Thank you to Father Ryan for inviting me and for making my job easy. You always generate so many ideas for me with your wide-ranging remarks.

I once saw a man on TV who had won a fantastic amount of money in a contest by Publishers Clearing House or the like, who exclaimed, “I must be doing something right!” He expressed a good Deuteronomistic principle about wealth and poverty. One strain of thought in the Hebrew Bible says that material and worldly success is a sign of divine favor. In the daily liturgy, we recite Deuteronomy 11:13-15, “And if you will carefully obey my commands which I give you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, I will give rain for your land at the right season, the autumn rains and the spring rains, that you may gather in your grain, your wine, and
your oil. And I will produce grass in your fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied.” Running after other gods and ignoring the laws of God will result in drought and starvation.

The Deuteronomist, the person or people responsible for the review of Israel’s history from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings, gravitates around the principle, “If bad things are happening, you must have done something wrong.” Its corollary is that good things come to those faithful to the covenant. It surfaces in the New Testament, too, in the story of the man born blind in John 9, where people ask Jesus, “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Money as a sign of favor is a convenient idea, a subset of the idea that good things happen to good people. How much simpler and morally satisfying life would be if these ideas were really true. We all know that is not the way the world works. Other voices in the Bible knew it, and so did the rabbis. Life is capricious and can be cruel or benevolent for no apparent reason. In the Greco-Roman world, where certain attributes were personified as gods and goddesses, one very popular one to placate was Tyche, or Fortuna, the mistress of Chance or Fortune. She represents the blind and inscrutable quality of life; humanity tossed about by unexpected events. Each Mediterranean city would often have its own statue for the city’s particular good fortune and would attempt to bring her to their side through cultic acts. Another popular goddess, no doubt related to Chance, is “Hope” or Spes. Jews and Christians, at least officially, could not appeal to Greco-Roman deities. They had to explain events via the God of Israel, so sometimes argued like the Deuteronomist, trying to make sense of Israel’s checkered history by judging her faithfulness to the covenant.

I have three points to emphasize about wealth and poverty in Judaism, while not claiming to cover all of Jewish history. First, poverty is not necessarily a virtue, nor wealth necessarily a vice. Second, it is no accident
that the word for charity, *tzedakah*, is related to the word for justice, *tzedek*. Third, a balance between securing a reasonable livelihood and pursuing a life of Torah seems to me the most common path.

First, wealth per se is not bad. While in a few cases Jews rejected material goods, like some at Qumran who shared goods in common; the great Hillel, who gave up a comfortable life in Babylonia and courted poverty to study Torah in Palestine; or some rabbis and mystics given to fasting, their poverty seems more of a by-product than an ideal. Economic success alone is not evil. Father Ryan mentioned Abraham, whom I have always visualized as a Bedouin prince, moving across the Fertile Crescent in a great entourage. Poverty alone is not virtuous. The question is how one acquires one's money, and what one does one with it. Wealth always has potential to corrupt, and there are plenty of complaints against the rich in the prophets, but it is about how they got their money and the blindness it induces, as Amos reports, “because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, [meaning they allow people to sell themselves into indentured servitude to repay a trifling debt], they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way (2:6b-7) ... they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge.” Exodus 22:26 states if you take someone’s garment as pledge of repayment you, must return it before sundown because it may be all he has to sleep in. But the moral problem is not the wealth (after all, the money from your loan may have saved him) but the potential blindness of privilege, especially if one has never known anything else.

A high school teacher recently devised a simple experiment to demonstrate how privilege works.¹ Students were sitting in traditional rows. He gave them each a piece of scrap paper and told them to wad it up. He moved the recycling bin to the front of the room. All they had to do to succeed in society was get their paper into the bin. The students in the back complained, “It’s not fair.” Many more students in the front row made it into the bin. He said, “This is what privilege looks like.” He also noted
that the students in the front did not complain about unfairness. They were focused on their task and did not “see” the problems of those in the back.

Many laws embedded in the Hebrew Bible try to take off the blinders, raising up the poor, treating them with dignity and understanding their predicament. For example, if you have a day laborer, “you shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them” (Deut 24:14). They may be counting on it to eat that night. When you reap your harvest, leave some for the poor. “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord” (Lev 19:9-10). “Do not charge on interest,” sometimes to a brother, sometimes to the poor (Deut 23:19; Ex 22:25). When Jews became money-lenders in the Middle Ages because the guilds were closed to them, they found ways to mitigate this, but the spirit of the law still would argue against payday loans or bad mortgages. My favorite of these laws remains Ex 22:26, “If you take your neighbor’s cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor’s only clothing to use as a cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate.” In other words, God says, “I’m watching you folks with money and how you conduct your everyday affairs.” Father Ryan, you made the point about the association of the poor with piety, and I wonder if that is more a matter of God simply taking their side and identifying with them. It also stems from the fact that they are not the ones exploiting anyone.

Second, tzedakah, inadequately translated as “charity” stems from the word tzedek, or “justice,” meaning economic and social justice, the recognition that some people need extra consideration, like the people in the back of the classroom in our experiment. Widows and orphans, who in ancient society had no one to take their side, were the special focus of
God’s interest. Isaiah preaches, “Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (1:17). The charge is to create a society where everyone has a chance and everyone has dignity. Martin Luther King, Jr. loved to quote Amos 5:24, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

This ethic is not about “us” and “them,” but about reducing those distinctions, closing the distance between classes. I wonder if our language around “the poor” doesn’t promote the idea of the poor as an abstract and distant group that we should support, but not really engage. I think of others who struggle, but do not qualify as “the poor,” like the single parent just getting by, or the adjunct professor, shuttling between multiple institutions, without health care or retirement benefits. I long for a system that empowers more people. Because that is what money really gives us, power and freedom.

Maimonides, the great medieval scholar, rabbi, and physician, identified eight levels of *tzedakah* or charity in ascending order. The lowest is when one gives grudgingly. The second highest is when the giver and recipient are unknown to each other. But the highest is when one assists someone so that they do not become poor. The highest form of charity is to help sustain a person before they become impoverished by offering a substantial gift in a dignified manner, or by extending a suitable loan, or by helping them find employment or establish themselves in business so as to make it unnecessary for them to become dependent on others.²

Maimonides is not against the other, “lower” forms of *tzedakah*, saying one must rejoice on a holiday, “And while one eats and drinks himself, it is his duty to feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and other poor and unfortunate people, for he who locks the doors to his courtyard and eats and drinks with his wife and family without feeding the poor and bitter of soul—his meal is not a rejoicing in a divine commandment but a rejoicing in his own stomach” (*Hilkhot Yom Tov* 6.18).³
Thinking about the problems of the poor getting nutritious food in the ancient world, we can see that Jesus’ many associations with meals begin to form an alternative society. Often meals are the sites of his teaching in the gospels, where he eats with tax collectors and sinners, with women, with Pharisees (7:36; 11:37), and with his disciples. Warren Carter argues that these meals create an alternative society that rejects hierarchies, “Jesus’ guests cross lines of occupation, gender, socioeconomic status, and religious (non) observance.”

The Passover seder, which we celebrated a short time ago, by design and practice, crosses boundaries of age, class, gender, and usually religion. Its content is the discussion of slavery and liberation. We chant a haunting prayer early in the seder, lifting the matzah and singing “this is the bread of poverty, that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt,” remembering the meager rations that our ancestors ate. The next line is, “All who are hungry, come and eat. All who are in need, join our Passover meal.” Unlike most of the Haggadah, the Passover recitation, which is in Hebrew, this prayer is in Aramaic, reflecting the common language of its time, so that all could understand it. The Mishnah on Passover stipulates that the poor be included, and that they too get the required four cups of wine, even if the funds for it must come from the charity plate (mPes 10.1). Recent customs include a tomato on the seder plate to talk about fair food practices, slave labor, and human trafficking, suggested by the Jewish organization T’ruah, the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights. An older custom is an orange on the seder plate, to promote women’s inclusion in Judaism. We always have a cup for Elijah, who will usher in the age of redemption. Like the meals around Jesus, these seder meals express the longing for everyone to be included and for everyone to have enough as features of the age of redemption.

Finally, I want to suggest the ideal of balance. The Rabbis, at least in Pirke Avot, encourage people to take up a profession. The ancient sages did all sorts of things: the great Hillel was a wood-cutter, Rabbi Meir was a scribe, and Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was a businessman. There we a
variety of other professions as well, including sandalmakers, blacksmiths and tanners. They tell us “im ayn kemach, ayn Torah” (mAvot 3:21b), “If there is no food [literally “flour”], there is no Torah.” One cannot study and live without food and security. The next line is equally important, “im ayn Torah, ayn kemach.” No Torah means no food, or a life that is only about making a living and not about Torah is worthless. Indeed, the Sabbath is predicated on the dignity and necessity of earning a living, “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath.” In fact, Sabbath rest is most welcome at the end of a busy work week, while it does not feel the same during vacations.

But work should not be all consuming. In a story from the Babylonian Talmud, “Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said ‘Did you ever see a wild beast with a trade? I have never in my life seen a deer drying fruits in the field, or a lion carrying heavy burdens, or a fox who kept a shop, and yet none of them die of hunger. Now if these, who have been created to serve my needs are able to support themselves without trouble, how much more reasonable is it to expect that I, who have been created to serve my Master, should be able to support myself easily, without trouble.” (b. Qidd. 82b).

This story reminds us of a more famous Jewish teacher’s parable, about the lilies of the field.

Father Ryan mentioned Eastern Europe and the poverty of the shtetl, but I would also mention the Jewish question in Western Europe, and Jews’ desire to join the larger society. I asked my students “What are the two ways you can better yourself in society?” They said immediately, “education and money,” which are not unrelated. For Jews in Western Europe from the seventeenth century on, these education and financial successes were their tickets out of the ghetto. There was the phenomenon of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, which embraced secular subjects, while promoting Hebrew language and literature as expressions of a Jewish classical culture. Moses Mendelssohn, the grandfather of Felix, was an observant Jew who nevertheless had a foot in the larger society, recommending one be “a man abroad and a Jew at home.” Others were
the “port Jews,” Sephardic and Italian Jews, many former *conversos*, who prospered in shipping and international trade. These port Jews included the first Jews in the Americas, coming to New Amsterdam from Brazil in 1654. Poverty was something to leave behind as these Jews sought acceptance. So, too, has it been happily shed by the immigrant groups who have come to this country and flourished—the Jews, the Irish, the Italians and others.

Economic success is a means, not a good in and of itself. Money is power, and can be used or mis-used. Does one use it to sway an election, undercutting the democratic process, or use it to eliminate polio or give people access to education, thus preventing them from ever joining the ranks of the poor?
NOTES

1  http://www.buzzfeed.com/nathanwpyle/this-teacher-taught-his-class-a-powerful-lesson-about-privil#.uvJ4VLKqw0


CLAUDIA SETZER, PH.D.

Claudia Setzer is professor of religious studies at Manhattan College in Riverdale, NY. She received a Ph.D. in biblical studies from Columbia University/Union Theological Seminary in 1990, specializing in New Testament. She also received an M.A. in rabbincs from The Jewish Theological Seminary.

Her book, *Jewish Responses to Early Christians* (Fortress, 1994) discusses the reactions of Jews to the earliest generations of believers in Jesus. She has also published articles on the historical Jesus, Mary Magdalene and the witness of women in proclamation of the resurrection, and Jews and Christians in North Africa.


She has served for several years as chair of the Early/Jewish Christian Relations group at the Society of Biblical Literature, as an associate editor of *The Journal of Biblical Literature* and as a contributor to the PBS website “From Jesus to Christ.” In 2006, she helped reestablish the Columbia University Seminar on the New Testament, which she also co-chairs.