

Poverty Module

Some Introductory Notes for Sermon and Study

Most of us are more than willing to help the socially acceptable poor—the widowed mother in our congregation, for instance, or the husband laid off through no fault of his own. We are understandably less comfortable, however, with panhandlers, drug abusers, prostitutes, runaways, and people who are homeless or unemployed because of mental instability.

There are rational reasons for our discomfort: We fear for our safety; we fear for our health; we fear that they will take advantage of us; we fear that our efforts will be a waste of time and money. But consider the parables of the lost son and the lost sheep (Luke 15:11-32, Luke 15:1-7. See also Matthew 9:12-13 and Psalm 107:10-21). The Father is merciful, even to the worst of us; and the Son died for the worst of us. If we wish to be like God, we must be willing to minister even to those who don't deserve it. We must be willing to risk humiliation. We must be willing to endanger ourselves in our attempts to ennoble others.

But we must also prayerfully consider ways to make our efforts effective, and not mere gestures that allow us to feel good about ourselves. This is, for many people, the hardest part of ministering to the poor. The right answers begin with a biblical view of the human person as a being made in the image of God. Even the poorest of the poor have abilities. Even the poorest of the poor are raised up more by creating opportunities for them to be creative with their abilities than by merely providing them a steady stream of food and clothing.

We need to think about how we can help in specific instances of poverty, but we also need to think globally about what institutions have proven effective at creating wealth and progress where widespread poverty previously had existed. Socialist schemes to eliminate poverty merely created greater poverty and misery, even as they often led to totalitarian regimes that tried to control every aspect of people's lives. In contrast, cultures marked by limited government, secure property rights, and the rule of law have led from poverty to prosperity. Christians should look for ways to strengthen each of these in cultures around the world. And we should be encouraged by the fact that the spread of Christianity itself has done much to prepare the ground them, helping them to take root.

For Further Study

The ESV Stewardship Resource Bible contains many resources for the further study of biblical stewardship. Below are just a few of the many scriptures and ESV study notes relevant to this module on poverty:

Deuteronomy 15:7-11: Attitudes Toward the Poor
Deuteronomy 24:6, 10-15, 19-22: Practical Care of the Poor
James 2:1-9, Romans 12:16: Favoritism
James 5:1-6: Warnings to Rich
II Corinthians 8:13-15: Caring for One Another
II Corinthians 8:18-14: The Careful Administration of Money