

IF I WERE A RICH MAN

Play video clip – *If I Were a Rich Man* from *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Today I want to talk to you about poverty, the poor. While I have certainly alluded to the topic several times from this pulpit, I am sad to say that I have never devoted an entire study to the topic. This will be the first of two messages on the subject.

Let me clarify what I mean here. When I use the word poor, I am not just talking about the destitute and homeless – although I do include them in my definition and message. I am also talking about the millions of people who struggle to get by day to day, often holding down two jobs – sometimes three – while being single with children. I want to explore poverty as a world-wide problem, I also want to work at bringing the issue down to where you and I live; to the here and to the now.

I want to describe to you what millions of Americans have known for generations: the feeling of not knowing where their next meal is coming from, where they will be living in six months, what they will be doing in terms of employment; the many and varied feelings of being poor.

I want to describe for you the life and times of those who can only wish that they were in fact a rich man.

- The message will have dozens of Scriptures because God cares deeply about the poor and as a result, He has much to say about their plight.
- The message will contain many statistics because I feel as if they will help us to see the tremendous scope of the problem.
- The message will also contain several stories and illustrations from the Bible as well as stories from today. I want you to get a grasp of what poverty is like from those who live in it year in and year out.
- The messages as well as the pictures will no doubt cause pain and discomfort at times. You might want to close both your eyes as well as your ears. You see, we are prone to ignore this problem, to act as if it doesn't exist. Well friends, poverty does exist. It is alive and well in Janesville and Rock county. It affects this church and it affects people that you know and love. Today, I will be their voice and God's mouthpiece as I share with you this message.

THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

I need your help. If you have a dollar bill, I want you to take it out of your purse or billfold and wave it at me. This is not an offering. Your money is safe. What can you buy with that small amount of money? Could you live on it – if that were your total income? Yet, today, over one billion people on Planet Earth live in absolute poverty, earning less than a dollar a day. Then too, nearly one billion people go hungry and 40,000 children a day die from hunger or hunger-related diseases.

(Lt. Col. Paul Bollwahn, ACSW, CSWM National Social Services Secretary for The Salvation Army)

- In the United States, one child in six lives in poverty, one child in five is born poor, one in three will be poor at some point in their childhood.
(Children's Defense Fund)
- One poor family in seven lives in housing which is severely physically inadequate, such as having no hot water, no electricity, no toilet, or neither a bathtub nor a shower.
(Habitat for Humanity)
- Poverty rates among children in single-mother families are particularly striking: 55 percent of such children under six lived in poverty in 1998. The figures were even higher for black children - 60 percent; and Hispanic children - 67 percent.
(National Jobs for All Coalition)
- Let me add a word here about the nation's 300,000 homeless. (Habitat for Humanity) The

homeless population is, on average, 43 percent single men, 37 percent families with children, 13 percent single women, 7 percent unaccompanied minors.
(U.S. Conference of Mayors)

Poverty is a big problem, a very big problem.

Listen to Psalm 113:7. It is a vivid word picture and yet it has a literal meaning as well, **“He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap....”** *The New Living translation* says here, **“He lifts the poor from the dirt and the needy from the garbage dump.”** The term translated ash heap or garbage dumb here literally means “a heap of rubbish or filth, a dung hill.”
(*Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary*)

It has been estimated that up to 2% of the population in Third World countries survives by recovering materials from garbage dumps. For instance, at least 43,000 children play, eat, work and sleep in the waste of others in the nation of Brazil. Then too, according to the UN, some 20,000 people in India farm garbage dumps in order to survive.

Many of you are acquainted with the late Mark Buntain's hospital, school, church, and feeding program in Calcutta. Today in Calcutta, 18 million residents live in a nine mile by four mile area. The city has a 30 percent slum population, and tens of thousands are so-called pavement dwellers (homeless). Millions suffer day after day with no food, no water - no hope.

Each day, 15,000 men, women, and children are fed by the church's feeding program. Some walk many miles just to receive one meal a day; for them, it's the only meal they will have. Currently the Assembly of God in Calcutta operates nine feeding stations.

Each day, thousands line up to receive a mixture of vegetables and rice. Starving lepers are brought to the stations by trucks because they are unable to walk. Many of these people actually live in the waste of the city's vast garbage dump.

Remember, the writer of the Psalm noted that the Lord lifts the poor from the dirt and the needy from the garbage dump. Of the 1,500 people on currently staff in Buntain's church, school and hospital, two-thirds of them came through the ministry's programs as children. Many of these were literally lifted out of the ash heap!

The psalmist was speaking to a very real situation that was a part of his day so long ago and is yet a very real part of the day in which we live too. **“He lifts the poor from the dirt and the needy from the garbage dump.”**

I want to now bring this a little closer to home. No doubt, everyone here has been touched in some way by Hurricane Katrina -- the terrible tragedy that continues to unfold on the gulf coast. Thousands are dead and multiplied thousands have been left homeless. One of the nagging questions throughout this whole ordeal has been why didn't the people evacuate New Orleans when they were ordered to do so? I have wondered the same thing.

Anyway, I want to share with you a portion of a column that appeared in the *New York Daily News*. The piece was written by Errol Louis. Louis holds degrees from Harvard, Yale, and the Brooklyn Law School. In his column entitled The Ugly Truth, Louis writes:

New Orleans officials issued an almost cynical evacuation order in a city where they know full well that thousands have no car, no money for airfare or an interstate bus, no credit cards for hotels, and therefore no way to leave town before the deadly storm and flood arrived.

The authorities provided no transportation out of the danger zone, apparently figuring the neglected thousands would somehow weather the storm in their uninsured, low-lying shacks and public housing projects. The poor were expected to remain invisible at the bottom of the pecking order and somehow weather the storm.

At the beginning of this point I said that I would attempt to share with you the scope of the problem of

poverty. Now that I have talked to you for a few minutes about the problem, I still feel as if I have only scratched the surface.

As you know, I was raised in poverty. Somewhere in my poorer days I picked up this phrase; it may have come from my dad. I am not sure. Anyway, the phrase goes something like this: "The poor get dumped on." They do, they really do. Whether it is in the inner city of New Orleans or some garbage dump in Calcutta, they do get dumped on.

Does anybody really care?

GOD CARES

For the remaining minutes of this message, I want to help you form a personal theology concerning the poor. We are going to look first at the Old Testament, then at the New. As one reads the writings of the Old Testament, one has to be taken by the elaborate system of caring for the poor and needy that was a real part of ancient Israel. Please notice that the people had:

Food distribution programs. Listen to Deuteronomy 14:28-29, "**At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.**"

Think giant food pantry here. Every year someone's three year stint was up and they had to bring their provisions to the storehouse. As they did this, the needs of the people of the temple as well as the poor and needy were met.

Then too, landowners were to go through their fields only once during the harvest. Everything missed was to be available for the poor to glean. If you remember the story of Ruth in the Old Testament, you may remember that she went along behind the harvesters gathering that which they had missed. This was a common practice. It was, again, one of God's laws to meet the needs of the poor.

Interest free, forgivable loans. It was illegal to charge interest to another Israelite. And while it was expected that loans would be repaid, if for some reason they could not be, the lender was to forgive the loan on the seventh year.

Employment programs. If an individual could not meet a financial obligation, a rich uncle or someone else of means was to pay off the poor person's creditors in exchange for a promise of work for six years. At the end of the six years, the employer was to send the individual on his way. In addition to this, he was to go one step farther. The Bible says, "**And when you release him, do not send him away empty-handed. Supply him liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to him as the Lord your God has blessed you.**"

Redistribution of capital. No doubt, many of you are acquainted with what the Bible calls The Year of Jubilee. Every fifty years -- the year of Jubilee -- all property was to revert to its original owner. God recognized that over time inequities would occur. Maybe there was a string of dry years, health problems, crop failures, perhaps some poor decisions or mismanagement resulted in loss. God, though, made provision that after fifty years a person was to be given a fresh start; a new beginning. He was to have his land back.

The point? God cares for the poor. He made ample provision for their care and nurture. A mother was once asked which of her children she loved most. "The one who is sick" she responded. We understand what the lady was saying. While she loved every child the same, she made special provision for the one who was not feeling well at the time. The Bible is clear that God, too, identifies with those who are most vulnerable; most needy.

Listen to these passages:

- Deuteronomy 15:10-11 (*The New Living Translation*), **“Give freely without begrudging it, and the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do. There will always be some among you who are poor. That is why I am commanding you to share your resources freely with the poor and with other Israelites in need.”**
- Psalm 140:12 points out, **“I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor.”**
- Proverbs 14:21 (*The Message*) adds, **“It’s criminal to ignore a neighbor in need, but compassion for the poor—what a blessing!”**
- Then Solomon wrote in Proverbs 14:31 (*The Message*), **“You insult your Maker when you exploit the powerless; when you’re kind to the poor, you honor God.”**

I want to direct your attention now to Isaiah 58. In this chapter God redefines what it means to conduct a fast before the Lord. We generally think of a fast as a time when we miss a meal or a series of meals as a means of spiritual discipline. The prophet, though, describes a true fast, one that God accepts here in Isaiah 58. Verses 6-7 says, **“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter--when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”**

Verse 10 of that same chapter continues, **“If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.”**

Going without food is one thing; a good thing. However, if you really want to fast, if you really want to ring God’s bell, then do something to take care of the poor, feed the hungry, give housing to the homeless.

A Presbyterian church in Washington, D.C., which carried on an extensive ministry to poor and homeless people, moved to a different neighborhood out of necessity. The new neighborhood was a bit more upscale than the previous one, but the church continued its outreach to the needy. And, as you might expect, the hungry and the homeless continued to come to its doors seeking help.

Some of the new neighbors didn’t like this very much so they ended up taking the church to court. They wanted to try and stop them from caring for the poor and hungry. Their activities violated zoning laws, they argued.

The court, though, ruled in the church’s favor. The judge noted that freedom of religion is protected by the constitution. The judge then went on to add that feeding the hungry and housing the homeless is “a practice akin to worship.” Isaiah the Prophet couldn’t have said it any better.

Israel quickly forgot God’s great heart for the poor. They turned inward and in time Israel became a wealthy nation. They quickly forgot their own history of poverty and captivity in Egypt. This time it was the Prophet Amos who stepped up with a word of warning. Amos 5:11-12 (*The New Living Translation*), **“You trample the poor and steal what little they have through taxes and unfair rent. Therefore, you will never live in the beautiful stone houses you are building. You will never drink wine from the lush vineyards you are planting. For I know the vast number of your sins and rebellions. You oppress good people by taking bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.”** To put it bluntly, they had ticked God off and they were going to pay for it big time! They did and they have.

When we explore the Bible’s teachings about God’s concern for the poor, we discover that we belong to a compassionate Kingdom, one that is concerned about the lost, oppressed, the hungry, homeless, and dispossessed. This Kingdom feels with the people of the gulf coast, those who live in and feed off

of the garbage dumps, those who go to bed hungry, the homeless, those who are in need.

Now I want us to move to the New Testament and to the life of Jesus.

Let's walk for a few minutes where Jesus walked. One day as the Master was in a city called Tyre, a Canaanite woman approached Jesus. Tyre was on the wrong side of the tracks. It was considered pagan territory. Then, I must point out, the Canaanites were the most despised of all of Israel's enemies in the Old Testament. It was such a women who came up to the Lord and said that her daughter was tormented by a demon. She then asked Jesus to heal her: "**Son of David, have mercy on me,**" she pled. Jesus healed the child.

After the Transfiguration, a man begged Jesus to heal his epileptic son: "**Lord, have mercy on my son. . . . He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water.**" Again, the Lord responded with a miracle.

Luke 5:12-13 (*New Living Translation*) contains another account of another miraculous healing. "**In one of the villages, Jesus met a man with an advanced case of leprosy. When the man saw Jesus, he fell to the ground, face down in the dust, begging to be healed. 'Lord,' he said, 'if you want to, you can make me well again.'** Jesus reached out and touched the man. 'I want to,' he said. 'Be healed!' And instantly the leprosy disappeared."

I love that line – "**I want to, be healed.**" How could Jesus not respond? He identified personally with the sick, the outcast, and the poor. He lived among the poor. His closest friends were basically drawn from the lower class. They were not the movers and the shakers, they were fishermen, tax collectors, and people with a number of skeletons in their closet. He wanted them healed, He wanted them blessed. He wanted them to know Him and be set free of their sins.

One of the things that the passage points out is that Jesus touched the leper. The man didn't ask to have that happen. He knew that he was unclean. He knew that no one could or would touch him. Why, he hadn't felt a another human hand in years. And yet, Jesus touched him and made him clean.

Back in the sixties some of you may remember Bel Kaufman's *Up the Down Stair Case*. In the book Kaufman writes about this young teacher who graduated from college with stars in her eyes. She wanted to teach. She wanted to make a difference. And so she took her first job. She couldn't believe what she had got herself into. Surrounded by paper, bureaucracy, endless meetings, irate and apathetic parents, her dreams began to fade fast. In fact, she struggled just to have time to teach.

One of the big rules posted everywhere for the teachers was:

DO NOT TOUCH THE WOUNDS! Why you might get sued or catch something. **DO NOT TOUCH THE WOUNDS!** Hold those you teach at arm's length.

The young teacher was in a catch-22. On the one hand she had the administration posting the rules and setting the boundaries. On the other hand, she said, how in the world can you teach somebody if you cannot touch their wounds? That is still a good question yet today.

This is what got Jesus in trouble:

He touched a leper.

He ate with those who not only did not observe the ritual regulations of cleanliness but they didn't even know what they were and couldn't care less. He caused a stir because he moved close to human need. He touched the wounds. For, above everything else, he knew that this was the very purpose of His coming to this crazy planet in the first place. He had come to "TOUCH THE WOUNDS".

Once when an up and coming leader approached Jesus wanting to gain the secret to eternal life, Jesus, in short, told him to go sell everything that he had and give the money to the poor. The man

went away sad – with his things in hand -- because he was very rich.

I want to share with you now Matthew 8:18-20, **“When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, ‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.’ Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.’”**

Isn't that a rather strange way to answer someone who wants to become your follower? And, mind you, this wasn't just anyone, this was a highly educated fellow, a part of the scholarly class of the Jewish society. He was attracted to Jesus and wanted to become His disciple. Interestingly, Jesus responded to the gentleman by saying in effect, are you sure that you are up to this? “I am homeless.”

Now, could you imagine how people would have reacted to the thought that Jesus was homeless? I imagine that some would have said,

- "Wait a minute, Jesus, how could you be homeless? You are to be the king - the one who will conquer the Roman Empire and bring freedom to our nation and to our people."
- Hey, Jesus, didn't you create all of this – birds and foxes...?
- Aren't you the very Son of the Living God?
- Doesn't leprosy flee at your touch?
- Don't blind eyes open at your word?
- Don't the lame pick up their bed and walk home after a short visit with you?

How can you be homeless? And yet He was.

He not only identified with the hurting during His trial,

- the lost at His death,
- the poor at His burial,
- But He also identified with the poor, the homeless, the outcast while He walked this planet.

Look now at Matthew 25:35-40, **“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, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”**

The implication here is that God chooses to dwell among the most weak and vulnerable persons in society. And when we serve the poor, the hungry, the needy, the prisoner, we are in fact serving Christ. Think of that the next time someone seeks your help. In serving them, you could be serving your Lord and Master.

To summarize:

- God provides for the poor (Psalm 68:10),
- delivers the poor (Psalm 72: 12),
- secures justice for the poor (Psalm 140:12),
- hears the poor (Job 34:28),
- does not favor the rich over the poor (Job 34:19),
- protects the poor (Psalm 12:5),
- will not forsake the poor (Isaiah 41:17),
- and gives food to the poor (Psalm 146:7).

Jesus does make a difference.

IF I WERE A RICH MAN

Part 2

Today I want to talk to you about poverty, about being needy. This is the second message in this three-part series.

The word poverty, according to *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, means, the state of having little or no money and few or no material possessions. In 2000, according to the official measure, over eleven percent of the total U.S. population lived in poverty.

(U.S. Census Bureau)

The Poverty Thresholds can be seen in this chart:

2004 Poverty Thresholds, Selected Family Types

Single Individual	Under 65 years	\$ 9,827
	65 years & older	\$ 9,060
Single Parent	One child	\$ 13,020
	Two children	\$ 15,219
	No children	\$ 12,649
Two Adults	One child	\$ 15,205
	Two children	\$ 19,157

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2004*, Report P60, n. 229, p. 45.

To make these figures more applicable for you and me, consider this: despite the remarkable numbers of poor people in America, housing for them is so scarce that of the 3,141 counties in the United States, in only 4 can a person making minimum wage afford a one-bedroom apartment.

In 1999 Barbara Ehrenreich, who holds a Ph.D. in Biology, tried an experiment. She changed her clothes and climbed down the social ladder to be a person living on minimum wage; to become a part of the so-called working poor. Being trained as a scientist, she took careful notes. She detailed her experiences in the book *Nickel and Dimed*. One after another she took six jobs, for a minimum of a month each. She worked as a waitress, hotel maid, house cleaner, nursing home aide, and Wal-Mart salesperson. She drove a car, but made herself live each month only on what she could earn – mostly at \$6 and \$7 an hour. This meant living in the cheapest lodgings (trailer parks, motels, downtown hotels) and eating a narrow, bland diet.

Getting a job wasn't all that difficult. She also considered herself to be an exemplary worker. But her first finding was that it is almost impossible to work for those wages and survive. For instance, monthly earnings as a waitress in Florida were \$1,039. The cheapest rental she could find was a \$500 efficiency, and food, gas, laundry, utilities and phone and toiletries came to \$517, leaving her \$22 for everything else. She moved to Maine, hired out as a house cleaner, scrubbing young yuppies' houses, making \$6.65, and paying \$480 rent for a room, and so on.

Her second finding was that the jobs often involved exhausting effort, and overtime, and in some jobs she literally worked by the sweat of her brow so that all she wanted to do at night was watch TV

over her dinner and fall asleep.

She endured humiliation, abuse, and routine violation of privacy, and sometimes had to surrender basic civil rights. As a waitress she was told that her purse could be searched at any time by management. There were rules against talking on the job. Constant surveillance, being written up by the shift supervisor, and being 'reamed out' by managers were all customary parts of the job; also being subjected to drug tests (which were most humiliating to say the least.) After a while, she felt she was not just selling her labor but her life.

Then too, there is another face to poverty. It is the face of a young girl sitting under the shade of a Cypress tree in the blazing sun watching the heat waves shimmer above the blinding brightness of the hot sand. If she could talk to us this morning, she would say something on this order: "I wish I had food in my stomach. My back aches and my body feels weak and limp. In the last week, I have eaten only rice and beans. Sometimes I only eat two or three times a week. Having to sleep in one room with the rest of my family on the hard, uncomfortable floor and listen to my brother cough all night, I am sleep deprived. I never know what the next day may bring. I just hope to survive."

A blind woman from Moldova describes life as she knows it: "For a poor person everything is terrible, illness, humiliation, shame. We are cripples; we are afraid of everything; we depend on everyone. No one needs us."

Sadly, half of the world population lives on less than two dollars a day.

Such people need a voice. Today, I am their voice to you.

In my first message in this series, I spent quite some time establishing the scope of the problem. Then too, I spent some time in Scripture establishing the fact that God both loves and cares for those who are poor. In today's message, I want to share with you a five different reasons people are poor and how we are to respond to each of these various reasons.

I WANT US TO NOW TURN OUR ATTENTION TO SOME OF THE REASONS FOR POVERTY. In the Bible, we find that people were poor for a variety of reasons. The same holds true for us today.

1. SIN

Think back to the beginning of man's time here on the earth. As you know, the Lord placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It was a beautiful place. It was a combination orchard/garden hand planted by God Himself. Food was plenteous. Then too, Genesis 2:12 (*New Living Translation*) says that "**The gold of that land is exceptionally pure....**" The passage goes on to point out that other precious stones could be found in the garden as well. I also want to remind you that the place was filled with livestock and other types of animals. Adam and Eve had it all. It was simply there's for the taking. They were rich.

Then they sinned. As a result, they were driven from the garden. They were also placed under a curse. The land that had produced gold and onyx now produced thorns and thistles, That which they had enjoyed freely now had to be gained "by the sweat" of their brow.

The thing that I want you to notice here is, poverty, loss, came about as a result of man's disobedience. It wasn't God best, it wasn't God's will. Adam and Eve brought it on themselves.

When I talk about how God wants us to be blessed, how He cares for us, I am thinking of how he set humanity up for plenty. Need was an aberration, a freak, something that God never wanted in His garden.

Moving on, I want you to now turn in your Bibles to Deuteronomy 15. This is a very strange passage. In fact, it seems to contradict itself. Notice:

- First we are told that the Lord will so richly bless Israel that there will be no poor people in the land; verse 4, **“However, there should be no poor among you....”**
- Then provisions are made for the eventuality that there should be some poor in the land; verse 7, **“If there is a poor man among your brothers....”**
- Finally we are advised that the poor will always be with us; verse 11, **“There will always be poor people in the land.”**

Which statement is true? Or if they are all true, how do we explain the seeming contradictions?

If verse 4 is made to stand on its own, then it certainly does look like a flat out contradiction of verse 11... **“There will always be poor people in the land.”** But verse 5 begins with the tiny word **“if”**. If only Israel would **“fully obey the LORD”** and if they would be **“careful to follow all these commands”** then **“there should be no poor among you....”** But if Israel was to refuse to fully obey – if they were to sin, in other words, -- (which they did), then the end result would be, **“There will always be poor people in the land.”** Once more we see poverty as a result of man’s disobedience to God. God didn’t want it. He provided a way to avoid it. Nonetheless, it happened.

Just like one source of pollution can foul a river, so it is that the pollution of sin has fouled God’s river of blessing and provision for mankind. If the Lord would have had His way, God’s people would still be living under a blessing and we wouldn’t be having this sermon this morning.

Now I want to make one thing perfectly clear. While I do believe that sin is at the source of poverty, I do not believe that:

1. It is a sin to be poor,
2. That poverty is a result of sin being in one’s life,

Again, sin simply marred God’s best. It fouled the river of blessing and provision.

Speaking of sin, I want to share a quote from Christian writer Raymond Fung. Fung writes, "Not only are the poor sinners (like all people), they are the most often sinned against." We all know the scripture, **“for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”** However, there is a tendency in our culture these days to focus especially on the sins of the poor. It is easy to lay all the blame for poverty at the feet of the poor. Indeed, the poor have been blamed not only for their own poverty but also for our national indebtedness, and for violent crime to name just a few ills. So we hear the scriptures being twisted until they come out sounding something like this: "for the poor have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," and "that’s why they’re poor. They got what they deserved. If they would just get to work, stop having babies, and stop being so lazy, they wouldn’t have to be so poor.

There is some truth to the sentiment that personal responsibility is important. I will deal with that in a few minutes. And poor choices and sinful actions do contribute to poverty and a host of other social ills. But I think Raymond Fung is onto an equally important truth that we must understand about poverty. The poor are not the **only** sinners. All people are sinners, according to the scripture, and the poor are the ones most often sinned against.

This brings me to my next point...

2. SITUATIONAL POVERTY

A million things can fall under this heading: a drunken father or mother, slavery, the looting of a nation as happened in Iraq under its previous leadership, health issues. When I speak of situational poverty, I speak of situations where people are poor for reasons which are beyond their control.

As you know, I was raised in poverty. I had four brothers and sisters. My dad was a hard working man. He wasn’t an alcoholic. He didn’t abuse drugs. He was just uneducated and poor. Who do you fault for that? Whose to blame?

A real prime example of situational poverty is India's chaste system. It literally perpetuates poverty from one generation to another.

The terrible sex slavery trade in southern Asia serves as another case in point. A Unicef report says there are 400,000 to 500,000 child prostitutes in India alone, while one third of Thailand's prostitutes are minors and the sex industry earns 10-14% of the country's gross domestic product. These children are viewed as being nothing more than human animals that exist solely for the entertainment of degenerate and debased humanity. Those children are powerless and, to a large extent, they have no voice with which to speak to the world about their plight. Let me repeat, these people are poor **because of people and events over which they have no control.**

Tex Sample tells a wonderful story in which a very good, straight-laced woman began to see the tragic effects of situational poverty.

The woman's name was Ella. She was a pillar in a church much like ours. There were a lot of what Tex calls "hard living people" who lived in the community around the church. The pastor had been working hard to build a relationship with a gang of tough street kids. One of them was called Big Mart, short for Marshall. The kids liked the preacher. They had decided that maybe the preacher was ok.

Ella was on her way into the church, and the pastor was sitting in his office, when the explosive beginning to the story happens. The pastor hears a loud argument outside. Then he hears Big Mart calling someone something that I would be embarrassed to repeat in front of my best friend much less here in the pulpit.

The pastor had about enough time to think, "oh great," when Ella came storming into his office. "Did you hear what that young man called me out there?"

"Yes." Whew was she mad.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" she asked.

"That's a good question, Ella," the pastor said, "a really good question. But the real question is what are you going to do about it."

That stopped her momentarily, and a bit exasperated she said, "I guess I want you to go out there and throw him out."

"Ella," the pastor said, "I've been working for six weeks to get him in here. You want me to throw him out the first day he comes around?" The pastor was thinking fast. He just couldn't do that. He says, "Ella, let me tell you this story; it's a true story, and then I want you to go home and think about it. Don't say anything right now. Just hear the story, then go home and think about it." Well, she waited.

"When Big Mart was a little boy, his dad came home one night in a rage and began to beat up Big Mart's mother. He became so furious and so violent that he brought the children into the room, closed the door and forced them to watch while he killed her... I'll spare you the gory details. When Big Mart couldn't stand it anymore he broke for the door and got out, but when he reached the top of the stairs, his father threw his mother's body after him. It knocked him down the stairs. That's Big Mart. He's the guy you met out there, the guy who... uh... called you that name.

Ella didn't say a word. She just turned and walked out the door. The pastor thought to himself, "I'm in trouble."

She was back in twenty minutes. The pastor was worried. He had wanted her to think about it longer than that. But she walked over to his desk and just looked at him.

"Well," the pastor finally asked not really wanting to know what he expected to hear.

She said, "I guess I am going to have to learn how to get cussed out."

The pastor declares that the ministry of that church began right there, right then. If Ella could be so angry for simply being cussed out, imagine the rage that must exist inside Big Mart because of the sins committed against him and his mother. In this experience, the woman came to understand the horror of those sins committed against this tough street kid. That didn't excuse, for one minute, the way he treated her. But it helped her see that she needed to let him in, into her life, into the church.

She needed to sense his need over her need.

Let me give you another example of situational poverty. Do you realize that bankruptcies in America have ballooned to the point that they now outnumber divorces and college graduations? Amazing!

Rarely do people go bankrupt because of severe misfortune. Commentator Paul Krugman's belief is that more than half are due to medical emergencies. In fact, nearly nine out of ten bankruptcies (87%) follow one of the "Big Three" events in a person's life: job loss, medical problems, divorce or separation. As a sidebar here, a week ago the *USA Today* reported that the average family health policy now nears \$11,000. The article went on to note that Starbucks will spend more on health insurance for employees this year than on coffee. Hard to believe, isn't it?

By the way, a Harvard-based study, the ongoing Consumer Bankruptcy Project, shows only 13% of bankruptcies stem from credit card overspending or from covering bad investments, or the like.

3. INJUSTICE

The Bible condemned wicked rulers and businessmen who crushed the poor and seized what little they had. Listen to these verses:

- Psalm 72:12-14, **"For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight."**
- Exodus 23:6, **"Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits."**
- Proverbs 31:9, **"Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."**
- Isaiah 3:13-15, **"The Lord takes his place in court; he rises to judge the people. The Lord enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people: 'It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?'"**
- Amos 2:6-7, **"This is what the Lord says: 'For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name."**

When there's justice in the land and people fear the Lord, then the poor have a voice and protection from oppression.

Why is God so concerned about this issue? Proverbs 14:31 (*New Living Translation*) gives us the answer, **"Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who help the poor honor him."** God doesn't respect the rich more than He respects the poor. The Lord doesn't respect the poor less than the rich. **"The rich and the poor have this in common, the Lord is the maker of them all"** (Proverbs 22:2, *New King James Version*). However, the truth is, the poor – like the rich – were made in the image of God. When we deny justice to the poor, when we trample on their rights, when we take advantage of them in the courts, then we are actually insulting the very God who made them.

Someone put it this way, The way that we treat the poor is the way we treat God.

Speaking of injustices. Every year, shareholders and America's workers learn of new jaw-dropping executive compensation packages that seemingly defy rational explanation. In 2004, the average CEO of a major company received \$9.84 million in total compensation, according to *The New York Times*.

Notice this chart:

2004 Top 10 Most Highly Paid CEOs on Executive PayWatch		
<u>Yahoo Inc.</u>	Terry S. Semel	\$109,301,385
<u>Coach Inc.</u>	Lew Frankfort	\$64,918,520
<u>XTO Energy Inc.</u>	Bob R. Simpson	\$62,141,981
<u>United Health Group Inc.</u>	William W. McGuire	\$58,784,102
<u>Viacom Inc.</u>	Summer M. Redstone	\$56,017,985
<u>TXU Corp.</u>	John C. Wilder	\$54,960,893
<u>Countrywide Financial Corp.</u>	Angelo R. Mozilo	\$52,993,637
<u>Occidental Petroleum</u>	Ray R. Irani	\$52,648,142
<u>KB Home</u>	Bruce Karatz	\$47,288,228
<u>Gateway Inc.</u>	Wayne R. Inouye	\$46,338,744

Is this fair and just? Do these excessive salaries take dollars out of the pockets of shareholders — including the retirement savings of America’s working families? Do they affect the salaries of the common laborer on the line? I will leave that up to you to decide.

4. POOR FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

I remember counseling a lady a few years ago that needed help with her personal finances. She came to me with the issue. As I explored her situation, I found that she owed better than \$12,000 in credit card debt and, to be honest, she had nothing to show for it. She had a cracker box house, no vehicle, used furniture, and a poor wardrobe. This little widow lady had spent nearly everything that she had to try to get ahead of the mounting debt, but was unable to do it. She was sunk.

How did it happen? She hardly made enough to keep body and soul together. Therefore, she ended up having to charge her food and her prescriptions on her cards. Then too, the credit card companies were more than willing to continue to send her an seemingly endless stream of credit card applications.

As the debt grew, she applied for more plastic. The cycle was endless. As her credit rating slowly sent south, her interest rates went up until her interest payments were literally higher than her minimum payments. In other words, the lady was actually going farther in the hole each month whether she charged anything or not. Tragic!

Notice these additional Scriptures:

- Avoid Get rich quick schemes: Proverbs 21:5, **“The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.”**
- Avoid co-signing: Proverbs 11:15, **“He who puts up security for another will surely suffer, but whoever refuses to strike hands in pledge is safe.”**
Proverbs 22:26, **“Do not be a man who strikes hands in pledge or puts up security for debts....”**
- Avoid borrowing more than you are able to repay: Proverbs 22:7, **“The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender.”**

Saints, one of the things that we provide here at New Life is wise financial discipleship. Peter Collins and Brian Benson just completed another 13-week series of classes just four weeks ago. Carol Urban, our Financial Secretary here at the church, is a certified financial counselor. A part of her responsibilities to this congregation is to provide free budget and financial guidance. If you need her help, all you have to do is call and set up a free appointment. I repeat, it is completely free.

5. SOME PEOPLE ARE POOR BECAUSE THEY WON'T WORK

Notice with me this photo:



It says a lot...

It reminds me of Proverbs 23:21 which says in the *New King James Version*, “**For the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, And drowsiness will clothe a man with rags.**”

People, there is a whole strata of folks out there who simply refuse to work. Warren Wiersbe in his *Bible Exposition Commentary* states, “The biggest thieves of all are the lazy people who could work but won’t, the people who consume what others produce but produce nothing for others to use. The “sluggard” and the “slothful man” are mentioned at least seventeen times in Proverbs, and nothing good is said about them.

Then too, I do think this fellow is rather industrious – in his own way:

Let me share with you some of those verses:

- Proverbs 10:4, “**Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth**”
- Proverbs 14:23, “**Hard work always pays off; mere talk puts no bread on the table.**”
- Proverbs 26:13-15 (*New Living Translation*), “**The lazy person is full of excuses, saying, ‘I can’t go outside because there might be a lion on the road! Yes, I’m sure there’s a lion out there!’ As a door turns back and forth on its hinges, so the lazy person turns over in bed. Some people are so lazy that they won’t lift a finger to feed themselves.**”



I have found that poverty is a great educator. If a person is too lazy to work he or she will soon come to realize that he or she is going to miss a few meals.

It’s worth noting that the Prodigal Son’s first request was, “**Father, give me!**” But when he returned home, after a season of living with the pigs, his request was, “**Make me one of your servants**” (Luke 15:12, 19). He’d learned the value of his father’s discipline and the joy of hard work.

The Bible simply sums up this point by pointing out, if a man is poor because he is not industrious then he shall simply stay poor.

The Apostle Paul established the standard in the New Testament. He wrote in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 (*New Living Translation*), “**And now, dear brothers and sisters, we give you this command with the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ: Stay away from any Christian who lives in idleness and doesn’t follow the tradition of hard work we gave you. For you know that you ought to follow our example. We were never lazy when we were with you. We never accepted food from anyone without paying for it. We worked hard day and night so that we would not be a burden to any of you. It wasn’t that we didn’t have the right to ask you to feed us, but we wanted to give you an example to follow. Even while we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘Whoever does not work should not eat.’**

Yet we hear that some of you are living idle lives, refusing to work and wasting time meddling in other people’s business. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we appeal to such people—no, we command them: Settle down and get to work. Earn your own living.”

The New Testament saints were happy to care for those who needed help and couldn’t care for themselves, but they had no time for freeloaders who lived off of the goodness of others.

NOW I HAVE GIVEN YOU FIVE BIBLICAL REASON FOR POVERTY:

- Sin
- Situational poverty
- Injustice
- Unwise financial dealings
- Laziness

The Scripture has a different remedy for each of these situations. In other words, there wasn't a one-size-fits-all answer. According to Dr. Tony Evans:

- You see, some people don't need money, they need opportunity,
- some people don't need money, they need encouragement,
- some people don't need money, they need justice,
- some people don't need money, they need instruction,
- some people don't need money, they need motivation and ambition.
- Finally, some people do need money.

The Lord would have us to be wise enough to be able to discern who is needing what.

I want you to listen to Acts 4:32-35 with me: **“All the believers were of one heart and mind, and they felt that what they owned was not their own; they shared everything they had. And the apostles gave powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's great favor was upon them all. There was no poverty among them, because people who owned land or houses sold them and brought the money to the apostles to give to others in need.”**

I want to point out that in the early church, the church shared their wealth, the people had no poverty, and the people brought their money and had the apostles distribute it to others outside of their circle who were in need. The reason the gifts were laid at the apostle's feet was due to the fact that these men were able to discern just exactly what it was that the people needed, what type of poverty that they were dealing with, and how the need should be addressed.

I WANT TO CLOSE OUT THIS MESSAGE with one additional illustration and passage of Scripture: Fulton Sheen – the noted Catholic bishop – once visited a leprosy colony. While there, he walked up to a man sitting on the ground who had a number of serious skin diseases. The man's body was oozing with puss and putrefied sores. As Bishop Sheen leaned over to talk to him, the chain of the crucifix he was wearing broke and his crucifix fell into an open sore on the man's leg.

Bishop Sheen said he was so revolted by what happened, his first response was to jump back. But, he said, "All of a sudden I was overwhelmed with compassion for this person. So I reached into the sore and took up the cross."

Isn't that a great definition of Christianity? "Reaching into the sores of life – where people are broken, hurting, dying, poor, hopeless – and taking up the cross." I believe that is what God is calling us to do. Isaiah 1:17 puts it like this, **“. . . cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.”** That's it. That is our mandate from heaven. Are you up to it? Are you up to reaching into the sores of life – where people are broken, hurting, dying, poor, hopeless – and taking up the cross?

IF I WERE A RICH MAN

Part 3

Do we have the money to really help the poor and needy? I will let you be the judge.

- Americans spent approximately \$46 billion on diet products and self-help books. The median diet worked out to a costly \$85.79 a week -- that's 50 percent more than the \$54.44 the average single American spends on food. The sad part of this is, every year we keep getting fatter. Nothing seems to work. *Forbes*
- Speaking of food, Americans spend more than one billion dollars per day on prepared food and restaurant dining. That adds up to \$376 billion.
- Last week the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported that the going price for fine prime beef on the strip now runs upwards to \$190. If you are more bargain conscious, you can get a 8-ounce Kobe steak for \$175 at Caesars Palace.
- Robert Crandall, Chairman of American Airlines, recently wrote in the airline's *American Way* magazine that last year Americans spent "over \$600 billion in the United States" alone on travel and tourism.
- According to The American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, pet spending has doubled from \$17 billion in 1994 to a projected \$34.3 billion for 2004 - 100 percent growth. This positions the pet industry 60 percent larger than the toy industry (\$20 billion) and 33 percent larger than the candy industry (\$24 billion).
- According to *Marie Claire* magazine, the total price for all cosmetic operations in 2004 in the United States was a pretty \$8.4 billion.
- Eighty percent of the world's Christian financial resources are in the hands of American Christians, yet we spend more on chewing gum than we do on missions.

According to the Chronicle of Philanthropy, eight of ten Americans who died in 1990 with estates worth at least half a million dollars did not leave a penny to charity.

(*Servant*, January, 1994)

The church has the potential to do so much good. Listen to this: if members of historically Christian churches in the United States had tithed (had given 10 percent of income) in 2000, an additional \$139 billion would have been available for the church to carry out it's God-given mission. (Overall, only 3 to 5 percent of Americans who donate money to a church tithe.)

Talk-show host Dave Ramsey once spoke about how different America would be if every Christian tithed. He said: "There would be no more welfare in North America. In 90 days there would be no existing church or hospital debts. In the next 90 days, the entire world could be evangelized. There would be prayer in schools, because Christians would buy all the schools!"

Just look at how the church world responded to those impacted by Hurricane Katrina. Collectively, the church world has given tens of millions of dollars to hurricane relief efforts in goods and services over the past several weeks. Last week, this church, in conjunction with the recent Day of Compassion, mailed off a check to Convoy of Hope for \$24,000!

The idea of compassion for the poor or those in need is quite central to our faith. It is not complicated or hard to understand. We do have the means. We know about the need. We understand the teachings of Scripture. The problem is, do we have the heart?

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HELP THE POOR

Proverbs 14:20-21, **"The poor are shunned even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends. He who despises his neighbor sins, but BLESSED is he who is kind to the needy."**

The prophet Jeremiah wrote of good 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?’ declares the Lord” Jeremiah 22:16.

Jesus offers a disturbing picture in Matthew 25. He tells His followers that at the end of time all humanity will be separated into two groups, sheep and goats. Listen to how He decides which is which: Verse 33, “He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ‘Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 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, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

‘Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

‘The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

‘Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

‘They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

‘He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

‘Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.’”

Now Jesus is not suggesting for a moment that doing good works will pave one’s way into heaven. However, He is teaching that one of the things that will mark one who is a sheep – one who is going to heaven – is a compassionate lifestyle. Care for those in need helps mark one as being a follower of Jesus Christ. Again, He said that such a person is blessed.

Let me direct your attention now to Mark 9:41, **“I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.”** Even giving something as simple as a cup of cold water merits God’s favor. Think of that, if you will.

Jesus is teaching that that even the slightest effort on our part for good will result in reward.

Then too, we give the water in the name of Jesus. In other words, we do it so as to direct the attention upwards toward Christ. It is not a self-centered thing. A look at me and what I am doing thing.

- No, let me cool you down and refresh you in the name of Jesus.
- Let me visit you in prison, in the name of Jesus,
- Let me give you some clothes,
- Let me give you something to eat.
- Let me work with junior high boys,
- Let me assist the elderly,
- Let me help with the homeless...

And I will do it all in the name of Jesus.

I want to take you back to a passage that I alluded to earlier in this series – Isaiah 58:6-7. As you may recall, these verses cover the subject of spiritual fasting. Notice: **“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?**

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter--

when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"
Friends, that is our part. That is our giving out cups of water.

Verses 8-9 now detail God's part. When we learn to practice compassion and to work for justice, then God will make sure that certain blessings come to you. The Bible says...

- **"Then your light will break forth like the dawn,**
- **and your healing will quickly appear;**
- **then your righteousness will go before you,**
- **and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.**
- **Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: 'Here am I.'"**

"Here I am." Say it with me. **"Here I am."** These words, in the original language, speaks of a "ready availability."

Almost everywhere else in the Bible where these words are used, they are the words of a servant responding to his or her master, or the response of the faithful person who is about to receive marching orders from God.

- When God calls Abraham, Abraham responds, "Here I am."
- When God appears to Moses in the burning bush and calls, "Moses, Moses!" Moses responds, "Here I am."
- When the boy Samuel hears the voice of God calling him in the temple, Samuel responds, "Here I am."
- When Isaiah sees the Lord high and lifted up in the temple and hears God calling, **"Whom shall I send, and who will go for me?"** Isaiah responds, **"Here I am, send me."**
- When the angel appears to Mary and announces that she is to be the mother of Jesus, Mary responds, **"Here I am, the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word."**

But here, God says to us, "Here I am, at your service." Imagine it, if you will. God promises to bless those who care for and help the poor.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP THE POOR AND NEEDY?

Deuteronomy 15:7-8 states, **"If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs."** That is our mandate.

Many in the church have understood this and as a result, it was those in the church that have led the way in taking care of those in need.

- The book of Acts in the New Testament details how the early church took seriously the responsibility to care for the widows. In fact, it was due to the need of the widows that the office of deacon was established.
- In similar fashion, it was the church that opened the first orphanages,
- It was the church that opened the first hospitals,
- that came out against slavery,
- that stood against child labor,
- as well as stood against many other physical and social ills.

James 1:27 says that **"True religion is to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."**

Martin Luther's wife, Katie, sometimes complained that Martin's generosity to poor students, travelers, and religious refugees threatened to empty the family account. Luther claimed that a Christian needed

to have three things converted: his or her heart, mind, and purse. Luther believed “There should be no beggars among Christians.”

In the 1860s, when William Booth and his Salvation Army looked at industrial London he saw overcrowded homes, drunkenness, domestic violence, prostitution, and unemployment. As a result, he got involved...

- He set up what we would call today – soup kitchens.
- In severely cold winters the Army sold coal at rock-bottom prices.
- In sizzling summers they sold “penny ice.”
- The Army ran “working girls’ homes” so that women on low wages could live in a clean, safe place.

Some people scoffed at the Army’s bands and uniforms. But even scoffers observed that under the Army’s influence, prostitution, drunkenness, and family violence decreased in the cities. Homelessness and hunger lessened.

Let me give you some simple but practical things that many if not all of us could do:

1. Every time you buy a new piece of clothing, give a piece of good used clothing away. Acts 9:36, **“In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor.”** Her goodness caught God’s attention.
2. If you are getting ready to pay your tab at McDonalds, pay for someone else’s bill at the same time – preferably someone who appears to be in need. This idea came from a lady here at New Life who actually does this. She told me that she really enjoys doing it.
3. When you go shopping for groceries, buy some extras and then drop them off at the home at someone who is suffering financially.
4. Volunteer for the Breakfast Club or for Primetime Brunch – a new ministry here at New Life where we feed our Primetime children a meal on Saturdays.
5. Adopt an elderly person. Become his or her hands and feet. Drive the person to the doctor’s office, pick up prescriptions, etc.
6. Pay a child’s way to camp or college. Consider the example of 87-year-old Oseola McCarty. Several years ago, she donated \$150,000 to the University of Southern Mississippi to establish a scholarship fund for black students. The school often receives donations of this size, so what was the big deal? Simple: Miss McCarty earned the money by washing clothes for local residents over the past 75 years. Instead of owning a big house or buying new clothes, she saved her money for the simple reason that she just wanted to “help black kids get an education.” Her gift stimulated a nationwide response of over \$33,000 in additional contributions. Her charity even sparked a letter from President Clinton who wrote of her “unselfish deed. . . a remarkable example of the spirit and ingenuity that made America great.” “I’m glad I paid my donation to them,” said the laundry woman who claims her only education is from the Bible. “If I had any more, I’d give it to them, too.”
7. Sponsor a couple to go to a Marriage Encounter. I have a family that really wants to go and really needs to go, but they told me this past week that they can’t afford the \$75.
8. Be an advocate for the poor. Speak up on their behalf. Christian citizens ought to see to it that laws are written fairly and enforced justly. **“The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern”** Proverbs 29:7. Proverbs 31:9 adds, **“Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”**

Like the words of the old hymn, “Little Is Much When God is in It.” John 6 provides us with a biblical example of this truth in action. At this point in the Lord’s ministry, He was very popular. Huge crowds turned out to hear Him speak. Vast throngs followed Him everywhere that He went. Without the comfort of hotels and fast food outlets and mass transit systems, the people walked and in some cases ferried themselves across the Sea of Galilee to be with Jesus, to listen as He talked, and to marvel at the miracles He performed. As the account here in John 6 begins to unfold, the masses

were both tired and hungry. Jesus turns to Phillip, one of the disciples, and asks, **“Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?”** (I have always believed that when God asks a question, He already knows the answer.) The Bible notes that there were around 5,000 men present plus women and children.

Four solutions were proposed.

1. The disciples suggested that Jesus send the people away. Mark 6:35-36, **“And when the day was now far spent, his disciples came unto him, and said, This is a desert place, and now the time *is* far passed: Send them away, that they may go into the country round about, and into the villages, and buy themselves bread: for they have nothing to eat.”** Get rid of the problem. But Jesus knew that the people would faint on the way if somebody did not feed them.
2. The second solution came from Philip: raise enough money to buy food for the people. Philip had already done the math. He instructed Jesus that it would take the equivalent of 200 days' wages to feed such a bunch of people.
3. The next solution came from Andrew, another disciple. He had found a little boy who had a small lunch: two little fish and five loaves of bread. Even though he had found the lad, Andrew still did not know what good so little would do in the face of such a tremendous need.
4. The fourth solution came from Jesus. He borrowed the little boy's lunch, blessed it, broke it, handed it out to His disciples. The end result was, everyone was fed and the disciples salvaged twelve baskets of leftovers. Don't you know that the little boy got back everything that he had given to Jesus plus interest!

The lessons in this story are clear:

1. Jesus is moved with human need. He did not want people to go hungry.
2. Then, whenever there is a need, we are to give what we have to Jesus and let Him do the rest. In the face of thousands of hungry people, five loaves of bread and two fishes mean absolutely nothing; however, when those same fish sandwiches are placed in the hands of Jesus, they become the stuff miracles are made of!
3. The disciples had been asking, what can we do? Jesus was teaching them that the real question, the one that begs to be answered is, “What does God want done?”

The ancient Rabbis used to say, “God allows the poor to be with us always, that the opportunities for doing good may never fail.”

The disciples almost missed this opportunity. They weren't sensitive to the needs of the hungry. Jesus didn't miss it though and as a result, He pulled off one of the biggest miracles of His ministry.

THE GOSPEL AND THE POOR

Please notice another passage of Scripture with me – Luke 4:18. The passage shares the words of Jesus. He was in the synagogue at the time. As a guest Rabbi for the day, He was asked to read from the Scriptures. The scroll was passed to Him and He began to read of the coming Messiah from the writings of the Prophet Isaiah: **“The Spirit of the Lord *is* upon me, because he hath preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised....”**

Notice, again quoting Dr. Tony Evans:

- The solution for a blind man? He is to be given back his sight.
- The solution for a lame man? He is to be made to walk.
- The solution for a leper? He is to be cleansed.
- The solution for a deaf man? He is to have his ears opened so that he can hear.
- The solution for a dead man? He is to be raised back to life once again.
- And the solution for a poor man? He is to have the Gospel of Jesus Christ preached to Him!

Dan Wakefield was a Hollywood writer. He had written bestsellers. He woke up one day on the eve of Christmas in Boston. He was an alcoholic, he was addicted to prescription drugs, his blood pressure was out of sight, he was overweight and his live-in girl friend had moved out. Everything was wrong. And on Christmas Eve he wandered into a church in downtown Boston.

Something happened. Lightning struck. He was moved in ways he had not been moved in years. He planned on going back the next week but he got the flu and didn't go back. But months later he couldn't get that Christmas Eve service out of his head. He went back to the church again.

Slowly his life began to change. He accepted Christ. Got into AA. He changed his eating habits. He changed the way he lived. He learned to read the Bible and to pray. The New York Times was so struck with his story that they printed the Christmas Eve story in their Sunday magazine at Christmas time. The point? When confronted with the Gospel, Dan Wakefield was changed. He became a different man. When the Gospel is preached, things start to happen. The tide turns. Lives are changed for the better.

The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:3, **“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures....”** Here again we see that the Gospel is of “FIRST importance.” It is front and center above all else.

Pastor Dr. Tony Evans of Dallas, Texas again says:

- If a man is poor, he can recover from that,
- If a man loses his house, that is bad, however he can recover from that.
- If a man does not have transportation, he can recover from that.
- If a man loses his job, that is sad, but a man can recover from that.
- But, if a man is lost, there is no possible way that he can recover from that aside from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. No Way. No matter what good works you do, no matter how much you give to the poor....

If a man dies without a relationship with Jesus Christ, you just hit him with a blow he can never recover from. That is why, regardless of what social service you do, what ministry you put forth, what good works you perform, you must tell that man about Jesus Christ. Without Christ, that man will die lost and go into eternity without the Lord.

You see, the Bible says that there will be rich people in hell, poor people in hell, upper class people in hell, lower class people in hell. Heaven and hell has nothing to do with what side of the tracks you live on. What matters is, do you know the Savior? That is of first importance!

Saints, we're a hospital. We tend the sick. We touch the wounds. It gets messy. Sometimes it is downright dangerous. We take risks, terrible risks. People take advantage of us. Lie to us. Cheat us out of hard-earned money. But we continue to move on.

Why? Because we are living out a great dream. We are attempting to take a city for Christ. We have set our course to make everyone in this area “Christ conscious.” Everyone. That includes the poor and those with needs. This is what Jesus Christ has called us to do. And, by God's grace and with His help, that is what we are going to do!

George MacLeod was right:

"I am recovering the claim that Jesus
was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles,
but on a cross between two thieves;
on the town garbage heap;
at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that
they had to write His title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek
at the kind of place where cynics talk smut,

and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble.
Because that is where He died.
And that is what He died about.
And that is where churchmen should be
And what churchmanship should be about."

Amen? Amen.