

## **Unit 6: “Love your neighbor”**

### **Sermon 2: The poor**

**February 14, 2016**

As many of you know, I’ve always been a bit of an oddball. I suppose one example is that even though I’m a pastor, I’ve never been a big fan of short-term mission trips. Partly because my parents were long-term missionaries, and they weren’t very fond of short-term mission trips. It took a lot of their energy to host the short-termers, and the impact the short-termers were able to make was actually quite small.

Did you know that, according to the research, most short-term mission trips do not empower those being served, and they do not build lasting cross-cultural relationships, and they do not improve the quality of life for those being served, and they do not help relieve poverty? In fact some times they make things worse. (Lupton, Toxic Charity, 15-16) And did you know that, according to the research, most short-term mission trips do not increase support for mission work and they don’t significantly change the heart and the attitudes of those who go on the trips? They have discovered that within 6-8 weeks, most short-term mission-trippers go back to the same attitudes they had before going.

Wow! That’s kind of dismal. Because here at Capital City we send short-term mission teams to Haiti, and Honduras. And yet ... despite the evidence, I have softened in my resistance to these mission trips. Because if they are done right, if they are done differently, they can make a difference. They are just not usually done right. And if they are done right, they can open our eyes to a world way bigger than we think it is. So I’d like you to go, if you can. And you’ll be hearing about some more opportunities, soon.

Truth is, my trips to Haiti and the Dominican Republic have changed my heart. You see, I don’t think I ever really understood poverty – I’m not talking about American poverty, I’m talking about biblical poverty – until I went to Haiti and the DR. There I saw children ... literally starving. It broke my heart! I saw families living in unspeakable filth, with no access to clean water, or clean food. I saw some people who were desperate for hope and change, and others who seemed to have given up any hope. And I saw how so much of our “charity” actually can make things

worse. It opened my eyes, I think. I hope I began to see the messy a bit more clearly with God's eyes.

So ... what do you think God thinks about the poor? I'm talking about the really poor. What do you think God thinks about the poor? And what do you think he wants us to feel, and to do, about it? Let me tell you that on this one we don't have to guess much. What God thinks about the poor, and how God wants us to treat the poor is all over the Bible. There are literally hundreds of places in the Bible where God gives us a peek at his heart for the poor.

As you know, our big theme this year has been "Leaning in to the messy." Last Fall we talked about how important it is for a Jesus follower to lean in to the messy, and why it's so hard for us. Starting January we kind of shifted directions. Now it's about where the rubber hits the road. We started by lasering in on one of the toughest messes God wants you to love. He says, "Love your neighbor ... as yourself." And a lot of you guys will try to love your neighbor, but you really struggle to love yourself the way God wants you to – because you are messy.

And then this month we are going to laser in on the love your neighbor part. We started out last week by talking about forgiveness, because you can't love your neighbors if you refuse to forgive the messy. And now today and for the next two weeks we are going to look at three groups of neighbors who have a special place in God's heart. And for that reason, they need to have a special place in our heart, those of us who claim to be Jesus followers. This week we are going to talk about the poor. Next week we're going to talk about orphans and widows. And the next week we are going to talk about people who don't look like us, and who don't talk like us. We're going to talk about different kinds of racism. Because God has some really strong opinions on that stuff, too.

But today we are going to talk about the poor. Who are they? And what does God say about them? And how does God want a Jesus follower to respond to the poor? These are really big questions, really important questions if we are serious about this "love your neighbor" stuff. And to tell you the truth, God gives us all kinds of guidance. There are over 300 places in the Bible where God gives a peek at his heart for the poor. Over 300! That's a boatload. I'm going to kick it off by showing you just four. Here goes.

- Proverbs 21.13: The Bible says, “Those who shut their ears to the cries of the poor will be ignored (I suspect by God) in their own time of need.” Does it ever seem like God doesn’t hear your prayers? Maybe this is a reason. It says, “Don’t pretend the poor aren’t there; and don’t live like they don’t exist.” Which we often do.
- Proverbs 28.27: The Bible says, “Whoever gives to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to poverty will be cursed.” I suspect by God. Now this is not an ironclad promise from God that if you feed the hungry you will always have the house you want, and the car you want, and the clothes you want, and the money you want. It’s a principle that if you do life God’s way, you can trust God to take care of you ... his way.
- James 2.14-17: This is a bit more direct. James, who is a physical brother of Jesus, says: “What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith (if you say that you are a Jesus follower) but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of (lip service) faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing (they are poor!), and you say, “Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well” — but then you don’t give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? (Your faith is all talk!) So you see, faith by itself isn’t enough. Unless it produces (actions) good deeds, it is dead and useless.” So, if you see someone who is poor – I’m talking really poor – and you just blow them off when you are positioned by God to make a difference ... you may be a Jesus “admirer,” but are you really a Jesus “follower”?
- Last one: 1John 3.16-18. This is from John, who was in the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples. He says, “We know what real love is because (we saw it in Jesus, when he) Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters.” And then he says this. He says, “If someone has enough money to live well (you have enough, and even extra) and (you) sees a brother or sister in need but (you) shows no compassion — how can God’s love be in (you) that person?” How can a person like that really say he is a “Jesus follower”? John says, “Dear children,

let's not merely say that we love each other; (let's prove it) let us show the truth by our actions.”

Guys, I could keep piling on verses like these, and we're going to scroll a bunch of them on the back wall. But this ought to be enough to get us to take this stuff seriously. This is big to God, guys, and it needs to be big to us.

But ... What makes it confusing is that there are different kinds of poor. And how God wants us to respond to them kind of depends on what kind of poor they are.

- There are some people who are flat-out poor through no fault of their own. We saw a lot of that in Haiti. Little education, very few jobs, very few resources. The rich and powerful conspiring to hoard what resources there were. A lot of those people were flat-out poor with no way out!
- And, sometimes people get poor because things happen that destroy them financially. A hurricane, a tornado, a flood wipes out your house. Your business collapses, you are downsized, you lose your job – and it's flat-out hard to find another that can sustain your family. You get sick, or your spouse gets sick, or a kid gets sick, and the doctor bills, and the hospital bills ... they can be staggering! Some people are poor because life has gotten really, really hard.
- But sometimes people are poor because they made bad choices. Maybe they have buried themselves in debt – because they wanted way more than they could afford. Kind of a self-imposed poverty. Sometimes people have taken a risk on a business, or an investment, and it just didn't work. Sometimes people spend amazing sums of money on drugs, or alcohol, or gambling, or hobbies – and find they are out of money when it comes to bills, or generosity. They are poor because of bad choices.
- And sometimes people are poor because they are just flat out lazy. Some people figure out that they don't have to work, because there are other people who will take care of them. There are a whole lot of poor in our country who have mastered a life of dependency and who have developed an acute sense of entitlement.

And I'm going to tell you that God's heart for the poor, and how he expects us to respond to the poor is different, depending on the kind of

poor they are. And one more thing, before we drill down. Some of you guys may be thinking, “This sermon isn’t aimed at me, because I’m I’m one of the poor.” Well, Guys, chances are you are not. You see, most of us think we’re poor because there are always people who have way more than we do, and there are always things I want that I can’t afford. But very few of us qualify as one of the biblical poor.

Here’s the deal guys, if you have access to clean water, and if you have enough decent food to keep from malnutrition, and if you have enough clothes to keep you warm, and if you have a roof over your head at night, and if you have some kind of access to medicine, and some mode of transportation other than walking – you really don’t have that much to complain about, do you? For our purposes this morning, let’s consider the poor anyone who has way less than you do. And let’s consider the really poor anyone who really does not have access to clean water, or decent food, or suitable clothes, or adequate shelter, or competent medical care, or some way to get around.

Now I know there are different levels of poor – been there, done that -- and you may have been there at some point. If you’ve ever been in a spot where you didn’t know where the next meal was going to come from, or you didn’t have a safe place for your children to sleep at night, or you couldn’t get the medicine your wife or your kid needed, and you were scared ... maybe you can understand what we’re talking about, and why God wants us to be sure to include the poor in this “love your neighbor” stuff.

Now, I’m going to give you four big ideas. I expect some of you to push back, because every one of these ideas is countercultural – as God’s ways often are. We’re going to push back because sometimes our thoughts are guided more by our world, than by our God. And I expect to make some of you a bit mad at me today, because I’m going to try to unpack how God wants us to love on the poor, and some of this stuff is hard. And if what I teach you this morning is my thinking, and not God’s – then you ought to push back. But if you think what I teach you this morning really is God’s way, then if you are a Jesus follower, I challenge you to give it a try. His way is always smarter and better in the end than ours.

Piece 1: God wants every one of us to ... work ... hard. What's that have to do with loving the poor? Well, you'll see. Guys, God didn't create you to drift through life being served. He created you to roll up your sleeves and work, hard. Right from the start, the Garden of Eden, it says, "The Lord God took the man (Adam) and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." (Genesis 2.15) We were created by God to work. You weren't put here to drift through life, guys. You were put here to contribute, to make a difference.

Do you think that is countercultural? Guys, we live in an age where people delay getting a job as long as possible, and quit working as soon as possible. We define "success" as not needing to work. We define success as self-indulgence. So we have young boys who refuse to become men, devoting themselves to video games rather than pursuing an education or a job, relying on someone else to pay their bills. And they think life is great! We have young women whose goal is to find some guy to take care of them so they don't have to work.

And it's not just the kids. Our young guys are learning their disobedience by watching their parents, and their grandparents. Guys, sometimes we glorify the goal of retirement too much, to the point that we minimize the value of work. Guys, where in the Bible does God call the healthy into a life of self-indulgence? Where does he encourage those with productive minds and productive hands to pursue a life devoted to soaking up the sun on a beach, or riding in a golf cart, or sitting in a fishing boat?

Guys, I'm not against retirement. I'm so pleased my wife was able to retire. And I'm certainly not against going to the beach, or playing golf. And I'm only a little against fishing – because I hate fishing. But if that's all that life is to you any more, that's not right! I am talking about those who think they have earned the right to be lazy. Come on! Listen guys, most of us, when we retire, still have the time, and the skills, and the money to make a difference. So when we use all our time on us, and when we spend all our money on us, and when we put the gifts and the skills God has given us up on a shelf, do you really think that is God-honoring? ... Have I made anyone mad yet?

Now I know that some of you guys are worn out. And God wants you to rest. And some of you guys just can't do much physically any more. That's okay! God loves you so much. But guys, work is not a necessary

evil. It's what we were made for. We were made to contribute to something way bigger than ourselves. So piece 1: Work hard, it's a good, God-honoring thing. And it's going to make a difference in our ability to love our neighbors, especially the poor.

Piece 2: Live ... simply. Here's a novel idea, guys: How about, live on less than you make. Culture convinces us that we must—we must—spend every penny we make. We buy the lie that a higher salary requires a higher standard of living. It's a lie. That lie leads us down a slippery slope Paul warned Timothy about. He says, "Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money (the love of money, not money itself; the love of money) is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." (1 Timothy 6.9-10) Guys, unless your heart is right with God, and unless your values are in line with his values, money will mess you up. Becoming obsessed with "more" will lead to a messed up life.

Have you ever considered setting a cap on your lifestyle? Can you determine a number that is less than you make that you could live on and be content? I preached on it years ago ,but I suggest you create a plan that is upside from the way most people manage their money. Most people prioritize what do to with their money like this:

1. Spend—get what I want when I want it.
2. Pay debts—pay for the things I wanted that I couldn't afford but got anyway.
3. Pay taxes—Uncle Sam has to get his.
4. Save—if there's anything left.
5. Give—that's if there's anything left at all.

Well, God's way is way different. How about this:

1. We Jesus followers Give first -- Give God first part. He deserves that, in everything.
2. We Save — Even if it's just a little, we create some margin, and give ourselves the ability to be generous.
3. We Pay our taxes — That's one I hate, but I can't get around.

4. We Pay our debts — In fact, we try to pay them off and live debt free! It's liberating.
5. And then, We Live off the rest! Adjust your standard of living to stay within what's left.

Now ... this is supposed to be a sermon about “love your neighbor,” particularly the poor. What does working hard and living simply have to do with leaning in to the poor? Well guys, there's a reason God wants us to work hard, and live simply. It's because of piece 3: He calls us to live generously, even to give sacrificially. One of the greatest Christian teachers in history was a guy named John Wesley. He put it something like this: Work as hard as you can, to earn as much as you can, to be as generous as you can. (repeat) You see, if we don't work hard and if we don't live simply, we won't have the resources to lean in to the poor the way God wants us to. But when we do give generously, you'll not only lean in to the messy, you'll discover how thrilling it is to do life God's way.

The apostle Paul gives some Macedonian churches amazing praise because they got it. He says, “Fierce troubles came down on the people of those churches, pushing them to the very limit. (But) The trial exposed their true colors: They were incredibly happy, though desperately poor. The pressure triggered something totally unexpected: an outpouring of pure and generous gifts. I was there and saw it for myself. They gave offerings of whatever they could — far more than they could afford! — pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians. This was totally spontaneous, (it was) entirely their own idea, and caught us completely off guard. What explains it was that they had first given themselves unreservedly to God and to us. The other giving simply flowed out of the purposes of God working in their lives.” (2 Corinthians 8.2-5) And they were so blessed!

Now sometimes you just feel overwhelmed. “There are so many hurting people, and I can't help them all. I can give some, but I don't have enough even to make a dent in the pain.” That's okay, it's not all on you. We are in this together. I love the way Andy Stanley puts it. He is an amazingly good pastor down in Atlanta. He says, “Just do for one what you wish you could do for everyone.” You are not called to do it all, but you are called to do something, if you can.

One more piece on this “live generously” part. You old guys know that C. S. Lewis is one of my heroes. This is really good. Here’s some advice he gave a long time ago. He says, “I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. (That’s between you and God. He says,) I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc, is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charities expenditure excludes them.” That’s pretty good. I can’t tell you how much you should be giving. That’s between you and God. I can tell you that we work hard, and we live simply, so we can give generously – like the one we worship.

Last piece: We Help constructively. There are two great books some of you may want to read. They are being studied by some of our teams here at Capital City. One is called, Toxic Charity. And the other is called, When Helping Hurts. You see, people who study this stuff tell us that sometimes when we try to help people, we actually make things worse. Sometimes you are pretty sure that when you give \$20 to the guy on the street corner, he’s heading straight to the liquor store. A lot of the people who come into the church looking for money are just trying to scam us. How do you help people without being used, without sometimes making some people just more lazy and dependent and entitled? It’s a real problem!

How can we do good in a way that really helps? One guy put it like this. He says, “The worst thing we can do is neglect the needy; the second worse thing is to subsidize them.” How can we genuinely give people a hand up without eroding their dignity, or deepening their dependency, or fostering their sense of entitlement? How can we help in a way that preserves dignity, and builds self-respect, and helps them become what God made them to be? It’s not easy. Too often our giving just subsidizes and hardens poverty.

Well we have to give wisely. The guys who study this stuff have a list of principles that guide their work. I don’t have time to give them all to you, or to unpack them – but maybe these will give you some idea how to get it done. If you want more – I’d go get one of those two books.

- They tell us, 1: Never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves. We don't want erode their self-respect. And we don't want to cultivate a sense of dependency or entitlement. So never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves.
- 2: Limit your one way giving to emergency situations. If there is an emergency, be generous. Once the emergency is over, try to figure out a way to help people help themselves.
- 3: Subordinate your self-interests to the needs of those you are. Sometimes we give what we want to give to make ourselves feel good. But guys, it's not about my feeling good, it's about what really helps them
- Last one for now: Above all, they say, do no harm. And a lot of our giving does way more harm than good.

I can't tell you who you should lean into, I'm not going to try to tell you how much you should give. I'm just asking you to have a special place in your heart for those who are poorer than you are, and especially for those who are flat out biblically poor. Jesus said that the poor will always be with us, but he also told us to love on them, God's way.

- Guys, as a church family we have been raising about \$55,000 a year through our generous buckets. Every penny of that money goes to lean in to those who are in some very messy places. That's good stuff; that's God honoring.
- As a church family we support the Soup Kitchen, and the Women's Shelter, and Avenues for Women.
- We send money and mission teams to Haiti and to Honduras.
- We built a shelter to help feed kids at one of our trailer parks.
- We provide backpacks of school supplies for financially stressed school kids.
- And we try to respond in a host of other ways as the needs arise.

But there are some things you can do too.

- There are people who serve you every day – in stores, in restaurants. Some of them are poorer than you are. Don't look past them. They deserve to be treated with dignity, with respect, and really big, really generous tips.

- Maybe you can offer some child-care to a single mom, so she can escape for an evening.
- Maybe you are in a position to hire, and you can figure out a way to give one of God's precious kids a hand up.
- Maybe you can provide money for a medical visit, or for medicine.
- The point is, guys: open your eyes; trying looking at people through God's eyes; and when he gives you a window of opportunity – let his grace flow through you.