



Seventeen Dollars and Seventy-Four Cents

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[Jesus] said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them, for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.” – Luke 21:3-4 (NRSV)

Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. – James 5:4 (NRSV)

I’ve set a timer as I sit down to write the first draft of this piece...

Do you remember your first paying job? I mean the one with hourly wage, taxes withheld, and a timecard to punch. Many of us will remember this big personal step into the “real world.” My first “real” job was the summer after ninth grade. I worked for a high-end landscaper, beautifying primarily upper-class properties around central Virginia in hot, tactile humidity.

My mom somehow made possible this character-building foray into hard, rewarding labor. I was fifteen. I still laugh wondering what the adults on our crews must have thought. Here I was, my spindly (but determined!) frame making \$7+ an hour alongside hardened men as we cultivated and completed projects on pricey estates. I remember how cool and insufficient I felt, the ribald humor and the sweat, the satisfaction of transforming landscapes.

How was your first wage-paying job? What lessons, values, and red flags did that experience instill in you? How do those things impact your worldview now . . . Oh! My timer just went off.

Since I began writing, I made about \$17.74. Not bad for a handful of paragraphs, though a chunk was cut from this final version.

\$17.74 is also the amount [donated to relief efforts in Gaza by a man named Hamza](#) last November. I don't need to tell you that amount is not large, but \$17.74 was all of Hamza's savings.

Moreover, Hamza worked 136 hours of hard labor to accrue those funds: 13 cents/hour. That's because Hamza is incarcerated in a California state prison, where he's been for 40 years. He was 16 when he was jailed, barely older than me at that first landscaping job.

Is my or your work worth more than Hamza's? I believe the answer is no. And when we turn to the Jesus we claim manifests God's dream for humanity, we learn that not only is Hamza's personhood and work equal to ours, but his sacrificial compassion is worth more.

Many of you know that the 13th Amendment abolished slavery. Some of you will know, however, that the law, ratified in 1865, includes ["except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted."](#) In other words, our country never fully banned slavery.

And all of us are "beneficiaries" of [this modern-day slavery](#).

As was [recently reported](#), "hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of agricultural products" come from incarcerated labor, sold by "some of the world's largest food companies and most popular brands." Mega-grocer Kroger continues to have (non-carceral) [forced labor slavery exposed](#) in its supply chain. Not coincidentally, Kroger is one of the last major holdouts from the [Coalition of Immokalee Workers' Fair Food Program](#) a proven slavery-eradication initiative the UCC has [supported for decades](#).

Finally, there's the target of Hamza's imprisoned compassion: our tax-funded slaughter of Palestinians in what human rights experts defined as an open-air prison even before the current genocide in Gaza.

Do you have \$17.74? Probably! But literally shutting down business-as-usual is the starting point for people of faith and conscience not bound by prison walls.

To acknowledge and name these things is to discomfort and implicate. To admit we are participants in these truths is to compel response. So, we often choose silence to maintain a veneer of fabricated comfort. But silence is denial, and denial enables these evils. In the strong name of Jesus, let us unequivocally refuse to be “beneficiaries” any longer. We don’t have to live like this. A transformed world is possible. God is crying out for willing landscapers.

And be uplifted! Hamza will be released from prison at the end of this month, [thanks to a new California law that grants parole opportunities to minors charged as adults](#). Justin Mashouf, a filmmaker who works with inmates, has known Hamza for 15 years and shared news of his donation. When news of Hamza’s generosity spread, Mashouf set up a GoFundMe to help ease his friend’s transition back into the “real world.” [It raised over \\$100,000](#).

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