

On Hunger & Poverty: A Biblical Perspective

Jesus launched his public ministry saying: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor*” (Luke 4:18). He started with those words, and his concern for poor and hurting people continued throughout his life.

To be a follower of Christ implies a desire to live as Jesus lived and to emphasize the things he emphasized. Care for the poor and hungry is one of the consistent concerns expressed in Jesus’ life, as it is throughout the Bible.

The Gospels

Jesus pictured the poor as among those who suffered amid life’s circumstances. The quote above came as Jesus read from Isaiah’s prophecy and included his broader concern. The full passage reads:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* (Luke 4:18-19)

We can interpret Jesus’ words as also referring to spiritual poverty, captivity, blindness, and oppression, but the clear meaning refers to physical suffering. A *both/and* understanding can be applied to multiple New Testament passages – physical and spiritual suffering – but here we focus on physical suffering.

Bringing good news to the poor – those multitudes of desperate Palestinians – was central to Jesus’ ministry and to the unfolding of God’s kingdom. His embrace of the social outcasts of his day stood out as paramount.

We see and hear this particular love everywhere. Looking at Luke’s account alone, we see numerous healings of the lame, the lepers, the diseased, the blind, and the demon possessed. We hear the beatitudes, “*Blessed are you who are poor, ... you who are hungry now, ... you who weep now*” (6:20-21). We see the raising of the dead boy at Nain, the only son of his widowed mother (7:11-17). In 7:20-23, we read Jesus’ answer to John the Baptist’s question, “*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*”

Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Jesus multiplies the bread and fish for a crowd of hungry listeners (Luke 9:10-17). He tells the parable of the Samaritan who had compassion (10:29-37) and the parable of the spurned host who invites “*the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame*” to his banquet (14:15-24). Jesus gave the following advice to a Pharisee:

He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:12-14).

Jesus’ parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25 is possibly his most famous about addressing the needs of those who suffer, including the poor and hungry.

And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

When we help those who suffer, it is the same as providing care for Jesus Himself.

The Old Testament

Jesus knew well that Scripture brimmed with expressions of God’s concern for the poor. The Law, for example, details regulations of the sabbatical (or seventh) year in which the land was to lie fallow in part at least, so “*the poor of your people may eat*” (Exodus 23:10-11; cf. Leviticus 25:2-7) presumably, from the unharvested and voluntary crops.

The jubilee year (every 50th year) provided that slaves be set free and debts be forgiven, which granted a new start to Hebrews who had sold themselves into slavery or fallen into debt (Leviticus 25:8-17). During this year all land would return to its original owners without compensation. It apparently was understood that God wanted the original, and basically equal, distribution of land in Israel to continue. In an agrarian society land was capital; and with capital returned, the poor could again earn their way.

The Law also contained a special regulation of harvests, usually referred to as the gleaning law. Leviticus 19:9-10 says fields and vineyards must be harvested in a manner where a portion of the crop is left for the poor to pick up and consume. The story of Ruth illustrates the gleaning law at work.

Many other passages could be quoted to reflect God's special concern for the poor. The Law argues, in fact, that this special concern lies at the heart of divine justice.

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:17-19).

It is not surprising that the Old Testament prophets demanded that this particular justice of God be done in society. Indeed, one of their common complaints against both Israel and Judah was that the people had neglected and oppressed the poor in their midst (Isaiah 5:8; Amos 8:4; Micah 2:2). This complaint rivals religious apostasy in terms of frequency of mention. Amos thundered that the Israelites “*trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth*” (2:7).

The Early Church

Just as Jesus embodied this powerful Old Testament tradition in his life and ministry, the early church followed Jesus. The book of Acts records the practice of the Jerusalem community.

With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need (Acts 4:33-35).

Because many in the church were poor, those who had material means liquidated their assets to provide for members of the fellowship in need. The book of Acts says that by this practice the early church bore powerful witness for Christ in the world.

When the Jerusalem church suffered famine in the middle of the first century, the Apostle Paul undertook to collect an offering from the churches in Asia and Macedonia. To the Corinthians he wrote the following:

I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for

your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little” (2 Corinthians 8:13-15).

James makes ministry to the poor central to his well-known argument about the inseparability of faith and works.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:14-17).

John makes the claim that sharing with those in need is the sign of real love.

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action (1 John 3:16-18).

And this is our challenge still today, that our love be more than words. True love is shown in action toward those in need, including those who are poor and hungry.

All Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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