

“HONORING THE POOR”

Luke 4:18-19

INTRODUCTION

1. I have to tell you, I don't really like the word, “poverty.” It's one of those words loaded with a great deal of baggage. To some it sounds like a disease some people have and others don't.

One author said,

“It's a word that tends to divide the world into two unequal groups - the poor and the rest of us, as though somehow we are different.”

2. It's even possible to make value judgments about those who are poor. In this great land of opportunity, it's easy to think that if people are poor, it's because they don't work as hard as the rest of us or because they've made bad choices. We may even think the poor are lazy or stupid - even if we wouldn't say that.

3. But, that's not how God sees those who are impoverished in our world. Did you know in Jesus' day, it was common to believe that the poor, the sick and the disabled were somehow being punished by God for their sins? That's why the Pharisees and Sadducees were so shocked when Jesus touched a leper or healed the blind or associated with the lower class. But that's not how God looks at the poor.

5. Think about your own life for just a minute. How healthy would you and your family be if you had no clean water available to you? Imagine growing weak and malnourished to the point where your body and your mind did not develop properly. What if something as simple as

an abscessed tooth or an ear infection was a death sentence because you had no health care? What if you lived where you couldn't go to school because you had to simply fetch water for six hours a day?

Do you realize that's life for almost half of the world's population? Three billion people on our planet live in poverty. Over 1 billion live in extreme poverty.

The question all of us have to answer is this...

- Does that matter to me?

It does matter to God.

Somebody has discovered there are over 2,000 verses in the Bible that address the subject of poverty and economic injustice. God cares about the poor. That's obvious when we study the life of Jesus. In fact, Dr. Luke tells us that when Jesus began His ministry, He especially directed His message to the poor. If you have a copy of the Scriptures, why don't you turn with me to the 4th chapter of the Gospel of Luke? The words of Jesus really help set the foundation for our study today as we continue this series that I've called, “A Passion for Compassion.” Today, we want to especially examine two guidelines that help us understand how to think about the issue of poverty in our world. Let's pick up the account as Jesus begins His public ministry in Luke 4:16:

“He went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day He went into the synagogue, as was His custom. And He stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him.

Unrolling it, He found the place where it is written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him,

and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-21).

Most of us grew up in an atmosphere where we were concerned about our families, our jobs, our homes, our bills and our needs. We were taught to live responsible lives and to address those issues head-on.

It's so easy for us to assume if we've done that, we've done what God expects. Yet, when Jesus came to this earth, His first words were directed toward those who were disadvantaged. Because that's true, you and I need to see the issues of poverty in our world like God sees them.

First of all, I must know some of the...

1. REASONS WHY POVERTY EXISTS.

Scripture gives us a number of reasons why poverty exists in our world. The first cause for poverty is...

- Injustice

Look at these words from Proverbs 13:23,

"A poor man's field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away" (Proverbs 13:23).

We live in a broken world. Sometimes, the immoral action of others causes poverty.

Eg. I think that's one of the reasons why the actions of Bernie Madoff received so much publicity. He scammed dozens of people out of millions of dollars they'd saved.

Eg. I met one of those families a few weeks ago. I had a new appreciation for the injustices of what he did!

Some people experience poverty through unscrupulous salesmen, email scams or fraud by phone. The Bible talks a lot about those who take advantage of others. In Proverbs 14:32, the Bible says,

"He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God" (Proverbs 14:31).

Through no fault of their own, some people end up in poverty because of injustice.

Another cause for poverty is...

- Inadequate medical care

The Gospel of Mark tells us about a woman who was *"subject to bleeding for 12 years."* Look at Mark 5:26,

"She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse" (Mark 5:26).

Things haven't changed much in 2000 years, have they? Sometimes, even when you have insurance, a crippling disease can drain your finances and leave you in poverty.

Eg. I read about one man who had good medical insurance, but his insurance didn't cover the 6-month hospital stay he experienced when he needed a heart

transplant. His insurance didn't cover his loss of employment and the drugs and medications required after surgery. As a result, he's facing poverty for the rest of his life.

You see, it's not hard to identify with the woman who said, *“If I could just touch Jesus' clothes, I'll be healed”* (Mark 5:28). It's easy to see why people are desperate when they face what seems to be insurmountable medical problems.

Sometimes, poverty happens because of injustice. Sometimes, it happens because of inadequate medical care. Sometimes, poverty happens because of...

- Insensitivity to God's direction.

In other words, sometimes people make sinful choices that produce poverty. Proverbs 23 says it like this:

“Drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags” (Proverbs 23:21).

Eg. Some of you grew up in the home of an alcoholic. You know what Solomon is talking about. That same principle applies to all kinds of addictive behavior including sexual addictions, gambling addictions and drug addictions. Some of the people on the streets of our nation are there because they're just waiting for their next fix or the next drink.

Eg. One of the leading causes of poverty is men who father children without the commitment of marriage and then abdicate their responsibility to those kids.

When I ignore God's principles for my life, it not only has consequences for the life to come, it has consequences right now.

Furthermore, God has some strong warnings about laziness. Look at these verses:

“The sluggard says, “There is a lion outside!” or, “I will be murdered in the streets!” (Proverbs 22:13).

“The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth.” (Proverbs 26:15).

Ultimately, if I ignore what God wants for my life, I can end up in poverty.

But there is a fourth reason why poverty exists. And that involves an...

- Increasing devotion to the will of God

You might call this, “voluntary poverty.” Sometimes, the call of God requires a person to give up all his material possessions in order to follow Him. The disciples did that.

Jesus said it like this in Matthew 19:29:

“Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for My sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29).

Eg. When I was in Southeast Asia, I met Pastor Simeon. He's one of many church planters with whom Kevin and Jill Kane are working.

These church planters have given up much for the cause of Christ, and they barely have enough to feed their families.

Pastor Simeon received a small loan of \$100 to breed frogs in order to help feed his family. Another pastor has a small mushroom business.

Eg. When Pastor Dave Lawson visited the Central African Republic a couple of months ago, he met several African pastors who had barely enough money to feed their families. Every Saturday morning, one of them rides 37 miles to preach and train church leaders in the eastern part of the country. Another pastor rides his bicycle 23 miles to teach and train orphans we're sponsoring. Another pastor in the Chad rides 40 miles to reach a new people group. On his way, he carries his bike on a small bridge across a mile-long swamp in order to share who Jesus is with a part of the world that's never heard His name.

In my opinion all these pastors are fulfilling Matthew 19:29. We have a unique opportunity to support people like this through a special offering today that's been called, “*Day of Generosity.*” If you'd like to help men like this in other parts of the world, you can mark your offering envelope, “*Generosity,*” and we'll make sure they receive those funds.

In these last few years, I've sensed a growing wave of compassion and love here at Grace for those who are poor and marginalized in our world. Many of you want to do all you can to help those who are in need in our world. God gives this promise to His people when they respond to the poor.

“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.” (Isaiah 58:10)

So, how am I going to do that? How do I spend myself on behalf of those who are hungry? Let me suggest four...

2. RESPONSES TO POVERTY IN OUR WORLD

Look at these words in Proverbs 19:

“He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done” (Proverbs 19:17).

The Prophet Micah said it like this:

“He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Here's the bottom line: God expects His people to be kind to those who are poor regardless of how they got that way. We're expected to do justice and to love kindness. So, how do we do that? Let me suggest these four ways...

- Defend their cause

Solomon said it like this in Proverbs 31:9:

“Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:9).

One of the ways to do that is to leverage your regular purchasing power for the items that you buy each week.

Eg. Did you know, for instance, for about the same price, you can drink Fair Trade coffee? We serve that in the lobby today. Fair Trade coffee provides appropriate payment to Latin American coffee growers so they're able

to feed their families. You can do the same thing with soap, tea and clothing.

A second response to poverty in our world is to...

- Delight in the opportunity to help

Some of you remember the story from the Gospel of John where Mary poured expensive perfume on Jesus' feet. She was criticized by Judas for doing that. And Jesus made this statement:

“Leave her alone,’ Jesus replied. ‘It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me’” (John 12:7-8).

Some people think Jesus was saying we should worship Him and not worry about the poor. That's not what He meant at all. He was just saying that we'll always have the opportunity to care for the poor. As we do that, we must never forget to keep Him first in all that we do.

Eg. In the summer of 2008, the children of our Vacation Bible School raised over \$18,000 to help drill a water well for those without clean water in the heart of Africa. These children delighted in that opportunity.

There is a third response to poverty in our world...I can...

- Demonstrate personal concern

Look what Jesus said in Luke 14:12-13:

“Jesus said to His host, ‘When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or

relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” (Luke 14:12-13).

When Jesus walked this earth, He didn't just fix the problems of people from a distance. He touched them. He befriended them. He ate and drank with the outcasts of society. He invites us to do the same thing.

Eg. Tony Campolo tells this story:

“I was walking down the street in Philadelphia and a bum came towards me. I mean a dirty, filthy guy. He was covered with soot from head to toe. You couldn't believe how messed up he was. He had this huge beard and there was rotted food stuck in the beard. As he approached me, he held out a cup of McDonald's coffee and said, ‘Hey mister, want some of my coffee?’

I looked at this dirty, filthy man and said, ‘Thanks, but that's okay,’ and I walked by him. The minute I passed him, I knew I was doing the wrong thing, so I turned around and said, ‘Excuse me. I would like some of your coffee.’ I took some of the coffee and sipped it and gave it back to him. I said, ‘You're being generous. How come you're being so generous today?’

And this bum looked at me and he said, ‘Because the coffee was especially delicious today and I think that when God gives you something good, you ought to share it with people.’

I didn't know how to handle that, so I said, ‘Can I give you anything?’ I thought he would hit me for five dollars.

He said, ‘No.’ Then he said, ‘Yeah, yeah. I’ve changed my mind. There is something you can give me. You can give me a hug.’

I was hoping for the five dollars!

He put his arms around me and I put my arms around him. And as I in my suit and tie, and he in his filthy garb hugged each other on the street, I had the strange awareness that I wasn’t hugging a bum, I was hugging Jesus. I found Jesus in that suffering man.”

Eg. We’re trying to create all kinds of ways to do that here at Grace. Some of you will want to stop at the Christmas Tree displays in the hallway where you can express your love at Christmas to a family that’s under-resourced in our community. You might want to participate in a food drive that’s being sponsored by one of our high school students to provide food for those in our community who just don’t have enough to eat.

One of the best things you can do is sign up to mentor a boy or a girl in our community who is lacking the influence of a godly mom or dad. That’s just a few of the ways you can demonstrate your personal concern. But in all of this, the most important thing we can do to address the issue of poverty in our world is to...

- Direct them to Jesus

The great reminder of Scripture is that only God answers the deepest cries of the human heart. We might provide food and clothes and shelter for people but if we do not address their deepest spiritual needs...we have failed them. David asked,

“Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God...” (Psalm 42:5a).

Eg. I read about one man who worked in the projects of Memphis, Tennessee. He saw many people place their faith in Christ, but he was never able to start a church in the projects.

Somebody asked him why he was never able to start a church in the projects. He said, *“When they placed their faith in Jesus, He changed their lives. Suddenly, God delivered people from their drugs and alcohol. They started to work regularly. They started staying home with their families instead of running around town and spending their money.”*

He said, *“After awhile, the people began making enough that they could move out of the projects and find a better life for themselves.”*

Now, that can’t happen in every part of the world, but the ultimate answer for the needs of people is a relationship with the God who loves them.

Sometimes, the needs of this world seem overwhelming, don’t they? God doesn’t expect you and me to do everything, but He does expect us to do something.

CONCLUSION

Would you bow your heads with me? I wonder how you’d answer this question:

- How am I responding to the broken world around me?