

Should We Help The Poor?

I will never forget walking through Perishing Square in downtown Los Angeles, California many years ago and encountering a man who lived on the streets. He was destitute, dirty, dingy, and desperately in need of food. He was standing on the sidewalk. As I walked toward him, he asked me for some money so that he could have something to eat. I was not sure if he wanted the money for drugs, alcohol or food. I decided to help him get something to eat. I was a college student and did not have very much money myself; but nevertheless, I took him to a fast-food chain and bought him a hamburger, fries and something to drink. I do not remember if I bought him anything else. I will never forget his repeated expressions of thanks and the eagerness with which he hurriedly ate that food. I suspect there are some who would say I did the wrong thing since I had little money myself, but I wanted to help a man who was truly in need.

I am sure there are some who say that we should never give our money to such a person since we do not know what they will do with it. Consequently, they never give anything to anyone or they give very little since they are concerned about “being ripped-off.” But how should a follower of Jesus Christ respond to someone who is in need? In this study we will explore what the Bible says about helping those in need. The scriptures are our source of truth and the basis for everything we do. We will start at the beginning of God’s revelation.

ORIGINS OF POVERTY. When Adam and Eve were created, God had prepared a place for them to live and all the water and food that they needed (Gen. 2:8-17). God instructed Adam to cultivate the land and keep it. The Garden of Eden was truly a paradise. In this ideal place to

live, God provided everything. Listen to His words to Adam,

From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die. Gen. 2:16-17 (NASB)

They had a buffet of food from which they ate. There was only one tree from which they could not eat - the tree in the center of the garden (Gen. 2:9, 17). The message of this verse



is that God did not place man in a state of poverty. It is obvious that God cared for His creation. But Adam and Eve eventually rebelled by sinning. Afterward, God pronounced a curse on the woman and on the man (Gen. 3:14-19). There were multiple aspects to the curse, including a curse on the ground. For God said,

*You shall not eat from it;
Cursed is the ground because of you;
In toil you will eat of it
All the days of your life.
Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;
And you will eat the plants of the field;
By the sweat of your face
You will eat bread,
Till you return to the ground,
Because from it you were taken;
For you are dust,
And to dust you shall return. Gen. 3:17-19 (NASB)*

With sin life changed, and one had to work hard to obtain food to eat. Need, poverty and destitution became possibilities and the realities of life. Some can more easily meet their needs than others. Each situation is unique.

FIRST INSTRUCTIONS ABOUT THE POOR. One can help, be indifferent to, or take advantage of the poor. These responses occur all the time. What response do you think God desires from us? The first clues come from Exodus 22:22 and 23:6. In the first passage God warns that we are not to take advantage of the poor and in the second passage we are not to deny the poor justice in their lawsuits. At first these may seem strange. Who would want to take advantage of the poor? What do they have that one would want? Yet, it occurs all the time. Those who have more manipulate the poor to their own advantage. In Mark 12:40 our Lord Jesus Christ gave one example that came from the religious leaders of His day,

Beware of the scribes who . . . devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation. Mark 12:40 (NASB)

Proverbs 22:22 is another passage that warns to not exploit the poor.

A second clue as to how God wants us to respond to the poor is found in the injunction that Moses gave to the Israelites in Exodus 23:10-11,

You shall sow your land for six years and gather in its yield, but on the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the needy of your people may eat; and whatever they leave the beast of the field may eat. You are to do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove. Ex. 23:11 (NASB)

The Israelites had just left the land of Egypt and they were camping at the base of Mount Sinai when Moses gave this instruction. In this command the Israelites are told to allow the fields to observe a Sabbatical year. From an agricultural perspective, this was beneficial for the ground; from a spiritual perspective it helped the poor. Whatever grew in the field such as vegetables, grapes from vines and fruit from the trees the poor were to be allowed to eat. This command is repeated in various ways in Leviticus 19:10 and 23:22. In these passages the Israelites were told to not glean their field a second time. They were not to seek all the produce that

they could get. That is, they were not to try to retain everything for which they had labored hard.

INSTRUCTED TO CARE FOR ALL. In Leviticus 25:8-12 and 35-43 we discover that God directed the Israelites to care for their fellow citizens as well as strangers and travelers. The instructions are detailed. God prohibited the Israelites from collecting interest on financial loans or on food that a person might give a poor and needy person. The Israelites were instructed to not buy a fellow Israelite who offered himself as a slave in order to live. Instead, the Israelite was to be hired as one would hire an employee until the year of Jubilee. Why did God give this instruction? The answer is found in Lev. 25:38.

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God. Lev. 25:38 (NASB)

God presented His own care for them as the reason they should be generous and kind to others. In Deut. 24:14, 17 the Israelites were also commanded to not take advantage of the poor, needy whether alien, widow, or orphan. They were not to require surety for the help that was being offered either.

GOD'S WELFARE TAX. God also imposed a local welfare tax or tithe in addition.

At the end of every third year you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in that year, and shall deposit it in your town. The Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance among you, and the alien, the orphan and the widow who are in your town, shall come and eat and be satisfied, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do. Deut. 14:28-29 (NASB)

So the Israelites were to provide food from their fields and in addition they were to help the poor through a welfare system. The parallel to modern societies is obvious. Most cultures have a welfare system but how many provide money from their own "fields" in addition?

PROMISE OF NO POOR. The next passage in the Mosaic

Law that is concerned with the poor and needy is Deuteronomy 15:4-5.

However, there will be no poor among you, since the LORD will surely bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, if only you listen obediently to the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today. Deut. 15:4-6 (NASB)

In this passage, God promises that there will not be any poor among them if they obey Him. But they didn't and couldn't since they were sinners. God simply told them that it was theoretically possible to not have any poor. He was honest and forthright. This reminds us of Jesus' statement that we will always have the poor among us in Mark 14:7. His message was that men and women can never satisfy the requirement of Deut. 15:4-6. And God makes that clear in Deut. 15:11 when He said that the poor would never "cease." The message is clear. There will always be needy and poor folks due to poor planning, events beyond one's control, or for some other reason.

HELP WITHOUT REGRET. In Deut. 15:7-8 we hear that God instructed the Israelites to freely give to the poor.

If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. Deut. 15:7-8 (NASB)

Maybe the most significant phrase in this passage is "not harden your heart" and the most significant word is "harden." Clearly the Israelites were told to help the poor, but they were also told not to harden their hearts. The Hebrew word for harden is AMES. It means to make "hard, strong, bold, or to be solid." It has the idea that the person will not budge or cannot be moved. The Israelites were also told to "freely

open their hand" and to be "generous" to sufficiently meet their need.

GOD IS OUR EXAMPLE. In Deut. 10:18; Ps. 40:17; 68:5 and Jer. 22:16, God presents Himself as the defender of the poor and the One who meets their needs. Then He challenges us to do the same because he also works through us. Here are a few verses,

He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. Deut. 10:18-19 (NASB)

The LORD protects the strangers;

He supports the fatherless and the widow,

But He thwarts the way of the wicked. Ps. 146:9 (NASB)

He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?" declares the LORD. Jer. 22:16 (NASB)

God is our example as to how we should help those in need.

In the last verse, God tells us that

those who truly know Him will care for the poor. That is a strong statement.

Protector of the Poor. In 1 Samuel 2:8 God states that He lifts up the needy and the poor.

He raises the poor from the dust,

He lifts the needy from the ash heap. 1 Sam. 2:8 (NASB)

The same thought is repeated in Psalm 35:10. In Psalm 72:12-14 God says that He will respond to those who ask for help, and in Psalm 12:5 God states that He responds to the groaning of the needy. The message is that God is sensitive to the needy - to their emotional pain and pleas for help.

Provider of the Poor. In Psalm 68:10; 146:7 and Isaiah 41:17, we are told that God helps the needy and the prisoners. He gives food, water, and ensures that justice is satisfied.

Who executes justice for the oppressed;

Who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free. Ps. 146:7 (NASB)

The afflicted and needy are seeking water, but there is none,

And their tongue is parched with thirst;

I, the LORD, will answer them Myself,

As the God of Israel I will not forsake them. Is. 41:17 (NASB)

Here God states that He is the one who personally helps the poor. If God helps the poor, then it is a special honor for us to care for the poor and needy.

Savior of the Poor. In Job 5:15; Psalm 34:6 and Ps. 109:31, we discover that God rescues the needy and poor. He saves them from oppressors.

This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him

And saved him out of all his troubles. Ps. 34:6 (NASB)

God is their savior from evil, uncaring men and women.

Refuge for the Poor. In Ps. 14:6 and Isa. 25:4 we discover that God defends the helpless and the needy from people, distress, the weather, and the ruthless.

For You have been a defense for the helpless,

A defense for the needy in his distress,

A refuge from the storm, a shade from the heat;

For the breath of the ruthless

Is like a rain storm against a wall. Is. 25:4 (NASB)

While it is obvious that some needy and helpless do suffer, it is God who is at work to provide help. He does this through people and circumstances. It is His people who are to be His hands and His feet. It is His people who provide the hugs and expression of warmth and compassion. The truth is, few of the needy and helpless would be helped if it were not for God's instruction and the movement of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of people - believer and unbeliever.

In summary, God cares for the poor and needy whether they are dirty, dingy or desperate. God is their protector, provider, savior and their place of refuge. He is our example. What an honor to mirror our Father's example and have a heart like His.

PROMISES TO THOSE WHO HELP THE POOR. In the following verses we will discover that God repeatedly promises to help those who join the Lord in helping the poor. How many promises you can find?

How blessed is he who considers the helpless;

The LORD will deliver him in a day of trouble.

The LORD will protect him and keep him alive,

And he shall be called blessed upon the earth;

And do not give him over to the desire of his enemies.

The LORD will sustain him upon his sickbed;

In his illness, You restore him to health. Ps. 41:1-3 (NASB)

How blessed is the man who fears the LORD,

Who greatly delights in His commandments.

...

He has given freely to the poor,

His righteousness endures forever;

His horn will be exalted in honor. Ps. 112:1, 9 (NASB)

He who despises his neighbor sins,

But happy is he who is gracious to the poor. Prov. 14:21 (NASB)

He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker,

But he who is gracious to the needy honors Him. Prov. 14:31

One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD,

And He will repay him for his good deed. Prov. 19:17 (NASB)

He who is generous will be blessed,

For he gives some of his food to the poor. Prov. 22:9 (NASB)

He who gives to the poor will never want,

But he who shuts his eyes will have many curses. Prov. 28:27

The righteous is concerned for the rights of the poor,

The wicked does not understand such concern. Prov. 29:7

How many promises did you find? There are eleven promises. But did you notice that giving to the poor is lending to the Lord? The message is that God will eventually repay us.

In these promises we discover that God will bring joy to those who help the poor. If we help the poor we will receive blessing from God. But those who withhold will discover that God withholds from them. Proverbs 29:7 is especially poignant. The mark of the righteous is that they are concerned for the poor. This is an important truth. We can gauge our righteousness by our heart's concern and care for the poor. Probably one of the most moving passages of rebuke occurs in Isaiah 58 when God rebukes the Israelites for the pretentious act of being holy. But notice what God said was missing,

Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry
 And bring the homeless poor into the house;
 When you see the naked, to cover him;
 And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
 Then your light will break out like the dawn,
 And your recovery will speedily spring forth;
 And your righteousness will go
 before you;
 The glory of the
 LORD will be your rear guard.
 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
 You will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.'
 If you remove the yoke from your midst,
 The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness,
 And if you give yourself to the hungry
 And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
 Then your light will rise in darkness
 And your gloom will become like midday. Is. 58:7-10

JUDGMENT ON THOSE WHO DO NOT CARE. In the following verses God pronounces a curse on those who close their hearts to the poor.

Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow.' And all the people shall say, "Amen." Deut. 27:19

He who mocks the poor taunts his Maker;
 He who rejoices at calamity will not go unpunished. Prov. 17:5

He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor
 Will also cry himself and not be answered. Prov. 21:13

He who oppresses the poor to make more for himself
 Or who gives to the rich, will only come to poverty. Prov. 22:16

He who gives to the poor will never want,
 But he who shuts his eyes will have many curses. Prov. 28:27

The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and princes of His people,
 "It is you who have devoured the vineyard;
 The plunder of the poor is in your houses.
 What do you mean by crushing My people
 And grinding the face of the poor?"
 Declares the Lord GOD of hosts. Is. 3:14-15 (NASB)

Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy. Ezek. 16:49

The righteous is concerned for the rights of the poor, the wicked does not understand such concern. Prov. 29:7 (NASB)

The last curse is an open rebuke to those who are rich and are not moved with compassion sufficient to respond with help. The message is not just for the wealthy. It applies to anyone who is not poor and needy.

REACTIONS TO THE POOR. In Proverbs 14:20 God reveals one reason why some people do not like to help the poor. They hate the poor.

The poor is hated even by his neighbor,
 But those who love the rich are many. Prov. 14:20

In Prov. 19:4 and 7 we are told that the poor are separated from their friends. In fact, even their family members do not like them. But in sharp contrast God pronounces that He is their Maker,

The rich and the poor have a common bond,

The LORD is the maker of them all. Prov. 22:2

And in 1 Samuel, God says that He makes the wealthy wealthy and the poor.

The LORD makes poor and rich;

He brings low, He also exalts. 1 Sam. 2:7

Therefore, why should we refuse to help the poor? The one that God made wealthy He could have been made poor. It was His choice. Why shouldn't we help the poor?

INDIVIDUALS WHO HELPED THE POOR. There are also numerous examples in the New Testament of individuals caring for the poor. Jesus was and is the ultimate example. In Luke 4:18 Jesus was reading from the book of Isaiah and declared that the following words were true of Him,

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed . . . Luke 4:18 (NASB)

Notice that the prophecy does not mention the wealthy, the middle class, influential or the famous. The prophecy states that Jesus' primary audience is the poor, the needy, captives and the sick. Jesus ministered to everyone but especially the poor.

When He fed the five thousand and some time later four thousand (Matt. 16:9-10), Jesus did so because He was concerned that they were hungry (Mark 8:2). Due to His compassion He wanted to meet their need. All of us are recipients of His love, mercy, and care. He simply asks us to respond to others as He has to us.

Just before Jesus died on the cross for the entire world, He was on the Mount of Olives with the disciples. They asked Him about the signs of the end times. He answered their question and then told them what the marks of a true believer are. Here is what He said,

For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger,

and you invited Me in . . . Matt. 25:35 (NASB)

The message is that those who are true believers have a heart like that of their spiritual Father.

The apostle Paul is another example of one who cared for the poor, and he encouraged other believers to do the same. Paul had this to say in his epistle to the Galatians,

They only asked us to remember the poor — the very thing I also was eager to do. Gal. 2:10

Acts 24:17 and Romans 15:25-26 are other illustrations of Paul's compassion for the poor and needy.

The writer of James shared this under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,

Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? (NASB) James 2:5-6

It is the rich who oppress the poor and take advantage of the needy. It is the rich who close their hearts to those who are in need. The middle-class and wealthy people often hesitate to help the poor. That should not be true of the righteous.

Instead of closing our ears to the cries of help, God calls us to help. The prophet Isaiah wrote the following,

Learn to do good;
Seek justice,
Reprove the ruthless,
Defend the orphan,
Plead for the widow. Is. 1:17 (NASB)

And the apostle John wrote these words,

But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. 1 John 3:17 (NASB)

SUMMARY. Throughout the pages of scripture God directs and encourages us to help the poor, needy, widows, helpless, orphans (James 1:27) and prisoners (Heb. 13:3). God presents Himself as the protector, provider, savior and place of refuge for the needy, poor and the helpless. He is our example. He has given us promises of various blessings and also warned us what will occur if we do not help the poor.

Those who have money are fearful of losing what they have to those who want “free” money. The poor ask for something we own and something we worked hard to obtain, and something we do not want to give up. Yet, God has allowed them to be poor. God has also chosen some to be wealthy. He makes both the wealthy and the poor.

Therefore, we should not be surprised that God commends the “Good Wife” of Proverbs 31 for giving to the poor (Prov. 31:20, 29). In Luke 14, Jesus gave a parable about a wedding feast. In the parable He told the disciples to not take the place of honor. They should wait for someone to invite them to sit at the place of honor. Then near the end of the parable Jesus said,

Do not let the oppressed retreat in disgrace; may the poor and needy praise your name. Ps. 74:21

But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. Luke 14:13

What a great summary of the teaching of scripture about how the poor should be treated. It summarizes everything, including the blessing.

How Individuals Should Respond. It is clear from the words of our God that helping the poor is not an option. Our heart should desire to help the poor, needy, widows, helpless, orphans and prisoners. God makes it clear that we are to help them in two ways. First, we are to help them personally and organizationally. The majority of the injunctions call for personal involvement. That is, we are to do something. We are to give something. We need to get involved individually. When we do help, we need to treat them with respect and dignity. That is the message of Psalms 74:21,

Do not let the oppressed retreat in disgrace; may the poor and needy praise your name. Ps. 74:21 (NIV)

When we help them financially, we need to be concerned about other aspects of their lives,

Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. Ps. 82:3-4 (NASB)

How Churches Should Respond. We are also to help them organizationally. As we have already discovered in the Mosaic Law, the Israelites were to give a tithe and it was to be used for various individuals who were needy, including the Levites. It was a national tax. In the New Testament, the early church also collected monies for those who were in need. One such example occurred when Paul collected monies for the poor Jews in Jerusalem (Romans 15:25-27; 1 Cor. 16:1-2). Therefore, we can conclude that financial assistance should be provided both individually and organizationally.

But how should a church organize to accomplish this task? A great case lesson for us comes from Acts 6:1-7 when the early church had some widows who were in need.

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. Acts 6:1-3

There are several things we can learn from this situation and the directions that the apostle provided.

1) When the need occurred, the leadership responded to

meet the need. They followed the biblical principle that we have already explored in this study.

- 2) They organized to meet the need. That suggests that churches need to be organized as well. They selected seven men to care for the widows who they knew were in need.
- 3) It is recommended that the responsibility be given to the pastor or an elder. In each situation the pastor or elder will explore the individual's relationship with the Lord. The goal is to lead them to Jesus and motivate them to commit to attending a local church.
- 4) They knew the widows needs were real since the widows were among them. They had first person knowledge. But when people from outside the church seek help, we do not have knowledge of their situation. We do not know if the need is real or if it is a scam. Therefore, it is recommended they we use the attached questionnaire to help determine if the need is valid (see attached).
- 5) It is recommended that a specific, amount depending upon the situation, be designated that can be used to

help individuals who are in need.

- 6) We also are to treat those in need with respect and dignity. That includes verbal respect and also confidentiality to the degree possible.

- John Calahan