



When a Pandemic Falls on the Poor

DESPERATE NEEDS IN THE GLOBAL CHURCH



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When I was a 20-year-old serving with Youth With A Mission in an impoverished section of an immense Asian city, I grew close to a Christian family that lived near our base house. These dear friends still live in that same neighborhood, and we've managed to stay in contact for 35 years.

Life for my friends has always been extraordinarily hard by Western standards. Now, the coronavirus pandemic that's prompted a lockdown in their nation has made life extraordinarily hard by *their* standards. They can't work. Which means no money. Which means no food, no medicine — nothing. Those in their network of relationships, including their church, share the same level of poverty, so there's very little to go around. And there's no government relief payment coming their way. We are seeking to help them, but their network of extended family and friends is so big that our help feels like five loaves and two fish. We are praying our Lord multiplies it.

My friends represent hundreds and hundreds of millions of precious souls who live in areas of the world where the pandemic is forcing them into impossible situations. Many millions of these souls are Christians.

In this global emergency, God is once again issuing a call to Christians everywhere, with any amount of means to help, to “remember the poor” ([Galatians 2:10](#)).

Remember the Poor

When Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to make sure the gospel they were preaching to the Gentiles had the approval of the church's "pillars" — including James, Peter, and John — they received, along with the official blessing, the request to "only . . . remember the poor" ([Galatians 2:9–10](#)).

Many scholars believe that "the poor" in this text refers specifically to impoverished Christians living in Judea — those whose dire situation Paul sought to help relieve through the financial collections he gathered from Gentile churches ([Romans 15:25–26](#); [1 Corinthians 16:1–3](#)). But if so, this directive certainly would not have been exclusive to the Christian poor in Judea, even if they were the most sizable and notable of the world's Christian poor at the time.

Rather, this call demonstrates that right from the beginning, the entire Christian church was instructed to be mindful of, and feel some measure of responsibility for, the plight of other Christians, however geographically and culturally remote they might be. And from Jesus's own example, we know that Christians' concern for the poor also extends beyond the church's boundaries into the unbelieving world.

From Riches to Rags

The incarnation of God the Son is a massively influential, church-shaping, Christian-forming example of God's heart to bring relief to the poor. In fact, Paul pointed to this example when raising funds for the Judean poor: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" ([2 Corinthians 8:9](#)). Paul's words highlight two realities: First, before God we *all* are extremely spiritually poor and needy, and God moved to meet our deepest need. Second, Jesus's willingness to "empty himself" ([Philippians 2:7](#)), identify with our poverty, and address our greatest needs models how we should move to meet the profound spiritual and material needs of believers and unbelievers.

Think of Jesus's entire life. He was born and raised in a poor family. During his years as a public figure, he and his disciples refused to monetize their ministry ([Matthew 10:8](#)), living off the charitable gifts of supporters ([Luke 8:3](#)). He taught that those who are "poor" ([Luke 6:20](#)), and "poor in spirit" ([Matthew 5:3](#)), are "blessed" since "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And he healed, delivered, and performed miracles for those who were destitute, afflicted, and across-the-spectrum needy.

Jesus also regularly gave to the poor. We know this because, during the Last Supper, when Jesus told Judas, "What you are going to do, do quickly," the other disciples assumed Judas, who kept the moneybag, might be going to "give something to the poor" ([John 13:27–29](#)). The disciples would have assumed this only if such giving were not unusual.

The Church's Care for the Poor

The church's early days show that the example of Jesus's remembering the poor had taken root in the apostles' lives and shaped the church's culture. We see it in these famous verses:

All who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ([Acts 2:44-45](#))

Out of the mass conversions emerged a new community of Christians, and with it all kinds of needs. Many were likely already poor when they converted, and others could have found themselves suddenly facing financial hardship when following Jesus cost them the support of family or other sources of income. Whatever the causes, the church quickly mobilized to meet these needs so that “there was not a needy person among them” ([Acts 4:34](#)).

The controversy regarding the neglect of the Hellenistic widows in [Acts 6:1-6](#) gives us a helpful picture of how they approached this. Without neglecting the “preaching [of] the word of God,” those early Christians created new social structures and systems to meet people’s basic needs and make sure the poor were remembered.

Christian history is replete with examples of Christians serving the poor and the sick (yes, with some glaring failures too). The sheer number of individuals, churches, and Christian charities rushing to the front lines of crises and chronic troubles to meet both Christians’ and non-Christians’ needs demonstrates that what Jesus and the apostles modeled and taught continues to live on in the living church around the world. Millions of Christians continue to “remember the poor.”

Remembering Reveals Our Treasure

Now, as the coronavirus pandemic builds steam, particularly in the Global South, where countries have nowhere near the wealth and infrastructures of the more industrialized nations, God is calling us Christians again to remember the poor — all those in need, with a particular responsibility for poor believers.

This crisis is not like a famine or tsunami or hurricane, or even like HIV/AIDS or Ebola. It is a global health crisis with a global economic crisis on top of it — and the latter crisis may cost more lives than the former in the poorest nations. And these crises are unlike the regionally contained crises that occur in far-flung places in the world, because we are now being called to remember the poor while dealing with various consequences of the crises ourselves. Which means this is a time of real treasure-testing for us. Where is our treasure stored up? Where is our heart ([Matthew 6:19-21](#))?

This is a time to remember the poor. It’s part of what it means to be a Christian. This is our calling and our joy. We must remember the poor among us, those in our local churches who have been furloughed or laid off and find themselves in sudden financial or some other need. We must remember the poor in our cities or regions that are particularly vulnerable. And we must remember the poor in impoverished countries who are at the greatest risk on the greatest scale. These needs are overwhelming, but we cannot allow ourselves to shut down due to the staggering size of the needs, and retreat to Netflix, while they perish.

You’ll notice a conspicuous lack of specific recommendations for where to give and what to do. That’s because we each have unique situations, unique needs right in front of us, and unique prompts from God regarding where he wants us to give and serve. But also, our Lord tends to use our prayerful discernment and research to help us more fully engage in our acts of remembering. And the more engaged we are, the more likely we will see and feel the treasure that has our hearts.

Generosity Born from Affliction

As I was finishing this article, I received a message from my dear friend in that impoverished region of that immense city on the other side of the world. And as I read, I was humbled.

She confessed the sin of losing her temper with someone. (Knowing the very stressful and grievous nature of that situation, my response likely would have been worse.) She also shared her deep trust in Jesus to provide for their needs. And she told me of opportunities she's had to pray with neighbors and share words of gospel hope with them, and that she's been trying to meet the material needs of others around her who also are in a desperate place. Like the ancient Macedonians, "in a severe test of affliction, [her] abundance of joy and [her] extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on [her] part" ([2 Corinthians 8:2](#)).

She is carrying on the great tradition of her Lord and centuries of Christian witness. If she can remember the poor, so can I. So can we all.