

Caring for people experiencing poverty is a worthy undertaking, and I hope that everyone is sympathetic to the cause of the poor and practically committed to caring for the poor.<sup>1</sup>

However, deciding upon the proper manner in which we provide this care as a church community can result in contention.<sup>2</sup>

Right and wrong answers and true or false perceptions often divide or dilute the efforts to help. As an example, different answers, and perceptions result in divergent political platforms and policies of our own major political parties. One party suggests that people are rich or poor as a result of their own efforts. Another party emphasizes individual persons' circumstances and cultural advantages. Congress perpetually debates over the causes and cures for poverty, but what does the Bible say? I will address four critical questions:

### I. First, Who Are the Poor and What Causes Poverty?

The Scriptures identify those who are 'poor in material resources.' Scripture gives us examples of those *most vulnerable* to a form of poverty (though they are not necessarily financially poor). In Exodus 22:21-22, God says, "*You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him (separated from family and community), for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. You shall not mistreat any widow (separated from husband) or fatherless child (separated from father).*" Again, he says in Deuteronomy 24:14, "*You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy (possibly a low-wage laborer or any that earn at the behest of another).*" Paul mentions the elderly, especially elderly widows, in 1 Timothy 5:9, "*Let a widow*

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<sup>1</sup> This lesson is a basic summary of an article written by a pastor named, Steve Boyer. He deserves all credit for this material.

<sup>2</sup> Issues and questions that arise may include: Who are the most deserving among the poor? Do our gifts constitute wasted effort or encourage dependency? Do our gifts encourage multi-generational sloth, poverty, or drug dependence? What are the most effective means to give our gifts?

be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband...”

John mentions the physically disabled in John 5:3, “*In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed,*” and Jesus references the presumably diseased sick in Matthew 25:36, “*I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.*” These people can be vulnerable.

According to the United States Census Bureau, about **12.5%** of the population of Alamance County lives below the financial “poverty line.” Those among us who live, by the grace of God, above the poverty line must not be indifferent to financially needy people, but show compassion to them as occasions to do so arise: *For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’* (Deuteronomy 15:4).

Second, the Bible talks about those ‘poor in spirit’—the physically poor point towards a far deeper and darker reality of fallen life in this world. In other words, material poverty is a metaphor for spiritual poverty — the greater poverty. The first to ever become impoverished in this world were Adam and Eve. They lost their only provider [God], their home [Eden], their lives [health, e.g., becoming mortal], dominion of the planet [earth]. The physical poor and needy are only a constant reminder and metaphor of this ubiquitous condition.

Jesus did not come ultimately or primarily to remove physical sickness or relieve material poverty. For example, In Luke 4:38-44, Jesus healed many in Capernaum but departed because He “*must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also.*” Jesus’ primary mission was to preach about the Kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Again, in John 6:25-59 Jesus miraculously fed the 5,000. The feeding of the 5,000 demonstrated to the people that He was the Christ, the bread of life, and he urged people to believe in him to be spiritually fed for eternity through Christ.

Let us now ask, who are the spiritually poor? Well, all people are born spiritually dead, destitute, and in sin. But God makes those who acknowledge their spiritual bankruptcy and their destitution of true righteousness, who call upon and believe in Him, spiritually rich, giving them Christ's righteousness. Jesus says in Matthew 5:3, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" God has a particular concern and purpose for the spiritually poor.

Jesus' gospel saves sinful man from the wrath of a holy God, poverty of body and soul, through the humiliation, poverty, death, and resurrection of Himself. This gospel applies salvation to individuals, according to their faith, and not to society as a whole. Christians must reject the social gospel, but not reject that the gospel has social implications. Christians should promote biblical principles in the political, social, educational, judicial, and economic realms, yet not conflate these promotions as the primary or final missions of either themselves, as individuals, or the local church, or the universal church, in general.

So, Scripture describes two kinds of poverty-stricken individuals – the 'poor in physical resources' and the 'poor in spirit.' However, there is no necessary link between the two. Scripture does not always and only exalt the poor, nor does it always disparage the rich. God is no respecter of persons, nor their wealth or lack thereof.

Second, let's ask, what causes poverty? The reasons for poverty are endless, and it is impossible to list them all here.<sup>4</sup> God's curse upon the world caused adverse outcomes out of man's control. Sin also tempts us with vanities of laziness, greed, self-indulgence, foolishness, despondence, drunkenness, etc. We are wise to recognize these tendencies in ourselves when

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<sup>4</sup> Such as government oppression, natural disaster, job loss, mental illness, the economy, lack of skills, even the inscrutable will of God, et cetera.

seeking to understand the financially poor, and how best to help the poor, and ourselves, to the extent that we be poor.<sup>5</sup>

God is concerned with the materially poor, and He often shows Himself to them as utterly loving, kind, and faithful. And, when we consider ourselves before God, we see our own poverty, which should motivate those well-off among us to identify and selflessly help others without necessary physical resources in this world. Their needs, just as ours, for eternal redemption infinitely outweighs our needs for economic reform! So, ministry to the poor, must make evangelism and mercy interdependent on one another, like two wings of an airplane.<sup>6</sup>

## II. Second, What Wisdom Does Scripture Give us Concerning the Poor?

First, let's ask, who is my neighbor? Luke 10:25-37: "*Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?*" *The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."* Jesus told him, "*Go and do likewise.*"

It is easy for sinners to elevate man-made traditions over God's Word. An expert on the Law wanted to narrow the commandment to exclude certain individuals as his neighbor. This would make himself feel self-righteous and fit his chosen lifestyle.<sup>7</sup> **The Jews hated Samaritans, and Jesus says that a loving Samaritan was closer to the Kingdom than an unloving Jew.**

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<sup>5</sup> In response, some Christians embrace a **social gospel**. A social gospel typically attributes human failures and conditions to civil governments, as well as inadequate educational, judicial, and economic systems (*these can and do bear blame*). The social gospel mainly seeks to change these systems by means of social reform. It has an overly optimistic view of man, and his ability to make the right choices.

<sup>6</sup> We become all things to all men that God may save some (1 Corinthians 9:22) and, like Paul, pass "on to you as of *first importance*: that Christ died for our sins..." We must never share the gospel callously, unconcerned for those to whom we minister as image bearers.

<sup>7</sup> Jesus chose to use as examples two things with that the expert in the law might seek to avoid, a helpless and needy Samaritan. When asked by Christ "*Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?*" the legal expert could not even bring himself to say "the Samaritan".

The word ‘neighbor’ is a covenantal term, which means brother or member of the covenant people of God. For example, Leviticus 19:18 says, “*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.*” The Bible makes helping other Christians, particularly those in your church, the priority. However, by making the Samaritan the hero of his parable, Jesus shows that our good works, must not *only* be limited to other Christians or those who might reciprocate. The question is not, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ but “Am I acting like a neighbor?”

So, should we differentiate between those who are more or less deserving?<sup>8</sup> We must exercise wisdom when caring Biblically, for people experiencing poverty. **First, we could be carelessly indiscriminate, giving money to anyone who asks for it on the street.** Are we helping in these cases? Maybe, and maybe not. While it is impossible to ensure that every penny we spend or give to another will be used responsibly, it is worth asking: What if the person, you just gave money to, goes and buys drugs with it?<sup>9</sup> Then we would be aiding a possible drug addict, and this would not be helping, though it might be an act of mercy.

**Second, we could be too strict with giving money.** This attitude is prone to accuse or suspect individuals of deception or laziness. Jesus taught us, however, “*Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*”

**Third, we can be faithfully responsible.** In I Timothy 5:9-10, we learn that communal relationships and their commitments bear particular obligations. This method implies the need to

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<sup>8</sup> Mercy is more than just giving to all those who ask. We show mercy to our children, for instance, by not giving them everything they want or think they need.

<sup>9</sup> Jesus makes references to God’s accounting of pennies in the widow’s mite, and in the parable of the lost coin.

build relationships and hold recipients of help responsible. Scripture teaches us that we must be wise in our charity, and the best Christian relief organizations abide by this principle.

In the Old Testament, those reaping their fields for harvest were not to reap to the very edges of their fields, nor were they to go over their fields a second time. God made this provision for the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10). The field owners provided food and a means of work for financial compensation. The poor worked for their food. In II Thessalonians 3:6-12, Paul objects to aiding and abetting an unproductive lifestyle. After setting himself as an example, Paul says, *“For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” We hear that some among you are idle...Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.”* Yet, we must also remember that we work to provide not only for ourselves, but also for others (Ephesians 4:28).<sup>10</sup> We must love responsibly in ways that preserve or rebuild the dignity of the human person.<sup>11</sup>

### III. Third, Who is responsible for caring for the poor?

I Timothy 5:8, 16 says, *“If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.... If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows.”* The admonition expresses a natural order, our generosity is to begin with those in the next closest covenantal relationship, and then proceed outward.

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<sup>10</sup> Take Proverbs 11:24 to heart: *“One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.”*

<sup>11</sup> Luke 6 reminds us, *“...love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”* Paul tells us in I Timothy 6:17-19 to *“Command those who are rich...to put their hope in God.... Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way, they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age...”*

**First, what about the government?** As mentioned last week, God makes the State responsible for protecting the lives of its citizens. First, the government makes and enforces laws: Proverbs 8:14, *“By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just...”* Next, the government is to judge based on these just laws. *“By justice a king gives a country stability.”* Finally, the state *is* responsible for helping the poor, albeit in a different way than the family or church is responsible. In Scripture, rulers often needed to help the oppressed and those with insufficient voice or influence to be heard.<sup>12</sup> The government may also need to provide food or shelter for its citizens in the event of a crisis, **as Joseph did for Egypt**. We can care responsibly for the poor by working for a just government.

**Second, what about the local church?** The fundamental purpose of the church is to make disciples of all nations by preaching the Word and administering the sacraments.<sup>13</sup> The church imitates Jesus’ primary mission but not everything Jesus did. **For example, Jesus healed the lame, but that does not mean that our church should open a physical therapy clinic.**

Church members engage in mercy ministries and caring for the physical needs of the poor. But the local church, is not as a whole nor as an institution, the usual or the primary vehicle in a community or the world to meet concerns such as financial poverty.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In Psalms 72, King Solomon writes, *“Endow the king with your justice, O God... He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor...he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help.”*

<sup>13</sup> John Murray said, *“To put the matter bluntly, the church is not to engage in politics. Its members must do so, but only in their capacity as citizens of the state, not as members of the church.”* *Collected Writings of John Murray*, J. Murray, p. 255.

<sup>14</sup> We must distinguish between the specific work given to the local church and the work individual Christians may take up. For example, Ken Jones said, *“If the church never offers a single hot meal but preaches the gospel, then she is true to her calling. But if all she does is offer hot meals and dances in the neighborhood and gives away clothes but never preaches the gospel – she’s not a church...”*

The apostles set up a deaconate for this work. Galatians 6:10 sets a natural order for God’s people, “*as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*”<sup>15</sup> Prioritize needy church members first. Then, *as [you] have opportunity (good Samaritan)*, do good to everyone according to their need, as their neighbors.

**Third, what is our individual responsibility?** God calls us individually to help the weak, poor, and needy, and Scripture says that we will be rewarded in heaven for our kindness (See Luke 12:33; Proverbs 19:7, 22:9, and 28:27). **So, for example, in Acts 9:36-43, a disciple named Tabitha, who was raised from the dead, was characterized by doing good and helping the poor, particularly making clothing for the widows.** But how we serve will look different for each individual, yet God calls all of us to it.<sup>16</sup>

#### **IV. Fourth, How Should we Provide Relief to the Poor?**

**Immediate Relief:** Our church covenant says, “*We will contribute cheerfully and regularly to... the relief of the poor...*” **First, we relieve people experiencing poverty by giving financially to help them.** For instance, our church has a designated benevolence fund. We use this fund to assist members in dire need and to provide grocery store gift cards to or pay the bills of the needy who show up at our church door. If you are a Christian, joining a church and giving to it is a great way to begin practically and intentionally caring for others. Furthermore, our church has allocated funds to help with ministries that members have started or are involved

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<sup>15</sup> Acts 6:1-7 illustrates that the church first extended material care to those inside the church. There was a “*daily distribution of food.*” In Galatians 2:10, Paul “remembered” the poor as he went out to minister the gospel to the Gentiles. The poor here referred to the Judean Christians in Jerusalem, not the poor in general. In I Corinthians 16:1-4, Paul instructed the church in Corinth to take up a collection for “God’s people” in Jerusalem when they gathered together

<sup>16</sup> Scripture calls us to help the stranger and even our enemies (Luke 10:30-37; Romans 12:17-21), not only those in our family or those who are Christians. We are to let our light shine before all men, that they may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven.



with, such as Embrace Grace, Sidewalk Sunday School, and Alamance Rescue Mission. We have even created a diaconal group dedicated to helping church members in need or helping coordinate your efforts to help others.

Personally, I have rarely found it prudent to give *money* to strangers. It is challenging to know the real concerns of a stranger, and I don't want to encourage a wrong way of living. Instead, I go to Food Lion or McDonalds' and buy gift cards in bulk with enough money for a decent meal or a grocery run. I will also purchase hot meals for them or fill their car with gas. Likewise, depending on the situation, I point them to an organization I support.

**Developmental: Second, helping the poor can mean doing other things, such as assisting a widow with groceries.** You can give the elderly or the disabled rides to church. You can meet with less privileged members and help them craft a budget or help them develop compensable skills valued in the workforce and business place.

**Third, give to organizations with a gospel emphasis that are well run, such as the Rescue Mission.** These organizations are set up expressly to help the poor and can better hold accountable those in need. Giving to an organization can also help to maximize the benefit of the financial support provided.

**Fourth, build relationships with those in poverty.** Investing time and energy is more difficult than investing money. Go with the youth to Sidewalk Sunday school and try to engage the parents. Let me encourage you to invest in someone who wants to overcome their circumstances and is open to the gospel. You could also volunteer at a not-for-profit organization, a mentoring relationship, or some other avenue.... (**Societal Reform**)... **Pray, give financially, and build relationships by being a help and a friend to them.** Examine your heart: **Are there ways that you can combine any of your regular activities with caring for the poor?**