

What the Bible Says About Care for the Poor

Excerpted from *Free Men and Free Markets*

By Max Lyons, Ph.D.

1. Christians have a huge mandate to care for each other: poor, sick, oppressed, down hearted, etc. The \$64,000 question is: How? Methods matter. A “good” thing, done with unbiblical methods is not good.
2. We must do things God’s way. We have a civil government model today that is not Biblical, but to oppose it means you get accused of “wanting people to die in the street.” It is assumed that if the civil government does not do it, it won’t get done. Nonsense; man had taken care of his fellow man for thousands of years. Poverty is not primarily a lack of goods and services, although this is the most visible result of certain attitudes, assumptions and behavior. If we think so, we are reasoning like a materialist, not a Christian. Most always there are other issues starting with spiritual issues.
3. Remember Denise Peacocke’s five kinds of wealth? Relationship with God, relationship with mankind, revelational wealth (truth), time (health), material contentment. If you are missing one or more of these types of wealth it is easy to see how you might end up having a measure of material poverty as well.
4. Definition of poverty: Poverty is the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings. (Bryant Myers, Fuller Theological Seminary). Story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15;6) is a good example of relational breakdown that needed restoration. It was good that no one gave him anything because this forced him to repent to his father, whom he had offended, and be reconciled.
5. We must be concerned about the root of the poverty. It can include things like: no work ethic, addictions, estrangement from family, divorce, underemployed or lack of skills for well paying job. If we don’t deal with the root, we will forever be dealing with the fruit. Dennis Peacocke observes, “Poverty is the result of sin: be it personal sin, parental sin, social

sin, or national sin. Because it is “sin based,” poverty won’t just go away by throwing money at it as we have already seen. Neither will it go away by spreading blame.”ⁱ

6. It is clear in the Bible that I am responsible to work to gain my wants and needs. I Thess 2:9, I Thess 4:11, Titus 3:14. God is serious about our working (Thessalonians 3: 6-14).
7. What about those who cannot work? Isn’t this what we really mean when we talk about helping the poor? Let’s be clear. Not ever “poor” person is lazy, a moocher, a freeloader, stealing from those who work. There are those who cannot work for reasons that are not under their control (age, physical health, mental health, disability, etc.). There are also those who are working, but it’s not enough to provide for them and their family. Let’s also admit that there are many who are gaming the system. They are quite capable to working but choose not to, and are quite willing to let someone give them the necessities and niceties of life. Proverbs 21:25 contrasts the sluggard and the righteous: The sluggard’s craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work. All day long he craves for more, but the righteous give without sparing. Notice that the sluggard refuses to work but his craving never ceases, will the righteous, because he works, he something to give. God’s ideal is for all of us who are able to work, to produce so that we can have to give to those who are truly needy.
8. Assisting the needy, whether materially, spiritually, emotionally or any other way is an obligation of all Christians every day, for all time. You cannot love God unless you also love your neighbor tangibly. The Old Testament laws governing the nation of Israel reveal God’s principles for caring for the poor. The poor were to be allowed to glean in the fields and the vineyards (Lev. 19:9, 10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19). God commanded this loving provision for the poor. Harvesters were not to reap all of the harvest; they were to leave a small portion so that the “poor,” who were able to work, could come into a field and gather food for themselves. The tithe of the third year was to be set aside for the poor and needy (Deut. 14:28, 29). Furthermore, Jubilee laws (Leviticus 25) limited to no more than 50 years the time that family property could be leased to others. By having family owned lands revert to the original owner every half century, provision was made for equal

opportunity for Israelites to earn income, without destroying economic incentives to work and produce.

9. Biblically there should be equality of opportunity, **not equality of material prosperity**. By the way, those who think Biblically about this issue will be against welfare to all socio-economic groups including the middle class and the wealthy. So called corporate welfare is wrong as well.
10. In the Old Testament, the emphasis was upon individuals meeting their own needs, **with the family as the “safety net”**:

Of the 613 laws in the Torah only a small number relate to the role of the civil magistrate or civil government. Most require individuals to govern themselves and their families in terms of just principles of behavior and compassion for the poor as expounded in the Torah. God judged Israel for failing in this respect, but the Torah does not require the State to rectify this failure through wealth redistribution programs for the poor...ⁱⁱ

There are over 2000 verses of Scripture referencing assisting the widow, orphans, oppressed, poor. How many of them advocate for government forced redistribution of wealth? None!

Aid always given in the context of the family. Story of Ruth and Boaz.

11. Speaking of the family, this is a jurisdictional issue. Who is responsible? Ind, Fam, Church, VA, civ gov? I Timothy 5:4,8
12. Civ Govt has an all important role regarding the economics of the people: law, property, free market, punish evildoers.
13. Civil rulers are not to become benefactors. Luke 22:23- 24 says, “ And there came to be a dispute among them, who of them seems to be greater. And he said to them, The kings of the nations lord it over them, and the (ones) wielding authority over them are called benefactors.” A benefactor (euergetes) is worker of good, a philanthropist. Jesus teaches that we are to wield power through service not from a position of power and wealth redistribution.
14. Our government has provided strong incentives not to work. The Cato Institute: The Work Versus Welfare Trade-Off, 2013 An Analysis of the Total Level of Welfare Benefits by State

15. Last year (2013), at all levels of government, we spent approximately one trillion dollars on wealth transfer programs to the “poor.” 40 million remain below the federal poverty line. If we had simply given these the money, each person would have received \$25,000, or \$100, 000 for a family of four. The trillion dollars spend is roughly the same as the federal deficit for each of the last five years. In addition, 17 trillion dollars has been spend in the “war on poverty” since it began. This is roughly the same amount as our current national deficit.
16. New Testament: In I Timothy 5 there were strict qualifications for receiving aid. In American history Christians said: it is sinful to not assist the truly needed; also it was a sin to enable someone who need to work, needed character, to repent, to be restored to their family.
17. Jesus: Luke 4: The poor have the gospel preached to them. Their greatest need is the good news, not food. Jesus started no soup lines, no handouts, no commands to government for welfare programs. What about feeding of 5000? It was a miracle, designed to get people to believe. The other thing Jesus did was he taught principles of liberty that if followed will ultimately bring the greatest freedom to mankind.
18. What Jesus did do: He preached and taught the truth, healed, gave sight to the blind, healed lepers, got rid of demons, delivered people from sinful lifestyles. Now people are able to work!
19. What about feeding of 5000? It was about doing a miracle. This was not the civil government. Not about a check every month when not working, not entitlement. Not taking enabling people who were capable for caring for themselves. Not robbing people of fulfilling their calling in the marketplace.
20. Jesus could not have been more forceful when He declared (Matthew 25) that mankind will be separated into sheep and goats. The sheep, those on the right, were to enter eternal life for they had feed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, provided shelter for the stranger, gave clothing to those in need, looking after the sick, and visited those in prison. The goats, those on his left, did not do these things, and were to go away to eternal punishment. But wait, Jesus was speaking to individuals (“the people”) not to civil governments! Clearly Jesus will hold us as individuals accountable for how we treat “the least of these.”

21. Isaiah 58 is very similar as God describes the “fast” that He desires in order for the nation of Israel to show true repentance: share your food with the hungry, provide the poor wanderer with shelter, when you see the naked clothe him, and don’t turn away from your own flesh and blood. This was to “my people” not civil government.
22. Ditto for the disciples. Did Jesus send them out with a truckload of food, clothing, medicine, etc.? In Matthew 10 they were told to: preach the message of the kingdom of God, heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, drive out demons. Do not take any gold or silver, but as you work expect to get paid (food and shelter).
23. We often hear the term “social justice” used and it means ultimately means redistribution of wealth. But is such action just? Leviticus 19:15 declares, “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. So to act justly means not to show favoritism; all are to be treated equally under the law, because God made both rich and poor (Proverbs 22:2).
24. Justice among other things means being able to enjoy the fruits of your labor. Isaiah 65: 21-22 says, “They will build houses and dwell in them: they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat.” Laws that are for poor and rich will assure the inviolability of private property.
25. Stealing is most unjust. That is why it is condemned in no uncertain terms in the Bible. Commandment eight simply says, “Thou shalt not steal.” Ephesians 4:28 says, Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need.” The thief is not just to not take what justly belongs to others but to work so that he becomes a giver himself. Stealing is wrong, even if it is to satisfy one’s hunger: Men do not despise a thief, if he steal to satisfy his soul when he is hungry; But if he be found, he shall restore sevenfold; he shall give all the substance of his house (Proverbs 6:30-31).

ⁱ Dennis Peacocke, *Doing Business God's Way*, 104

ⁱⁱ Stephen C. Perks, *The Political Economy of a Christian Society*, 284