

## Faith as Politics: The Religious Justification of Neglect

Written by Ginny Grimsley  
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By: Charles Gourgey, Ph.D.

It is not unusual today to find the language of religion mixed up with the language of politics. The Republican Party's platform mentions God no less than 12 times, and Republicans have condemned Democrats for not mentioning God in theirs. Many Republican politicians do not hesitate to proclaim their Christian faith as a great motivator of their policies. So we have a right to expect that those policies will reflect godly values and honor the founder of the religion its adherents proclaim.

Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan insist that their tax proposals would not burden the middle class. However, the figures do not support this claim. According to the nonpartisan Urban–Brookings Tax Policy Center (Aug. 1, 2012), “A revenue-neutral individual income tax change that incorporates the features Gov. Romney has proposed ... would provide large tax cuts to high-income households, and increase the tax burdens on middle- and/or lower-income taxpayers.”

The great transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich, resulting from our recent financial crisis, will continue.

In addition to more tax advantages for the wealthy at the expense of others, the Republican plan will further shred the social safety net by virtually dismantling Medicaid. It will shrink the program drastically, replacing the current system with block grants to the states. To make up for the shortfall, families who are already struggling will be charged part of the cost of their

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elderly loved ones' care.

Medicare, too, would change beyond recognition. People would receive a fixed amount from the government to purchase their own plan. Called "premium support," this is really a euphemism for "voucher." These Medicare vouchers will not keep pace with rising health care costs, which traditionally outrun inflation. Medicare as we know it will come to an end. And once again, the burden will fall on the poor and middle class.

How do they justify this? Paul Ryan actually refers to his faith. In an interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network (April 10, 2012) Ryan stated: "A person's faith is central to how they conduct themselves in public and in private. ... To me, the principle of subsidiarity, which is really federalism, meaning government closest to the people governs best."

Ryan found a nice word to theologize his economics. The principle of "subsidiarity" was formalized in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII, who in all likelihood never intended it to supersede the Gospel, or to justify a reverse-Robin Hood economics of taking from the poor to give to the rich. But Ryan sees dismantling the safety net for disadvantaged people as actually helping them, by teaching them "independence." His "preferential option for the poor" means, in practice, cutting their benefits.

These positions are gaining popular support largely because they play on people's fears and resentment. "If I am doing poorly in this economy," one may be tempted to think, "it's because there are so many lazy people who consume my tax dollars without giving anything back."

But many of those who would suffer under Romney/Ryan economics are hard-working and do have jobs. I think of my friend who works long hours at a simple retail job that does not pay what her efforts deserve, and that gives her no health coverage. There are many like her. They work much harder than many who would judge them, including people who live off their investment income and don't work at all. Yet under Romney/Ryan the latter would pay even lower taxes, while the rest would suffer more.

And many others, including older people on fixed incomes; people with severe disabilities (mental, physical, or both) who need government assistance; people who are homeless not by choice but due to mental illness; and people with dementia whose family members may give up

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their own lives and livelihoods to support them, cannot simply go out and get a job. Many are unskilled and unemployable. Age and disability discrimination are rampant, even though we deny it. Yet in spite of this we seem to have a new Republican Gospel: when Jesus said (Matthew 25:36) “I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me” he was encouraging dependence. Better he should have said, “I was naked, I was sick, and you told me to get a job.”

This is the politics of resentment, of stigmatizing the poor as parasites who deserve to lose their benefits. In an offhand moment, Romney said it all: These are people “who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it.” This resentment is self-justifying: “I have mine, and if you don’t have yours, it’s your own fault. So lower my taxes.”

Those who practice this resentment seem not to mind that in the richest nation on Earth, millions of people go without health care. “Are there no emergency rooms?” they ask, much as old Scrooge asked “Are there no workhouses?” But emergency rooms only stabilize you until you can receive some other form of care – which you won’t if you lack insurance. If you have a chronic, degenerative disease, you are on your own. This inequality is criminal, but it is so easy to justify by playing on resentment.

This is the opposite of what Jesus stood for. So those who try to turn him into their political partisan may find themselves in for a shock. When we focus on what Jesus actually taught, we may be quite surprised that he does not share our party affiliation.

Charles Gourgey is a licensed creative arts therapist and author of [Judeochristianity: The Meaning and Discovery of Faith](#) (available at Amazon.com), which explores what faith can mean if we restore Jesus’s teachings to their rightful place of central importance.