

“Helping The Poor”

By: Doug Warren

What are the best ways to help the poor?

What do you do when you find yourself stopped at a traffic light right next to someone standing on the sidewalk with a sign that says, “Will work for food”? Do you sit very still and try to keep your eyes looking straight ahead so that you won’t have to meet that individual’s gaze? Do you hand her some change? Do you give him something to eat? I have found that almost everyone I talk with about such situations is not satisfied with their response. They don’t know what to do and they feel bad about it. Maybe you can relate? I am especially thankful for a *Neighbors* reader who recently asked, “What should we do to help the poor?”

First, we need to see the poor not as a problem but as people. Poor people are not a social problem to be fixed, they are sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, friends and coworkers. The Bible uses the word “neighbors” to convey both their personhood and their relationship with all of us.

Jesus told the story about a Samaritan to underscore the humanity of those in physical need and our responsibility to them. You may know the parable. It is found in the tenth chapter of Luke’s gospel account. A man was traveling a dangerous road and was attacked by robbers. They beat him up, stripped him, and left him for dead. A priest happened by, but instead of helping kept far to the other side of the road. Another religious figure (a Levite) came along, but neglected him also. Then a Samaritan (one of a group hated by Jesus’ audience) found him and compassionately cared for him. He administered first aid, got the man to a safe place, and paid for his meals, lodging, and recuperation.

The Samaritan in Jesus’ story had mercy on the one who was robbed. He saw the man as a person in need and he responded to that person with compassion. Jesus puts particular stress on this by portraying the rescuer as a social enemy of the victim. The Samaritan overcame a barrier by seeing him as a person, a barrier that we, too, need to overcome. We must not be put off by the poor by seeing them as somehow distinct from us.

Second, we need to express that compassion in tangible ways that meet real needs. Compassion means literally “to share someone’s suffering.” It took time, effort, and money for the Samaritan to meet the broken man’s needs. Jesus proceeds from the story to a strong command, “Go and do likewise.”

Helping other people in need must not be a detached activity of charity. We are not to help simply because this person is *someone’s* sister or father, but as if this person were *our* mother or brother. Aiding the poor is not something we do out of our resources, but by giving of ourselves. We must enter into their world and meet them as peers. The difference between a handout and a hand is that the latter is relational.

As our hearts become engaged in serving this fellow human, we begin to see with their eyes that poverty is not simply a matter of lacking resources; it is powerlessness full of grief. Helping another overcome that helplessness raises new questions. In the case of our Samaritan friend that might mean questions about the danger on this particular road and how to better ensure the safety of travelers or the need for justice with the robbers. Again, if it were our loved one, we wouldn't be content with just their welfare; we'd want to ensure this tragedy wouldn't happen again.

That leads to our third principle: we need to move beyond just meeting individual needs and redress societal wrongs that keep certain people disadvantaged. If we really do begin to see the poor as people and seek to meet their very real needs in sacrificial ways, their concerns become ours. Liberals and conservatives tend to emphasize different pieces of this. Conservatives will point out the poor choices made by the man in traveling this road or going alone or not planning ahead. Liberals will bewail the social structures that contribute to bandit behavior or poor lighting on the roadways or institutionalized highway robbery.

The reality is that all of these things and more are all part of the mix in this fallen world. Jesus said that we will always have the poor with us. The only solution is His return when He will set up the New Heavens and New Earth where there will be no more poverty. So what do we do until then? We follow His example of giving not just our resources, but ourselves. He has all the riches of creation but to redeem us from our spiritual poverty He didn't just write a check. He came and suffered with us and ultimately for us. He gave of Himself.

Until we fully appreciate this reality our efforts at helping the poor will never be more than an unsatisfying, token endeavor. This is because our philanthropy is about us more than it is about others. We are just like the lawyer whose question precipitated Jesus telling the parable of the Samaritan in the first place. He was asking, "Who is my neighbor?" not so he could love them, but so that he could justify his own meager attempts to obey God who said, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

We need to see in the needs of others our own neediness. When we begin to care for others, not as superiors, but as fellow broken people, then the grace of Christ begins to show in our sacrifices. Jesus shows us that He cares for the poor and that He wants us to be His agents for meeting their needs both individually and collectively.

So what do you do the next time you find yourself sitting at that traffic light? I hope that you will work through these principles in your response. That might result in your pulling off the street to make a friend. Or it might mean taking that person to a restaurant for a meal or giving them a care package you prepared in advance for just such an opportunity. Or it might mean volunteering at a resource center like the Root Cellar or Preble Street. But even more than any of those possibilities, I pray that you will apply these principles in such a way that stopping at a traffic light isn't the only time you come face to face with the poor.
