

Christian Ethics and Social Action Department

Values Day 2023

The date allocated is Sunday 5th February, but this resource can be used at any time.

It would be helpful if you would give feedback with any comments, details of how you have used this material, was it helpful etc. to the address at the end of the notes.

Poverty: The Christian Response

Written by Pastor Andy Wilcock

Poverty restricts opportunity. Opportunity to eat, to think, to choose, to hope, to aspire, to relax, to love and so much more. Maybe you are reading this, and you have never had to want for anything. Pause for a moment, and consider how your mind works when you are hungry, cold, ill or stressed... Most people just want to be left alone, preferably in a dark room; you certainly don't want to apply yourself to a major task that requires any level of thinking. Consider the person that has been hungry, cold and stressed for months on end. Add to that the responsibility of bringing up children, not to mention the stress it would put on any relationship.

The 'Great American Dream' uses the 'Boot Strap' philosophy, that if you work hard enough you will succeed, and it uses Actors & Sports Stars living in Hollywood to prove the point, especially those who have 'rose from the gutter.' But they are the exception, and it fails to acknowledge the millions who live in poverty and work hard, long hours just to exist. The cynic may well ask 'Is the American Dream just about motivating the poor to work harder, to make the rich richer, by selling them an unrealistic, materialistic dream?'

This paper seeks to help us as Christians to consider poverty in light of the Gospel (Good News to the Poor ^{Matt 11:4-6}) and the priorities that the Gospel sets for us as the Church.

Poverty devalues a person. Devalues them in their own estimation and in the estimation of society. Dignity is far more important than we may first realise and it's Jesus who demonstrated this priority. If we ignore dignity as an essential to any type of provision, we devalue the person. Companies and advertisers know this when selling to the rich, so why are those who are vulnerable not given the same priority. For example, sticking people in high-rise concrete flats, so when they open their front door, all they see is a grey concrete wall a few feet away, robs them of dignity, value, and hope. Jesus speaking about poverty said, "consider the lily of the valley!" He was speaking to those concerned where they're next meal or clothes would come from, and He got them to consider the beauty, of a wild, free, flower for hope. In the same breath He was offering them the love of His family and a relationship with His heavenly Father, this is true dignity.

Jesus publicly defended the marginalised and made their dignity a priority of His ministry and the Gospel. At His first public sermon He read one of Isaiah's prophecies' about the coming Messiah's ministry.....

“the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” Luke 4:16-19

Once in the Temple, observing the wealthy offering big donations, Jesus pointed out a ‘poor widow’ who gave just two small coins Luke 21:1-4. Jesus said that she had given more than everyone else. He acknowledged her act of true worship because it isn’t money or status that gives us dignity. In Bethany, a week before He was arrested, Mary the sister of Lazarus poured very expensive perfume over Jesus, “this perfume could have been sold and given to the poor!” accused Judas. Again, Jesus looked beyond the monetary value, and acknowledged this woman’s act of true worship, but in answer to Judas, He said, “You will always have the poor among you” John 12:8. The jar of perfume could not solve the issues of poverty, no matter how expensive it was. You can’t just give money and then turn your back. Poverty isn’t an issue that you can fix like a broken bike, or an item ticked off on your To Do List. Yes, we all need food and money to live, but the dignity of the person cannot be addressed with money alone, but love, friendship, hope and ultimately a relationship with God.

Ask these three simple questions to any of the following stories Lazarus and the Rich Man Luke 16:19, The Rich Young Ruler Mark 10:17, Zacchaeus Luke 19:1 and The Woman at the Well John 4:1

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1. Where was the poverty?
2. Where was true fulfilment/satisfaction found or lost?
3. Who found or lost dignity and how?

Compassion and understanding for those experiencing poverty

When seeking to help someone who is vulnerable, we must guard against trying to be their saviour. In the Woman at the Well story Luke 10:25, it was Jesus who asked her for water. When Bartimaeus who was blind cried out for help Mark 10:46, Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?”

We need to seek to understand those who are struggling and not presume we know what problems they are facing.

Consider why we might ask “How did you get into this situation?” Is this question necessary? Is it really us seeking to judge the person in need? Or to justify our own life choices and situation?

Also asking someone to explain how they came to this point, could be very traumatic. Recounting their story could carry immense emotional stress. Failure of a business, abuse, family breakup, unemployment; or to a refugee it could be the trauma of war, losing their home and family, even the journey to this country. How could anyone unpack this to a stranger.

In understanding Grace remember: - Love is patient, and kind, it is not envious, nor does it boast, or is proud. It does not dishonour others, nor is it self-seeking, it keeps no record of wrongs. it rejoices in the truth, always protects, trusts, always hopes, and perseveres.

Now if someone, starts telling you, voluntarily their story, of course we listen, take them seriously and respect their confidence. Maybe we could say "If at any time you want to tell me about your situation, I'm here to listen."

Practical Action – How do we respond?

It could well be that as you read this, you're the one struggling to make ends meet. You wish you had the resources to help others, but you're struggling to heat your own home, feed yourself or your family. Maybe it's time that you're short of, or your health is not what it used to be, and you don't have the physical energy or strength to volunteer.

Being honest and open about our situation is the best place to start, and with this can come mutual support and friendship. Apparently, there was a time in Lancashire, when people didn't have their own ovens, and they would take their uncooked stew to the Bakers before work, and when the Baker had finished baking his bread, he'd load the oven with peoples Hot Pots. On the way home from work, they would then collect their steaming Hotpot. Maybe we need to re-learn the practice of sharing and receiving hospitality, warmth, food, and friendship with our neighbours.

Jesus, throughout his ministry accepted hospitality from others, from Pharisees, Tax Collectors, Samaritans, and close friends. He fed thousands, provided a BBQ on a beach for cold, hungry, tired fishermen. In offering hope, support, love and hospitality we demonstrate the heart of the Gospel, full forgiveness, a home and family embrace in heaven. Jesus described Heaven in one place as a Kings Wedding Feast for those living under hedgerows and they were even given a set of quality clothes with the invite. At another feast He spoke of the humble being elevate to the most important seat at the banquet.

Why not Google? *(Other search engines are available.)*

What's going on in your area?

- Use Google maps and Street View to pray for your area.
- Look up where your local Food Banks, Citizen Advice, Food Share Programs etc. Pray for them. Consider how you could get involved.
 - In our area there is a company that provide Suits people suits and training for interviews. They can also provide clothing for when you start a job.
 - What's on offer in your area? Can you advertise these projects at your church and pray for them.
- Do you have activities like Warm Spaces or coffee morning, where you can link up with those who are struggling?
- Look up Christians Against Poverty (CAP) and see what they offer. Maybe you could invite someone from CAP to come and speak at your church.