

## New Poor People's Campaign Bible Study Series

### #2: Life Abundant

The bible was written in economic contexts very different from our own, and yet the promises of God are eternal. God's intention for abundant life for all creation is found throughout the bible. We are called to discern what that promise means for our world today. We find ourselves in a global economy that is rapidly changing, and that change is filled with both great danger and great opportunity.

This study pairs three biblical texts on abundance with sections of two essays on the economy and two sermons. It is recommended that you read the texts aloud together (20-25 minutes), share initial responses (10-20 minutes), and then answer the discussion questions (20-40 minutes). If you have less than an hour, you might ask participants to read the texts in advance.

#### Discussion Questions

1. What does abundant life mean to you?
2. What keeps us from the assurances in Matthew 6--personally, socially, economically?
3. In what ways are the sermon passages from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rev. Erica Williams a response to the promises in John 10:10, Matthew 6 and Genesis 1: 29-30?
4. How do the sermon passages and bible verses respond to the arguments made by Peter Frase and Ben Tarnoff?
5. How might a new Poor People's Campaign proceed from a faith in abundant life?

#### John 10:10

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

#### Matthew 6:25-33

<sup>25</sup> "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? <sup>27</sup> And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? <sup>28</sup> And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup> yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? <sup>31</sup> Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' <sup>32</sup> For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. <sup>33</sup> But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

#### Genesis 1:29-30

<sup>29</sup> Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. <sup>30</sup> And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

#### Peter Frase, "Politics of Abundance"

"We are now being bombarded with the message of austerity, of sacrificing and doing without. The conservative UK government has announced draconian cuts to social programs, and has presented them as a difficult necessity.

Prime Minister David Cameron called the cuts “unavoidable”, insisting that the country had lived beyond its means but that “we are all in this together, and we will get through this together.” Barack Obama has recently sounded similar notes, arguing that government must “tighten its belt” along with individuals and households...

“But make no mistake, the politics of austerity is not driven by some inevitable economic necessity, and it has little to do with ensuring economic growth or prosperity...For the rhetoric of austerity is based on a lie: that we have suddenly entered a world of scarcity, in which there is less wealth for all and so we must all collectively suffer. But this is not a scarcity dictated by the material state of the world—it is not as if our factories have been destroyed by an asteroid, or our people wiped out by a plague. This scarcity is entirely a result of the dysfunction of the capitalist economy, in which idle resources confront unmet human need. We live in a world with greater material wealth than at any previous time in human history, which makes the idea of abundance more important than ever...The point of articulating (a politics of abundance) is to provide a firm grounding for why we resist the call for austerity. Rather than giving in to the ruling class’s politics of fear, we can be inspired by a vision of a better possible future. It is a vision that is profoundly optimistic about the potential of human societies, while questioning the ability of capitalism to deliver on that potential.”

### Ben Tarnoff, “Robots won't just take our jobs – they'll make the rich even richer”

“Despite a steady stream of alarming headlines about clever computers gobbling up our jobs...So far...this phenomenon hasn’t produced extreme unemployment. That’s because automation can create jobs as well as destroy them. One recent example is bank tellers: ATMs began to appear in the 1970s, but the total number of tellers has actually grown since then. As ATMs made it cheaper to run a branch, banks opened more branches, leading to more tellers overall. The job description has changed –today’s tellers spend more time selling financial services than dispensing cash – but the jobs are still there.

“What’s different this time is the possibility that technology will become so sophisticated that there won’t be anything left for humans to do. What if your ATM could not only give you a hundred bucks, but sell you an adjustable-rate mortgage?...Instead of merely transforming work, technology might begin to eliminate it. Instead of making it possible to create more wealth with less labor, automation might make it possible to create more wealth without labor.

“What’s so bad about wealth without labor? It depends on who owns the wealth. Under capitalism, wages are how workers receive a portion of what they produce. That portion has always been small, relative to the rewards that flow to the owners of capital. And over the past several decades, it’s gotten smaller: the share of the national income that goes to wages has been steadily shrinking, while the share that goes to capital has been growing. Technology has made workers more productive, but the profits have trickled up, not down. Productivity increased by 80.4% between 1973 and 2011, but the real hourly compensation of the median worker went up by only 10.7%. As bad as this is, mass automation threatens to make it much worse. If you think inequality is a problem now, imagine a world where the rich can get richer all by themselves....

(Matt Bruenig explained) “The problem with robots is not the manufacturing and application of them – that’s actually good for productivity,” he told me. “The problem is that they are owned by the wealthy, which means that the income that flows to the robots go out to a small slice of wealthy people.” Job-killing robots are good, in other words, so long as the prosperity they produce is widely distributed. An Oxfam report released earlier this year revealed that the eight richest men in the world own as much wealth as half the human race. Imagine what those numbers will look like if automation accelerates. At some point, a handful of billionaires could control close to one hundred percent of society’s wealth.”

### Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Dr. King’s Speech” Frogmore, November 14, 1966

“God has left enough (and to spare) in this world for all of his children to have the basic necessities of life, and God never intended for some of his children to live in inordinate superfluous wealth while others live in abject, deadening poverty. And somehow I believe that God made it all...I believe firmly that the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof. I don’t think it belongs to Mr. Rockefeller. I don’t think it belongs to Mr. Ford. I think the earth is the Lord’s, and since we didn’t make these things by ourselves, we must share them with each other. And I think this is the only way we are going to solve the basic problems and the restructuring of our society which I think is so desperately needed.”

## Rev. Erica Williams, “America: The Home of the Greedy”

“Dr. King saw how poor people are mistreated in this country and it is heartbreaking to see that the same problems from Dr. King’s era persist today. This is why America must undergo a moral revolution of values. America must promote radical prosperity for all people. There are enough resources in this country for those who are homeless to have affordable housing. There are enough resources in this country for those who are or may be sick to receive outstanding, free, prompt medical care. There are enough resources in this country for those who are hungry to be well fed. There are enough resources in this country for those who are unschooled to receive excellent, free, public education. There are enough resources in this country for those who are thirsty to receive clean, un-poisoned water. And there are enough resources in this country for those who are naked to be clothed; those who live in darkness to receive the light of affordable electricity; and those who are cold to receive warmth. And given the outsize wealth of a few and the amassing of money for war and entertainment, all of these resources can and should be given out for low-to-no cost. In the best tradition of Dr. King, it is imperative that those of us who believe that all God’s children have a right to live with dignity, stand up and declare that we will not be silent against the oppression of those on the margins. Our sisters and brothers are hurting and it is up to us to make sure that no one is left out of God’s love for humanity.”

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The **Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice** works to strengthen and expand transformative movements for social change that can draw on the power of religions and human rights.

The **New Poor People’s Campaign** is being called for by nearly fifty community and religious organizations seeking to connect our often isolated battles and begin creating a broader and deeper social movement with the power and vision to transform the structures that create poverty, inequality and oppression, nationally and globally. Inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr.’s vision for a Poor People’s Campaign in 1968 that would unite the poor across lines of division to become a “new and unsettling force in our complacent national life,” those who are building a new Poor People’s Campaign are working to build on struggles now taking place, strengthening our connections to produce the unity that is the only way to move us from merely reacting to different disasters to transforming society. There are many ways to be involved in the emerging campaign, including endorsing the call for the campaign, attending revivals and truth commissions in your region, joining the conversation on social media and raising money to sponsor events. Find us online at [poorpeoplescampaign.org](http://poorpeoplescampaign.org) or email us at [newpoorpeoplescampaign@gmail.com](mailto:newpoorpeoplescampaign@gmail.com).

**Rev. Erica Williams** is a graduate of Howard Divinity School and has dedicated her life to the work of eradicating poverty around the world. Her ministry is based on the wisdom of Luke 4:18–19. She is currently working in North Carolina. “America: Home of the Greedy” was originally published by Many Voices: A Black Church Movement for Gay & Transgender Justice.

For **additional bible studies** that put Martin Luther King, Jr. in conversation with the ministry of Jesus Christ, visit [kairoscenter.org/last-week-jesus-christ-last-year-martin-luther-king](http://kairoscenter.org/last-week-jesus-christ-last-year-martin-luther-king).