty that is not chosen, which might make some modern readers uncomfortable. While Augustine did support the poor in working for their own uplifting (as we will see shortly), he just as consistently promised them salvation if they remained poor. It is important to note here that Augustine, like other Fathers of the Church, does not use the word poor only for utterly destitute people. He understood poor to include those who might be working but with uncertain income or those in danger of sudden economic reversal, like small farmers or urban craftspeople.29

Augustine preached, “I urge all of you who are poor and have heard these words not to seek to become rich.”30 He encouraged wealthy Proba to “pray like a poor woman, for you have not yet the true wealth of the world to come … pray as a desolate widow,”31 and he attributed St. Paul's praise for the spiritual life of widows to their typically “desolate” material life.32 Considering that Augustine at times depicted even marital sex as morally suspect, it is especially remarkable that he praised widows not because of their (theoretically) celibate lives but because of their involuntary poverty.

Augustine held that even involuntary poverty imposed as punishment could provide moral benefit and protection. He recommended hefty fines to help reform a group of pagans who destroyed a Christian church:

27 Sermon on the Mount, 56.9. Note that those blessed by God are not described as wealthy, a state Augustine would not promote, but as "not in want."
28 Sermon on the Mount, 61.8.
30 Sermon on the Mount, 11.2.
Burdensome poverty … is, in fact, a restraint and restriction on the sinner … I did not say that the enemies of the Church … should be punished by being reduced to such poverty as to lack the necessaries of life … They have their bodily integrity; they have the means of livelihood; they have the means of living wickedly. Let the first two of these remain intact … It is better to be in want than to possess to the full everything that satisfies evil desire.\textsuperscript{33}

As this passage shows, Augustine did not believe the moral protection of poverty demanded total destitution; virtuous people could desire enough wealth to afford food and covering. “This sufficiency is not an improper desire in whoever wishes this and nothing more,” Augustine clarifies. “Whoever does wish more does not wish this, and therefore does not wish properly.”\textsuperscript{34} However, even basic goods should not be desired for their own sake but because they support human “personal dignity” and afford the ability to “honorably andrespectably” live in community.\textsuperscript{35} As we know, the Christian respect for poverty has at times been misused to tell poor people they should not work to improve their lives. So it is important to note that while Augustine praised even involuntary poverty, he expressed strong support for poor people working for better lives.

**Self-Advocates and Porters to Heaven: The Poor in Christian Community**

Since Augustine saw no harm in everyone having sufficiency—and knew that access to basic needs helps us live in community with dignity—he strongly supported poor people in working for improved living conditions. He encouraged the poor to ask for help from God: “While it would be shameless for you to ask God for riches, it is not shameless to ask Him for daily bread. It is one thing to ask for what might make you proud; it is another to ask for what enables you to live.”\textsuperscript{36} He also urged the poor to advocate for themselves with the wealthy. Calling himself the ambassador of the poor, he said to the rich in his congregation, “[The poor] have urged us to speak to you. When they see that they are receiving nothing from you, they think that we are laboring in vain among you.”\textsuperscript{37} Augustine insisted that requests from the poor to the rich are tests from God.\textsuperscript{38} Clearly, he did not want those in poverty to suffer needlessly and he vocally supported them in asking for help.

Augustine wanted all members of his Christian community to realize their economic interdependence. He validated the obvious claim of the poor to assistance by the wealthy. But Augustine also wanted the rich to know there is an important service the poor can render them, too: “bearing their goods to heaven” by receiving alms. He explained:

Let us transfer [our possessions] to a place where we shall not lose them. The poor to whom we give alms! With regard to us, what else are they but porters through whom we transfer our goods from earth to heaven? Give away your treasure. Give it to a porter. He will bear to heaven what you give him on earth. But you will say to me: “How does he bear it to heaven, for I see that he consumes it by eating it? Certainly, he eats it. It is by eating it, and not by keeping it, that he bears it to heaven. … Christ has received what you have given.”\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{33} *Letters, Volume II,* 104, 3-5.
\textsuperscript{34} *Letters, Volume II,* 130, 12.
\textsuperscript{35} *Letters, Volume II,* 130, 12.
\textsuperscript{36} *Sermon on the Mount,* 56.10.
\textsuperscript{37} *Sermon on the Mount,* 61.13.
\textsuperscript{38} *Expositions,* 125.2.
\textsuperscript{39} *Sermon on the Mount,* 60.8.
Augustine reversed the view common to his time and our own that the rich, at the center of things, can choose whether to ignore the poor or to help them. He insisted that the wealthy need the assistance of the poor to gain reward in heaven.

Augustine used the image of the poor as porters to heaven frequently, writing in one sermon, “What are the poor to whom we give, but our carriers, by whom we convey our goods from earth to heaven? Give then: thou art but giving to thy carrier.” and in another, “Help the hungry, the naked, and the needy; help strangers and those in bondage. They will be the porters to convey your riches to heaven.” To underscore how reliably the poor deliver wealth to heaven, Augustine even compared their work to an undeniably effective machine: the catapult!

Today, Catholic social teaching promotes the value of participation for all; a just society is one where all are encouraged and able to contribute according to their abilities. Augustine’s understanding of the poor as God’s porters presents a similar vision of an inclusive and participatory society. Augustine insisted that rich and poor people are “companions on the journey” of life. By transferring some of their earthly “baggage” to the poor, the wealthy can afford relief to themselves and to their poor companions. He also noted that the poor can give alms to each other and even to the wealthy by, for example, helping a rich person cross a river. Augustine insistently urged his Christian community to recognize their mutual need in economic life and honor the contributions of every community member.

**Property, Ownership, and Justice**

As a bishop whose followers consulted him on financial matters and an author who sometimes had to bill friends more than once for copies of his books, Augustine experienced a range of practical issues in economic life, which should prevent us from dismissing his views as idealistic or uninformed by reality. He knew the financial laws of his time well but sometimes disagreed with them on moral grounds; for example, he condemned usury as “cruel” and “ill-gotten gain.” Perhaps the most important aspect of his thought on financial legalities is his distinction between legal and just with regard to wealth, where Augustine initiated an argument for distributive justice:

Do we not prove that those who seem to rejoice in lawfully acquired gains, and do not know how to use them, are really in possession of other men’s property? Certainly, what is lawfully possessed is not another’s property, but ‘lawfully’ means justly and justly means rightly. He who uses his wealth badly possesses it wrongfully, and wrongful possession means that it is another’s property. You see, then, how many there are who ought to make restitution of another’s goods, although those to whom restitution is due may be few; wherever they are, their claim to just possession is in proportion to their indifference to wealth … money is wrongly possessed by bad men while good men who love it least have best right to it. … some of them become faithful and fervent—and these have a right to all things.

---

41 *Sermon on the Mount*, 11.6.
42 *Sermon on the Mount*, 11.6.
44 *Sermon on the Mount*, 11.6.
45 *Expositions*, 126.13.
Here Augustine claimed that wealth belongs to those unlikely to “use [their] wealth badly” in sinful practices, including trusting in wealth instead of in God. However, elsewhere he suggested that the right to goods comes not from virtue but from need, writing: “Find out how much [God] hath given thee, and take of that what is enough: all other things which remain as superfluities are the necessaries of others. The superfluities of the rich are the necessaries of the poor. Thou possessest what belongs to others, when thou possessest more than thou needest.”

While the theme that the poor have a right to share in all wealth occurs only rarely in Augustine, what he did say almost constantly is that wealth should belong to those who love it least. A comprehensive reading of his work suggests that those who have wealth but aren’t overly attached to it are just the kind of people who would likely give wealth away as alms. This collected evidence allows us to speak of an Augustinian distributive justice. Augustine believed that mere ownership does not create a right to goods; that those who are most likely to redistribute wealth based on others’ need should have control of it; that any wealth beyond basic necessity really belongs to the poor; and that, while wealth brings moral danger, anyone in need is entitled and encouraged to ask for help. Augustine seems to have imagined that inequality would always exist, but any serious movement toward his ideal society, where the poor are empowered to ask for help and only generous givers have a right to property, would clearly reduce inequality and want and foster more widespread human flourishing.

**Augustine and Christian Economic Life**

Most Augustine scholars believe that he, like most people of his time, did not see social change as a priority or even as possible. This separates him from most Christians today, who tend to believe it is both possible and important to work to change the social order to, for example, reduce evils like poverty, war, and racism. Economic life in Augustine’s time was naturally very different from our own. Some might protest that these differences in viewpoint and experience render Augustine’s teachings on wealth and poverty irrelevant to Christians today. However, this perspective misunderstands Augustine’s intent in his writings and consequently misses out on the rich resources of his thought.

Augustine’s writings on economic topics are deeply concerned with the human person, with the individual’s development of virtue and relationship to God. It is safe to say that his first concern regarding wealth is how it affects the owner’s tendency to have virtue or vice—rather than, for example, how one’s accumulation of wealth might affect the natural environment or the poor. Augustine’s concern with how our wealth or our poverty affects our being and our becoming is deeply resonant with current concerns about virtue and moral growth. One act of alms given or withheld does not make one a good or bad person, but a lifetime of decisions about how we make, use, and share our wealth does affect our development as moral beings. Although Augustine understood his financial world with all its flaws, his primary concern was not the reform of economic structures but the saving of souls and the development of better Christians. His work at the interface of wealth and moral growth remains relevant as long as we believe that Christians today are just as capable of sin and of virtue as were those in Augustine’s time.

Augustine’s view of economic life is not results-oriented, which can be frustrating to modern people who want to judge even their good deeds by return on investment. Christians today, particularly in Western societies, have been trained to judge actions based on results. From this perspective, if I help someone financially and she is still poor at the end of the day, I have accomplished nothing. Augustine would have seen things differently. He would have asked first what changes the act of giving made in my soul. Was I reminded of my own dependence on God? Did I give away something I was perhaps overly attached to, freeing my emotions to care for God and God’s creatures? Was I transformed by the opportunity to give, or did I reject the opportunity to recognize that my salvation could be bound up in the opportunity to help another? Furthermore, the one who asked for help might well be called by

---

49 *Expositions*, 147.12.
God to help others rid themselves of their morally dangerous wealth, offering them moral protection at the same time as she improves her own comfort and security. Answering the call to participate in the Christian community in this way could be an important factor in her own moral growth.

Another question we might ask is whether, given that Augustine's main concern was with the moral development of individual Christians, his writings on economic issues can be helpful to those today who discern a call to work for more just societies and structures. I believe the answer is an unequivocal yes. Two of his contributions are perhaps most relevant to conversations around global and local justice issues in Christian settings today. First, Augustine recognized the poor as moral agents. Augustine's poor advocate for themselves with the powerful—a concept promoted today in liberation theology—and they advocate for the wealthy with God when they bear goods to heaven by receiving alms. Christians who are struggling economically deserve to know that Augustine supports them in advocating for their own well-being, contrary to the magical thinking taught by the “Prosperity Gospel” or the messages of shame and silence wealthy cultures can impose on those in poverty. Augustine's teachings remind today's well-off Christians to respect the ability of those in poverty to know what they need, to ask for it, and to enlist powerful people (as Augustine's poor enlisted him) to their own cause. Today's globalized economy has made it quite obvious that the world's wealthy need the poor to provide cheap labor in farms and factories. Augustine reminds all Christians how much more the wealthy need the poor as spiritual leaders whose work as “porters” helps mediate God's blessings.

While Augustine's thought belongs to the heritage of the global Church, his insistence that wealth is morally dangerous should feel particularly significant to Christians in the United States and other wealthy nations. Christians today hear the same words of Jesus that Augustine repeatedly cites to teach this (Luke's Beatitudes: see Sermons 11 and 60), yet we struggle to interpret these words for our own lives. American Christians can name many stratospherically wealthy, the modern equivalents of Augustine's friends Melania and Pinian—and we could probably do better at preaching Augustine's truth to them. Yet in today's global economy, how can middle-class Christians be sure that their lifestyle includes only what Augustine would call sufficiency and not what he would blast as superfluity, the rightful property of millions in poverty? The groundswell of interest in class issues in the United States, sparked by the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the abiding passion of so many American Christians for relief of global poverty, suggests that Americans are more than ready to hear Augustine's message. Augustine's deeply felt compassion for the poor, his suspicion of wealth, and his insistence that rich and poor Christians need each other's help remain profoundly timely lessons.

50 Of course, religious leaders are sensitive to the feelings of those who fund the parishes, hospitals, and universities in which faith is lived and made visible. But Augustine, too, relied on such support (see Letter 96), which did not deter him from what he saw as the moral emergency of preaching about wealth's danger.