

Is inequality the problem?

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A lot of people are talking about income inequality and wealth disparity. My friends post statistics bemoaning the fact that, for example, the wealthiest 62 billionaires have as much money as the poorest 50 percent of the world.

This is startling, and worth knowing about. But is it itself a problem?

I don't think it necessarily is. In explaining why, I want to make clear why many (typically progressive) arguments that bring up inequality fail to gain traction with other (typically conservative) audiences. This might help us have more fruitful conversations about economic justice.

Imagine a relatively isolated town. (This is going to sound like a high school math problem, but bear with me.) In this town, 99.9 percent of the inhabitants each make about \$100,000 a year. Every adult has more than enough money to keep their family clothed, well fed, and educated. They even have enough left over to buy minivans, detective novels, jorts, and so on. All of the inhabitants of this town are financially stable and content.

But two residents of the town, Beth and Hannah, the co-owners of a bakery, annually make \$10 billion each.

(It's a popular bakery.)

In this town, then, there is massive income and wealth disparity. Two people have more money than the rest of the town combined. Yet I'm inclined to say there isn't a problem here, except for the fact that people are wearing jorts. There isn't anything intrinsically wrong with this town, isn't anything unfair happening, isn't any need for new laws or policies.

The point is that there is no automatic connection between wealth disparity and injustice. But the crucial word there is *automatic*. Because there are, of course, important ways in which our society is different from that imaginary, pastry-loving

utopia. It is these injustices—of which income inequality may be an indicator or symptom—that we ought to focus on.

If our economic system creates barriers that inhibit hardworking people from improving their situation, thereby making the American Dream a myth, that's an injustice. If our legal system lets the wealthiest 1 percent get away with almost anything, while simultaneously cracking down on poorer communities, that's an injustice. If our political system permits the Koch brothers to have more influence over an election than all of Montana, thereby making America more of an aristocracy than a democracy, that's an injustice. If the rich get richer by making the poor get poorer, that's an injustice.

These are just some of the issues people see when they see statistics about inequality—but these issues are not always made explicit. You can make the case that income or wealth disparity is a sign that systemic injustices are happening, but it's important to actually make the case. If you want your message to be pro-justice and not just anti-rich, you have to spell out what's really the issue. As with that high school math problem, you have to show your work.

Christians are called to stand up for the poor and against greed. This doesn't mean that Christianity is opposed to wealth or to the wealthy, since the existence of great wealth does not necessarily imply avarice or oppression. But where there are ducks, there's probably a pond; where there are old people in tie-dye, there's probably a Grateful Dead concert; and where the wealthiest 400 people in a country have more money than the poorest 150 million, there's probably greed and exploitation.

After all, Jesus said that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.” Great disparities in wealth should prompt us to challenge the unjust practices that tend to go with it—even if economic inequality is not itself an evil.