

God's Heart for the Poor

October 4th, 2015

A number of years ago, some first-year seminary students at an evangelical seminary decided to highlight every verse in the Bible having to do with **the poor** and **God's response to injustice**.

- And what they found took them almost entirely by surprise... that there were **over two thousand verses** in the Bible that addressed the issue of **poverty & injustice**.
- In fact, they found that, in the Old Testament, the only subject spoken of more than poverty and injustice **had to do with idolatry**.

But even then, they found that idolatry & injustice, especially toward the poor, were often linked together.

- In the **New Testament** they discovered that **one out of every sixteen** verses related to the subject of the poor or money.
- In the **Gospels**, it was **one out of ten verses** that were devoted to the subject of the poor, money, and injustice.

And yet, as they began talking about what they had discovered, they all realized that none of them could remember hearing even a single sermon

- devoted exclusively to the **subject of the poor** and the Christian's **response to poverty & injustice**.
- And so, out of frustration over how all these verses had been figuratively "cut out" of the Bible,
- one of the seminary students **got a pair of scissors** and began to literally cut out **every single verse in the Bible** that dealt with poverty & injustice.

So, the story of the **Good Samaritan**... he cut it out. He cut out **verses 10 & 11** from Deuteronomy **15**, which says,

- *"Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this, the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. ¹¹There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward those of your people who are poor and needy."*

- He cut out verses **16-18** from **1 John 3**, which says, “*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another.*”¹⁷ *If any one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you?* ¹⁸*Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*”

All of the passages in which **Paul and Peter and James urge us to be generous** to the poor; He cut them all out.

- And **when he was done**... his Bible was completely shredded, though he carried that shredded Bible around for years...
- *claiming* that what was in his hand was, in fact, the evangelical Bible... a **Bible full of man-made holes**.

You see, somehow, at some point in time, the evangelical church **chose to close its eyes** to what **so clearly resounds** in the heart of God.

- And yet, it was a heroic German pastor named **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** who wrote from the Flossenburg concentration camp during WWII, that “*The church is only the church when it exists for the sake others.*”
- Those words, which were written just before Heinrich Himmler had him executed, on April 9th, 1945, **have echoed in my heart since the first time I heard them** nearly twenty years ago.

Guys, a church is only *really* a church when it gives itself away... when it exists for something more than just itself.

- That’s why our passion here, beyond our calling and desire to be a worshipping church, is to be a **community of hope** to the to the **desperate & powerless** around around us.
- Because if we only look inwardly, if we only exist for our own members, then whatever else we may be, we’re not really the church.
- We might be a nice **religious club**... we might be a **gathering of friends** or **one big happy family**... But we’re not a church.
- Because a church always exists for the sake of God... and for the sake of those outside of themselves.

And so, what I'd like to do this morning is to take a serious look at what Jesus is saying to His church to regarding the poor.

- In fact, it was 2000 years ago that Jesus stood up in that synagogue and **began reading from the Torah**,
- saying, in **Luke 4:18-19**, "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.*"

In other words, as **Jesus launches His public ministry**, the very first thing He proclaims is His intention to bring hope to the poor.

- But, according to Scripture, **who are the poor?** Well, as you read through the Old Testament,
- there are **three groups or categories of people** that are regarded over and over again as the poor.
- They are the **Foreigner, the Fatherless, and the Widow. For example, in Deuteronomy 24:17-22**, we read...

*"Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or accept a widow's cloak as security for her debt. ¹⁸**Remember that you were slaves in Egypt** and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. ¹⁹When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a bundle of grain, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. ²¹When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. ²²**Remember that you were slaves in Egypt**. That is why I command you to do this."*

So, let me ask you this? Why does this passage along with dozens of others like it, call us to embrace the Foreigner, Fatherless, and Widow as being special objects of concern for God and His community?

- Well, as you can imagine... in a patriarchal society like ancient Israel, men were the **protectors of** and **providers for** their wives and children.

- But in this kind of subsistence level society where people were **never able to put away some extra money** for a rainy day...
- *if* a father and husband were to die **before his son was old enough to provide an income**, his family would have **virtually no provision or protection**.

And, like the fatherless & widowed, the **foreigner** was extremely vulnerable to poverty and exploitation as well.

- In today's language, they would be considered **refugees**... those who had no other option but to escape **persecution** or **famine** or **war** or **severe economic deprivation** in their country.
- At the very least, I would think twice before you dismiss the idea of bringing in Syrian refugees... yes... even at the risk of a few ISIS infiltrators.

The fatherless, foreigner, and widow, all lived on the very edge of survival.

- Without any help, they could **easily starve**, or **go without shelter**, or **die of treatable diseases**.
- In the context of our Deuteronomy passage, we're talking about the **dependent**, the **vulnerable**, the **easily exploited**... those who simply cannot make a life for themselves...
- Those who were desperate for the mercy and help of the larger Israelite society around them to just survive.

But then, who are the poor today? Well, **like in ancient Israel**, there are a number of categories of poor.

- In our society, for example, there are the **refugees**, the **hungry**, the **homeless**, the **orphans**, and the **sick & uninsured**...
- Those who are **living at the edge of survival** where just about anything could push them over the edge into utter destitution.

Tony Hall, served as a Democrat in Congress for 24 years. He came to Christ after being elected to Congress and became a strong pro-life voice within the Democratic Party.

- He also served as the head of the *House Select Committee on Hunger* and was the founder and chair of the *Congressional*

Hunger Center, which was a non-governmental organization dedicated to fighting hunger in developing nations.

- As a three-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee, President Bush appointed him to be the **U.S. Ambassador to U.N. agencies** committed to fighting hunger around the world.

Tony Hall said that while driving along one of the main roads in Ethiopia some time ago, he **kept hearing what sounded like a deep moan** echoing around him.

- As he observed numbers of people sitting by the side of the road, he **stopped his car** and began walking around.
- And what he realized was that **the deep moan he was hearing** were sounds of those around him starving to death...
- **the unspeakable pain** of a mother, for example, who couldn't offer her starving child even a single grain of rice.

In my last few years in Tajikistan, there was a particular family that I started spending time with.

- The father worked at Chernobyl when the nuclear reactor accident took place in 1986.
- He was sick... and his mud house was falling apart. So, we put a new roof on for him and regularly brought over sacks of flour and oil.

They lived in **extreme poverty**, which is often defined globally as making less than one dollar a day.

- Because I ran a Relief & Development organization, I had access to resources that helped them survive,
- though, I'll **never forget returning to their village** after being out of the country for just a short time.

The mother had just had her third child before I left... but when I visited them after that trip, I noticed that the baby wasn't there.

- I asked where she was... and they told me that she had died.
- Their baby had a fever and, as much as they tried, **they couldn't find the three dollars** they would have needed to buy the antibiotics their baby needed.

And while, of course, America has an infinitely higher standard of living than the rest of the world, we certainly have our share of poverty.

- Just talk to **Senior citizens** making \$800 a month on Social Security trying to pay off medical bills that are running \$750 per month.
- Just speak to the **working poor** making minimum wage. We're talking about **jobs that offer no health care and no child-care...** jobs paying \$8.40 per hour.

Think about that. If a single mom with two kids worked 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, she'd only bring home **\$17,475**.

- In our own back yard here in Morris County, the sixth wealthiest county in the US, out of **170,000 families**,
- **8000** are living below the poverty line, which is \$20,090/year for a family of three.

And, by the way, of those 8000 families, 5200 are single mother-led households... 80-90% of whom are working 40 or more hours per week.

- The problem is, that at minimum wage, she'd have to work **152 hours a week** just to pay the fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment here...
- and she'd have to work another **17-34 hours** just to pay for childcare.

You see, that's why, as a church, we started Arms Around Morris County. Because within a ten-mile radius, there are over **300 families** living below the poverty line.

- Imagine being a single **mom with two children making less than \$21,000** here in Morris County!
- You see, these are some of the most vulnerable and powerless people in our area... incredible people doing the best they can to survive.

And what we've seen each year is that, as we commit to doing our part, we're able to make a real difference in the lives of many of these people.

- I **spoke** with a retired mother named **April** some time ago... who not only takes care of several of her own children but is raising her six grandchildren as well.

- She started crying **as she thanked us for the incredible support we were able to offer her during** the holiday season.
- Over and over again, we've seen what we, as a Community of Hope, could do if we continued to really work together on this.

So, we've reflected just a little bit so far over what the Bible has to say about poverty. But, what does the Bible **teach us about wealth**... about having money?

- We read in **1 Tim. 6:17-19**, "*Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.*"
- "¹⁸*Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.* ¹⁹*In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.*"

So, how should we think about money? Unlike *some* who preach on prosperity today, the Bible says that money is not an unmitigated good.

- In other words, the Bible says that **there's a potential danger** to being wealthy. And why?
- Because there is a temptation to be arrogant... there is a temptation to believe that your **material wealth** reflects **spiritual wealth**...
- *that* because you've been blessed materially, that God must automatically be smiling down on your life.

Clearly, you can be materially wealthy and yet be **spiritually impoverished**... you can be materially wealthy and be **relationally impoverished**...

- *that* you can be materially wealthy and have **no sense of purpose**... that you can be materially wealthy and have **no sense of meaning**.

In fact, the **Bible avoids the two financial extremes**, which nearly every culture falls into regarding **money & wealth**:

- the **danger of materialism** and the **danger of asceticism**... the notion that you become a more spiritual person the less you have.
- Concerning the danger of materialism, **verse 17** says:
“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain.”

You see, you will never fill your spiritual needs at the Rockaway Mall or Menlo Park Mall.

- Another **pair of shoes**, another **pair of jeans**, or another **item for your home**...
- **will not satisfy your hunger for God** or your hunger for **meaningful relationships** with other people.
- Another **purse** or another electronic **gadget** is not going to add increased **depth, meaning, purpose** to your life?
- So the Bible calls us to avoid the trap of materialism. But it also calls us to avoid the error of asceticism... that you're more spiritual if you have less.

Again, from **verse 17**, *“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.”*

You're allowed to enjoy things. You're allowed to enjoy a **good meal**... you're allowed to **enjoy your home**.

- Does the Bible say you should feel guilty because you've done well... because you've done well financially? No.
- **The Bible never teaches you to feel guilty... the Bible teaches you to feel responsible!**
- So, don't walk out of here feeling guilty, walk out of here feeling responsible for those who have less.

Look at **verse 18**... *“Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.”* Here's the Biblical message regarding material blessing.

- God has **blessed you** so that you can be a blessing. God has **shown you grace** so that you can be gracious to others.
- God has **opened His hand to you** so that you can open your hand to someone else.
- Don't feel guilty; **feel responsible** for those around you who are worse off than you.

And if you are generous, the Bible says, in **verse 19**, ***"In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life."***

You've heard it said that you can't take anything with you when you die. That's why you've never seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul... because you can't take your earthly treasures with you.

- But here's the secret... while you can't take them with you when you die... you can **send it ahead of you** while you're still alive.
- You can't take them with you... but if you give to the poor, **the promise is that your wealth will meet you there...** that there will be treasures in heaven when you get there.
- That's what the Bible teaches. That generosity to the poor will produce true riches. You can send it ahead!

So, **why should we care about the poor?** Because there are over 2000 verses regarding God's heart for the poor and injustice in the world.

- From these verses I could share so many Biblical reasons to reach out and care for the poor. But let me share just five...

1. Because we were poor and God helped us

Deuteronomy 10:19 says, *"And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt."*

- In the passage we read earlier from **Deuteronomy 24**, the Israelites are commanded two different times to reach out to the fatherless, foreigner, and widow.
- And why? Because, as it says in **verses 18 & 22**, the Israelites were themselves slaves in Egypt... and because God redeemed **them** from the Egyptians.

In other words, **the Bible continually reminds us** to look back at where we were when we first experienced God's love and salvation.

- No matter what life was like for us at that moment, we all had a sense of our own spiritual poverty. We were impoverished... and we knew it.
- And now, God is asking that you reach out your hand to others the way He's reached out His hand to you...
- To **love others** the way He's **loved you** and **poured out His mercy & grace** on your life. So, why should we help the poor?

2. Because God identifies with the poor

In **Proverbs 19:17**, we're told that *"Those who are kind to the poor lend to the Lord, and He will reward them for what they have done."*

- In other words, **there is such a close identification** of God with **the plight of the poor** that when we minister to the poor & hungry, **it is as if** we are lending to the Lord.
- The God, who has **need of nothing**; The God who **owns everything**; God who **gives us the very ability to earn** an income;

This God says: If you **minister to the lost, poor, & sick**, it's not as if you're simply ministering to Me.

- But rather, it's **as if you've given Me a loan** and I'm in your debt!
- Our God, **who is in the debt of no one**, says *"I will put myself in your debt if you care for and reach out to the poor."*
- That's how much God identifies with the poor & hungry & lost. Why else should we help the poor?

3. Because God protects the poor

Deuteronomy 10:17-18 says, *"For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. ¹⁸He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigners residing among you, giving them food and clothing."*

- You see, God is always working on behalf of the poor... loving & defending the poor.
- The question is, whether we will **take up our Father's cause** OR **whether we'll take all He has given us** and use it simply for our own benefit.
- Why should we help the poor?

4. Because caring for the poor leads to blessing & eternal reward

Proverbs 22:9 says, *“The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.”*

- **Luke 12:33** says, *“Sell your possessions and give to the poor. This will **store up treasure for you in heaven!** And the purses of heaven never get old or develop holes. Your treasure will be safe; no thief can steal it and no moth can destroy it.”*
- There are dozens of promises in the Bible that link blessing in this world with giving to the poor. Why give to the poor?

5. Bottom-line... Because we are commanded to!

Deuteronomy 15:10-11 says, *“Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.*

*¹¹There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore **I command you to be openhanded** toward those of your people who are poor and needy...”*

Over and over again, God calls His people to **not just store up** what He has given us;

- to **not hoard our wealth**, but to **use a part of what He's given** us in order to be a **channel of His blessing** to the world around us.
- The Word of God calls to **help the poor...** to **give...** to be **generous...** to **open your hand...**
- To **care about others...** to **let your heart be touched...** to feel the pain of other people in this world.

There are so many reasons the Bible gives us to care for and reach out to the poor... **so why don't we do more?** Well, let me suggest three things.

1. I refuse to be a bleeding heart liberal!

Sadly, one of the reasons we don't reach out to the poor has to do with politics.

- Here in America, evangelicals & charismatics are **shaped more by politics & ideology** than we are by the **Word of God**.
- The truth is, there are passages of Scripture, which both sides of the aisle would like to ignore when it comes to our response to the poor.
- For example, there has always been a fair amount of debate between Republicans and Democrats regarding the fundamental causes of poverty... why poor people are poor.

Let's be honest and say that there are verses in the Bible that **social liberals** tend to avoid... **those who tend to see poverty solely through the lenses of oppression.**

- For example, the Bible says that a person can **become poor through self-indulgence**.
- In fact, **Proverbs 21:17** says: "*Whoever loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich.*"
- If you're self-indulgent, even if you make a decent living, if you are self-indulgent... **running up your credit cards, throwing money away on drugs**, alcohol, or gambling, for example... the Bible certainly teaches that you can become poor.
- **Proverbs 23:21** talks about how addictions can "*set you on your way toward poverty.*"
- The Bible even teaches that you can **become poor through laziness**. In fact, **Proverbs 10:4** says, "*Lazy hands make for poverty.*"

People on the conservative right are correct in saying that we won't be able to break the problem of poverty **until we also deal with** the problem of broken families....

- because *there really is* a **connection** between **economic** poverty and **moral** poverty.
- Those on the conservative right, for example, are correct in saying that **no amount of funding or government programs in and of themselves** will deal with the **issue of sexual promiscuity** and **poor moral choices** that can often lead to poverty.

But it's **selective reading at best** to suggest that scripture points to poor moral choices and laziness as the only reasons for poverty.

- The Bible overwhelmingly gives us a whole set of reasons why the poor are poor *beyond* their own moral choices...
- Including such things as **injustice** and **sickness** and **floods** and **famines** and **historic racism, unfair labor practices, and poor educational opportunities.**

As you read what God's Word says about poverty and injustice, it is clear that *oppression* figures **far** more prominently in the Bible **as a cause of poverty than does *laziness***, for example.

- Listen... we understand that **bad moral choices left ignored** will not lead to a good life... and that those choices might even lead to poverty.
- But we also understand that a person's good moral choices won't necessarily lead to a **good education**
- or to the **end of prejudice** or **agism** that keeps them from getting a better job because of race or age (in spite of the labor laws we have in place).

You see, helping the poor is **not a matter of being liberal** or left-wing... It is a **matter of being biblical**... it's a matter of being an authentic follower of Jesus.

- And, as followers of Christ, understand that together, as the church, **we can pull together what politics alone** has never been able to pull together. **And why?**
- Because the church is able to address **personal moral choices** that liberals may not want to emphasize...
- As well as the **issues of social justice** that the conservative right may not want to pay attention to.

The Church can pull them together and say, “*we find both in the Scripture.*”

- We, as a church, have the capacity to bring together the two sides of the coin that politics keeps apart... **personal moral choices and social justice.**
- And because of that, we can **address the issue of poverty in a holistic, more impactful way.**
- So, why else don't we help the poor? Because we say:

2. “I am only one person”

When Representative Tony Hall went to Calcutta on one of his many trips to visit Mother Teresa, he said:

- *“Mother Teresa, as I look around India, the problem of poverty is so staggeringly huge and even with what you are doing, it is just a drop in the bucket.”*
- Mother Teresa said: *“No, it is not just a drop in the bucket. It is a drop in the ocean. But if I didn't do something, there would be one less drop.”*
- So he asked her, *“What should we do? What can I do?”* She answered him, saying, *“Just do what is in front of you.”*

So, the next time you feel overwhelmed by the idea of your being only one person, remember these two things.

- First, that even though your contribution may seem like a drop in the bucket, **that one person you're helping will see it as a true gift from God.**
- So, go ahead... and *“just do what is in front of you.”*

And secondly, remember that **you're not just one drop in the bucket.** But, together as a church we become the “bucket!”

- Perhaps not the biggest bucket around... **but a vehicle to help dozens of single moms as we continue to reach out** through Arms Around Morris County.
- Why don't we do more to reach out to those living in poverty?

3. We don't Plan on Helping the Poor

While the **last issue was one of inadequacy...** this issue **reflects the problem of intentionality.**

- In other words, we don't help the poor because **we don't build it into our calendars & budgets.**
- I heard someone say: **I can tell you in five minutes** what you really care about by just examining your calendar & checkbook.

You see, no matter what I say to you from this pulpit, **the way to really know** what I value is by **looking at how I spend my time and money.**

- Do you build it into your **to-do lists** and **budgets** to invest in the lives of the poor around you?
- It's not about how much you give... that's between you and God. But it is about being intentional about giving and doing what you can.

So, **what can you do?** Well, the best way to start is by getting to know someone in need!

- Truth is, people typically stop speculating about the reasons why the poor are poor when they actually **get to know someone** who is **poor, homeless, or living on a low, fixed income.**
- Something happens to you when you meet that **single mom**, working hard to keep herself and her family above water...

When you get to know a **senior citizen** or that **immigrant family** with sick children and no health care...

- *and* realize that they're all having to regularly decide between **paying for food** and **paying for a doctor's visit.**
- You see, when you stop to get to know someone like this, **you're not going to be interested in politics...** you're going to be **interested in their survival.**

So, how will you respond to God's calling? Will you live life with an open hand?

- Are you **willing to see and respond** to the brokenness & lostness around you? **It's up to us.**
- We can **avoid.** We can **withdraw.** We can **hold our hands over our ears.** We can **look the other way.**

- OR... We can **notice**. We can **see**. We can **feel**. We can **hear**. We can **pray**. We can **care**. We can **serve**. We can extend ourselves... It's **up to us**.
- Let's choose now to never close our eyes or shut our ears to the cry of the poor.
- Let's not simply walk away from this message and do nothing. So, what can you do?

Well... Consider **helping out this year with our Christmas ministry** to some of the neediest single parent families in the area.

- In fact, if you'd like to help, would you **just write "AAMC" on the newcomer card** with your email address and leave it on your seat as you leave today?
- Perhaps a group of you would like to **initiate a Thanksgiving program** to provide a complete meal to ten of our most needy families? If so, just write that on the card.
- Perhaps you'll want to join with others here to **sponsor another Christmas dinner for the teens at the youth shelter**... many of whom are fatherless.

Bottom-line... God wants us to **grow as a church that sees the poor and loves & defends the poor and responds to the poor** in a way that **reflects His heart & passion** for them.

- We can't do everything, but together, we can do our part to reflect God's love to the world around us.
- So, let's do this. Let's be a church that helps the poor... a church that makes a real difference in the lives of real people in our area...
- people who's needs and cries have already captured the attention of our Heavenly Father.

**Thanks to a sermon by Rich Nathan called Building a Church that Cares for the Poor for much of the material for this sermon. Rich pastors the Vineyard in Columbus, OH.*