

# Provider to the Poor

Well good morning. My name is Marcus and I'm one of the pastors here at City Church. And before we get into everything, I know Kent talked about this already but, now that Thanksgiving has passed, I just need to know who all has their Christmas trees up right now? I asked my LifeGroup guys how they felt about it and it was mixed. One guy even said he was gonna wait and put his tree up on Christmas Eve in protest, which is a new one for me personally: Protest by Christmas decoration. Alright, now that we've gotten the important stuff outta the way, if you are new here today, to catch you up, we are a few weeks into our Good News for All People series where we are spending our time talking about what the good news of Jesus is, and then specifically how the gospel is particularly good news for specific groups of vulnerable people in the world. In the ancient world those people were the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the immigrant.

And we announced in week one of the series that we've put together a list of modern-day equivalents to those people groups: single moms, the homeless, foster children, refugee families, and exploited women. And as a church, we'll be caring for them in a few different ways, and one of them is by bringing items to the Gathering each week that one of those groups particularly need. So this week, if you were able to, you brought coats for the homeless in our city through Knox Area Rescue Ministries.

And then we told you that each week during the teaching portion of this series, we are going to look at the bible's focus on one particular vulnerable group of people. Last week Kent talked about how God is the defender of groups of people like the widow and single moms, and how he calls us to participate in that with him. And today we will talk about how God cares a lot about the poor and how he calls us to love and serve them.

Now a lot of thoughts may be running through your head when you hear me say God is calling us to love and serve the poor.

And to that point, I think when we look at the list of the single moms, the homeless, foster children, refugee families, and exploited women it can be easier to get on board with the single moms, foster children, refugee families, and exploited women because it's easier to see that they are *victims* of injustice. In other words, something *happened to them* that put them in the position they're in. But with the homeless, or poor, it sometimes can feel like you just don't know exactly. It feels like they *could* be victims of injustice, they also could have put themselves in this spot by being careless, or by choosing certain actions that landed them in this spot. It could be a number of things and because of the unknown, and because our society as a whole is so driven by the idea of pulling

yourself up by your bootstraps, sometimes our hearts don't naturally go out to the poor. We assume the worst rather than naturally viewing them as victims of injustice.

So here's what I want to try and do today. I want to help pull our hearts a little closer to the heart of God when it comes to interacting with the poor. Now here's something I know about hearts, it's that the heart can care one minute and in the same hour or two disregard in the next. So something to be praying for during this sermon is that our hearts would yearn to align with God's and that it would last throughout the coming weeks to take a step towards his heart.

Matter fact that might be the best thing to do before we dive into the sermon. Let's pray and then we'll go from there.

Alright, so here's how I want to break this sermon down. I want to talk about **what poverty is**, **why we should care** (about poverty), and then lastly **how we should care** (about poverty).

### **What Poverty Is**

So for many of us, I'm sure we feel like we can spot poverty from a mile away: we see a homeless person on the street asking for money, or something to eat; or when we see a kid who is dressed in the same clothes for most days of the week or has hand-me-downs that don't necessarily fit them properly. And for sure these are signs of poverty but poverty can be so much more than just that. It can actually look like the person sitting next to you.

What you might not know is that there were 37.2 million people living below the poverty line, which is around \$26,500 for a family of four. To say it another way, there were approximately 1 in 9 people living in poverty last year and all of them were not people who were homeless.<sup>1</sup> These were people who were just scraping by with a little bit of food, or just being able to pay rent. Or choosing between rent and food. They were people that looked normal on the outside, people who were high functioning and didn't want to ask for a handout, but were struggling to get what we would call the basics. *I've told this story before but I remember when I did freelance and didn't have much. I could be wrong but I feel like I was living below what was considered the poverty line at the time. And really the only way I survived was because one of my friends was generous and helped cover the gap between where I was and what I needed to have the basics. Now on the outside I was high functioning and didn't seem to be struggling at all.* Now I say that to reiterate the point that poverty isn't always obvious on the outside.

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<sup>1</sup> [Poverty Stats](#)

Now generally speaking you have two schools of thought when it comes to the causes of poverty. One camp often believes that the causes of poverty are only and primarily systemic: People are most poor because of circumstances outside of their control. While the other camp believes that people are primarily poor because of bad personal choices: that they're poor because their choices and habits made them poor.

When you look at the Bible though, it would say that there are a myriad of causes associated with people becoming poor. To be sure there are social forces that do stifle the poor, whether that's oppression (Leviticus 19:15) or unjust low wages (James 5:1–6). In the Old Testament, the prophets would often blame the rich for poverty existing (Amos 5:11–12) and on the flip side the Bible would also say that natural circumstances could be a cause of the poor such as famines (Genesis 47), floods, fires, and disabling injuries. But on the other hand, the Bible also makes it clear that a lack of personal wisdom and discipline can also cause poverty. (Proverbs 10:4, 13:18, 20:13)

So the Bible makes it clear that when it comes to the causes of poverty, it is both/and, not either/or. Poverty is caused by both systemic, circumstantial reasons, AND it's caused by personal choices. There are usually *several factors* that coincide with someone being poor and it's not usually as cut and dry as we may want it to be.

In fact, I once heard somebody who does a lot of work directly with poor populations say that if you think poverty is ONLY because of systemic injustices or ONLY because of a person's individual choices, you just reveal that you've never worked much with poor people. Because if you had, you would realize that it's almost always some of both. Now the breakdown might be 50/50, or 80/20, or something else—but it's usually at least some of both.

### **Why should we care**

So that is some of what poverty is, but why should we care about that? What will move us to actually do something about this. Why should we be concerned about something that we never caused directly? Well I think there are at least three overarching reasons given in the bible for why we should care for the poor.

### **Because People Are Made in the Image of God**

The first motivation we can find in [Genesis 1:26–27](#). It says this:

*26 Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground." 27 So God*

*created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

As followers of Jesus we believe that God created us each in his image because of this passage right here. We image or reflect, much like a mirror, who he is. I remember growing up and people would always say that I looked like my mom or my dad. There was always a way I looked when I did something or when I said something that reminded them of my parents. And I'm sure many of you have heard the same thing as well. Now while we have not seen God, there are people much smarter than me that have pointed out there are things that we reflect as human beings when it comes to the image of God. There's human rationality, personality, creativity, our moral and aesthetic sense, and our deep need for and ability to give love in relationships. And while we don't do these things perfectly, these and many more reflect or image our creator. So here's why we care for the poor: we care for them because they look like their dad. We are in fact God's children. And with that comes the highest level of dignity and respect. All of us have an inherent sense of worth and value placed in us from the beginning of life to the end of life.

This is why Jesus tells the famous story in Matthew that ends with him saying "whatever you did for the least of these, you did to me. He draws a line between how we treat the poor and the marginalized and how we treat him, because they are deeply intertwined. People—all people, regardless of income or social status—are made in the image of God. That's reason #1.

### **Because All of our Stuff Belongs to God Anyway**

The second motivator for us as followers of Jesus comes from [Psalms 24:1 and Psalm 50](#). Let's check it out Psalm 24 first, it says this:

*The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;*

Now [Psalm 50](#) [this is God talking, by the way]:

*For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. 11 I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. [and look at this line] 12 "If I were hungry, I would not tell you [if only God had the emoji eyes to add to this], for the world and its fullness are mine.*

So you see this in the Psalms but throughout the Scriptures it consistently teaches that God rightfully owns every single thing that there is. Everything on heaven and on earth rightfully belongs to him. **And while God gave humanity authority over the world's**

resources, see Adam and Eve's story, he never gave ownership over to us. Let me say that again, while God gave humanity authority over the world's resources, he never gave ownership over to us. And that's an important distinction. We are stewards of everything on earth. We are stewards of everything the Lord has made. Everything that the light touches right?!? That's a Lion King reference. We are stewards, but the Lord is the creator and therefore the owner of everything on earth. Even our wealth.

But I'm sure you're thinking in your head, but wait, I've worked hard for this. I put in a lot of hours to get this house, this car, my status. I earned this.

Tim Keller, a pastor in New York puts that mentality in perspective really well. He gives an illustration where he said if you were born on a mountain in Tibet in the 8th century, it wouldn't matter how hard you work or how driven you were, ultimately you wouldn't have much to show for it. You didn't choose when you'd be born. You didn't work hard to be born in America in the 20th century. Some of you didn't work hard for your parents to set you up for success. Everything you have and everything you own, you owe at least in part to the time and place in which you were born, neither of which you personally earned.

And the closer we get to realizing this reality that we are stewards and God owns everything, I believe our hearts will move closer to God's heart when it comes to loving and caring for the poor.

So that's reason #2. The last motivator we'll find is:

### **Because of the Grace of God**

The third motivator that flows into what we just talked about so let's look at **2 Corinthians 8: 8–9**. It says this :

*8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

So Paul here wrote a letter to the Corinthians and right before this he tells them you seem to be excelling in everything. Faith, speech, knowledge, all types of things, but I need you to remember to also excel in the grace of giving.

So he starts out by saying I know I could command this of you but let me motivate you in a different way. A way that should change your entire outlook on giving. And he does that by reminding them of the grace of God.

That God through Jesus has been sacrificially generous towards us, and because of that we should be sacrificially generous towards others. That's it. **Sacrificial generosity from Jesus works itself out in sacrificial generosity towards others.** If you want to become someone who gives to the poor—not just someone who gives but someone who loves giving, someone who embodies the heart posture of sacrificial generosity, you need to take a long hard look at the cross. Because that's where generosity begins. "For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross. Jesus could go into the most sacrificial moment of his life, and do it for the joy set before him. And if he can do that, you with the same Spirit inside you can do that in regards to giving towards the poor.

We already talked about Keller in this sermon already but here and he says it this way in his book Generous Justice:

**That is the real proof that you believe your sins have been atoned for, and that you have truly been humbled by that knowledge and are now living a life submitted to God and shaped by knowledge of him. People who fast and pray ritually but still show pride and haughtiness toward the poor and needy reveal that no true humbling has ever penetrated their hearts. If you look down at the poor and stay aloof from their suffering, you have not really understood or experienced God's grace.**

Ouch right. I think a good ouch though. Understanding God's grace in our lives. Actually taking time to reflect on it would really do us some good when it comes to, everything actually, but also when it comes to giving towards those who are poor. The more we are able to think on the grace of God. The more we are able to tap into that, remembering how our debt, the ultimate debt was paid for, then that will soften our hearts in ways we might have not seen coming.

### **How We Should Care**

So assuming that we understand why we should care for the poor as followers of Jesus, let's talk about how we should care for the poor. For starters there are a myriad of ways to care for the poor but most of it can be placed into one of three categories: **relief, development, and social impact.**<sup>2</sup>

### **Relief**

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<sup>2</sup> Borrowed from Tim Keller's Generous Generosity

First up relief. Relief is direct aid to meet immediate physical, material, and economic needs. If you've grown up in church a while, think Good Samaritan from Luke 10, where Jesus talks about a man who sees someone in need and provides for his *immediate* well-being. So relief does just that, it provides for the *immediate* needs of the poor.

So what does that look like for us when it comes to those who are poor in Knoxville. Well for starters I think that looks like what we did by bringing coats in for the poor. We often say things to the poor like, 'go get a job' or 'take responsibility for yourself.' But it's hard to get a job and hold a job if you're literally trying to thaw out from sleeping on the streets the night before. It's hard to "take responsibility for yourself" if you literally can't think straight because you haven't eaten in three days. For the poor to even have a fighting chance, they often need some of their immediate needs addressed and provided for.

Now as I stated before, food is also in the category of relief for those who are poor. And while there are plenty of avenues for the poor to receive food, one of the ways those who are poor can receive food is through your generosity. It might look like gift cards, it might look like buying them food from a nearby restaurant or convenience store so you can have them on hand if someone on the streets asks you. And at the very least it shouldn't look like always passing them by when everyone else does the same. Parents with school age kids, this may look like you not only paying attention to your kids during school functions but also paying attention to other kids in your kids' classroom. One of the best things you can do honestly is ask your kids' teacher if there are needs outside of the classroom that can be met. This is how you can proactively be the hands and feet of Jesus and show your kids' what generosity looks like.

So first is relief, next is development.

## Development

Development is when you are able to give a family or individual, or even yet an entire community, something they need to have to be able to move out of the relief stage and into self sufficiency. In [Deuteronomy 15:13–15](#), we get a picture of how development works when it comes to someone being enslaved because of their debt, and then being released due to God's grace. God says this to the former master:

*13 And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed. 14 Supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to them as the Lord your God has blessed you. 15 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today.*



So God is directing the former masters to give liberally to their former slaves in response to them once being enslaved in Egypt. This idea of giving liberally is an over and above act and would essentially set up the former slave to be able to be self-sufficient. They got some of everything, grain, tools, resources, animals, you name it. These were all things that allowed them to not only have enough for the day but allowed them to provide for themselves in the long term.

Now while many of us don't have all of the resources to be able to do this, for our purposes, development looks like us partnering as a church family with the Knox Area Rescue Ministries, or KARM.

For slightly over 60 years KARM has been working to help people break out of a cycle of homelessness. And currently KARM does this by providing meals, emergency shelter, clothes and programs to educate and support their guests all while working to introduce them to the person of Christ. The **Launch Point program** is a four week emergency program intended to help the guests get connected with community resources and build a plan to get out of homelessness. The **Berea program** is a twelve month residential life development program that is modeled around a work, learn, live, and serve model. Berea teaches students the value of each of these areas and equips them to engage in them well. KARM's hope for every guest is that they are able to move out of homelessness in a sustainable way that will not put them at risk of becoming homeless again. And as followers of Jesus, we get to partner with them in being the hands and feet of Jesus to those who are poor.

Alright so we have relief, development and the last one is social impact.

### **Social Impact**

So often, it's not just that the poor need immediate relief, and it's not just that they need development. Sometimes there are unjust laws and systems and systemic injustices that make it harder for the poor to climb out of poverty. We even see this in the Bible in places like [Isaiah 10:1-2](#):

*1 Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, 2 to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.*

So sometimes it's not just that the poor need relief, and it's not just that they need help learning how to make better choices. It's that they need certain unjust laws and systems to be corrected. That's what social involvement does.



Social impact takes development a step further and starts to create persistent and systemic change in the communities that don't have what we have. Because God has blessed us we are called to a blessing to others less fortunate than us.

So for us, maybe this looks like moving in a neighborhood that doesn't have the fanciest things and helping create systems in that community through involvement in community boards, parents in the room maybe it looks like doing the same thing and making an impact in the school system. Voting in local elections and attending city council meetings could also be a good look. You could also support organizations that work to push back on systemic poverty and unjust systems in our world.

So those three ways, relief, development and social impact are ways we as followers of Jesus can impact the lives of people who are poor. Now we've talked about a lot and I know it can feel like a lot. Poverty is not a simple issue, and so it doesn't have a simple solution either. But by being informed, and being motivated by the grace of God, we can be a tangible part of providing and caring for the poor in immediate and long-lasting ways.

Let's pray