

Helping those who are least able to help themselves.

How do Christian individuals, and The Church as a whole approach support for the poor, orphans, and widows?

✓ Short answer? **In order.**

1 Timothy 5:1-24 “Do not rebuke an elder, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, ² older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity...”

³ **Honor widows who are really widows.** ⁴ **But** if any widow has **children or grandchildren**, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God. ⁵ Now she who is ^A **really a widow**, and ^B **left alone**, ^C **trusts in God** and ^D **continues in supplications and prayers night and day.** ⁶ But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives. ⁷ And these things command, that they may ^E **be blameless.** ⁸ **But if anyone does not provide for his own**, and especially for those of **his household**, **he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever...**”

> NOTE: The Bible commands Christian families to take care of their needy loved ones before soliciting others.

⁹ “Do not let a widow under ^F **sixty years old** be taken into the number, and not unless she has been ^G **the wife of one man**, ¹⁰ **H well reported for good works**: if she has ^I **brought up children**, if she has ^J **lodged strangers**, if she has ^K **washed the saints’ feet**, if she has ^L **relieved the afflicted**, if she has ^M **diligently followed every good work...**”

> NOTE: The Bible gives significant qualifications for candidates for alms.

¹¹ “But ^N **refuse the younger widows**; for when they have begun to ^I **grow wanton against Christ**, they desire to marry, ¹² having ^{II} **condemnation** because they have cast off their first faith.”

> NOTE: Scripture shows here a version of “generosity” that damages the reception faith. Able-bodied people can take care of themselves.

¹³“And besides ^{III.} **they learn to be idle,** ^{IV.} **wandering about** from house to house, and not only idle but also ^{V.} **gossips and busybodies,** ^{VI.} **saying things which they ought not..”**

¹⁴“Therefore I desire that the ^{A.} **younger widows marry,** ^{B.} **bear children,** ^{C.} **manage the house,** ^{D.} **give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully.** ¹⁵ For some have already turned aside after Satan. ¹⁶ **If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened,** that **it may relieve those who are really widows..”**

> NOTE: Scripture shows the difference between Christian responsibility and Church responsibility.

¹⁷“**Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.** ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer is worthy of his wages.” ¹⁹ **Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses.** ²⁰ Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear..”

> NOTE: Scripture litigates this case clearly because, those critical of the church typically attack its pastors and their livelihood as proofs for why a handout should have been given.

²¹“**I charge you** before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels that you **observe these things without prejudice,** doing nothing with partiality..”

²⁴“Some men’s sins are clearly evident, preceding them to judgment, but those of some men follow later. ²⁵ Likewise, the good works of some are clearly evident, and those that are otherwise cannot be hidden.”

> NOTE: True “Almsgiving” is a private thing (Matthew 6). Meaning: When the church does it, it does not report it to protect the integrity of the recipient.

The Old Testament conveys in Deuteronomy to “open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor..” We can read about Job’s heart for the needy and oppressed in Job 29 through 31. We read of God’s special concern for the poor in Psalm 35 and Proverbs 14.

In the New Testament, we read how Jesus was moved with compassion for the weak, the harassed, and the helpless (Matt. 9:35–36). We see in the early church that the needs of the poor and distressed was a constant priority (Acts 4:34–35; Acts 11:30; Gal. 2:10). And frequently we are command to love one another not only with words but in the concrete actions of generosity and material support (James 2:15–17; 1 John 3:16–18). Even the elders, who are to be devoted to the word of God and prayer, were told by Paul to help the weak (Acts 20:35).

Clearly, God cares about the poor and wants us to care about them too.

How Should We Help the Poor?

The question is deceptively complex. It’s very easy (and altogether Biblical) for folks to insist that Christians ought to “be concerned about the needy” or “do something about the poor.”

That’s powerfully true, but it doesn’t say nearly enough; nor the whole story. How should we think about our responsibility to help the poor?

First, there are two principles can help us answer that question.

Principle 1:

The Christian is most responsible to help those closest to them.

In general, we ought to think of our sphere of responsibility as having expanding concentric circles. In the middle, with **the closest circle, is our family.** “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8). This means that if you have the ability to help your (not lazy) children and don’t, you are a pagan. If you have the necessary resources and yet you neglect your aging, helpless parents, you have turned from Christ.

In the next circle, Christian individuals are called to care for members of their church community to the best of their ability. The principle is really the same: Just as we have an duty to our natural family, so we also have a responsibility to our spiritual family. The New Testament frequently encourages us—by example and by explicit command and

warning—to care for the needs of the Christians in our local churches (Acts 2:45; 4:32–37; 6:1–6; James 2:15–17; 1 John 3:16–17).

If there is a Christian in your church who is materially devastated by calamity or infirmity and we who have resources in abundance do nothing to help, we prove that we do not truly have the love of Christ or know Christ himself.

Next, we have members of our Christian family whose needs are more distant. We still have an obligation to care for our brothers and sisters, but the Bible speaks less forcefully the farther away the needs become. So in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 Paul clearly wants the Christians in Achaia to generously support Christians in Macedonia, but he stops short of laying down a command (8:8) or exacting a contribution from them (9:5).

In the outer circle we have the needs of non-Christians in the world. Christians should still be ready to do good to all people, but this support is less obligatory than what we owe to Christians and is framed by “opportunity” rather than requirement (Galatians 6:10).

NOTE: One other category should be mentioned. Sometimes we come across needs that are so obvious, so immediate, and we are in such a unique position to help, that it would be wrong to ignore them, whether the person is a family member, a church member, or a complete stranger. Regardless of prior affiliation or acquaintance the “closeness” of the need is too close to ignore. This seems to be the point of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) and the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). If we see a child drowning in the pool, we should dive in. If a woman is being beaten up, we should intervene. If a minivan has collapsed on a barren stretch of highway, we should stop and lend a hand. The concentric circles are helpful as a general guideline for care, but they should not be used to justify the lack of care when someone needs our assistance right here and right now.

Be led by God’s Spirit!

Principle 2:

The Christian is most responsible to help those least able to help themselves.

Here again we can think of expanding concentric circles of responsibility. The progression with this principle is a little different because if we go out far enough in these circles we are actually commanded *not* to help. So the logic needs to be tweaked, but the basic imagery is still useful.

At the center, we have those people whose situation is most desperate because their options are most limited. In the Bible this prototypically meant “orphans and widows” (James 1:27). But the principle carries on to any person or persons who will crash without safety net. Caring for believers in prison was another classic example in the ancient world (Hebrews 10:34).

Outside of this inner circle, we find those who are less desperate but still depend on others for their well-being. In the New Testament this meant being generous with hospitality, especially to travelling evangelists who relied on the kindness of their brothers and sisters for their mission (Matthew 10:40–42; 25:31–46).

Next, we have those Christians with long term needs. *The striking thing about almost all of the “poor” passages in Scripture is that they envision immediate, short-term acts of charity.* **There is nothing about community development and only a little about addressing situations of ongoing need.** By putting these situations in this circle, I don’t mean to imply that we ought only to care about “quick fixes.” The point, rather, is that **we must think more critically before committing to long-term assistance.**

This circle, and the next are where Christian individual responsibility is now potentially paired with Church involvement.

In both Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 5 we see church leaders working hard to develop a just and sustainable process for distribution of resources to the poor. In particular, we see in 1 Timothy 5 that the widows who went on the official rolls had to meet certain requirements. The women had to be godly, older Christians in order to receive the church’s care (1 Tim. 5:9–16). No doubt, the church sympathized with almost all widows, but they had to be wise with their resources. They did not want to support young women who could get married or fall into idle sinfulness. And as for the other requirements, I imagine the church knew it had to draw the line somewhere and requiring “a reputation of good works” ensured that the widows on the rolls were genuine, faithful, known Christians and not just busybodies looking for a handout.

In the farthest circle out we have people that must positively *not* be helped by the church. First, **neither Christians nor The Church should not provide hospitality for false teachers** or do anything that would aid and abet their wicked works (2 John 10–11). Second, **neither Christians nor The Church should not support able-bodied persons who could**

provide for themselves, but prefer laziness instead (1 Thess. 4:11–12; 5:14; Prov. 24:30–34).

The Apostolic Principle is clear here: ***"If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat"*** (2 Thessalonians 3:10). In fact, Paul insists that church discipline be exercised on those who persist in idleness (2 Thessalonians 3:14). **The Christian responsibility to charity does not extend to those who expect others to do for them what they could do for themselves.** Helping the poor in these circumstances is no help at all.

> Basic Principles for Wise Decisions

Obviously, I have not begun to answer the myriad of "What if . . . ?" and "What about . . . ?" questions that arise when Christians start to work on actually caring for the poor. And:

The Bible doesn't give those answers either.

The Bible does, however, provide principles to inform wise decision-making.

Faith begins with knowing the will of God.

If one felt led to be generous (and if their giving stayed within the Biblical framework), they should give. Most importantly: Christians must consider their personal involvement with the needy before their church's obligation.

> The Church cannot be defined by the world's expectations.

The Church is not organized – as the Federal Government asserts – as a merely charitable organization. The Church is called by God to help people Know God, Find Freedom, Discover Purpose, and Make a Difference. The Church is called to help people get saved and walk out their discipleship. When the church uses generosity, or other means, to reach the lost, it is fulfilling its call from God.

When the church gives alms to bona fide needy people, it cannot fully report to protect the dignity of the recipient. Jesus said it this way:

Matthew 6:1-4 "Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in Heaven. **When you give to someone in need, don't do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity!** I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. But **when you give to someone in need, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.** Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you."

Just because you didn't hear the story doesn't mean that it didn't happen (see 1 Timothy 5:13).

Galatians 2:10 "They desired only that we should **remember the poor**, the very thing which **I also was eager to do..."**

James 2:15-17 "If a brother or sister is **naked and destitute of daily food**, and **one of you** says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' **but you do not give** them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

> NOTE: "Naked and destitute of daily food" is the standard here. Clothes and food fall short of what many who solicit for help request.

> NOTE: The Christian is the one held accountable here, not government, an organization, nor the church.

1 John 3:16-18 "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And **we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren**. But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but indeed and in truth."

What kind of support do we give the needy?

I've always found it significant that Jesus mentions the poor in his very first sermon: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for He has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor" (Luke 4:18).

Notice, the Scripture doesn't say that God anointed Jesus to "*bring a free ride/ stuff/ stuff at the expense of your family to the poor...*" Yet: We must care about the poor. Jesus did! We don't have a choice. So how can we help the people in our churches minister to the poor? Here are a few ideas I have; perhaps you have more:

✓ **Treat the poor with dignity.**

We're not necessarily smarter or more talented than needy people. We're definitely not more valuable than people who are poor. The Bible says, "Rich and poor have this in common: The Lord is the Maker of them all" (Proverbs 22:2). I like to say that our self-worth isn't based on our net worth.

✓ **Offer the poor opportunities.**

The Bible says, “When we have the opportunity to help anyone, we should do it” (Galatians 6:10). As I’ve talked to people in various ministries, they all say that the best way to help the poor isn’t to give them a bunch of money. It’s to give them opportunities.

Often, needy people need training. Maybe they need help finding a job. Maybe they need a network of folks who can connect them with mentors and resources. Christians need to be taught to look for ways they can give opportunities to the poor.

Christians balance compassion with responsibility:

The Bible does not endorse entitlement or laziness.

✓ **Allow the needy to work for their provision.**

Under the law, the Jews gave this opportunity:

Leviticus 19:9-10 "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God."

This reveals a principle: The poor were provided for, but they had responsibility paired with the generosity—God did not permit them to simply receive handouts.

Christians encourage work paired with generosity as to not hurt the recipients faith (1 Timothy 5): Those who can work should do so, even if they need help to get started.

✓ **Defend the poor.**

The Bible says it’s our responsibility to care about injustice. We’re called to speak up when we see the poor (or anyone else) mistreated. Needy people are vulnerable to abuse. They’re often the ones who get taken advantage of by unfair practices of businesses and landlords. And it’s the poor around the world who are most likely to get sold into slavery.

We can look for opportunities to defend them. In fact, at New Chapel, we’ve mobilized missional and legal ways to defend literal slaves, and the marginalized.

Christian generosity is to be orderly, organized, and God-honoring.

Support should be structured, wise, and prevent abuse.

✓ **Share what we can.**

This is how we can be a Christ-follower who practices true religion. The Bible says, "Share your food with everyone who is hungry; share your home with the poor and homeless. Give clothes to those in need; don't turn away your relatives" (Isaiah 58:7). True religion isn't getting mad about the need. True religion isn't just enlisting government, the church, or others to meet every need that stands out. True religion takes responsibility for the need to the best of one's ability.

James 1:27 "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to **look after orphans and widows in their distress** and to **keep oneself** from being polluted by the world."

New Chapel encourages people to meet needs when they find them, not just expect someone at the church to handle needs. It's easy for someone to talk about others doing something when they're inactive. A church full of Christians on mission can make a huge difference.

And as we teach people to help the poor, we're helping them to worship God: "If you oppress poor people, you insult the God who made them; but kindness shown to the poor is an act of worship" (Proverbs 14:31).

Christians are called to be compassionate:

Generosity is part of who we are, and the poor should not be ignored.
