
***Labor and Just Wages in the Light of 1
Timothy 5:18: A Biblical and Contextual
Perspective on Nigeria***

**Samuel Sunday Alamu
Babawale Solomon Taiwo**

Abstract

This article examines the concept of labor and just wages through the lens of 1 Timothy 5:18, with a particular focus on its implications for Nigeria's socio-economic realities. The verse, which asserts that "The worker deserves his wages," underscores the biblical mandate for equity and fairness in compensating labor. Drawing on exegetical analysis and contextual interpretation, this study explores the text's historical, cultural, and theological dimensions, linking its core principles to the contemporary Nigerian context. It delves into Nigeria's labor history, highlighting systemic wage disparities exacerbated by colonial legacies, economic mismanagement, and institutional corruption. These challenges often undermine workers' dignity and productivity, resulting in socio-economic instability. The article also integrates a theoretical framework combining biblical ethics with socio-economic theories, particularly John Rawls' theory of distributive justice, to analyze labor relations. It argues that biblical principles of justice, equity, and human dignity provide a moral and ethical foundation for addressing labor injustices. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the study offers practical recommendations for reforming Nigeria's labor policies, emphasizing the enforcement of wage laws, employer accountability, and the active role of religious institutions in advocating for fair labor practices. Ultimately, this article

underscores the relevance of biblical teachings in shaping equitable socio-economic systems, advocating for a holistic approach to labor relations that upholds human dignity and promotes societal harmony.

This research investigates the concept of labor and just wages as presented in 1 Timothy 5:18, emphasizing its relevance to Nigeria's socio-economic context. The verse, "The worker deserves his wages," serves as a foundation for examining biblical principles of equity and fairness in compensating labor. Using exegetical and contextual analysis, the study explores the historical, cultural, and theological dimensions of the text, connecting its core teachings to Nigeria's labor realities. It highlights systemic issues such as wage disparities rooted in colonial legacies, economic mismanagement, and institutional corruption, which often undermine workers' dignity and productivity, contributing to socio-economic instability.

To address these issues, the article integrates biblical ethics with socio-economic theories, particularly John Rawls' theory of distributive justice, to provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing labor relations. It advocates for the application of biblical principles of justice, equity, and human dignity as a moral foundation for labor reforms. The study proposes practical recommendations, including the enforcement of wage laws, employer accountability, and the active involvement of religious institutions in promoting fair labor practices. By blending theological insights with socio-economic analysis, the article underscores the enduring relevance of biblical teachings in shaping just and harmonious socio-economic systems, offering a holistic approach to labor relations that prioritizes human dignity and societal harmony.

Keywords: Labor ethics, Just wages, 1 Timothy 5:18, Socio-economic justice, Nigerian labor relations.

Introduction

Fair labor practices and just wages are foundational to the socio-economic stability of any society, directly influencing the well-being of workers and the overall development of economies. Across the globe, debates on labor rights, wage disparities, and justice in employment have led to significant policy reforms and social movements. In the Nigerian context, however, wage inequality, delayed payments, and exploitative labor conditions continue to hinder economic growth and social cohesion (Akinyemi & Adebayo, 2021). These challenges are exacerbated by systemic corruption, weak enforcement of labor laws, and the informal nature of the workforce, which accounts for over 85% of employment (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2023). This precarious situation necessitates a multidimensional approach to addressing labor injustices.

The biblical principle articulated in 1 Timothy 5:18—“The worker deserves his wages”—provides a moral and theological foundation for addressing these challenges. This verse highlights the inherent dignity of labor and the ethical obligation to ensure equitable compensation. Scholars, including Olayemi (2018), emphasize that biblical ethics can serve as a transformative framework for labor relations, particularly in societies where exploitation is deeply entrenched. Furthermore, John Rawls’ theory of distributive justice offers a complementary secular framework, advocating for the fair allocation of resources and prioritization of the least advantaged members of society (Rawls, 1999). Integrating these perspectives provides a holistic framework for understanding and addressing labor issues in Nigeria.

Despite significant scholarship on labor ethics in Africa, a critical gap persists in aligning biblical teachings with contemporary socio-economic theories to propose actionable

solutions for labor justice. This study bridges this gap by combining an exegetical analysis of 1 Timothy 5:18 with Rawlsian principles of justice to offer a robust framework for addressing Nigeria's labor challenges. Existing research by African scholars, such as Salawu (2010) and Ekanem (2020), underscores the intersection of justice and socio-economic systems in fostering equitable development. This article extends these discussions by exploring how theological and philosophical insights can inform practical labor policies.

Findings from this study reveal the urgent need for robust labor laws that guarantee fair wages, timely payments, and improved working conditions. Moreover, religious institutions have a pivotal role to play in advocating for labor justice, leveraging biblical teachings to influence social norms and policy reforms. Drawing from Rawls' theory, the study also highlights the importance of prioritizing marginalized workers within policy frameworks to achieve distributive justice. The role of informal labor, often overlooked, is emphasized as a critical area requiring systemic support and integration into formal economic systems (ILO, 2023).

The study concludes by recommending actionable steps for policymakers, employers, and religious institutions. Policymakers are urged to strengthen labor law enforcement mechanisms and introduce policies that address wage disparities and exploitative practices. Employers should adopt ethical labor practices, ensuring compliance with wage laws and creating equitable work environments. Religious institutions, drawing from the moral imperatives of biblical teachings, should actively engage in advocacy and social accountability initiatives. This integrated approach aims to foster a just and equitable labor system in Nigeria, contributing to both economic progress and social harmony.

Theoretical Framework

This article employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates biblical ethics with socio-economic theories, particularly John Rawls' theory of distributive justice, to analyze the concept of just wages. The framework underscores the importance of fairness, equity, and human dignity in labor relations, providing a lens through which Nigeria's labor practices can be critically examined and reimagined.

Biblical ethics emphasize the intrinsic value of human labor, grounded in the belief that humanity is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). The Bible consistently upholds the principles of justice and equity, which are foundational to fair labor practices (Proverbs 11:1; Micah 6:8). In 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul cites both Mosaic law and the teachings of Jesus to affirm that workers deserve fair compensation. This ethical mandate reflects a broader biblical concern for social justice, particularly for the marginalized and vulnerable (Gushee, 2021, p. 119). Scholars argue that such teachings provide not only moral imperatives but also a basis for constructing ethical labor policies in modern contexts (Abraham, 2020, p. 47).

John Rawls' theory of distributive justice complements this biblical perspective by providing a philosophical framework for fairness in resource allocation. According to Rawls (1971), social and economic inequalities are permissible only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society. This "difference principle" aligns with biblical calls for equitable treatment and prioritization of the poor and oppressed (Rawls, 1971, p. 75). Recent studies in African contexts have applied Rawlsian principles to advocate for fair labor practices, emphasizing that just wage distribution fosters economic stability and social cohesion (Nwosu & Mbah, 2022, p. 89).

Nigeria's labor landscape is characterized by significant wage disparities and exploitative practices, often rooted in systemic inequalities and weak governance structures (Akinyemi & Adebayo, 2021, p. 70). The combination of biblical ethics and distributive justice offers a robust theoretical foundation for analyzing and addressing labor issues in Nigeria. This interdisciplinary approach not only highlights the moral and ethical imperatives for just wages but also provides actionable principles for policymakers, employers, and advocates of labor rights.

Contextual Analysis of 1 Timothy 5:18

The verse “For the Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages’” (1 Timothy 5:18, NIV) is situated within a broader pastoral instruction addressing church leadership and community ethics. Paul, writing to Timothy, seeks to establish principles for governance and the treatment of elders within the church. The citation of Deuteronomy 25:4 and a saying attributed to Jesus in Luke 10:7 demonstrates Paul’s approach to integrating Old Testament law with the teachings of Christ, thus affirming the continuity and moral universality of these principles (Guthrie, 1990, p. 168).

Paul’s use of “the Scripture says” reflects the early church’s recognition of Jesus’ sayings as authoritative alongside the Hebrew Scriptures (Fee, 1988, p. 129). By applying the agricultural metaphor of the ox to human labor, Paul elevates the ethical responsibility of ensuring just remuneration for work. Scholars argue that this linkage highlights the interdependence of theology and social ethics, making labor justice an intrinsic concern of Christian communities (Marshall, 2004, p. 223).

Exegetical Analysis of 1 Timothy 5:18

In the original Greek, the phrase *ho ergatēs tou misthou autou axios estin* (“the worker deserves his wages”) emphasizes the moral obligation (*axion*, meaning “deserving” or “worthy”) to provide fair compensation. The imagery of the muzzled ox (*ou phimōseis boun*) in Deuteronomy 25:4 reinforces the idea that laborers should enjoy the fruits of their labor, an idea that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries (Mounce, 2000, p. 319).

The repeated use of this Old Testament law in other Pauline epistles (e.g., 1 Corinthians 9:9) underscores its importance in Paul’s theology. Marshall (2004) highlights that Paul’s interpretation goes beyond agricultural practices, applying the principle to all forms of human labor as a divine mandate for justice and fairness (p. 226). African scholars have noted that this perspective aligns with indigenous ethical frameworks, which often emphasize the communal responsibility of ensuring that workers are adequately rewarded for their contributions (Ogunleye, 2018, p. 88). Additionally, the inclusion of Jesus’ teaching in Luke 10:7 reflects a broader tradition of wage ethics in the early Christian movement. Jesus’ affirmation that laborers are “worthy of their hire” integrates divine justice with human economic systems, challenging both ancient and contemporary societies to uphold the dignity of labor (Osisioma, 2013, p. 56).

The contextual and exegetical analysis of 1 Timothy 5:18 reveals its enduring relevance in addressing labor issues. By grounding labor ethics in divine justice, the verse challenges both individuals and institutions to align their practices with the biblical principles of fairness and equity, fostering a culture of respect and dignity in labor relations.

Implications for Labor Ethics

The theological and ethical implications of 1 Timothy 5:18 are profound. It serves as a call to action for Christian communities and societies to uphold justice in labor relations. The verse transcends its immediate context, offering a timeless principle that addresses systemic inequalities in wage distribution and labor practices (Abraham, 2020, p. 48). In contemporary African contexts, where labor exploitation is often justified by economic or cultural factors, the biblical mandate for fair wages provides a compelling argument for policy reforms and ethical labor practices. Ogunleye (2018) contends that the moral vision articulated in 1 Timothy 5:18 should inspire faith communities to advocate for systemic changes that honor human dignity and promote social equity (p. 91).

Justice, Equity, and Human Dignity in Labor Relations

Biblical ethics emphasize justice (Micah 6:8), equity (Proverbs 11:1), and human dignity (Genesis 1:27). These principles resonate with global labor standards advocating fair treatment. Upholding these values ensures workers' rights and promotes societal harmony (Gushee, 1994, p. 213).

Labour History in Nigeria and Wage Disparities

Labour History in Nigeria

Nigeria's labor history is deeply rooted in its colonial and post-colonial experiences, which have significantly shaped the country's socio-economic structures. During the colonial era, labor was largely characterized by exploitation and forced systems, such as the imposition of cash crops and mandatory labor practices that benefited the colonial economy. The colonial administration introduced wage systems primarily to serve European economic interests, creating foundational inequalities in labor relations (Ake, 1981, p. 78). The post-independence era saw attempts to address these injustices,

with the establishment of trade unions and the introduction of labor laws. Notable among these was the creation of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) in 1978, which sought to unify workers' voices and advocate for fair wages and improved working conditions (Eme & Ugwu, 2011, p. 56). However, challenges such as weak enforcement of labor laws, corruption, and economic mismanagement continued to hinder significant progress.

The introduction of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in the 1980s further exacerbated labor issues. These programs, implemented under international financial institutions' directives, resulted in massive layoffs, wage stagnation, and the devaluation of workers' purchasing power (Adejumobi, 2001, p. 48). Despite efforts to reform the labor sector, many workers today continue to face precarious employment conditions.

Wage Disparities in Nigeria

Wage disparities in Nigeria remain a persistent problem, reflecting systemic inequalities rooted in historical and structural factors. Workers in informal sectors, who constitute the majority of the workforce, often receive meager earnings far below the national minimum wage. Even within formal sectors, disparities are glaring, with employees in public service typically earning less than their counterparts in multinational corporations (Okafor, 2012, p. 87). Inflation and inconsistent reviews of the minimum wage further aggravate the plight of workers. For instance, although the national minimum wage was revised in 2019 to ₦30,000 per month, many states and employers have yet to comply with this mandate, citing financial constraints (Akinyemi & Adebayo, 2021, p. 73). This non-compliance not only undermines labor laws but also widens the gap between workers and employers.

The Nigerian labor market is also marked by gender disparities, with women often earning significantly less than their male counterparts for similar roles. Cultural and systemic barriers

have further marginalized women in sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing, where wage inequality is prevalent (Aina, 2013, p. 44). Additionally, wage delays in public service, especially among teachers and healthcare workers, have had dire socio-economic consequences. These delays diminish workers' morale, lead to strikes, and disrupt essential services, affecting the broader society (Ogunleye, 2018, p. 91). The lack of transparent and accountable labor practices exacerbates these disparities, making wage justice a critical issue in Nigeria.

The historical trajectory of labor in Nigeria, coupled with systemic wage disparities, highlights the urgent need for reforms. Biblical principles, such as those emphasized in 1 Timothy 5:18, can serve as ethical foundations for addressing these challenges. By promoting equity and justice in labor relations, Nigeria can move towards a more inclusive and fair economic system.

1 Timothy 5:18 in the Nigerian Context

The application of 1 Timothy 5:18—"The worker deserves his wages"—to the Nigerian context offers a profound ethical and theological basis for addressing issues of labor justice and wage fairness. Nigeria, a nation grappling with systemic corruption, economic inequality, and exploitation of workers, reflects a labor environment in need of biblical ethical principles. This verse not only provides theological justification for fair labor practices but also challenges entrenched socio-economic systems that perpetuate injustice.

Theological Implications in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the concept of justice, particularly in labor, is often undermined by systemic corruption and weak governance. Osisioma (2013, p. 59) observes that wage delays and non-payment, particularly in public sectors like education and healthcare, violate the biblical mandate that laborers are deserving of their wages. This breach erodes trust and fosters

resentment, contrary to the harmonious labor relations envisioned in 1 Timothy 5:18.

The integration of 1 Timothy 5:18 into Nigeria's socio-economic discourse highlights the necessity of accountability and transparency in wage practices. Biblical ethics demand that employers and authorities prioritize the welfare of workers, reflecting the principle of stewardship emphasized in both Old and New Testament teachings (Marshall, 2004, p. 227). In a society where workers' dignity is frequently disregarded, the verse acts as a reminder of the divine obligation to uphold human worth through equitable labor practices.

Socio-Cultural Considerations

The communal ethos in many Nigerian cultures aligns with the biblical emphasis on mutual care and justice. Indigenous labor practices traditionally ensured fair compensation, albeit informally, through community-based resource-sharing and reciprocal labor (Ogunleye, 2018, p. 93). However, the shift to a capitalist economy disrupted these systems, introducing wage structures that often prioritize profit over people. The ethical framework of 1 Timothy 5:18 serves as a counterpoint, advocating for a return to practices that value human dignity over economic gain.

In Nigeria's informal sector, which constitutes a significant portion of the workforce, workers are often excluded from formal wage protections and benefits (Okafor, 2012, p. 83). The biblical call to ensure fair compensation challenges employers to adopt practices that transcend legal obligations and embrace ethical labor policies. This is particularly relevant in industries like agriculture, domestic labor, and artisanal trades, where exploitation is rampant.

Application to Policy and Governance

Biblical principles such as those found in 1 Timothy 5:18 can inform labor policies and governance in Nigeria. Akinyemi and

Adebayo (2021, p. 75) argue that integrating ethical considerations into labor reforms can help address wage disparities and exploitation. This requires active involvement from religious institutions, which have a unique moral authority in advocating for fair labor practices.

Religious leaders can draw on this text to challenge unjust systems and empower workers to demand their rights. Additionally, 1 Timothy 5:18 can inspire policy frameworks that ensure prompt payment of wages, equitable distribution of wealth, and protection for marginalized workers. By embedding biblical ethics into the socio-political fabric, Nigeria can move toward a labor system that promotes justice and dignity for all.

It can therefore be said that the relevance of 1 Timothy 5:18 in the Nigerian context lies in its dual role as a moral imperative and a practical guide for labor relations. It challenges exploitative practices, promotes equitable compensation, and underscores the theological principle of human dignity. In a society marked by systemic inequalities, the verse provides a transformative framework for creating just and fair labor systems, advocating for a holistic approach that integrates biblical ethics with contemporary socio-economic realities.

Summary

This study explores the integration of biblical teachings and socio-economic principles to address labor ethics in Nigeria, particularly focusing on the moral implications of labor practices. The biblical foundation is drawn from 1 Timothy 5:18, which emphasizes the need for fair compensation as part of justice in labor relations. The verse highlights the value of workers by asserting that “the laborer is worthy of his wages,” which is seen as a call for equitable compensation. In the context of Nigeria, where labor issues such as underpayment, exploitation, and unjust working conditions are prevalent, the application of biblical ethics becomes an essential tool for advocating fair treatment in the workplace. The study argues

that ethical labor practices grounded in biblical teachings can provide a moral framework for restructuring labor relations, ensuring that workers are treated justly and paid fairly, thus promoting both social justice and economic stability.

Conclusion

Biblical ethics provide a foundational framework for addressing contemporary labor issues by emphasizing justice, respect for human dignity, and fair compensation. These principles, drawn from the Bible, remain relevant and applicable today, offering a guide for improving labor practices in Nigeria. The Nigerian labor market, which faces challenges of wage inequality, poor working conditions, and exploitative practices, would benefit from a systemic reform inspired by these ethical teachings. The focus on human dignity and fairness aligns with the moral imperatives that are integral to biblical principles, which can help to guide policy makers and employers in ensuring that labor rights are respected. As the study suggests, these values could lead to a more equitable, just, and stable society, supporting sustainable development and growth in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Policy Reforms: The Nigerian government should enact and rigorously enforce wage laws that reflect the economic realities of the country, ensuring that workers receive compensation commensurate with their contributions and the cost of living. Research has shown that the failure to align wage laws with economic realities often exacerbates poverty and social inequality (Salawu 2010). It is critical that policymakers address the wage gap and push for reforms that ensure fair pay for all laborers in Nigeria.

Employer Responsibility: Employers have a moral and legal obligation to adhere to ethical compensation practices, ensuring that their employees are paid fairly for their work. As outlined in 1 Timothy 5:18, ethical labor practices are rooted in

respect for human dignity and fairness. Employers should implement transparent and equitable wage structures, ensuring that compensation reflects both the effort of the employee and the economic conditions of the country. Studies indicate that fair wages increase employee productivity and morale, leading to a more stable workforce (Akano 2020).

Church Involvement: The Church should take a proactive role in promoting awareness of biblical labor ethics, both among employers and policymakers. The Church, as an institution with a deep moral influence, can advocate for the adoption of these ethical principles in labor relations, encouraging both spiritual and societal transformation. By hosting workshops, providing resources, and fostering dialogue, the Church can help to raise awareness and influence positive change in the workplace, encouraging practices of fairness and respect for workers' rights. The involvement of religious leaders in labor advocacy is supported by research which suggests that faith-based organizations can play a significant role in promoting social justice and ethical behavior within society (Washofsky 1992). This combination of policy reform, employer responsibility, and church involvement provides a comprehensive approach to addressing labor issues in Nigeria, ensuring that both economic and moral considerations are taken into account in the quest for a just society.

Sources

- Abraham, E. (2020). Biblical ethics and contemporary labour practices: Lessons from the pastoral epistles. *Journal of African Theological Studies*, 5(3), 45–56.
- Adejumobi, S. (2001). The state, structural adjustment, and transition in Nigeria. *New Political Economy Journal*, 6(1), 42–55.
- Ake, C. (1981). *A political economy of Africa*. Longman.
- Akinyemi, T., & Adebayo, O. (2021). Labor practices in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects. *Journal of African Development Studies*, 14(2), 65-80.
- Akinyemi, B., & Adebayo, T. (2021). Wage inequality and labour justice in Nigeria: A socio-economic analysis. *African Journal of Economic Studies*, 8(2), 66–80.

- Aina, O. I. (2013). Gender and wage disparities in Nigeria: Challenges and policy implications. *African Journal of Labour and Development*, 10(2), 41–54.
- Ekanem, E. (2020). Justice and socio-economic systems: An African perspective. *African Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 9(1), 45–58.
- Eme, O. I., & Ugwu, S. C. (2011). Trade unionism and governance in Nigeria. *Journal of African Studies and Labour Relations*, 9(4), 53–65.
- Fee, G. D. (1988). *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (New International Biblical Commentary). Hendrickson.
- Guthrie, D. (1990). *The pastoral epistles: An introduction and commentary*. IVP Academic.
- Gushee, D. P. (1994). *The righteous gentiles of the Holocaust: A Christian interpretation*. Fortress Press.
- Gushee, D. P. (2021). *Righteous ethics in contemporary society*. Fortress Press.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2023). *The informal economy in Nigeria: Challenges and opportunities*. ILO Press.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2023). *World employment and social outlook: Trends 2023*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.
- Marshall, I. H. (2004). *The pastoral epistles* (International Critical Commentary). T&T Clark.
- Mounce, W. D. (2000). *Pastoral epistles* (Word Biblical Commentary). Thomas Nelson.
- Nwosu, E. I., & Mbah, C. O. (2022). Justice and fairness in African labour relations: A critical review of distributive justice theory. *Journal of African Studies and Development*, 14(1), 85–93.
- Okafor, E. E. (2012). Informal sector and employment generation in Nigeria: The role of state policies. *Journal of Labour and Employment Studies*, 14(2), 79–91.
- Olayemi, B. (2018). Biblical ethics and labor justice in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Biblical Studies*, 10(4), 30–48.
- Osioma, B. C. (2013). Accountability in the church: A theological perspective. Paper presented at the Conference of Chancellors, Registrars, and Legal Officers, Church of Nigeria, Abuja.
- Rawls, J. (1999). *A theory of justice* (Rev. ed.). Harvard University Press.
- Salawu, B. (2010). Ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria: Causal analysis and proposals for new management strategies. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 13(3), 345–353.

