**Gleanings**

Rediscovering God's Solutions for Poverty



**by Tim Weinhold**

Over three thousand years ago God himself preemptively weighed in on one of the most pressing issues of the 21st century — how can we solve poverty?  One of his answers is found in Leviticus 19: 9-10: Gleanings.

*When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God.*

God mandated that the landed farmers of ancient Israel not reap their fields to the very borders.  They were to leave the edges unharvested so that the poor could come and gather for themselves these set-aside “gleanings”.

From our modern vantage point, gleanings might seem a very quaint idea from a very distant and different past. Gleanings seems to be about making a curious connection between farming and the poor which has little application in today’s modern world.

Hidden beneath its ancient agrarian trappings, however, the gleanings model has much to teach us. There is more wisdom here than meets the eye, wisdom now in urgent need of rediscovery. Two thirds of the world’s people live in poverty.  For one third, subsistence itself is under constant threat.  All this despite an absolutely unprecedented scale and variety of anti-poverty efforts over the last half century.

**The Gleanings Model — Rediscovered**

As the former Hebrew slaves entered Canaan, God issued a great many commands.  In our terms, he was nation-building.  Many of these laws provide a blueprint for God’s conception of ‘the good society’.

It is important to note that God is not averse to relief (or “aid”) as a response to poverty.  In fact, God himself engaged in the most massive relief effort ever: daily supernatural food provision for the entire Hebrew people during their time in the wilderness.  But this was God’s response to an instance of acute poverty, i.e., atypical circumstances in which no opportunity for self-provision was possible.

On the very day the Hebrews entered Canaan, however, God’s relief project came to a full stop.  The manna ceased.  Strikingly, at the earliest possible moment that the Hebrews had the prospect of providing for themselves, God quit with relief.  He didn’t wait until the first harvest, or even the first planting.  Rather, he seems so acutely aware of how relief can cause enervating dependency that the mere prospect of the Hebrews providing for themselves was sufficient for God to bring his relief effort to a close.

God’s plan for His people was for them to primarily provide for themselves through their own effort. First and foremost the development of their society was to rest on the enterprise and labor of the people themselves. This was work and business activity that provided dignity and generated wealth.

But God also understood that, over time, and for a variety of reasons, individuals could find themselves marginalized, i.e., without a place in the normal workings of the economy. Once marginalized, these individuals, their families, and their descendants were at grave risk of becoming permanently impoverished.  God knew the solution was not simply relief, but the opportunity to provide for themselves. Gleanings provided that opportunity.

More than three thousand years later and we have increasingly come to understand and embrace the idea that what the chronically poor need most is the opportunity to provide for themselves. This aspect of ancient gleanings wisdom is what we might call the recently recovered portion of the model.  But there are two other aspects that are hidden treasures of wisdom for us as we think about poverty solutions today.

The key to unlocking the fuller significance of the gleanings model is to realize that commercial farms were the chief means of wealth creation in ancient Israel.  Landed farmers were not merely farmers, they were privileged owners of the primary business (wealth-creation) engines of their day.  Understood more broadly, therefore, God brought the gleanings mandate not to farmers per se, but to those who control the engines of wealth creation.  Gleanings was meant for business people.

**Viewed through this lens, two important principles jump out:**

**God intentionally forged a direct connection between business engines and the poor.**

Businesses are the creators of economic wealth and opportunity — precisely the resources of which the poor are in desperate need. It is easy to miss the essence here.  God did not say to the business owners, once you’ve harvested the economic rewards of your business efforts, please pass a portion of those rewards along to the poor.  Rather, God did something more pointed, more radical.  He says instead to the farmer/business people of Israel, I want to make a direct link between your business engine itself — your commercial farming operation — and meeting the needs of the poor.

**God forged a direct, experiential connection between business people and the poor.**

God could easily have found a less direct way to leverage the wealth generation of businesses to assist the poor.  But he didn’t.  Rather, via gleanings, God brought the poor and the business person into direct contact.

I imagine a farmer/business person standing in one of his fields, overseeing the harvesting effort of his employees.  He thinks back to the risk and effort in acquiring this field, plowing, planting, tending, all the while not knowing whether the rains would come or the locusts would stay away.  Now though, God be praised, a rich harvest is being gathered.

This is a pregnant moment.  The business engine is producing its rewards and there is an invisible question on the table: who should rightfully share in those rewards?  To the business person, all too often, the question is invisible because the answer is obvious: the rewards are mine!  I had the vision.  I took the risk.  I labored long and hard.  Of course, I now deserve the rewards.

And then the farmer glances over to the edge of the field and sees several of the poorest members of the community gathering the gleanings.  He thinks to himself, without the gleanings from my field, these people would probably be forced to beg.  They might even starve. Perhaps a heart softening, even a heart and vision re-calibration, begins.

The farmer/business person might think: I begin to see that this business engine I run, and this business vocation I pursue, is capable of more than merely giving me and my family a good life.  It’s capable of giving a good life to my community, even my society.  And, as I think about it, that’s the way it should be.  This harvest is really the fruit of a partnership between my efforts and the goodness of God.  It’s only right, therefore, that those God wants to bless — the poor and marginalized especially, and my community generally — share in the rewards of his and my partnership.

I believe this was God’s deeper intent for gleanings.  God was addressing two very different poverty problems for two very different groups of people.  One group was the economically impoverished — those who had been pushed to the margins by the socio-economic system.  Gleanings connected their need directly to the business engines of the day.  In doing so, gleanings effected a resource/opportunity reallocation that was considerably more potent and scalable than personal charity.

But that wasn’t the only poverty God targeted.  Business people face a different poverty problem.  The very risk and hard work inherent in starting and running a business inclines them toward selfishness regarding its rewards.  And God knows that selfishness, left unchecked, inevitably impoverishes the soul.  But God also knew that many business people, seeing firsthand the poor being blessed through the fruits of their business, would begin to experience a transformation of heart and vision. They would begin to see their businesses as capable of bringing about not merely the good life for themselves, but the good society.

**The Implications for today**

So what does gleanings mean for business people today?

**Chronic poverty solutions must focus on opportunity, not relief.**

The chronically poor need opportunity to provide for themselves.  First of all we must recognize God means for wealth creation through business to be the primary means of development and provision for a community. Business people can provide opportunities for the poor in numerous ways.

**Business engines are meant to be a critical resource for the poor**

Businesses are inherently self-sustaining and scalable, i.e., they live and grow under their own economic power.  In contrast to (most) philanthropy, when business engines are directly connected to efforts to help the poor, the resources to do so keep growing automatically.

**Business people have a direct role, beyond just being asked to get out their checkbooks.**

Heart change was critical to the gleanings outcomes God had in mind.  And he knew that personal connection between the business person and the poor was far and away the best strategy to get there.

It is very interesting to note that God provided no specifics regarding the portion of the harvest to be set aside for gleanings.  Leave unharvested a six-inch border?  A six-foot border?  Sixty feet?  God gives no answer, not even a hint.  That’s curious.  He goes to all the trouble to connect rich business people (and their business engines) and the poor — then leaves entirely unspecified the particulars of the connection?  On reflection, though, God’s intent and wisdom shines forth.  If the gleanings had been more prescribed, it would immediately have become a form of religious tax, just another levy on one’s business.

But God did not intend the business person to get off the moral and emotional ‘hook’ so easily.  Instead, gleanings purposefully forces a question that is personal, particular, profound: with how many, or how few, of the impoverished individuals I see around me am I going to share the rewards of my business?  This is the crucible for heart change that God engineered with gleanings.  And heart change was always the point, because God’s ultimate poverty solution is transformed business people, inspired by the good their business engines can do for the poor and their community.

For some stories of business people making direct connections and being involved in mutually transformational relationships... [Read More](http://www.businessasmission.com/weinholdexamples.html)

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