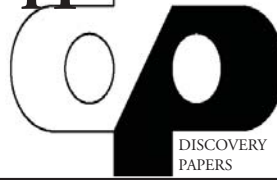


POVERTY: HOW TO END IT

SERIES: THE SKIPPING STONE OF THE SPIRIT



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What Can We Do About Global Poverty?

Our world is concerned about poverty. Justifiably so as the statistics are staggering. Poverty is defined as a lack of basic needs, such as clean water, nutrition, health care, education, clothing and shelter, because of the inability to afford them.¹ Almost half of the world lives in poverty or extreme poverty (living on less than \$2 per day) according to the World Bank. Many of us who have travelled to developing countries have seen poverty firsthand. We've seen people hungry, sick, and weak who can't change their situation. But poverty exists in this country as well. In 2008, there were almost 40 million people living in poverty in the United States. That's almost six times the population of the entire Bay Area.

Because poverty is such a huge issue, there are a growing number of people who are motivated to address it. There was a movie that came out a few years back called "The End of Poverty."² They claim that poverty is not caused by insufficient resources, but by economic systems that prevent developing countries access to what they need to avoid poverty. They say with a few simple changes, we can end it. Bono, from the band U2, has started an organization called "ONE"³ dedicated to addressing the crisis of AIDS and extreme poverty in the world. TIME magazine featured an article a few years back on "How to End Poverty."⁴ There are organizations all over the world such as End Poverty 2015,⁵ Make Poverty History,⁶ Stand Against Poverty,⁷ and End Poverty Now.⁸ Jeffrey Sachs, a world renowned economist, has led a movement called the Millennium Promise,⁹ with a goal to end extreme poverty around the world by 2025.

So poverty is a big deal in our world. And there are a lot of people who want to end it. What about the church? How do we address poverty? Many people have pointed out that caring for the poor is one of the most frequently repeated commands in Scripture. The first chapter of James says that pure religion is caring for orphans and widows—that's who lived in poverty in the first century. Several of the laws in Leviticus deal specifically with how Israel is supposed to respond to

poor people in their midst. Jeremiah claims that the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of God's people was due at least in part to the nation's failure to care for the poor among them.

So what does that mean to us? How are we to respond to this global crisis? This morning we're going to be asking the question, "How do we end poverty?" It's a question that a lot of people in our world are asking. And I think we have a unique answer. But the answer isn't a simple one. And it may not even be the same for every person in this room. So how do we discover how to address the issue of poverty? Well, I believe the Holy Spirit guides us.

That's the idea behind this series. We're trying to figure out how to follow Jesus in terms of some very complicated issues facing our world. So we're looking at three different things. We're trying to follow the Holy Spirit like a skipping stone across a pond. First, we're going to look at how the Spirit revealed Himself through Scripture. To do that, we'll be looking at two different passages from Jesus' life. In some ways, these passages seem contradictory, but we're going to see how they fit together. Then we'll learn from others throughout history who have tried to follow Jesus. So we'll look at how He has moved throughout church history. We'll look at a man who took one of Jesus' commands very seriously in the 12th century and gave the church a model for how to engage with poverty. Finally, the stone will skip into our own day and we'll ask how the Spirit is leading us today. How can we engage with the issue of global poverty? What can we do?

Giving Everything Away

We're going to start with one of the better known passages on Jesus' teaching about money. It's the story of a man people call the rich young ruler. As you listen to the story, I want to ask you to put yourself in the place of this man.

Matthew 19:16-22:

16Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

17“Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.”

18“Which ones?” the man inquired. Jesus replied, “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, **19**honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.”

20“All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?”

21Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

22When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Here is a man who at the beginning is a lot like many of us. He is eager to follow Jesus. He has heard of Jesus. He probably admires Jesus. He wants to get on Jesus’ good side. And that’s true for most of us. So he comes up to Jesus and asks Him how to be on His team. What does he have to do to become a part of the program?

It’s a simple question: What is the “good” thing that I must do? Now, the word for good is a significant one in Greek. The ideal of “the good” was one of the things Plato talked about. He thought everyone should aspire to this. The Old Testament talked about what is good. Much of Roman society was built around goodness. This is what people aspired to. Jesus picks up on this and says that only God is good.

And isn’t this like us? Aren’t we concerned about “being good?” Aren’t most of the people in our world concerned about being good? I’m not sure I’ve ever met someone who has no morals: some concept of what it means to be good. People just have different morals. But isn’t that always the storyline in the mobster movies. The man who isn’t afraid to kill people in cold blood can’t stand to let a woman open her own car door. Everybody wants to be good in their way.

A few nights ago, I had purchased a loft bed for my daughter from someone off craigslist¹⁰ and I was driving home with it. I had the mattress tied to my roof and I had to drive on the freeway to get home. So I’m trying to be careful, driving down the freeway in the right lane, never going above 45 mph because I can see the mattress trying to lift off. And pretty much everyone who passed me gave me a glare. I was not being good. This was not a good thing to do: to drive 45 mph down the freeway with a mattress tied to your roof. Everyone wants to be good.

So when we come face to face with an issue like poverty, our tendency can be the same as this young man’s. “God, there’s a lot of poor people in the world. I don’t exactly know what to do about it. So just tell me the good thing that I can do so that I can feel OK about myself.” In fact, we can do that with all the topics that we’re looking at in this series. I hope you don’t hear this sermon series that way. What we are doing here is not trying to figure out the good thing that we need to do in the areas of diversity, poverty, politics, etc. so that God will be happy with us. That’s why I’m not promising answers to the questions were asking, but trying to get us to ask the questions ourselves. What we’re doing is trying to figure out how the Spirit has revealed Himself and how He has led people in the past so that we can figure out how He is leading us. Most of us care more about being good than being with God. So this young man comes up to Jesus and asks Him, “what good thing must I do?” (vs. 16).

Jesus starts by giving him a simple answer: “you know the good things to do—just do them.” So the man says that he’s done these things. But he’s aware that something is missing. He is aware that this thing that Jesus is calling people to is something more. It’s about more than being good. So he asks Jesus a sincere question, “what do I still lack?” (vs. 20). What is missing in my life? Please, Jesus tell me what it is.

And then Jesus drops the bomb. He tells him if you want to be “perfect” or mature, “sell everything you have, and give it to the poor. Then you can follow me.” This would include fields, houses, servants, property. Everything. Sell it. Then give it away. This is a dramatic answer. A ridiculous answer. Jesus is asking a lot from him. He’s asking him to sacrifice what he has for the sake of the poor. So from that, we can see at least one way that God might call us to engage with the issue of poverty. We can give of what we have to address the need of poverty. We can give it away.

I don't know what "it" might be for you. It might be money, time, energy, thought, or professional effort. But the point here is that Jesus calls this man to sacrifice everything for the sake of the poor. But he isn't willing to do that. So he walks away sad.

I think many of us have a secret fear that this is what Jesus wants from us. We're somewhat uncomfortable with our possessions. We live in a very affluent part of the world. We have more money than most people in the history of the world. But we're aware of all the poverty in the world. So we feel guilty about our money. And we wonder how it can be God's will for us to have so much when others have so little. We may secretly think that what God really wants is for us to give everything away. We hear Jesus' words to this young man and think that maybe He's speaking to us. Maybe the "good thing" that we are supposed to do is to sell everything we have and give it all away.

And you know what? Maybe it is. Maybe that is what God wants you to do. If we're serious about following Jesus, we have to consider the possibility that following Him means doing something radically different with our lives. Addressing the issue of poverty might begin for us by sacrificing directly for the cause of poverty.

History: St. Francis

There was a man who lived over 800 years ago who took these words to heart. He was born in 1181 as the son of a rich Italian cloth merchant. There's a story about him as a boy when he was sent into the market to sell some cloth. While he was there, a beggar came up to him and asked him for some money. He didn't give him any, but when he had finished selling his cloth, he ran after the beggar. He found him and gave him every bit of money he had on him. His friends made fun of him for this and his father punished him for it.

But this man was also a man of the world. He grew up, served in the military, and lived a carefree life of ease. But after a series of illnesses, he started to realize that something was missing for him. He probably wasn't too different from the man that Jesus met. Soon enough, this man started to look for something deeper. One day he walked past a leper and turned away as everyone did in his day. But then he stopped. He turned around, walked back to the leper, bent down, and

embraced him. And gave him all his money.

This man kept doing crazy things like this more and more until one day he heard a sermon that changed his life. The text was from the book of Matthew, chapter 10, when Jesus told His disciples to go forth in ministry and carry nothing with them. So this man decided that Jesus was asking him to do the same thing. He gave everything he had away. He renounced his inheritance. He gave away his clothes, his shoes, and his staff. He found an old sack that the poorest peasants would wear and he put that on.

And he wandered around, singing praises to God, begging with the poor, taking care of lepers, helping the sick. Soon enough, people were intrigued by him and wanted to join him. So he let them. Their numbers grew and then there were a whole bunch of people. They split up and walked around singing and helping people. This man had a burden for those who didn't believe, so he travelled around the Mediterranean world, trying to proclaim the gospel to others. There's a story of him travelling to Egypt and meeting with a sultan there. He challenged the Muslim priests to a test of their faith by fire. He told the sultan that he would walk into a blazing fire and if he came out unscathed then the sultan would believe in Christ. That offer was never taken up, but centuries later, his group was the only Christian organization allowed to remain in Muslim Egypt.

This man's name was Giovanni di Bernardone, but his father called him Francesco. We know him as St. Francis of Assisi. The effect of St. Francis' life on the church cannot be overstated. Today there are over 2600 houses of different orders that are descended from the order that St. Francis founded. Just think, we don't know the name of the rich young ruler from Matthew 19 because he walked away sad. But we know the name St. Francis. St. Francis gave it away. If that rich young ruler had done what Jesus asked him to, we might know his name too.

But what I love about St. Francis is that his calling wasn't about the money. His calling was about following Jesus. Jesus led him into poverty to minister to the poor. Francis emphasized hospitality and generosity and treating everyone as equals. That's what ministry is: entering into what people experience in order to minister to them. Sacrificing of ourselves and caring for others. The Franciscan order of monks have always been

about caring for others.

Jesus' Anointing

So are we supposed to sell everything we have and give it to the poor? Maybe. But Jesus said some other things about poverty as well. Later in His ministry, we find a very different story about Jesus.

Matthew 26:6-13:

⁶While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, ⁷a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table.

⁸When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. ⁹"This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor."

¹⁰Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ¹¹The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. ¹²When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. ¹³I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

While Jesus is eating at the home of a leper, a woman approaches him and anoints Him with a very expensive perfume. The disciples probably remembered everything Jesus said about the poor. So they said this woman wasn't being good. It's like she was driving down the highway with a mattress on her roof. She was doing something foolish. The money could have been given to the poor. But Jesus defends her. He says that she has done a "beautiful" thing. Now, this is an interesting thing to say.

Remember that the rich young ruler asked what "good" thing he could do to inherit eternal life. He used the Greek word *agathos*. Jesus says that this woman has done a "beautiful" thing, he uses the Greek word *kalos*. Now, these two words are essentially synonyms. The New American Standard translates them both as "good." But they have slightly different nuances. The

first one, *agathos* refers especially to moral or religious responsibilities. "Be a good boy." "Do a good thing." That type of thing. The word Jesus uses, *kalos* refers more to aesthetics. "That is a good painting." "The hills look good when the sun is setting."

So the rich young ruler asks for something good to do, but the woman at Simon's house does something beautiful. Something unexpected, something dramatic, something costly: something that actually seems to be bad. All of Jesus' followers say she hasn't been good. She's been foolish. But she isn't trying to be good. She is expressing her extravagant affection for Jesus. That's why her act is so utterly appropriate. Through his series on the gospel of Mark, Scott Grant helped us to see that the way of the Lord is self-giving love. But it's not sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice. It's not giving yourself up to be good. It's giving yourself in love. Extravagant affection. Sometimes doing something beautiful actually seems to others not to be good. Even to other followers of Jesus.

The question I want us to wrestle with is whether we want to do something good or something beautiful. Do we approach the issue of poverty thinking about how overwhelming it is, but grudgingly acknowledging that we should help somehow? Or are we entering it because we're excited to see how we can contribute to the lives of people in difficult circumstances?

And I'm convinced that what made her act so beautiful is that she wanted to do it. She did what she wanted even though it seemed foolish. She probably knew that others would think it was a stupid thing to do. She was consumed by her worship of Him. It wasn't about sacrificing. It wasn't about giving something away. It was about Jesus and responding to Him. And that's why Jesus criticized the young ruler. He wasn't focused on Jesus. He said he wanted to, but he wasn't willing to let go of the stuff that really had his focus. He wasn't willing to respond to Jesus.

And when we're willing to respond to Jesus: to do what we want for His sake, something spiritually significant comes of it. Our little acts of obedience have great theological ripples. That's what happens for this woman. The real beauty of this act is not just her heart behind it, but the theological meaning that it carries. Jesus says that she has prepared Him for His burial. She has played a significant part of Jesus' story. Jesus says that what she has done will be memorialized forever. Her act has great meaning.

And this is another way that we address poverty. This woman had something valuable and she gave it away. But not to the poor. She gave it to Jesus. So sometimes we are called to give it away. To sacrifice our stuff for the sake of the poor. And sometimes we're called to focus on Jesus.

In a way, what this woman did had a far deeper impact on global poverty than if she had sold her perfume. Remember that after Jesus died on the cross, His body was buried without being prepared because it was already the Sabbath. Three days later a group of woman came to the tomb to do what this woman had already done. But they were unable to anoint His body because He wasn't dead anymore. This woman gave Jesus a proper burial. Without her, His burial would have been shameful and inappropriate. But she anoints His body for death. His death gives way to His resurrection. His resurrection will give way to the new creation, the new kingdom that He is building. And in this new kingdom, poverty will be a thing of the past.

So this woman was doing something with great theological meaning. And all the disciples saw were dollar signs. Or shekel signs in their case. But Jesus asked them to look beyond the money and find the meaning of her act. Look beyond the money for the meaning.

Occasionally we get into similar debates about how we should spend our money today. We as a church have a regular habit of sending short-time missionaries to serve in places in whatever capacity they can. Sometimes people question this. After all, it's pretty expensive to fly to India or Kenya or other places in the world. Couldn't the money that we spend on a trip be better served by just sending it to the people who need it? Shouldn't we just donate that money to people who can use it wisely? Those are good questions.

But I've asked local missionaries these questions and have heard many of them say the same thing. They say that the significance of our presence with them is far more impacting than simply a donation. Our being there, in person, in India, Kenya, or anywhere else makes a theological statement that it is about more than money. The meaning of our presence is more powerful than the money. You know what, I'd rather go to India. I want to meet people there, to talk with them, to pray with them. That's what I want to do. And I believe that some great theological meaning happens when I listen

to that desire.

What About Today?

So let's recap a bit. We've seen a young man in Jesus' day who was encouraged to give everything to the poor. We've seen a man in the 12th century who followed that advice and had a huge spiritual impact. We've also seen a woman in Jesus' day who was praised for extravagant affection toward Jesus, instead of giving to the poor.

So what do we do today? How do we follow the Spirit as we attempt to engage with poverty? Well, I want to talk about two different aspects. First, how does the Spirit call us and how are we led? And second, what are the different ways the Spirit leads people to engage with poverty.

Let's think back to the rich young ruler. Did Jesus need his money? Did Jesus need this man to give his money to help the poor? Was it about the money? Or was it about this man, wanting a relationship with God and yet unwilling to take the step that would ultimately allow him to do that. Jesus knew his heart and gave him a choice that would help this man see that he wasn't willing to do what it took. He wasn't ready to come to Jesus. It isn't about the money, it's about his willingness: his desire.

That's what the issue is for the woman who anoints Jesus. It isn't about how much the perfume was worth. It's about what God was doing, what the Spirit was about in her life and Jesus' life. Why do you think she wanted to do that? What could have happened to give her that desire? She was playing a role in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We can assume that the Spirit led her to do that. Why else would she?

Let's think about St. Francis again. He gave up all he had and made a vow of poverty so that he could follow Jesus and reach out to the poor. Why? To be good? No, he sensed the Spirit asking him to do that.

So the common thing in all of these stories is: willingness. What are you willing to do? Are you willing to become more informed about global poverty or are you afraid that information might lead you to make a response. One of my seminary professors used to say

that God never calls us into something that we don't know anything about. He calls us into areas where we understand the need. Are you afraid to find out about what's really going on in the world because you think it might mean you have to do something about it? Are you willing to respond to Jesus where He asks you to get involved? That is our call. Respond to Jesus.

It's not about what your response is. Jesus will call each of us differently. It's about your willingness to sacrifice in response to Him. I can't tell you what He's asking you to do. But I can tell you that it usually involves sacrifice. It's often something surprising. But it's always about Jesus.

And sometimes the best question to ask yourself is not, "what should I do?" but "what do I want to do?". Instead of beating yourself up for being unwilling to do something. Ask yourself what you are willing to do? What would excite you? You might find that what you want to do could be what God is leading you into. Maybe it's not what traditionally looks good, but maybe it has the potential to be something beautiful.

In that sense, we aren't responding to the issue of poverty, we're responding to the Spirit's leading. As followers of Christ that's generally the case: we respond to the Spirit, not to the need.

So the Spirit leads us when we respond to Jesus. But what might the Spirit ask us to do? Well, I'd like to mention three different ways that I see God leading us to engage with poverty and they stem from the two passages we read.

This analogy is not unique to me, but think of poverty as a great, raging river. People all over the world are drowning in this river. So one thing you can do is to pull them out. This is what Jesus asked the rich young ruler to do. Give your money to the poor. Help individuals get out of poverty. And this is certainly a way to contribute to poverty. The financial resources that we have control over in this room is immense. A lot of that can go toward people suffering in poverty. There are numerous organizations that do just this. There are opportunities to sponsor children through Compassion International¹¹ or other non-profits. I recently heard about an organization called Opportunity International¹² that is focused on microfinance and community development in poverty stricken areas. Some of us may be called to give our money to the poor.

But there is another way to help those people in the river. You can walk upstream a bit and find out why they're in the river. Are they falling in? Is someone pushing them in? Were they born in the river? So now you can start trying to prevent people from getting into the river in the first place. This is another way to address poverty: to change the systems that are causing people to suffer. The economists know what they're talking about. There are reasons people live in poverty and some of those reasons can be changed.

Both of these responses are similar to what Jesus asked the rich young ruler to do. Get directly involved. Sacrifice yourself for the sake of the poor. Make their lives better.

But there is a third response and it is more similar to the woman's response to Jesus. And this response acknowledges that poverty will come to an end. But it won't ultimately come to an end through living assistance, economic reform, or legislative efforts. There is only One who can completely end poverty and that is Jesus Christ. When He returns and establishes His kingdom on earth, poverty will be no longer. So we can pray for that day. Like the woman at Simon's house, we can focus on Jesus and see where that leads us.

If giving money to the poor is saving people from the river and changing the system is helping people not fall in, then praying for Jesus to return is asking for the Creator of the Universe to dry up that river. And we know that He has promised to do just that. He will fix poverty. That great river will stop flowing and the people will walk on dry land. Christ will end poverty. Maybe by 2015, maybe not. But He is the One who will bring an end to world poverty.

I have one caution though. People have, at times, used this as a way to escape being willing to respond directly. But let's be clear: the fact that Jesus will totally eradicate poverty does not mean that we don't have a responsibility to take part in that process now. We must be willing to respond to the Spirit as He leads us, expecting that to be costly, whether it's everything we possess like the rich young ruler and St. Francis or something else of great value to us like the woman at Simon's house. She did what she wanted for Jesus and great things came of it.

Conclusion

We started out by asking about how our world is addressing the global issue of poverty. This is a current issue in our world. People in our culture want to address the issue. And the cool thing is that we have the answer. Jesus Christ is the One who will ultimately address poverty. He will make all things new. He will save those in poverty. He will change the system. He will come back and make things right.

Our role as we pray and look toward that future hope is to be willing to engage with whatever God might be asking us to do. How have you been led? How have you seen others led? What do you want to do? What might turn out to be something beautiful?

But the ultimate question for each of us is how are we responding to Jesus? Are we willing to do something radical if He asks? Are we looking to do something good to feel OK about ourselves or are we willing to do something beautiful that may have theological significance far greater than what we realize or understand? Are we willing to be led by the Spirit? Where is He leading you?

NOTES

- ¹<http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/features/dictionary/DictionaryResults.aspx?lextype=3&search=poverty>
- ²The End of Poverty ©2009 Cinema Libre Studio. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.theendofpoverty.com/>
- ³ONE © ONE 2010. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.one.org/us/>
- ⁴TIME magazine, Copyright © 2005 Time Inc. All rights reserved. <http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101050314/>
- ⁵End Poverty 2015. This work is licensed under a creative commons attribution-noncommercial 3.0 United States Licence. <http://www.endpoverty2015.org/>
- ⁶Make Poverty History, <http://www.makepovertyhistory.org/>
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