

Precious in God's Sight

Jesus and Economic Policy on the Value of Human Life

By Sallie King

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Last quarter I took a course called Economics for Public Policy. At some point in the course we addressed the topic of the value of statistical life. Try as we might to get around it, we had to admit the necessity of assigning a monetary value to human life in order to perform a complete cost-benefit analysis. As if the conversion of life—God's greatest gift—into a tradable, replaceable commodity that can factor into the economic market wasn't bad enough, this practice is also rooted in the belief that some people's lives are worth more than others. This feels like a fairly fundamental contradiction to my personal belief that all people have been made equal and in God's own image.

This assumed inequality in the value of human lives became very unsettling in a question on one of our problem sets: "Should the Iraqi casualties be included in the cost-counting of the Iraq War?" To me, it was disturbing that question was even *asked*. Have we achieved the alienation of the "enemy" to such an extent that we would consider the blood of another human being so meaningless as to completely discount its "cost"?

If we are to truly and faithfully carry out Jesus' teaching to love our neighbor as ourselves, indeed, to love our enemies, how can we say that our neighbor's life is ultimately an unfortunate but unavoidable side effect of the war—nothing weighty enough to make us reconsider how much we can afford to put towards the war effort?

In terms of military tactics, American soldiers certainly have a more direct cost to the country in terms of equipment and training, and an added cost in that the war effort will suffer with a lower number of soldiers. As someone who believes all human life has equal value, however, I cannot conceive of one morally supportable argument that Iraqi lives have negligible or no cost in the war. The mentality of war

makes it easier to separate "us" and "them" and place a higher value, or cost, on the lives of American soldiers. The truth, though, is that we must weigh the cost of all human lives because they all have value to someone, if not to those doing the weighing (or the cost-benefit analysis).

I have moral qualms about considering even American soldiers' lives as having a quantifiable cost per person. I also have a real problem reconciling war under any terms with my religious conscience. I think beating swords into ploughshares shouldn't be a gradual process, dependent on favorable economic conditions. God's justice demands immediate action. The kingdom of heaven will come when peace reigns on Earth, which shouldn't have to wait until benefits outweigh costs—especially the cost of human lives.

Economics, the "dismal science," relies on being able to boil down complex systems of human interaction into numbers and figures that can be calculated and manipulated. Is it possible to integrate a compassionate, Christian awareness of the world—and our calling to help, serve, and love others—with the cold distance from emotional sentiment that calculating the cost of one life requires? Could we perhaps change or adapt the methods currently employed by economists?

Louis Uchitelle, in a *New York Times* article titled "When Talk of Guns and Butter Includes Lives Lost," says, "the old way of valuing life calculated the present value of lost earnings, a standard still used by the courts to compensate accident victims, generally awarding \$500,000 a victim." Economists no longer stick to the cut-and-dry line that a person's life is valued by their human capital—that you're worth as much as you make. But this principle still lurks beneath the surface of economic decision-making. Whenever one's moral conscience must be silenced in the name of sound economic policy, we are not doing our duty as followers of Christ. We are rather called to love and serve all people with equity and without concern for the economic value of their life, because in God's sight, we are all invaluable. ☩

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"Economics is too important to be left to economists alone. It is high time to apply biblical theology to the crisis of our global economy and to search for sustainable alternatives that affirm life, protect the earth, and build human community."

— Jim Wallis