

# **‘Remember the Poor’: Are We Doing It Right?**

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“Hello, my name is Jessica. Our family is three months behind on our rent and we are about to be kicked out of our house. Can your church help us?” Strangers requesting financial help like this is common at our church, and probably at your church, too.

Our church is small and resources are very limited. Constant requests against our limited resources prompted me to comb the Scriptures for God’s guidelines in helping the needy, and I discovered that many modern church practices are not patterned upon the Biblical model.

“Remember (to help) the poor,” Paul admonished in Gal. 2:10. But this admonition raises two fundamental questions: Who exactly are “the poor” and in what ways should we help them?

## **Who Are The Poor?**

It seems most of us unthinkingly assume that the poor are a homogenous group of individuals or families that vary only in degree of need. However, Scripture, confirmed by personal experience and observations, reveals that this is not the case. Instead, these sources indicate that poverty is better understood as composed of at least four separate groups characterized by the needy’s choices and circumstances.

• **Those Who Are Poor By Choice** — The truth is, some people are actually quite satisfied living in conditions our society labels as poverty; and they remain there not as victims of their circumstances, but by their own choice. Many do not need or want help. And any financial help given to them, if received at all, would not be used to improve this situation they prefer.

A number of Bible passages indicate that a level of poverty is not necessarily as bleak as some people presume. We know the Paul found contentment in such poverty. (Phil. 4:11-12) So living below an arbitrary income level does not mean that a person is not or cannot be content.

• **Those Who Are Poor Due To Their Choices** — This second group is made up of people who remain in poverty due to their routine poor money choices, most often in the form of injudicious spending of money that could inch them away from poverty. This could be the person who chooses to spend money on vices (e.g., gambling, alcohol), or on morally neutral “extras” (e.g. satellite TV, video game gadgetry). He may be spending on more-expensive-than-necessary versions of necessities. Or this could be the lazy or indifferent person who loses his job because he habitually chooses to not get to work on time.

The poster child for this group is the Prodigal Son who, due to continual poor money choices, spent himself into abject poverty. The Bible highlights a number of choices which can cause poverty, including laziness (Prov. 20:13), pursuing pleasures or other “empty pursuits” (Prov. 21:7; 28:19) and a lack of a diligent work-ethic. (Prov. 10:4; 21:5)

• **Those Who Are Poor Due To Short-Term Circumstances** — People in this category have the actual or potential ability to provide for themselves (at least to some degree), but that ability is temporarily hindered by some limiting circumstance (e.g., partial disability, a family crisis, corporate downsizing). The young Ruth (after the loss of her first husband) and famine victims are Bible examples of people in this group.

• **Those Who Are Poor Due To Long-Term Circumstances** — The needy in this final group face a permanent or long-term inability that prevents them from providing basic necessities for themselves and/or their families. Bible examples from this group include the 10

lepers, blind Bartimaeus and the lame man at the Gate Beautiful. Widows (if they were too old to remarry) and orphans (if they were too young to support themselves) also belong to this group.

We see that the Bible gives examples of each of the groups often labeled as poor today. But the Scripture's own concept of poor — those unable to provide their common daily survival needs due to circumstances they can not control — fits the fourth group and probably most cases of the third group. These are the poor that Paul said to remember.

### **Guidelines For Helping The Poor**

Bible guidelines for helping the various groups are found in passages such as Gal. 6:2, 5, I Tim. 5:3-15, Lev. 19:9-10, 23:22, and Ruth 2. Due to limited space only a summary model from those guidelines is outlined here. (See <http://ozarkinspirations.webs.com/Writings/PoorHelp.pdf> for a more detailed discussion.)

- We must re-examine our understanding of “poor” (poverty, needy) to be sure it matches the Bible's more limited range of meaning. If a person's survival is not genuinely in jeopardy, the label of poor may be Biblically unwarranted.

- We must understand that those in poverty are not all needy for the same reason. Therefore what is helpful in one situation might not be helpful in another. For example, our default “cure” of giving material help (food, clothes, shelter, etc., or the money to obtain them) to the poor can, at times, compound their problem instead of improving it.

- When a person remains in poor circumstances because of his own choices, other people should not be asked to shoulder the financial consequences of his choices.

- A person in any type of poverty should provide for himself (and family, if applicable) to whatever degree that his capabilities and circumstances allow.

- Those with regular increase from their labors should set aside a margin of that increase to help those in legitimate need. (Whether that margin should exceed one's government payroll withholdings is a matter he must prayerfully decide in his own heart.)

- The Bible's discussion of providing the poor with material help only mentions the common daily provisions necessary to sustain life (basic food, basic clothing). Any help given above that is not necessarily disallowed, but is not demanded.

- Ongoing material help (either short-term or long-term) should be provided only as the needy maintains a genuine effort to proactively address his poverty.

- If material help is needed, it should first be sought among one's own extended family.

- If family is unable (or unwilling) to help, the needy can then seek help from the church — specifically, from the local congregation he belongs to and is active in.

- At this point the congregation can consider helping, provided that the needy person has earlier invested in the congregation (at least relationally) and the needy has maintained a God-honoring lifestyle (both past and present). Only short-term help is given when the need is due to short-term or partially debilitating circumstances. Long-term help is reserved for more permanent inabilities. Any help must be discontinued when there is reason to suspect it has or will encourage laziness or other ungodly habits, or when it undermines a person's taking proper financial responsibility for himself.

## **Conclusion**

It seems that much of the modern help for the needy does not conform to aspects of the Biblical model. As a result, the world wrongly sees churches as holy ATM machines where

anyone in financial straits just drives in, “pushes all the right buttons,” and help is automatically dispensed.

This view of the church stands in sharp contrast to its intended family nature where a person continually invests himself (relationally and financially) as he is able, then when there is a legitimate need he receives back from those he previously invested in. I must wonder if our practice of constantly giving to those who have not invested themselves in the system has undermined one of the intended draws of the church-family life.

Ministering by these guidelines will not be easy — but it is what God instructs churches to do. Abandoning them for a less demanding and less intrusive approach has caused great misconceptions and misuse of churches’ help. To continue on that easy road will further complicate the ministries for tomorrow’s congregations, overburden today’s resources and hobble many of the poor we wish to help. However, patterning our ministries to the Biblical model will be a benefit to all.

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