

Helping the Poor and Homeless

By Randy Alcorn | March 18, 1993



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A stubble-faced, leather-skinned vagrant approaches me and asks, “Can you spare some change?” It’s nothing new, but the last few years the faces have been getting younger, the requests more frequent and my responses less certain. A popular sign reads, “Will work for food.” Sometimes it’s true. Sometimes it isn’t. (Unless I have a job to offer, how can I know?)

As a pastor for fourteen years, I was sometimes called on to deal with requests for money. Knowing that churches have benevolence funds, needy people dropped by asking for gas money, food money, or bus money. Some of them slept in their cars. Some even had children. It was my job to try to discern if the need was legitimate, and if so, the best way to help. As director of a parachurch ministry committed to assisting those who feed the poor, I have to exercise the same kind of discernment.

Definitions and therefore estimates of the homeless vary widely from source to source. (Does homeless include those who have no home of their own, but live with others? Does it include those who stay in government provided apartments and never face sleeping on the streets?) It appears that between 300,000 and 500,000 Americans may be homeless on any given night. Most of these end up in shelters, and a good portion of those who don’t are on the streets by choice. (According to *Newsweek*, New York City alone has 90,000 homeless, and 30,000 of these have AIDS or are HIV positive.) Most of these are adult men, but there are increasing numbers of women and children, and even whole families.

Demographic breakdowns of the homeless also vary widely from source to source. The following is an average of statistics found in several different sources, and is therefore only roughly accurate. It appears that about 15% of homelessness is due to job loss and lack of low-income housing. About 35% is due to mental illness, which is usually accompanied by marginal

job skills. About 50% of the homeless are physically and mentally able, with job skills ranging from minimal to optimal, but choose not to work.

Many in the latter group are alcoholics or drug-addicts. They take advantage of public shelters and soup kitchens to save money for their addictions. Frequently they are the most cunning and aggressive panhandlers, while the willing-to-work are often too ashamed to ask for money, and not “good at it” when they do. The 15% whose adverse circumstances have put them on the streets are the subject of most of the media stories on “street people.” The sentiments this generates prompt further indiscriminate social services that often end up going to the wrong people, thus fueling the growing public cynicism about the poor that results in “throwing the baby out with the bathwater” (failing to help the truly poor because of resentment toward those who abuse the system).

When it comes to the poor and homeless, I see three primary questions. The morality question—“What is our responsibility to the poor?” The wisdom question—“How do we discern who the poor are and what they really need?” The practicality question—“What exactly should we do to help the poor?”

What is Our Responsibility to the Poor?

In his essay on self-reliance, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “Do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor?”

Biblically, Emerson’s question can be approached two ways. First, are the non-poor to blame for the poor being poor? Karl Marx claimed that if anyone has more than someone else, he must have gotten it at the other’s expense. Scripture, however, tells us God “gives you the ability to produce wealth” (Deut. 8:18). There is not a set amount of wealth that is constantly redistributed. One person can generate wealth without taking it from another.

Of course, some *have* cheated and exploited others, contributing to their poverty—“The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you” (James 5:4). If we have done this we must repent and make restitution. Zaccheus determined to pay back four times over those whom he had cheated (Luke 19:8).

But contrary to Emerson’s sentiments, even if I am not to blame for the poor being poor, Scripture tells me I am still responsible to help them. The Good Samaritan was not *responsible* for the plight of the man lying beside the road. After all, he had not robbed and brutalized him. Nonetheless, he was *responsible* to love his neighbor as himself. He did this not simply by refraining from hurting him, but by actively helping him. He generously used his time, energy and money to care for him. Jesus instructed us to do the same (Luke 10:30-37).

God says, “I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land” (Deut. 15:10, 11). He promises special reward for helping the poor (Prov. 19:17; 22:9; 28:27). The Old Testament prophets boldly spoke forth God’s commands to care for the poor (Isa. 58:7-11). Jesus came to preach the good news to the poor and needy (Luke 4:18-19). Though he himself had little, Christ made a regular practice of giving to the poor (John

13:29). He also repeatedly commanded care for the poor, promising eternal reward for those who do so (Luke 14:12-14). Special offerings to help the poor were commonplace in the early church (Acts 11:27-30; 24:17; Gal. 2:10).

Caring for the poor is a litmus test of whether our faith is biblical and genuine (James 1:27; 2:14-16; 1 John 3:16-19). Our Lord takes personally how we treat the poor—"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat . . . In that you did it for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:34-35).

How Do We Decide Who the Poor Are and What They Need?

We are often told by government and religious agencies alike that we should help "the poor" by doing this or that. But it is a fundamental error to lump together all of the "poor," as if they were a monolithic group. Both Scripture and experience teach us that not all people are poor for the same reasons, and therefore not all can ultimately be helped by the same means.

I can think of at least fifteen reasons people may be poor: insufficient natural resources, adverse climate, lack of knowledge or skill, lack of needed technology or equipment, natural disaster (e.g. earthquake or flood), personal catastrophe (e.g. destruction of home or fields), poor health or physical handicap, mental handicap, exploitation and oppression by others, inability to find work, substance addiction, personal laziness, wasteful self-indulgence, personal choice to identify with and serve the poor (e.g. Mother Teresa), and religion or world view. (An example of the latter is the Hindu concept of karma which discourages improving one's circumstances and results in people starving while one of their major God-given food sources, cattle, consumes another, grain.)

Cures must be tailor-made to the cause of an illness. One does not take chemotherapy to cure a cold, nor insulin to treat asthma. It is as ludicrous to use one stock formula to "help the poor" as it is to give all sick people the same treatment for every disease and expect it to heal them.

If a person is poor because his home has been destroyed by earthquake or flood, the solution may be to give him the money, materials and assistance to help him rebuild his home and reestablish his business. If he's poor due to exploitation or oppression or injustice, we can offer immediate help while laboring for long-term legal, social, and economic reforms. When poverty is due to adverse climate, the poor need not just short-term relief, but long-term development that will give them the resources to prevent future poverty and hunger. (Some relief organizations are short-sighted, responding to present emergencies—as they should—but doing little to prevent future emergencies.)

If a person is homeless due to a mental handicap, we should seek to provide love, friendship and housing, find proper treatment and training in job skills. (Becoming a contributing member of society is often the best treatment for mental illness.) For those with addictions who want help, we can link them with rehabilitation and recovery groups. Again, giving short-term help without offering long-term solutions is counterproductive.

A person may be poor because of waste and self-indulgence—”He who loves pleasure will become poor” (Prov. 21:17). A man may make a decent income but waste it on drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, expensive convenience foods, costly recreation, or gambling (including lotteries).

Many people manage to meet their family’s needs on very low incomes. Others make several times as much money, but are always “poor,” always in a financial crisis. This is not because their means are too little, but because they are living above their means. Trying to solve such a situation by throwing money at it is like trying to put out a fire by dousing it with gasoline.

When I was a pastor, we called a government agency to get the names of needy people. We drove to their homes with sacks of food, only to find people surrounded by conveniences that some of us contributing the food couldn’t afford or justify. I’ve seen people who perpetually “have no money” to buy groceries for their family, but have a boat, car or recreational vehicle worth \$20,000 parked in their driveway! Such people need to be held accountable to liquidate their assets and feed their families, then learn to reorder their priorities and live within their means.

Some people are poor due to laziness. God’s Word says that the result of laziness will be poverty (Prov. 24:30-34). “Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth” (Prov. 10:4). “Laziness brings on deep sleep, and the shiftless man goes hungry” (Prov. 19:15). “A sluggard does not plow in season; so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing” (Prov. 20:4). “The fool folds his hands and ruins himself” (Eccles. 4:5).

Every act of provision to a lazy person legitimizes and reinforces his laziness. It removes his incentives to be responsible for himself, and makes him more dependent on others. Paul commanded the Thessalonian church to stop taking care of the lazy and reminded them of this strict rule—”if a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10). If we take this verse literally, and I do, it means it’s a sin to feed the lazy. The point is not to let people starve—the point is that faced with hunger they will be motivated to work and support themselves as God intends. “A worker’s appetite works for him, for his hunger urges him on” (Prov. 16:26).

The lazy and self-indulgent do not need financial support, they need incentives to no longer be lazy and self-indulgent. “Laziness brings on deep sleep, and the shiftless man goes hungry” (Prov. 19:15). As God-created nerve endings send the painful but life-saving message “take your hand out of the fire,” so hunger sends the life-saving message to the lazy person, “Stop being lazy and go to work.” That is, unless we circumvent God’s system by feeding the lazy. It is a serious error to invalidate the God-ordained mechanism that says “What you sow you will reap” (Gal. 6:7). By all means we must care for those whose circumstances and disabilities leave them poor. But any system—whether secular or religious—that feeds the able-bodied lazy is a counterproductive system. It does them and the rest of society a disservice. We become enablers and accomplices in the violation of God’s principles. The lazy man is poor by choice. We must do nothing to encourage that choice.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development counted 1900 homeless shelters in 1984. By 1988, there were 5400. Why? Because, some experts are now saying, the supply created a demand. *U.S. News and World Report* says people are now kicking out extended family or single

daughters with children—or the latter are choosing to leave an adequate home—precisely because society will provide them free housing. In fact, New York has 3,200 transitional housing units for the homeless that provide private living quarters, baths and a daily restaurant allowance—a better arrangement than people get living with their relatives.

Federal funding for housing has gone from twenty billion dollars in 1978 to over seventy billion dollars in 1990, yet the number homeless seeking new shelters has dramatically increased. While many blame the economy, government statistics show the number of poor people living in crowded households actually dropped significantly from 1.4 million in 1983 to less than a million in 1989. Government provided housing has become a “Field of Dreams” scenario—“if you build it, we will come.” This problem will not be solved with money and facilities—families must be built and strengthened, and responsibility must be taught by refusing to reward (and thereby encourage) irresponsibility. The *U. S. News* article comes to a conclusion in line with the apostle Paul—“the homeless sometimes respond better to discipline than to unfettered support.”

I know a man who chose not to work, yet received unemployment benefits twice as high as the salary of his friend who worked forty hours a week. I saw the light go on in his head—“Why work when you don’t have to?” I watched that man change over a one year period, as he grew accustomed to not having to work to live. That was ten years ago, and he hasn’t had a job since. He still lives off the misguided “help” of society. Meanwhile he has lost both his self-respect and his family. A nation, church or family that subsidizes the lazy spawns laziness. Since laziness leads to poverty, supporting the lazy breeds poverty.

What is Biblical Compassion?

I know from experience that many Christians will be uncomfortable, or even offended, by what I’ve just been saying. They will think, “This doesn’t sound compassionate.” But what *sounds* compassionate and what *is* compassionate are not always the same. Compassion must not be rooted simply in our feelings, or measured by our own subjective satisfaction in saying “I helped the poor.” True compassion sees and deals with the root of the problem. Compassionate parents don’t let their children watch whatever they want on TV, eat junk food all day, or play on the freeway—even though doing so may make the children happier (today), and make life easier for the parents (today). They don’t automatically give their child the new bicycle he wants—they tell him he can only have a new bicycle if he earns it, then they take the time and effort to show him how to earn it.

The fact is that many of us want to “help the poor” because of the good feeling it gives us. We are concerned about salving our consciences, not with whether our “help” has actually met their real long-term needs. But true compassion gives people what they need, not just what they want. Our primary calling is not to help others (or ourselves) *feel* good, but to help them *be* good. Shoveling money and goods at poor people may help us—and them—feel good for the short run. It takes more thought, time and commitment on our part—and theirs—to help them do what is best in the long run. It is terribly unfair to attribute all poverty to laziness. It is terribly unwise to try to help the lazy in the same way we help those who are truly in need.

This concept is a challenge to ministries that open their soup kitchens daily and distribute free food and materials to anyone and everyone. Some inner city missions are exemplary, but others fall into the same unhealthy pattern of fostering irresponsibility that has marred most government programs. Some truly needy will be helped—but others will be reinforced in their laziness, and subsidized in their pursuit of harmful addictions. If by feeding a person tonight, we enable him to spend his money on alcohol rather than food, effectively are we doing anything different than just handing him a bottle?

Of course, sometimes it will be impractical or impossible to screen out the irresponsible. Better to feed some who are irresponsible in the process of helping the truly needy, than let the truly needy (including the children of the irresponsible) suffer in the screening attempt. But better still to try to do both, for Scripture tells us to do both. To exercise such discernment requires taking time to get to know individuals and their unique situations, just as a doctor must diagnose each patient rather than prescribing one general cure for everyone. Tempting as it is to do so, we must refuse to equate biblical compassion with every impersonal or indiscriminate distribution program, whether by government or religious agencies.

What Exactly Should We Do to Help the Poor?

Obviously, a person can be unemployed without being lazy. We need to help the unemployed with his immediate needs, but above all we need to help him find work. Sending him to classes, teaching him a skill, helping him write a resume, coaching him for a job interview—all these may be much more helpful than ongoing financial gifts. When work isn't to be found, we need to provide it however we can. On a few occasions we've helped the unemployed by giving them work on our church grounds. I've come up with a variety of odd jobs around our house that are worthy and constructive. It's important for people's self-respect and initiative to maintain the God-ordained connection between work and income.

The Old Testament pattern of gleaning is a model of how to help the poor in the most positive way (Lev. 19:9-10). God said to leave the corners of the fields uncut so the poor could have food. But notice the grain was not cut, bundled, processed, ground, bagged, transported and delivered to the poor. Provided they were able, the poor were to go to the fields and do the work themselves. This way their needs were met, but they weren't robbed of their dignity nor made irresponsible by a workless welfare system.

We need to develop a screening process that isn't impersonal or dehumanizing, but accurately determines whether a person is in need, and if so, why. Christ's words "Give to him who asks of you" must be seen in the context of the whole Scriptures. Paul commands the church to care for "those widows who are really in need" (1 Tim. 5:3), but says that even in the body of Christ *not every widow qualifies for church support*. We must be generous, but also be discerning so that our generosity hits the mark.

I have the phone numbers of a few friends who own nurseries. I've told able-bodied street people if they want some honest work to earn money for food and other needs, there's a good chance they can get a job in the fields. If they're not interested, they've screened themselves out and I

know I shouldn't give them money. If they are, I can go the next step and see what else I can do for them. (Needless to say, we should look for every opportunity to share the gospel.)

The church is not to take over responsibilities that properly belong to family members (1 Tim. 5:35). In light of this principle, our church leaders approached an elderly woman's brother to encourage him to meet her material needs he had neglected. He was embarrassed, but he got involved in the life of his sister precisely because we called on him to. Had we continued helping her, he never would have. It is the church's role to encourage the family to fulfill its responsibilities, not to take over those responsibilities. (Of course, if family members refuse to help, the church must.)

Churches need to help the poor not just by giving money or food, but personal attention—our time, our skills, and our personal interest. An elderly widow doesn't just need a check, she needs someone to take her shopping, to sit and talk with her, to pray with her. She may need someone to mow her lawn, fix her fence, drive her to church. When we see the homeless, God may not just want us to open our pocketbooks, but our homes (Rom. 12:13). When we opened our home to a needy woman for a year, we had the privilege of seeing her come to Christ. No evangelistic efforts are more credible than those authenticated by hospitality. (Even when we open our homes, however, biblical compassion means expecting them to contribute to the household in some meaningful way.)

What many people need is not more money, but personal help in handling the money they have. Good financial counseling, including how to make and stick to a reasonable budget, is a far more valuable gift than \$500 to bail someone out of a situation he should never have gotten into in the first place. Direction in how to find and keep a job is much more helpful than putting groceries on a shelf while someone sits home and watches television all day. When a middle aged career person is laid off, he not only needs to find a new job, but may need support to avoid paralytic depression.

Conclusion

Our family gives regularly to World Relief, a ministry that brings immediate help, long-term development, and the gospel of Christ to the needy throughout the world. The fact is that the poorest of the poor live far away from most of us. Local efforts are good, but we must not forget the desperate needs in parts of Africa, Asia and South America. Furthermore, the class called the "poor" in Scripture includes the weak, defenseless and exploited. Efforts on behalf of unborn children, exploited women, the elderly, handicapped and underprivileged immigrants and minorities are close to the heart of God, who calls himself the rescuer of the poor (Job 29:12; Psalm 35:10; Jer. 20:13).

I cannot relate meaningfully to the poor when I am isolated from the poor. For some of us it's a question of walking down the block and getting to know the poor. For others it's driving twenty miles to find a homeless person. Perhaps I must take regular trips away from the cozy suburbs to the inner city. Whole churches have become involved in projects of helping the poor. Some youth groups take regular trips to Mexico. Others put on camps and evangelistic Bible clubs for

inner-city children. Churches can go to the ghettos, the jails, the hospitals, and rest homes—wherever there is need.

More radically, instead of following the evangelical pattern of abandoning the city for the suburbs, perhaps its time for more of us to go as missionaries to the poor and live in their midst. Clearly our social programs are not working—if we as Christians will not be the incarnation of Christ’s love and wisdom in the inner city, who will?

We must resist the unbiblical rationalization that we cannot make a difference. “But I’m just one person. And we’re just a small church. How can we eliminate poverty?” The answer is you can’t. Jesus said the poor would always be with us (Mark 14:7). But that shouldn’t inhibit our action. A poster asked, “How can you help a billion hungry people?” The answer below was right on target: “One at a time.”

Caring for the poor is a sobering responsibility for which we will all be held accountable—”If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered” (Prov. 21:13). We must seek to help the poor in the right way, but above all we must help them in some way. Helping the poor and homeless is not a peripheral issue. God links our efforts for the poor directly to our relationship with him. May he one day say of us what he said of King Josiah: “He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” (Jer. 22:16).

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