

# What Does the Bible Teach About the Problem of Poverty?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from multiples sources)

Introduction: Mark 14:7

- A. James 1:26-27 - Three qualifications for religion that God accepts:
  - 1. It must affect the way we treat other people
  - 2. It must affect the way we treat the helpless
  - 3. It must affect the way we live before others
  - 4. God expects us to be like Him - Psalm 68:5
- B. The phrase "poor and needy" occurs 17 times in scripture, from the ancient days of Job, to the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy, through the early exilic prophet Ezekiel; most often mentioned in the prayer Psalms
  - 1. The poor are in the first sentence of the first sermon of Jesus at the beginning of His ministry - Matt. 5:3
  - 2. Obviously, God cares about them, and expects His children to care for them as well
- C. There will always be poor persons in our communities - John 12:8

## I. POVERTY IS AN URGENT PROBLEM IN THE WORLD TODAY

- A. Poverty is a relative term. Some feel poor because others are much richer.
  - 1. Most Americans do not consider themselves wealthy, because there are others who have more than they do.
  - 2. We live in the richest nation in the history of the world, and perhaps the most ungrateful and entitlement minded people in the world
  - 3. 99% of Americans are rich by world standards.
  - 4. The combined income of 41 of the poorest countries in the world is less than the income of the poorest state in the US
- B. What we call poverty in the US is rich in comparison to the rest of the world
  - 1. The official poverty line in America is \$26,200 for family of four per year.
    - a. People at this level qualify for government assistance.
  - 2. 76% of the poor in the US have a car; 1% of the poor in the rest of the world own a car. 96% have a television; 58% have a computer
  - 3. 81% of the poor in the US have a phone; 15% of the people in the rest of the world have phones
  - 4. The average American makes \$145 per day; 80% of the rest of the world lives on less than \$13 per day; in Africa, the average person lives on 57¢ per day
- C. Hunger is a major problem in the world today. 34,000 children and 16,000 adults starve to death every day.
  - 1. Americans spend \$60 billion per year on weight loss products. 71% of Americans are overweight with 38% of them considered obese. We don't know poverty and hunger in this country

## II. HELPING THE POOR IS A FAITH ISSUE

- A. Our attitude toward the poor is directly related to our relationship with God. Most try to avoid the poor.

1. Like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we don't want to get involved.
  2. The poor have a different lifestyle and value system than we have. They have uniquely difficult problems that we don't understand.
- B. But, what one does for the poor glorifies God - Prov. 14:31
1. What one does for the poor blesses more than the poor; it encourages onlookers and makes him fulfilled
  2. Psalm 41:1; Acts 20:35; Luke 6:38
  3. One of the best feelings in the world is to have helped another with no thought of self.
- C. One's faith is measured by how he treats those in need - James 2:15-17
1. Faith that does not motivate Christians to compassionate action is not true faith.
  2. There is a difference between academic acceptance (belief) and faith.
  3. Faith motivates one's heart to put his body into action - James 1:22
- D. God has always commanded His people to care for the poor.
1. Deut. 15:11; Psalm 82:3-4
- E. Jesus instructed "the just" to give preference to the poor - Luke 14:13-14
- F. The apostles commanded it as essential to salvation - 1John 3:17-18
- G. The New Testament church cared for the poor from the beginning
1. Acts 2:44-45, 4:32 - From the Day of Pentecost
  2. Act 6:1-6 - Deacons were ordained to care for needy widows
  3. 1Tim 5:3-16 - Timothy was commanded to preach the care of widows.
  4. 2Cor. 8:1-15 - It is the responsibility of churches to relieve needy saints
  5. James 1:27 - It is the responsibility of individual Christians
- H. In reality, we get more spiritually from helping the poor than they receive materially from us - James 1:9-10
1. If we take the time to not just stoop down to give handouts to the poor, but really work with them, we may just come away richer for the experience
  2. It will not likely be in terms of tangible things, but we will learn much from their experiences, difficulties, and perspective
  3. Natalie Merchant's song With the Living - She called the non-poor "the living" and the homeless and substance addicted would be the dead
 

What's it like there outside, With the living with the living  
 Here I've found a place I can hide, From the living from the living  
 Oh the bottle has been to me, My closest friend my worst enemy  
 For a flavor I walked a fine line,  
 Squandered it all and wasted my time  
 And I don't stand a chance among the living  
 I'll go off, I'll make myself scarce  
 Oh, come tomorrow, You won't find me here  
 Because I don't care to stay with the living  
 I don't think I'll remain with the living
  4. We learn greater appreciation for what we have, and discover blessings we can share with others

### III. HELPING THE POOR REQUIRES THAT ONE OVERCOME PREJUDICES

- A. Since the Bible is so clear about the need to help the poor, why is so little often done?
- B. Too often prejudices hinder one from doing God's will
- C. Prejudice #1: "Poor people choose to be poor"
  - 1. This prejudice derives from an idealistic view of America
  - 2. This view accepts the idea of the country, that with hard work alone people can make something of themselves
  - 3. If someone is poor, therefore, they haven't tried hard enough or don't want to work
  - 4. While it is true that some people do choose idleness, it does not mean that all poor people have made that choice
  - 5. We should be open to the reality that occasionally conditions do exist in society that lead to many people being poor despite a desire to work
- D. Prejudice #2: "Poor people are lazy and don't want to work," and so in our judgment we apply 1Tim. 5:8; 2Thes. 3:10
  - 1. But that does not apply all poor people
  - 2. Some want to work but cannot find work, some lack the education needed to get work, or the resources with which to get the education. Some are the victims of unscrupulous or incompetent business men whose antics have cost this nation most of its industry and the jobs that go with it
  - 3. Are seniors lazy who are on fixed income who have worked all of their lives only to have high fuel costs and extortionary medical care force them to choose between buying a prescription and driving to church? Are they lazy?!
  - 4. There will be more poor people in the near future as this nation enters a prolonged recession under leadership that is not equipped to handle it. What choices do we have at the polls this fall? A man who has all of the grace of a bull in a china shop and a man whose policies are so irresponsibly liberal that he frightens reasoning folk. Will we describe as lazy all of the people who will be made poor by this recession?
  - 5. We must also remember that 1Timothy 5:8 was written to Christians and should certainly be true of every Christian.
  - 6. But even with this command, there were many occasions when brethren provided assistance to others in need - Rom. 15:26. Were they being lazy or was their poverty due to a famine?
  - 7. Attitudes and circumstances of the poor are often hard to judge, and we should not make blanket statements
- E. Prejudice #3: "In America, no one is really poor"
  - 1. It is believed that since there are some governmental programs that make sure that no one is without food, that America really does not have poor people
  - 2. After all, they're better off here than in parts of Asia or Africa
  - 3. While it may be true that everyone in America is at least a little better off than in other countries, it does not mean that there are no poor people

- F. Prejudice #4: "It's the government's responsibility to care for the poor"
1. The government runs all kinds of programs to assist the poor
    - a. Ebenezer Scrooge refusing to contribute to the poor - "Are there no prisons or Union workhouses? Oh! I was afraid, from what you said at first, that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course."
  2. Should we not just let the government handle it?
  3. It should be noted that the government began assisting the poor because people in America weren't doing it well enough
  4. If we all acted as God would have us to act, would welfare and other programs even be necessary?
  5. It wasn't necessary among disciples in the first century - Acts 4:34-35
- G. Prejudice #5: "I don't have anything to give"
1. Unfortunately, too many of us live self-absorbed lives
  2. It's sad how much debt we're in and how thinly stretched our budgets have become. For many, financial planning has transformed into debt management
  3. In reality, we would be surprised to discover how much we have to give
  4. Mark 12:41-44
  5. Even if you do not have money, do you have unused items that you could give? Not talking about the things you couldn't sell or even give away at your last yard sale
  6. Even if you lack things, do you not have time and energy to spend?
- H. Prejudice #6: "I don't want to"
1. This gets right to the heart of the matter; we don't want to get our hands dirty. Poor people may have messy lives and messy problems
  2. James 4:17

#### **IV. HELPING THE POOR HAS ALWAYS BEEN DIFFICULT**

A. "Great experience is required to distinguish between those who are really poor and those who beg only that they may collect money. He who gives to a distressed and sick person gives to God, and will receive a reward. But he who gives to a vagabond and parasite...gives it to men who deserve contempt for their audacity, rather than pity for their poverty." (Bishop Basil, 4th Century)

B. "Deacons rendered as great an individualizing effort as is possible in the relief of the poor. Every one received the assistance that his necessities required. Efforts were, above all, made to render the poor again capable of work, and put them in a condition to earn their own livelihood. They were directed where to find work, and were furnished with tools." ("Christian Charity in the Ancient Church" by Gerhard Uhlhorn)

C. The best, most spiritually and physically profitable relief is done on an individual basis.

D. To help the poor, one must know the poor. There are six classifications of the poor. Only two of the six bear any responsibility for their poverty. Be careful not to assume that all of them brought on their poverty by bad choices or behaviors. When we make such a judgment, we sin.

1. The oppressed poor. Evil dictators keep entire populations in poverty. (Kim Jong Un in North Korea; African and Arab warlords)
  - a. The third world feudal system keeps poor locked to the land. These populations can only be helped by liberation.
2. The uninformed poor. They don't know how or have not been taught to be anything else. (Generational poverty: taught by parents or culture)
  - a. They can be taught and helped to rise out of poverty, but it takes a long-term commitment on their part and of those helping.
3. The disabled poor. Mentally or physically disabled through genetics or accident, no responsibility for condition
  - a. Some can learn some forms of self-sufficiency, but others must be cared for long term.
  - b. Those who commit to their care serve God and glorify Him, they bless the ones cared for, and they become better people for it.
  - c. They unselfconsciously put God's love on display for the world.
4. The circumstantial poor. Poverty through unfortunate circumstances. (Economy causing job loss, hurricanes, floods, house fires, sudden loss of health from disease, accident, cancer, etc.)
5. The lazy poor. "He's so lazy, he wouldn't work as a taster in a pie bakery" The uninformed poor sometimes appear to be lazy, but we must form a relationship before we can tell the difference.
  - a. We do right when we help the uninformed poor; we do wrong when we assist the lazy poor - 2Thes. 3:10
6. The prodigal poor. He's reaping what he has sown (sin, drugs, alcohol, gambling) - Prov. 23:21
  - a. God may be working in their lives to bring them to repentance.
  - b. A prodigal son could not be helped until he chose to leave the hog pen of sin - Luke 15:8

## **V. HELPING THE POOR TAKES COMMITMENT**

- A. There are at least three ways we help the poor. All take commitment, money, work, and time
  1. Relief - Urgent and temporary aid in response to disasters. The Good Samaritan is a Biblical example.
  2. Restoration - Longer term response to permanently correct a grave problem; return people who experienced a crisis back to pre-crisis state
  3. Rehabilitation - This requires a lot of time and many tough decisions, but at some point, rehabilitation must replace relief and restoration.
- B. The poor who bear responsibility for their condition must ask themselves and honestly answer some very tough questions
  1. Have you changed the choices or behaviors that created the crisis?
  2. Do you want to be self-sufficient; and if so, how much are you willing to do to become self-sufficient?
- C. Those who help the poor who are responsible for their condition must be careful not to sin with their help

1. Help them with humility and love; never be judgmental, whether in relief, restoration, or rehabilitation
2. Teach them a Biblical perspective of work and stewardship. Teach them on how to find a job. Coach them on keeping their job
3. Understand that in the case of persons who are responsible for their poverty, continual relief will hinder their restoration and rehabilitation

Conclusion:

- A. Caring for the poor is not the job of the government. It is a command of God for the church in limited benevolence; for individuals on an opportunity basis.
- B. Preachers are commanded to teach it to Christians - Titus 3:14
- C. We are blessed, and with blessing comes responsibility - 2Cor. 8:13-14
- D. Those who remember the poor glorify God - Prov. 14:31
- E. By all accounts, the early church was a haven for the poor, the enslaved, and the dispossessed - James 2:1-9
  1. Christianity was sneered at as a religion for the poorest in society
- F. Somewhere along the way, we've changed the nature of the church as a refuge for people weary of the burdens of this life into a social club for people who have all of the right connections. One author wrote: "The contemporary church has become this kind of place where the runaway slave Onesimus would not feel welcome long enough to hear the gospel and where the first century Pharisee might feel right at home."
  1. The poor are seldom seen among us
  2. We only see some when they have some financial need
- G. Are we eager to help the poor, or will we just stay sequestered away in our own comfortable lives?