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# Gleaning as a Transformational Business Model for Solidarity with the Poor and Marginalized

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Gleaning as a Transformational Business Model  
for Solidarity with the Poor and Marginalized

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### Abstract

“Gleaning” refers to the mandate within the Mosaic Law that harvesters should leave behind “gleanings” for the sake of the poor who subsist on the literal and figurative margins of society. Although this biblical mandate is generally neglected and considered irrelevant in modern business practice, it holds powerful lessons to help guide modern businesses into transformational solidarity with the poor and marginalized. This paper interprets the biblical significance of gleaning, to discern how the principles of gleaning, though rooted in ancient agrarian culture, might be applicable to modern business which is generally far removed from agriculture. The exegesis and analysis presented here leads to the conclusion that the operative impact of gleaning can be described in terms of guiding principles that can be applied in present-day businesses. Thus, gleaning is shown to be a formative concept for business in every age, as an illustration of God’s will for a healthy economic system that intentionally invites the participation of those on the margins of society. In the course of this analysis, we develop a useful taxonomy of business practices pertaining to the principles of gleaning. This taxonomy is expressed in the form six characteristics: (1) sustainability for business, profits, market and society; (2) experiential links with the poor; (3) enhancement of human dignity; (4) disruption of the cycle of poverty; (5) grace-infused economy (*caritas*); and (6) revelation of transformational power (*transformatio mundi*). We illustrate these characteristics by examining several business case studies, using the rubric to arrive at an assessment of business relationships with those on the margins.

*Keywords:* gleaning, poverty, capitalism, business ethics, transformation, solidarity, *caritas*, human dignity

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When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God. [Leviticus 19:9-10]

This is the first appearance of the word “gleaning” (לָקַט *laqat*) in the Torah, and thus it serves as a seminal text for interpretation of its meaning. This is a commandment from God, transmitted through the Mosaic Law. In its original context it seems simple and easy to understand: Don’t take all the harvest for yourself. Keep the poor and the sojourner in mind. Let them gather the “gleanings”—the small portions of unpicked, uncollected grains left behind at harvest time—so they can follow behind your harvesters and pick up scraps to eat.

But in today’s business-driven society, this harvest mandate seems antiquated. Only a small fraction of today’s businesses are farms where the biblical commandment could be followed literally. Even among farmers, gleaning is seldom practiced, and it would seem to be essentially ignored by non-farm businesses in general. How then does this command speak to modern day business persons?

That is a matter of interpretation, and there are at least three ways to interpret the biblical texts about gleaning:

- (1) as an ancient custom of ancient agrarian societies that served as a simple act of charity and/or offering to appease the deity(ies) with respect to the produce of the fields;
- (2) as an outdated statute of the Mosaic law that may have been practiced in the past, but which has become obsolete and impractical, because modern commercial farming practices have

become vastly more efficient, and because modern economies do a much better job of feeding the poor through many other means;

(3) as a timeless demonstration of God's concern for economic shalom, and therefore a mandate whose intent is as relevant today as it was in ancient times.

The first and second interpretations will be evaluated here following; however, this paper advocates for the third option. Exegetical study of the texts pertaining to gleaning within the broader context of the biblical witness to God's concern for the poor and marginalized, and for economic justice as an essential ingredient in the outworking of God's kingdom purposes, leads to the conclusion that: *gleaning serves as a guidepost demonstrating a practical mechanism to bring about economic shalom in alignment with God's kingdom purposes, and therefore it remains relevant for contemporary business practice.* The exegetical analysis presented here is supported by case studies of businesses which have found innovative ways to practice the fundamental principles of gleaning. This analysis suggests that business leaders have a responsibility to find some practical means to incorporate the aims of gleaning into their business practice. In sum, gleaning is seen to be a transformational model for business solidarity with those on the margins of society.

### **Literature Review**

The practice of gleaning is first introduced in ancient Israel through the laws of the Pentateuch. In Leviticus 19:9-10, farmers are instructed to leave both the boarder of their fields and all unripe grapes when harvesting so that the disadvantaged within Israel – the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner – can collect enough food for survival. This is repeated again in Leviticus 23:22, specifically addressing grain harvests. After each instance, Israel is reminded that the “LORD your God” himself has commanded these laws. Deuteronomy 24:19-22 reiterates the harvest laws with a few additions. First, olive trees are added to the list of provisions for the poor and Israel. Second, farmers are reassured that God will look favorably on their generosity by blessing “all the work of your hands” (24:19). Last, the

Lord reminds his people that they need to show mercy to those in need, just as God showed them mercy by bringing them out of slavery in Egypt. The book of Ruth contains the single biblical example of the historic practice of the harvest mandate. Chapter two depicts the widow and foreigner Ruth goes into the fields to collect enough food for her and her widowed mother-in-law Naomi.

Scholars have interpreted the concept of gleaning in a variety of ways and contexts. Auld (1984, p. 269) causally references gleaning as an indicator that Boaz is growing progressively protective of Ruth. Beyond this, he ignores these laws in his analysis of Ruth. Mills (2001) emphasizes “the familial model of moral order, ... a weaving in of all three strands of cosmos, community and person”. Matthews (2004, p. 227-8) places gleaning under the larger sphere of ancient hospitality. Once a stranger enters an individual’s private sphere, the individual is compelled by law and custom to offer the stranger hospitality. In the context of Ruth, Boaz is obliged to permit Ruth’s gleaning request once she enters the personal domain of his field. These commentators emphasize how the practice of gleaning reflects God’s desire for grace, shalom and community among his people.

The opinions of most scholars can be grouped under three broad categories: gleaning as ancient practice, as reflection of God’s character, and as economic teaching.

**Gleaning as ancient custom.** Among those who hold gleaning as an ancient custom, Goslinga (1986, p. 529) asserts that the entire act was a “customary right” of the poor, not a strictly enforced law that could be taken for granted. On the other hand, Gray (1886, p. 392) asserts that Jewish laws concerning gleaning were very strict. Gleaners could only pick up what was inadvertently left behind, not what was accidentally dropped when a thorn or scorpion surprised the reaper. Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky (2011, p. 30) discuss gleaning as a well-known early agricultural practice that is often represented in ancient iconography. Others interpret gleaning as a pagan ritual that biblical authors reinterpret into a holy practice. The suggestion is made that the gleaning laws began by mimicking ancient harvest laws where part of the crop was left for the spirit of the soil to ensure that the crop would grow again next year

(Porter, 1976, p. 151; Tigay, 1996, p. 229). In their analysis of gleaning, none of these scholars believe that this ancient practice holds any relevance for modern times.

The suggestion that the biblical laws concerning gleaning were based in pagan customs is soundly refuted, however, by Baker (2009): “None of the extant laws from the ancient near East deal with gleaning, and it is rarely mentioned in other texts” (p. 233). He concludes: “So there is no good reason to doubt that from the beginning these laws were formulated for the sake of the poor”, as opposed to being pagan rights to “placate the spirits of the land” (Baker, 2009, p. 238).

**Gleaning as Reflection of God’s Character.** Still other scholars view gleaning as a direct reflection of God’s character. The laws, including those pertaining to gleaning, were created by God in order to provide for the poor and oppressed; they are “expressed in terms of the character of God” (Atkinson, 1983, p. 60). That the structure of the laws in Leviticus is coupled with the frequent reminder, “I am the LORD your God,” teaches that the general purpose of the Torah is to direct Israel to emulate God’s holiness. This includes showing his kindness, mercy, and charity to others (Scherman, 1990, p. 341). For this reason, Israel is commanded to set aside part of its harvest for the poor. Having seen God’s awesome provision during the Exodus, Israel cannot help but reflect and extend the same grace towards the less fortunate among them.

The gleaning laws given in Deuteronomy reflect God’s grace and provision towards Israel when they were still slaves in Egypt. Hubbard (1988, p. 136) adds that God is the rightful landowner of all Israel. Therefore, all crops grown belong to him. In addition to using farmers as the means of cultivating the ground and nurturing his crops, God uses farmers as the main mechanism to show his grace and provision to the poor.

Only Atkinson broaches the subject of modern day gleaning, yet he merely poses a narrow question, and does not search for an answer. He wonders how much countries with a Christian heritage should provide similar economic laws for the poor.

**Gleaning as economic teaching.** According to this perspective, gleaning prevents Israel's underprivileged from suffering economic injustice. The placement of the gleaning laws in the priestly Decalogue of Leviticus 19 reveals the "interrelatedness of proper social behavior and a meaningful religious life," two things that were never meant to be treated as separate (Levine, 1989, p. xv). In other words, those who are right in the Lord's sight will naturally treat others justly and prevent the occurrence of deceitful economic practices. Hamlin (1996, p. 27) expands this idea in saying that gleaning is a form of compassion inherent in the "social contract" ancient Israelite landowners share with the poor. Hamlin (1996) goes on to hint at the need to include business in a modern gleaning model.

Both Sakenfeld (1999, p. 39) and Pressler (2002, p. 276) agree that gleaning is the primary avenue of survival for the poor in agrarian Israel. Pressler asserts, however, that this survival mechanism could not be taken for granted by the underprivileged. Gleaning was not a universal right, but rather is a privilege allowed only at the discretion of each landowner.

Pressler takes her discussion of gleaning no farther than the ancient world, while Sakenfeld and Hamlin both bring gleaning into contemporary times. Sakenfeld compares ancient gleaning with the welfare laws and food banks in some modern countries, and acknowledges that modern welfare food programs do not do enough to help the poor: people must still "rummage through garbage cans" or worse in order to survive (39). Hamlin slightly broadens her conception of modern gleaning from governmental action to include participation by the private sector – churches, individuals, and grocery stores.

Although Sakenfeld (1999) and Hamlin (1996) each consider gleaning in contemporary context, their analysis falls short of a fully developed treatment of gleaning, because they focus merely on food distribution, rather than on the larger theme of economic justice within the Torah.

Horsley (2009) offers a more robust interpretation of gleaning as an example of "the safeguards against entrenched poverty" contained in Yahweh's covenant with the people. Thus gleaning stands with the other provisions in the Pentateuch designed to help those excluded with limited ability to participate



in the economic system (Mott and Sider, 1999). These provisions include gleaning, fallow land (Exod. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:1-7), debt forgiveness (Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:35-38; Deut. 15:1-11), and Jubilee (Lev. 25:8-17) (Mott and Sider, 1999).

Several commentators observe that the practical examples of economic mandates contained within the Mosaic Law deserve to be taken seriously as moral imperatives, relevant in this and every age. When it comes to fulfilling the moral imperatives of the Torah, “businesses—small and large—are the single most powerful agents” (Claar and Kay, 2007, p. 162). “There is no way for Christians to get around the biblical principle that care for the poor is an obligation, not an option” (Claar and Kay, 2007, p. 189). The Torah is filled with demands for justice, typically expressed in pragmatic, economic terms. The prophets and wisdom literature likewise give consistent injunctions against putting the poor at any disadvantage. Modern businesses thus responsibility to observe the principles transmitted through the agricultural context of the Bible (Mott and Sider, 1999; Meeks, 2006; Noell, 2007; Pleins, 2000; Wright, 2004). Paying particular attention to gleaning and the parallel law regarding “scrumpling” – the statute regarding fruit on the vine (Deut. 23:24-25) – Baker (2009) concludes that the “the practicalities are humanitarian but the motivation is theological.” Similarly, Buchholz (1988) concludes that gleaning and the other practical laws of the Pentateuch pertaining to economics serve to express theological tenets which have applicability beyond the immediate context of their original audiences. The biblical lessons pertaining to gleaning reinforce, in clear, tangible terms, all the major biblical themes of economic justice. The lesson to business managers is clear: *run your businesses such that everyone in your society has enough.*

Friedman (2000, p. 45) states the fundamental, controlling concept which makes the theological tenets the Mosaic law incumbent upon modern-day business:

In biblical times, farms were the equivalent of big business. ... Clearly, it is not a big stretch for a company that wishes to follow the spirit of these laws to recognize that there is a moral obligation to help the poor by setting aside a portion of a company’s profits for the needy.

In the following analysis, we proceed with this motif of theological interpretation in mind – to draw out the theological principles which bring the spirit of the laws into focus in our contemporary context in order that we may discern the moral obligations to which they bear witness.

### **Theological interpretation of gleanings as a business practice:**

#### **Gleaning in the Pentateuch**

As previously mentioned, Leviticus 19:9-10 serves as the seminal text for the harvest mandate to leave “gleanings” for the “gleaners”. It is worth noting that the command given here is addressed directly to landowners, and as a practical matter, to everyone else involved in the harvest: foremen and workers alike. The command is a public announcement; it affects the entire community. In essence, this puts the rulers of the harvest on notice to fulfill their obligation to leave enough behind so that the poor and sojourner can find something to eat. The entire community is aware of this mandate and of who is responsible to obey it. The principle of solidarity is immediately apparent here: it takes the entire community – landowners, supervisors, laborers, gleaners, and even the bystanders observing it all – to faithfully fulfill this statute.

The repetition of the law in the sequence of instructions for the seasonal feasts of the agricultural year reinforces its importance for the covenant community:

“And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.” [Leviticus 23:22]

In each mention of gleanings in *Leviticus*, the command is immediately followed by the reminder, “You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.” This reinforces the purpose of the statute: to permit those on the margins and find sustenance through a combination of their

effort in the grace bestowed upon them through the harvest. Likewise, this liturgical repetition emphasizes God's concern for the poor and the sojourner to participate in economic shalom.

The principles of solidarity, justice and community stand out clearly enough. But there remains something irksome in the gleaning commandment: it seems to violate the norm of efficiency required of farming as a *business*. In the context of business, the practice of gleaning seems to run counter to the norms of progress, productivity and efficiency. Business today is all about efficiency. Efficiency is accepted as a foundational good and a necessary condition for the proper function of free market capitalism. To deliberately leave produce behind, and forgo the sales and profit opportunity seems a poor business strategy on its surface.

How does Scripture answer this objection? Is gleaning imposed as a burden, akin to a tax on the operation? Is it merely an injunction to enforce charitable donations? At first glance, the text seems to ignore these questions altogether. No guidelines are given for the amount of gleaning to be permitted. No percentage is specified for the gleaners' share. No expectations are shown for profit margin or efficiency to be achieved in the operation. No provision is made for the farmer to be compensated for the grain and fruit taken by the gleaners. There is neither discussion of how much economic inequality is tolerable, nor instructions on how close to the edge of the field to harvest, nor a plan for how to feed those who have not even the ability to work as gleaners in the fields. The Bible's silence on these concerns is not however to be taken as a sign that these questions are unimportant. No, but rather silence on these practical concerns is better interpreted as a recognition that the farm manager has unlimited freedom to make intelligent decisions in the conduct of business. Gleaning is not imposed as a sort of tax upon the farmer. There is no suggestion anywhere in the Bible that gleaning was meant to be enforced as a sort of tax; rather, the implicit expectation is that the harvest will be well-managed, and there will be enough grain and produce to generate sustainable income, while at the same time providing for the gleaners.

All the practical details are left in the hands of the landowners and managers to use their best judgment. The intention of the Mosaic Law and Torah as a whole is that the business of farming should

be prosperous, *and* the poor and sojourners should find sustenance and not be trapped in a perpetual cycle of poverty and desperation. It is a both/and, not either/or proposition. God's covenant promise is based in prosperity and economic shalom.

The principles underlying gleaning do not work against the healthy, profitable operation of the business. Indeed, the beneficial provision for the marginalized is expected to flow from the natural course of business, without disrupting the business model of the property owners. The land owners are expected to earn a healthy profit, reaping the best of the grain first, and taking all of the sheaves up to the metaphorical and literal edge of their ability to earn as much as possible without unduly sacrificing either their own efficiency or the gleaners' opportunity to feed themselves. All the biblical texts regarding harvest rules presume that the land owners and farmers shall earn a reasonable profit. Indeed, the rationale for constraining the harvest is clearly stated in Deuteronomy, "[so] that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands" [Deut. 24:19]. By faithful obedience to this simple mandate, business owners are promised the blessing of financial prosperity. The profound biblical truth to be recognized here is that *healthy profits are consistent with gleaning as a standard business practice*. This conclusion is reinforced by overarching context of covenantal relationship which frames the Torah.

The Deuteronomic law adds nuance:

<sup>19</sup> When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. <sup>20</sup> When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. <sup>21</sup> When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. <sup>22</sup> You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this. [Deut. 24:19-22]

The word “forget” [shachah, שָׁחַח] in this passage provides a nuance that is easily overlooked. This is a common word in the Old Testament. It refers most often to the failure of the people to honor God and fulfill their duty to Torah. The Israelites are called to remember the Torah, and when they fail to do so, they are said to have forgotten the Lord [Dt. 8:19; Jer. 13:25; Job 8:13, 50:22; Ps. 50:22; Ps. 106:13; Is. 65:11 and *passim*]. Conversely, the word is used to describe God’s covenantal promise. He will not forget; rather, he will always remember his people. He will protect and bless them according to his covenantal promise [Dt. 4:31; Sam. 1:11; Ps. 42:10; Is 49:14; Hos. 4:6]. This significance of intentionality in the nuance of this word is easily overlooked, because the word “forget” in modern language (in English, for instance) typically conveys a more trivial sort of forgetfulness. Forgetfulness often conveys a sense of *unintentional* error due to absent-mindedness or weak-mindedness: for example, one might say, “I forgot where I left the keys.” This trivial sort of forgetfulness is not intentional; it is merely “accidental”.

The point to be made with respect to Deuteronomy 24:19 is that the farmer has likely made a decision not to pick up every last sheaf. He has not “accidentally” left some behind, but rather has taken the best, most quickly and efficiently harvested sheaves first, as a prudent farmer will. Haphazard, messy, careless or improper farming is not being advocated here. The farmer has deliberately turned away from the margins of the field. As anyone who has planted, harvested or simply traveled country roads knows, the crops along the margins, the roadside, the rocky edge, the eroding bank, the neighbor’s fence or the boundary line determined by the brambles, do not usually produce the most valuable fruit. There are diminishing returns at the margin. In economics there is even a name for this — *the law of diminishing returns*. The agricultural practice described in this passage is most sensible: the farmer has gone after the highest profits first. The most accessible, richest producing rows have been harvested. This is good business practice: the farmer reaps the greatest profit. This point is extended and reiterated by the mention of olive [v. 20] and grape [v.21] harvesting methods. Just as the “forgotten” sheaf [v. 19] has been left behind by choice, so likewise have the clinging, under-ripened olives and the less-than-succulent grapes

been left behind, prudently, by the harvesters. In each case, the most efficiently taken fruits are gathered, and the less efficiently gathered remnants are intentionally left behind. The business practitioner who does this first and does it efficiently will be blessed with profits and business success.

The business lesson here is to consider the law of diminishing returns as an ingredient in the practice of gleaning. The divine plan for economic shalom takes this into consideration. This harvest rules are therefore seen to recognize and affirm sensible, profitable harvest methods. At the same time, the economic law of diminishing returns is seen as a natural opportunity for the gleaners to step in and join in the work of the harvest. This means that gleaning is not intended to interfere with the efficient operation of the farming enterprise. The business model set forth here is ordained by the Lord for the betterment of both the farmer and those on the margins of society – sojourner, fatherless, and widow [v. 20]. This is the wisdom of God for the economic sustainability of a community. The marginal crops are for those on the margins.

### **Gleaning in the Prophets**

The prophets mention gleaning several times, with a distinct emphasis on the roughshod action of stripping a vine or branch bare [Is. 17:6, 24:13; Jer. 49:9; Ob. 5; Mic. 7:1]. The word used here to describe the action pertains specifically to grapes and olives, fruits of vine and branch. The noun [עֹלְלוֹת, *aolaloth*] is derived from the verb [עָלַל, *alal*] which describes wanton, rough or malicious treatment. Hence, the verb connotes the crude motion of stripping a branch bare, and gleaning is thus a metaphorical, poetic description of the harshest treatment, as in Jeremiah's severe warning, "They shall glean thoroughly as a vine the remnant of Israel; like a grape gatherer pass your hand again over its branches" [Jer. 6:9]. The gleaners, desperate to take a morsel by brute force, are more concerned about their immediate stomach pangs than about the quality of the produce.

Several other references to this style of gleaning make it clear that the poor gleaners are not going to find any choice fruits. All the good olives and grapes will have been taken by the harvesters. The

gleaners will be limited to slim pickings. This is made clear in the prophecy against Damascus, foreseeing the city as “a heap of ruins” in which food will be so scarce that it will seem as gleaning is the only source of nourishment [Isaiah 17:1-6]. To drive the point home, the prophet Isaiah describes the slim pickings in detail:

Gleanings will be left in it,  
as when an olive tree is beaten—  
two or three berries in the top of the highest bough,  
four or five on the branches of a fruit tree [Isaiah 17:6]

Micah similarly emphasizes the meagerness of the gleanings in his prophecy of devastation—

Woe is me! For I have become  
as when the summer fruit has been gathered,  
as when the grapes have been gleaned  
there is no cluster to eat, no first-ripe fig that my soul desires [Micah 7:1]

These descriptions point to the meagerness of gleanings, which reinforces the notion that gleaning is consistent with the economic law of diminishing returns. The prophets portray gleaning as dire straits, a last resort for those who must scavenge for scraps of food. This suggests that the gleaners have no better opportunity to earn a living than to trade a day’s labor for a day’s sustenance. Their economic status would seem similar to that of subsistence-level farmers.

There is however, an important distinction to be made between gleaners and subsistence-level farmers. The poor farmers scrape by on their own, coping with a variety of adversities—drought, poor soil, poor weather and lack of agricultural technology—to eke out a living. The gleaners however, depend upon a socio-economic system robust enough to produce a surplus. That situation presumes a market economy of some sort, even if it is a primitive barter economy.

The gleaners’ poverty is due primarily to their social status as foreigners, sojourners, widows and orphans. They lack access to capital, and are either unemployed or underemployed. There are systemic

reasons for their lack of job opportunities. The systemic routes of gleaning as well as the communal nature of the obligation are best illustrated in the singular biblical example of Ruth and her family.

### **Gleaning in the book of Ruth**

This story of Ruth is critical for interpretation, because it is the only detailed biblical narrative of how gleaning works. Gleaning [לָקַטְ, *laqat*,] as the word is used in Ruth, pertains to sheaves of standing grain. Ruth's act of gleaning serves as a primary theme within the plot of the story. It is mentioned twelve times in chapter 2 (and nowhere else within the book).

Boaz, the landowner in this story, is a model of virtue. He goes out of his way to make sure that the gleaners have enough, and even more than enough. He is generous to the point of even inviting the newly arrived sojourner, Ruth, to follow along with, and stay close to his servant harvesters, and then to join them at the dinner table. His overweening generosity should not be taken as normative however, although it is highly admirable and illustrates the dominant theme of loving-kindness (חֶסֶד, *hesed*) which runs throughout the story. In this case however, Boaz's generosity can be taken as the result of his mixed motives, since it becomes immediately apparent that Ruth has caught his eye. She courts his favor, and he treats her cordially. The story operates on many levels, including that of a provocative love story in which Boaz weds Ruth, and she bears a son, Obed, who becomes the father of Jesse, and thereby the grandfather of King David. Thus Ruth and Boaz have the honor of being progenitors of Davidic dynasty and ancestors in the lineage of Jesus.

The intrigue of the love story and the salient roles of Ruth and Boaz in the history of Israel make clear enough that the unique story of Ruth and Boaz should not be taken as a normative example of intimacy between landowners and gleaners! Nonetheless, there are several lessons to be drawn from this story which shed light on the general principles of gleaning.



First, we see that gleaning is accepted as a standard practice within the community, and that it confers a modicum of dignity upon those who must glean to feed themselves. Ruth is respected for her diligence. She works hard the entire day [2:7], and receives praise for her productivity and the responsibility she shows by providing for her mother-in-law, Naomi [2:11-12]. Her status as a gleaner does not despoil her character to any significant degree; otherwise, Boaz would not have seen her as worthy of marriage. This is especially significant given her status as a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but a Moabite, a member of the tribe despised for their animosity to the Israelites during the Exodus [Deut. 23:3-6]. As if to drive the point home, the text refers to her repeatedly as “Ruth the Moabite”.

It is hard to imagine a better illustration of God’s concern for the marginalized—the foreigner, sojourner, widow and orphan—because Ruth fits all four categories. Gleaning provides the context for her redemption from her status as an outcast. Her redemptive entry into the community of Bethlehem begins the day she goes to glean in the barley field of Boaz. This much we may say is normative for the practice of gleaning—it is *redemptive*. It models the grace and mercy of God. It restores and upholds dignity. It redeems relationships. It bolsters *shalom* in the community. It blesses both the giver and the receiver with participation in redemptive behavior and righteousness. Gleaning displays God’s lovingkindness (*hesed*), the undergirding theme running throughout the book of Ruth. The connection between gleaning and God’s lovingkindness is driven home by the harvest instructions in Deuteronomy which conclude with this reminder: “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this” [Deut. 24:22]. Thus, we may infer that the harvest mandate is given not merely as a means to extend mercy to the poor, but also to keep the faithful children of God mindful of their own relationship with their God. To show mercy is to live in faithful obedience to God’s will. The gleaning mandate would seem to be the quintessential demonstration of God’s will that those with power over the harvest would incorporate run their business in a manner which offers meaningful, redemptive work to those on the margins of society.

Those on the margins are to be invited into the economy in a way that will put them to work and provide them sustenance. They are to be afforded the human dignity of meaningful work, so that they may eat of the work of their own hands, rather than sit in the dust begging for a handout. Though their lives are hard and they suffer the curse pronounced upon Adam – “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread” [Gen. 3:19] – the curse in this case brings with it the blessing of food. And this food is earned through honest work. This is God’s plan for the marginalized – to be recognized, to receive human dignity by dint of their productive work, to feed themselves and their families [cf. the book of Ruth] – in short, to be included in the economy and not left out of it.

Friedman (2000, p. 45) cites Maimonides in recognizing that,

[T]he highest form of charity is providing one with the ability to earn a living so that the individual does not become poor. This may be accomplished by providing a gift or loan enabling one to start a business, taking the destitute person in as a partner, or helping the individual find employment.

This speaks to another important principle of gleaning: it bestows dignity by providing meaningful work. The gleaners do not stand idly by waiting for a “handout”. Rather, they take initiative and show up for work. In biblical context, sojourners represent those most in need of a chance to find work. Thus, Friedman concludes (2000, p. 46): “Employers have a special obligation to “strengthen” those who are of different backgrounds by providing them with meaningful work.”

### **Implications for Business**

This interpretation of the practice of gleaning is consistent with the major themes of the book of Ruth, and with the biblical witness to God as merciful, gracious and abounding in lovingkindness. This is a matter of faithful obedience, and also a pathway of spiritual growth for business leaders who would take seriously the mandate to offer redemptive economic opportunities for individuals living on the

metaphorical margins of their fields. Furthermore, it is a profound source of wisdom for political economy in general, even in the secular spheres of business and economics. The principles of gleanng promote social and economic sustainability. History has shown repeatedly how economies collapse whenever the power of profit is pushed to the limit as a means to extract financial gains from the larger society.<sup>1</sup>

These concerns for macroeconomic issues however depart from the immediate, personalized concerns of the gleanng mandate. Gleanng provides direct, personal relief to these individuals without necessarily addressing the systemic reasons for their distress. There is a lesson here for modern-day businesses also. The biblical command says nothing about the responsibility of the business operator to solve the persistent problems of society. It asks simply that business persons pay attention to the plight of those living nearby on the margins of society. In the case of agricultural gleanng the margins are literally the margins of the landowners' property. Most modern-day business owners will need to use imagination to discern how this obligation applies to them. The margins might be geographical, but other sorts of margins apply also, such as economic hardships and social issues.

The timeless wisdom expressed through the gleanng mandate deserves attention in every age. As shown by the forgoing exegetical analysis, the deep theological truths represented in the practice of gleanng and the obligation placed upon those with economic power transcend the cultural and historical peculiarities of ancient agrarian society.

The challenge before us therefore is to wrestle with the implications of these theological lessons in order to apply the ancient principles of gleanng amidst the daunting complexities of modern-day

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<sup>1</sup> I have developed this thesis elsewhere, citing the financial crash of 2008 as a case in point. Efficiency alone is an insufficient ingredient for health and sustainability in the political economy. The element of *grace/caritas* is necessary to enact the *hesed* that undergirds the harvest mandate (Baker, 2016). Robust economic stability carries with it an obligation for, and a dependence upon, concern for the economic equity of those at the bottom rungs of society (Stiglitz, 2012). History has shown that political economies which are extractive rather than inclusive have our prone to failure (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012).

business. The variations and permutations on this theme are boundless. Each business manager is given freedom to sort the details in each particular situation. It will prove instructive therefore to examine case studies to see how the principles of gleaning have been put into practice in different situations.

As a guide to evaluating a wide variety of business cases I offer the following rubric of seven parameters (Figure 1). Each parameter pertains to an aspect of gleaning based on the exegetical analysis presented above. The extent to which a business correlates with and satisfies the biblical notion of gleaning will depend upon the extent to which its business model embodies each of the following parameters:

**1. Sustainability for business profits, market and society:** Does the practice generate a reasonable and sustainable rate of return for the business owners, and does it contribute to the sustainable health of the market economy and society in general? Does the business model incorporate gleaning as standard practice?

Businesses are expected to earn a healthy profit without pushing their business models to the breaking point. These lessons emerge from exegetical analysis:

- a. Healthy profits are expected to be consistent with gleaning opportunities.
- b. Faithful adherence to the harvest mandate leads to sustainable prosperity for farm, community, and society at large.
- c. The proper limits upon a business's pursuit of profit are to be governed in some part by the law of diminishing returns. This means that healthy profits are expected to come first, before the needs of the gleaners have been met. It is the responsibility of the business manager to establish the extent of the harvest, and to know where the marginally profitable portion of the field should be left aside for the gleaners. While this prerogative seems to place the extent of profitable operations in the hands of the business manager, that manager must honor the commandment to leave the marginal harvest behind, and not take it all.

d. Business managers have freedom and discretion to make their own decisions about how to adapt the mandate to their situation, while upholding their obligation to pay attention to “the margins of their fields”, metaphorically speaking.

**2. Experiential link with the poor:** Gleaning is based in relationship. It is incarnational, meaning that in the ideal case the landowners, harvesters and gleaners have direct interpersonal connections, however tenuous those may be. Business models incorporating gleaning will engender direct interpersonal relationship; however, the depth of relationship can vary widely.

**3. Enhances human dignity:** Human dignity and economic prosperity are linked at the deepest level. Does the practice bestow dignity upon those being served by engendering participation in meaningful work? This differentiates pure gleaning models from other acts of charity, which might not bestow human dignity if the recipient is treated like a mere beggar. The dignity in the case of pure gleaning comes from the recognition of human participation in God’s call to exercise dominion through meaningful labor, and through recognition of meaningful work as a sign of the *imago Dei* in humanity. Thus, gleaning engenders *shalom*.

**4. Disrupts the cycle of poverty:** Gleaning not only provides for the immediate need for sustenance, but also disrupts the systemic cycle of poverty. The sojourner is drawn into community. The narrative of Ruth illustrates the restoration of familial and community ties. “Thus the narrative [of Ruth] functions as social teaching, meeting the contemporary need for a moral vision of the significance of, and boundaries, of the regional culture, ... [and] the actual integration of a foreigner in the heart of Israel” (Mills, 2001, 103). Individual acts of gleaning may not always break the systemic cycles, but they do at least have the potential to do so, by creating an opportunity for meaningful work and a living wage, where none existed before.

**5. Economy of grace:** The practice of gleaning depends upon the providence of God. God provides the harvest, and the landowners respond by sharing the bounty. Grace permeates the economic

system. In the act of gleaning, the gleaners receive the grace of being included in the work and the community. “The economy of grace... focuses on the creation of the commonweal that mutually assures dignity for all” (Meeks, 2006). This grace is apparent to all parties. Thus, the practice develops awareness of God’s grace/*caritas* on the part of the participants, on both sides of the harvest. The owners and managers of the harvest are called to display the character of God. He reminds them, “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this” [Deut. 24:19-22]. Transformation flows from recognition God’s abundance and grace in providing for economic shalom of the community.

**6. Revelation:** Gleaning bears witness to the greater reality of God’s redeeming grace and lovingkindness (*hesed*). This condition overlaps somewhat with the previous criterion regarding the *economy of grace*, because the very notion of divine grace is based in God’s self-revealing action. Revelation deserves separate mention within this rubric however, in order to answer the question of whether or not the practice is being done in such a way as to bear witness to God.

True gleaning does so by bringing transparent and public attention/witness to the fact that the dignity bestowed upon the gleaner greatly exceeds the value of the commodity being harvested, and that faithfulness to God is both the reason for this behavior and the source of this dignity. There is an evangelical witness here when God is praised, and even when liturgical words are not used to express faith in God, there remains a mysterious witness of sorts to spiritual reality. We thus categorize as revelatory those varieties of gleaning which bear witness to the greater reality of religious faith.

Taking all these principles together, the lessons of the gleaning mandate may be summed up in this timeless lesson: The business of business is the cultivation of economic shalom. This has remained true from the earliest agrarian societies to the modern economy.

Figure 1. Gleaning Rubric

parameter	description	example
<b>Sustainable Business Model</b>	Does the practice generate a reasonable and sustainable rate of return for the business owners, and does it contribute to the sustainable health of the market economy and society in general? Does the business model incorporate gleaning as standard practice?	<b>Quest Aircraft</b> – profit from every nine planes delivered subsidizes the tenth plane, which is granted to non-profit humanitarian organizations
<b>Experiential link with the poor</b>	Does the practice bring leaders and employees of the business into direct interpersonal contact with those being served? The biblical theme at work here is incarnational ministry.	<b>Theo Chocolate</b> – direct sourcing; personal relationships between company founder and farmers in Congo
<b>Enhances human dignity</b>	Does the practice bestow dignity upon those being served by engendering participation in meaningful work? This differentiates pure gleaning models from other acts of charity, which might not bestow human dignity if the recipient is treated like a mere beggar. The dignity in the case of pure gleaning comes from the recognition of human participation in God’s call to exercise dominion through meaningful labor, and through recognition of meaningful work as a sign of the <i>imago Dei</i> in humanity.	<b>Pioneer Industries</b> – employer of ex-convicts. Employees take responsibility for themselves and earn a living.
<b>Disrupts the cycle of poverty</b>	Does the practice intervene in the lives of the poor, deliver tangible benefits, and help disrupt the cycle of poverty brought on by systemic issues in society?	<b>Ciudad Saludable</b> – puts the poor to work cleaning up the streets of their city and earning a paycheck in the process.
<b>Economy of grace</b>	Does the practice develop awareness of grace/ <i>caritas</i> on the part of the participants, on both sides of the harvest? Do those within the firm—the managers, workers and perhaps others with a stake in the business—see the practice as an act of grace? And do the recipients of this grace recognize the grace being shared and bestowed upon them? Transformation flows from recognition of God’s abundance and grace in providing for economic shalom of the community.	<b>Thain Boatworks</b> – Builds ferry boats on Lake Victoria, enabling transformation of local economy, leading to flourishing of new trading and employment opportunities.
<b>Revelation</b>	Does the practice bear witness to the greater reality of God’s redeeming grace and lovingkindness ( <i>hesed</i> )? This condition overlaps somewhat with the previous criterion regarding the <i>economy of grace</i> , because the very notion of divine grace is based in God’s self-revealing action. Revelation deserves separate mention within this rubric however, in order to answer the question of whether or not the practice is being done in such a way as to bear witness to God.	<b>Sozo Friends</b> – The company name (transliteration of the biblical Greek word for salvation, σωζω) and corporate philosophy are based in the Gospel.

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