

THE DAY LABORER AND A LIVING WAGE



In the Gospel reading, Jesus spins a parable about day laborers struggling to find work. In this familiar story, a landowner hires some day laborers for a full day's work, some for a half day's work, and others for a few hours at the end of the day. These last day laborers received the same wage – a “just wage” – as those who worked the whole day.

Was this fair? Is this fair, today?

The prevailing wage for a day laborer was enough for a man to feed his family. It was a living wage. Society's expectations did not require the landowner to pay anything more than the prevailing wage. As a compassionate businessman, however, the landowner understood that the needs of the day laborers were not changed by the length of the time they worked; each needed a living wage to, well, live.

The old maxim of whether we live to work or work to live questions our purpose in working. The Catholic position on work can be understood by this question: “How does a person's work support and nurture him or herself and their family?” Work must be dignified (nurturing). Workers have rights (to support their family). The ability to support oneself and one's family requires a living wage!

What does the Church teach? “A just [living] wage is the legitimate fruit of work. To refuse or withhold it can be a grave injustice. In determining fair pay both the needs and the contributions of each person must be taken into account. ‘Remuneration for work should guarantee man the opportunity to provide a dignified livelihood for himself and his family on the material, social, cultural, and spiritual level, taking into account the role and the productivity of each, the state of the business, and the common good.’ Agreement between the parties is not sufficient to justify morally the amount to be received in wages.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2434*)

Let's look at two Oregon examples where living wages are threatened:

The [Oregon Wage Theft Coalition](#) advocates to add teeth to current state wage theft laws. Wage theft is the widespread and illegal practice of not paying workers for some or all of their work. Victims range from “that really great server” for whom you leave a tip on your credit card but whose owner took a cut, to the [day laborers at Voz](#) who are hired for a day and not paid even the agreed-upon wage.

Victims of wage theft are cheated out of what is rightfully due to them, and do not receive a living wage for their work.

At \$9.10, **Oregon's minimum wage** is the second highest in the country. The minimum wage would need to be \$10.10 to have the same purchasing power as the minimum wage was in 1968 (in 2014 dollars), when the minimum wage was indexed to prices.

If the minimum wage was indexed to productivity growth, as it was until 1968, the minimum wage in 2014 dollars would be \$17.00. Yet 40% of today's males – and 50% of women – will earn less than \$17.00/hour.

In Multnomah County, Oregon, a [living wage](#) for a single adult with one child is \$19.57.

The Catholic bishops of the United States have long held that the most effective way to build a just economy that reduces inequality is by creating jobs that pay a living wage. \$9.10 or \$10.10 an hour is not enough to live on. Minimum wage is legal, but minimum wage is not a living wage. It is not just. In today's Gospel, we see that the merciful landowner already knew that.

(Readings for 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time)



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