

'A POOR MAN NAMED LAZARUS' FAIR WAGES

PROPER 21, YEAR C

Lectionary Texts: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 Amos 6:1a, 4-7 Psalms 91:1-6, 14-16; 146
I Timothy 6:6-19 Luke 16:19-31

Focus Text: Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house – ²⁸for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

NRSV

ADDITIONAL TEXTS

You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.
Lev. 19:13

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns.

Deuteronomy 24:14

“Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up,” says the Lord; “I will place them in the safety for which they long.”

Psalms 12:5

Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob... who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the strangers and upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked God brings to ruin.

Psalms 146:3-9

The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice.

Proverbs 13:23

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey... To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth?

Isaiah 10:1-4

Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

James 5:4

SCRIPTURE COMMENTARY

BY CHRIS LIU BEERS, RESEARCH
ASSOCIATE, NC COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Jesus was masterful at using stories to challenge the power and status of the religious elite in his day. With just a few short lines of dialogue (“Blessed are the poor”) or common agrarian images (like a mustard seed), he narrates what it means to live in the kingdom of God. Our passage today, “The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus,” is part of a longer discourse that Jesus gives in response to being “ridiculed” by a particular group of Pharisees, whom Luke says were “lovers of money” (16:14).

Jesus has much to say about money in the gospel of Luke. The gospel opens with Mary’s *Magnificat*, a prayer that celebrates the God of Israel who fills “the hungry with good things” and who sends “the rich away empty” (1:53). Jesus’ “Sermon on the Plain” (a similar passage to Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount”) offers blessings upon the poor and woes upon the rich (see 6:24). Luke 12 features a parable about a rich fool, who stored up treasure for himself but was “not rich towards God” (12:21). In Luke 14, Jesus received hospitality from a leader of the Pharisees and says to everyone gathered, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (14:12-14). The “rich young ruler,” Zacchaeus, and the poor widow at the temple are all important figures in Luke. And just before Jesus juxtaposes the rich man’s wasteful decadence and Lazarus’ devastating poverty, he tells the crowd, “No slave can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and wealth” (16:13).

Our passage may be divided into two complementary parts. The first section (16:19-26) tells the story of the anonymous rich man and Lazarus (one of the only named characters in all of Jesus’ parables), emphasizing the way in which the rich man ignored Lazarus during his lifetime, only to realize after death how much he *needs* him (16:24). This section affirms God’s “preferential option for the poor” while at the time striking an ominous note for those who ignore the poor in their midst. The second part of the passage emphasizes how Jesus’ teaching is not really *new*; it is simply a reiteration of the Law (i.e. Moses) and the Prophets (see for example Deut. 15 and Isaiah 58). To those who would look for some *other* reason to care for the poor and to work for justice, Jesus would offer none. New Testament scholar Richard Hays notes that “Abraham’s chilling answer [to the rich man] reveals much about Lukan theology and ethics: ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ Even the resurrection – even Jesus’ own resurrection – remains futile, a mute apparition, for those who harden their hearts against Moses and the prophets. On the other hand, those who heed Jesus will understand that the message of Scripture calls the community to precisely the sort of generous sharing that is exemplified by the Jerusalem church in the early chapters of Acts” (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 1996, p. 124).

PASTORAL REFLECTION

BY GEORGE REED, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
NC COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

I can still see her in my mind’s eye.

It was 1969, and I was part of a choir premiering the folk musical “Good News” in Europe. (In Baptist circles, it was the trailblazing work that brought – gasp! – guitars into a lot of churches.) One of our stops was a large gathering in Berne, Switzerland, of Baptist youth from all over the world.

Bag lunches were served every day to all of us at the Youth Congress, several thousand people. The meal included a piece of luncheon meat. (I remember distinctly that it was tongue one day.) There was a hard roll, about the size and consistency of a baseball. A piece of fruit. And a candy bar that tasted like instant coffee flakes dipped in chocolate. We groused a lot about the lunches and tossed a lot of food in the trash.

We were on our tour bus, about to leave the dorm where we had been staying, when a few of us saw her. She looked about sixty years old, and she looked like she could have been my grandmother. She came quietly around the corner of the building, went straight to the big trashcan, and started digging out our thrown-away lunches. She put what she could find in a bag, and she was gone.

Sheltered life that I had led, I had never before seen someone using a trashcan as a food source.

The focal passage for today is one of Jesus’ most famous stories. What a study in contrasts! The rich man “feasting sumptuously” every day. We may feast on Thanksgiving and Christmas, or even for regular Sunday dinners. But every day? And he dressed in the finest clothes. He clearly had it made. By contrast, Lazarus ate whatever crumbs he could find, and his health care was provided by the neighborhood dogs. The contrast continues after both have died. Lazarus finds himself in heaven, comforted by none other than Father Abraham. Rich Man finds himself in hell, not comforted by anybody.

And what was Rich Man’s sin? Why did he end up in hell, looking over to the other side? The passage doesn’t say for sure. It does not say that his failing was simply his wealth. There’s nothing to suggest that he had gotten rich directly at the expense of Lazarus. Or that Lazarus was his oppressed worker. Or that Rich Man kicked Lazarus every time he went

by. There's really nothing to indicate that Rich Man ever even paid any attention to Lazarus. And maybe that's it. Maybe Rich Man had managed to come and go, day after day, without really seeing Lazarus outside his house. How could Rich Man help if he didn't even see the man in need?

John put things in the proper order when he asked, "If you have the world's goods and see your brother and sister in need, yet close your heart against them, how does God's love abide in you?" (I John 3:17).

I first had to see the woman in Berne. And, while I can't tell you that we piled off our bus and rushed over to help, I can tell you that her image had a lot to do in pointing me towards ministry that addresses the laws and systems that force people to become dumpster divers.

For those of us who are comfortably middle class (or above), the situation of our brothers and sisters who toil away at low wage jobs is something we just don't see. The minimum wage is currently \$6.15 per hour (and only this year up from \$5.15). You can run the math on that. \$6.15 per hour. Forty hours per week. Fifty-two weeks per year. One person working full-time, all year, with no vacation, no time off for anything, would earn \$13,972, *before* payroll taxes.

We could talk about how that's less money than the federal poverty level for a family of four. And we could talk about how that poverty level is an outdated measure of poverty, how a family living just above "poverty" can't pay for its basic needs.

Instead, I want you to imagine yourself as a single parent with one or two kids. Try figuring out your family budget. Start with rent. If you are not a renter, check out what rents are in your community. Find out what kind of place you and your kids would have for \$500 per month. It's another part of actually seeing Lazarus.

Then there's food. Transportation to get to your job. Child care, if your kids are too young to be at home by themselves. Telephone. Clothes. Can you imagine what that life would be like? For those of us who have never been there, I doubt that we can. But it's those of us who have never been there who, like Rich Man, most need to see our modern-day Lazaruses.

And then, as John says, we will be inclined to help, because, after all, we do know God's love.

That help may take the form of charity. Giving canned goods and used clothes. Helping out at the free clinic. Working on a Habitat home. But our response also needs to include justice. It's just not right for someone working full-time not to earn enough to support her family. For those of us who are employers, the justice response means paying our employees a living wage. And being sure that our churches and other religious institutions are paying a living wage. To all our employees.

And for all of us, the justice response means working to raise the minimum wage to something that is actually adequate to support a family's basic needs. In the summer of 2006, a strong coalition of faith-based activists – bishops and laypeople, pastors and children, conservatives and progressives – came together to secure passage of legislation which increased the minimum wage. We can do it again. We must do it again.

Because low-wage workers still struggle to make ends meet. And because, having seen them, how can we not help?

WORSHIP AID - 'A POOR MAN NAMED LAZARUS'

RESPONSIVE READING

Generous Lord, show us how to trade places to see with the eyes of the prophets Your truth.

In Your mercy, forgive us. In Your grace, help us to hear Your word.

Isaiah said, "Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance, for truth stumbles in the public square" (Isa. 59:14).

In Your mercy, forgive us. In Your grace, help us to hear Your word.

Jeremiah said, "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages" (Jer.22:13).

In Your mercy, forgive us. In Your grace, help us to hear Your word.

Amos said, "Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land saying, 'We will practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweeping of the wheat'" (Amos 8:4-6).

In Your mercy, forgive us. In Your grace, help us to hear Your word.

Malachi said, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me" (Mal. 3:1).

In Your mercy, forgive us. In Your grace, help us to hear Your word.

Mary said, "The Lord has shown strength and scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts" (Luke 1:51).

In Your mercy, forgive us. In Your grace, help us to hear Your word.

Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he said, "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:18-19, 21).

In Your mercy, forgive us. In Your grace, help us to hear Your word. In our hearing, God's word will be fulfilled.

Amen.

(from *Let Justice Roll's Living Wage Days 2006*, www.letjusticeroll.org/pdfs/LWRsources.pdf)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Benevolent God,

We confess that we have neglected the poor and destitute in our society, oftentimes assuming that because we are blessed with material wealth, we have your special favor.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Forgive our silence as millions of Americans, often without the benefit of an adequate education, struggle economically to enjoy what we daily take for granted.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Forgive us for our unwillingness to see the world as you see it. Holy Spirit, push us towards action to close the wealth gap in this country, so that all of your creatures may enjoy your gift of life without experiencing hunger, inaccessibility to healthcare, and fatigue from overworking.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Amen.

(by Jason R. Jenkins)

SUGGESTED HYMNS

- | | |
|--|--|
| ❖ <i>O For a World</i> | CH 683/NCH 575/PH 386 |
| ❖ <i>God of Grace and God of Glory</i> | MW 751/AM 62/CH 464/NCH 436/
UMH 577/TH 594 |
| ❖ <i>What Does the Lord Require?</i> | UMH 441/PH 405/CH 661/MW 695/
TH 605 |
| ❖ <i>The Harvest of Justice</i> | GA 300 |
| ❖ <i>Behold a Broken World</i> | UMH 426/MW 691 |
| ❖ <i>Cuando El Pobre</i> | PH 407/CH 662/UMH 434/MW 689 |

◆ Hymnal Legend ◆

- † AM — African Methodist Episcopal
- † BH — Baptist Hymnal
- † CH — Chalice Hymnal (Disciples of Christ)
- † CM — Christian Methodist Episcopal
- † GA — Gather Hymnal (Roman Catholic)
- † LW — Lutheran Worship
- † MW — Moravian Book of Worship
- † NCH — New Century Hymnal (UCC)
- † PH — Presbyterian Hymnal
- † TH — The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal)
- † UMH — United Methodist Hymnal

ADDITIONAL PRAYERS

A Responsive Prayer for Workers and our Nation

God, give us the imagination we need today to live in a land where justice and compassion flourish.

Lord, hear our prayer.

God, show us how to provide, so that across this land everyone who needs a job has one. Give us the resolve to make this a nation where no one earns less than a living wage; where compensation between genders—right down to each shiny penny—is equal, and men and women are equally valued; where those who cannot work and the elderly are fully provided and cared for; where immigrants are free from exploitation; where corporations give equal weight to social responsibility and profitability.

Lord, hear our prayer.

God, help us to make fair trade of goods and services between nations standard practice, promoting genuine global harmony. Fill us with the wisdom to aid our nation to support the wise use of global resources with the aim of providing everyone with fair wages and livable economic conditions.

Lord, hear our prayer

Creator God, transform our world, and transform our hearts and minds. Make us into one people, your people.

Amen.

(from The United Church of Christ, www.ucc.org/justice/workers.pdf)

Prayer for a Living Wage

Loving God, we thank you for the grace of work. We give thanks for jobs that fulfill Your intention for work, for jobs where we can use our hands to build houses of peace, for jobs where we can use our minds to explore the mysteries of the universe, for jobs where we can use our hearts to offer care to those in need.

We confess, loving God, that many of us take our work for granted and turn a blind eye toward those without jobs and those whose jobs do not pay enough for food and shelter for their families. We acknowledge our need to remember that Your covenant of work assumes mutual responsibility between workers and employers so that all members of the community may be blessed and prosper.

And so today, we pray for those who suffer the injustice of a job with wages insufficient to care for their family's needs. We pray for workers forced to take two low-paying jobs to survive. We pray for workers denied the dignity of earning a living wage, "a fair day's wage for a fair day's work."

Forgive us our negligence, and spur us to work for change. Let none of us be satisfied until all our brothers and sisters earn a living wage. Move us to employ our gifts and talents so that each of us contributes to a world where all Your children are paid a just and living wage for their daily work. **Amen.**

(Adapted from a prayer by Joan Malone, Coalition for Economic Justice, www.midsouthinterfaith.org/index/labor_pulpits/lip_prayers_06.doc)

ADDITIONAL HELPS

▪ QUOTES ▪

That world of the poor, we say, is the key to understanding the Christian faith ...the poor are the ones who tell us what the world is and what service the church must offer to the world.

Oscar Romero

Americans are wondering what's happened to their government. They are working hard to raise strong families and to live the American dream. But with each passing day, they find the American dream farther and farther out of reach as they struggle just to make ends meet....working families don't ask for much. Low and middle-income families are doing their part. But they could use a little fair play from their government as they are facing such hard times.

Senator Edward Kennedy

A just wage for the worker is the ultimate test of whether an economic system is functioning justly.

John Paul II

There has never been but one question in all civilization – how to keep a few men from saying to many men: "You work and earn bread and we will eat it."

Abraham Lincoln

No business which depends for existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country.

Franklin D. Roosevelt

A job should lift you out of poverty, not keep you in it.

Holly Sklar and Paul Sherry

True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

▪ VIGNETTE ▪

LOCAL COMMUNITIES TAKE ACTION: LIVING WAGE ORDINANCES FOR DURHAM

In January 1998, the City of Durham passed a living wage ordinance requiring all service contractors doing business with the city to pay workers “enough money to support a family of four above the poverty level.” In 2001, the City Council folded city employees into the living wage mandate and set the rate at \$9.15 per hour.

In 2003, the Durham County Commissioners adopted a living wage for all county employees and, with a few exceptions, service contractors. It set the rate at not less than 7.5% above the federal poverty level (FPL) for a family of four. By tying the rate to the FPL, the wage rises automatically with inflation. The County also mandated health insurance for those covered by the ordinance. Later, the Durham County Board of Education established the same measures for its employees.

In 2005, Duke University increased its pay to all university employees to at least \$10 per hour. In May 2007, Duke began to require companies with contracts to sell food on campus to pay their workers by the same standards.

Durham C.A.N. (Congregations, Associations, and Neighborhoods) has involved people of faith in these campaigns for a living wage in Durham. It is a broad-based, interfaith, and ecumenical coalition that uses the model of leadership development and community organizing of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). For more information, see www.durhamcan.org.

Jason R. Jenkins, “A Living Wage for North Carolina: An Introduction,” p. 17, published by the NC Council of Churches, NC Fair Wages Coalition, and *Let Justice Roll*, available online at www.nccouncilofchurches.org/resources/downloads/Living%20Wage%20for%20NC%20Report-Final.pdf

▪ CONTACTS AND OTHER RESOURCES ▪

- ✦ www.nccouncilofchurches.org/areasofwork/issues/economic_justice/economic_justice_issue.html – North Carolina Council of Churches’ “Economic Justice” webpage provides the Council’s focus on this issue, a link to the Economic Justice Committee’s website, and links to resources.
- ✦ www.nccouncilofchurches.org/resources/downloads/Living%20Wage%20for%20NC%20Report-Final.pdf – North Carolina Council of Churches, “A Living Wage for North Carolina: An Introduction,” by Jason R. Jenkins, is a primer on the issue of a living wage from a local, faith-based perspective. It includes facts, biblical quotes, and stories of North Carolina cities that are taking steps towards a living wage.
- ✦ www.letjusticeroll.org – ‘Let Justice Roll’ Living Wage Campaign: Faith and Community Voices Against Poverty is a nonpartisan program of more than seventy faith-based and community-based organizations, working in support of federal legislation to raise the federal minimum wage and state legislation and ballot initiatives to increase the minimum wage in selected states. The website has excellent resources and updates surrounding both federal and states’ minimum wage campaigns.
- ✦ www.ncjustice.org/cms/index.php?pid=70 – North Carolina Justice Center, “Workforce Issues,” is a website containing practical analysis and insightful reports on living wage issues in North Carolina.

- ✦ www.livingwagecampaign.org – ACORN’s *Living Wage Resource Center* is a webpage of the Association of Community Organizers for Reform Now. This site contains a brief history of the national living wage movement, background materials such as ordinance summaries and comparisons, drafting tips, research summaries, talking points, and links to other living wage-related sites.
- ✦ www.pcusa.org/hunger/downloads/hae_session.pdf – This Presbyterian study guide, entitled “Hunger No More: The Worker Deserves a Wage,” can be used for teaching about the importance of living wages from a biblical perspective.
- ✦ www.iwj.org – Interfaith Worker Justice is an interfaith non-profit organization which appeals to religious values in order to educate, organize, and mobilize the religious community in the U.S. on issues and campaigns that will improve wages, benefits, and working conditions for workers, especially low-wage workers. IWJ believes workers should have the right to organize and to engage in collective bargaining. Because many U.S. workers are being denied these rights, IWJ has a joint partnership with the Department of Labor to help guarantee and enforce these basic rights. Too often the religious community and the labor communities have worked in isolation from one another. IWJ promotes opportunities for labor leaders and people of faith to work together, including workshops and field placements for seminarians, novices, and rabbinical students.

KEY FACTS

- ❑ North Carolina has almost one million families with a worker and at least one child; 45 percent of them do not earn enough money to meet their basic needs. Over a third of North Carolina’s children live in low-income families. Almost one-quarter (22.7 percent) of North Carolina jobs do not pay enough to lift a family of four out of poverty.¹
- ❑ The federal minimum wage reached a peak, in inflation-adjusted dollars, of \$9.31 in 1968. It has fallen nearly 40 percent since then. Over the period from 1979 - 2003, the lowest-paid North Carolinians saw their wages increase by \$0.88 per hour, while middle-income workers saw an increase of \$2.17 per hour.

Scripture and Economic Justice

The Bible abounds in passages that address issues of money, wealth and economic justice. As recorded in the first chapter of Genesis, God gave the abundant fruits of the earth to all people and animals for their sustenance (Gen. 1:29, 30). And God gave all humanity – not just a few – the authority to steward the earth’s resources for the benefit of all (Gen. 1: 27, 28). This means that humanity has both the duty and the ability to organize economic life in such a way that all people can have lives of dignity, sufficiency and community participation. Because of this, God’s intent for people to enjoy just and compassionate economies can begin to be realized. Jesus said, “Sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Luke 12:33). Acts describes how the early believers carried out this instruction (Acts 2:45). Paul writes that affluent Christians must be “rich in good works, generous and ready to share” (1 Tim. 6:18). John warns that God’s love does not live in anyone who refuses to help brothers and sisters in need (1 John 3:17). Scripture addresses systemic, not just individual, issues of economic justice. The Law of Moses called for debts to be canceled and slaves to be freed every seven years (Deut. 15). Every fiftieth year, an equitable redistribution of land was to be carried out (Lev. 25). The Law also included many other public legal provisions for just economic relationships (e.g. Lev. 19, 25; Deut. 14, 16, 24). Isaiah censures monopolistic practices that deprive people of their homes and livelihood (Isa.5:8-10). Amos condemns exploitation of the poor through unjust institutions (Amos 2:6, 7; 4:1; 5:12). James denounces the wealthy who defraud their employees (James 5:4). And Jesus himself promises a great reordering in which the positions of the rich and poor will be reversed (Luke 1:52-53; 6:20-31).

(By Jason R. Jenkins)

Dispelling Minimum Wage Myths

MYTH #1: A RAISE WILL LEAD TO JOB LOSS

Opponents often maintain that catastrophic job loss would accompany an increase in the minimum wage. The problem with this argument is that it has never happened. Much research has been done on the effects of previous minimum wage increases, and studies done by major research institutions show no discernible job loss as a result of a hike. For example, the Economic Policy Institute conducted a study in 1998 of the previous year's federal minimum wage hike. The study concluded that there was no perceptible or significant job loss associated with the 1997 increase. Similarly, the National Economic Council in a 2000 report stated: "Since the 1996-97 increase in the minimum wage, the American economy...has continued to perform very strongly. Between September 1996 and February 2000, 10.2 million jobs were created." In 2004, 562 economists (including four Nobel Prize winners) released a statement urging a raise in the minimum wage: "The minimum wage has been an important part of our nation's economy for 65 years... the minimum wage is also an important tool in fighting poverty."

MYTH #2: SMALL BUSINESSES WILL BE HURT BY INCREASE

While this argument appears very persuasive, no credible evidence has been found showing that an increase significantly damages small businesses. The Fiscal Policy Institute in 2004 compared small businesses (with 50 or less employees) in states with a higher minimum wage with those that still utilize the \$5.15 per hour rate. Their study concluded that the states with higher minimum wages experienced faster economic growth in new businesses and jobs. Jared Bernstein of the Economic Policy Institute testified before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Workforce Empowerment and Government Programs. In his testimony, Bernstein stated: "There seems to be no discernible correlation between minimum wage increases and a rise in business failures, either in the year the increase occurred or in the following year. If anything, the evidence leans the other way."

MYTH #3: MINIMUM WAGE EARNERS ARE MOSTLY TEENAGERS

Perhaps the most cited myth, this argument claims that minimum wage earners are mostly teenagers. Yet according to the Economic Policy Institute, adults overwhelmingly make up the largest share of minimum wage workers: 80 percent are twenty years old or older. In North Carolina, three-fourths of minimum wage workers are over the age of twenty, and 51.8 percent are over the age of twenty-five.

MYTH #4: MOST MINIMUM WAGE EARNERS WORK PART-TIME

Over half (54 percent) of minimum wage workers work full time, and another third (30 percent) work from twenty to thirty-four hours per week. Additionally, the average minimum wage worker brings in over half (58 percent) of his/her family's weekly earnings.

MYTH #5: THE WORKING POOR "CHOOSE" TO STAY POOR

According to The Common Sense Foundation, the Jacksonville, North Carolina-based *Daily News* published an editorial in January 2006 that articulated a common misguided sentiment: "Instead of depending on government for everything, including a pay raise, it would be better if workers seeking a better lot in life took the initiative to do things that bring in better wages." This mentality in essence believes that the poor somehow choose to stay poor, i.e. they are poor through their own fault. Not only does this line of thinking ignore systemic oppression, such as cycles of poverty clearly evident in many areas of our country. It also buys into the illusion that the poor have myriad options through which to better their lives—such as education. Somehow, those who hold this line of thinking continue to view low-wage workers who have two or three jobs as "irresponsible" for not seeking to "better" their lives. How would a low-wage worker have time to pursue education or training when they work sixteen hours a day just to "get by"? Opponents of a minimum wage increase often are against having a minimum wage in the first place, claiming that the market should set wages. The problem with this extreme laissez-faire position is that, in effect, minimum wage opponents are willing to pay workers whatever the market could bear—even if it means wages as low as \$3.15 (or lower)!

MYTH #6: A RAISE WOULD NOT AFFECT MANY WORKERS

In North Carolina, the recent raise in the minimum wage to \$6.15 per hour directly benefits 139,000 workers, or 4 percent of the workforce. This number does not take into account how many workers are affected indirectly. On the federal level, an increase to \$7.25 per hour for workers would affect approximately 14.9 million (or 11 percent of the workforce). Of this number, 6.6 million (or 5 percent of the workforce) would be directly affected, while the remaining 8.3 million workers (or 6 percent of the workforce) would benefit indirectly. What is the difference between those affected directly and indirectly? Workers who would "directly" benefit from a raise are the ones earning between \$5.15 and \$6.15 per hour who would see their wage go up. Those "indirectly" affected are those who earn close to the new minimum wage. According to the Economic Policy Institute, evidence has shown that many employers "raise the wages of workers earning above the new minimum wage in order to preserve internal wage structures, an occurrence known as the 'spillover effect.'"

Conclusion: A Long-Overdue Raise

Earlier in 2007, Congress passed the first increase in the federal minimum wage since 1997. The wage increases from \$5.15 per hour to \$5.85 this year and ultimately to \$7.25 in 2009. Unlike other programs such as Social Security, the minimum wage is not adjusted automatically for cost of living increases, so its real value decreases over time.

1. All facts, statistics and quotes for this section, including "Scripture and Economic Justice," are taken from Jason R. Jenkins, "A Living Wage for North Carolina: An Introduction," published by the NC Council of Churches, NC Fair Wages Coalition, and Let Justice Roll, available online at www.nccouncilofchurches.org/resources/downloads/Living%20Wage%20for%20NC%20Report-Final.pdf.