

Musings About Ebenezer Scrooge and Modern Wealth and Poverty

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I'll raise your salary, and endeavour to assist your struggling family, and we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon, over a Christmas bowl of smoking bishop, Bob! Make up the fires, and buy another coal-scuttle before you dot another i, Bob Cratchit!

Wouldn't you like to hear your employer say that to you? The other day, we again watched the old *A Christmas Carol/Scrooge* movie starring Alastair Sim. Dickens wrote his Ebenezer Scrooge character as the epitome of miserliness, and "scrooge" has even become a dictionary word that means "a miserly person." Nevertheless, *before his conversion*, miserly, stingy Ebenezer Scrooge gave his clerk, Bob Cratchit, Christmas day off *with pay*.

Today, we tend to think of ourselves as more enlightened and superior to the grimy nineteenth century. Yet, over 160 years after Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, it will be common for countless employees to either have to work on Christmas or to have the day off with no pay. I'm not saying this as any sort of comment on Christmas, but as a comment on our times. Scrooge did not have to give Bob Cratchit the day off with pay. No law required it. But he did it anyway. And after his conversion, he raised Cratchit's salary and became as a second father to Cratchit's crippled son, Tiny Tim, seeing that he had the best medical care.

But many employers now seem to go out of their way to do for their employees only what the law requires, paying minimum wage, giving less than full-time hours, giving no medical benefits, and so forth. And this is not done, in many cases, just to barely stay in business. Walmart, just to take one example, employs 2,100,000 people and had a profit in 2009 of US\$14.33 billion.* The Walton family, which owns about 39 percent of Walmart stock, is worth about US\$90 billion. Michael Duke, Walmart's CEO, earns about as much in one hour as his average worker makes in a year. Of course, Walmart is not unique: CEOs in the country's top 500 companies make, on average, 319 times

* All of the statistics in this article are from reliable websites on the Internet and can be found by googling, but I didn't want to burden these musings with lots of footnotes.

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more than the average American worker. A generation ago, CEOs made only about 30 or 40 times average worker pay. I am not saying that these people should not have what their corporations are willing to pay them. And I am not advocating government intervention. I am saying that we now live in an age of greed and selfishness that deserves to be compared with Dickensian England or worse.

We are apt to look down on past ages with their filth and poverty and wonder how the rich could ignore the people starving in their streets and pay their laborers so little. But according to the US Census Bureau, 35.9 million people live below the poverty line in America, including 12.9 million children. Around the world, about one person dies every second as a result, either directly or indirectly, of hunger. One child dies every five seconds as a result either directly or indirectly of hunger. How did the affluent in past ages ignore their poor? They did it the same way we do it now: by paying their workers too little while feeling self-satisfied about paying them anything, by repeating the myth that poverty is always the result of laziness, and by looking the other way. Oh yes, and they were also very good eco-friendly, "green" people who cared about overpopulation and said along with Ebenezer Scrooge, "If they would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

The Bible says, "Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven" (Colossians 4:1); "Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you.... Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth" (James 5:1, 4); and, "remember the poor" (Galatians 2:10).

And you, dear reader, also remember that you are probably affluent when compared to someone else in the world.

Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world.... May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless Us, Every One!