

BLESSED ARE THE POOR

Spencer Stewart

Professor Robert Gonzalez
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INTRODUCTION

In the familiar pericope, “The Sermon on the Mount,”¹ Jesus addresses his audience with the beatitudes we're so familiar with: blessed are the poor, those who mourn, are meek, hungry, or persecuted.

In the familiar idea of “missions trips,” however, we strive to *impede* people from experiencing poverty, mourning, humility, hunger or persecution – laudable goals indeed, but could it possibly *impede* the blessings Jesus promises? When we read the book of James, it's even observed that “Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has *honored* them.”² In an era when missions trips seek to pursue social justice and to help change the world to be “right-side up,” it's important to reconsider the meaning of Jesus' upside-down kingdom and blessings to the poor, the hungry, and the meek.

Throughout the scope of this paper, I hope to discuss my personal observations and cogitations of the matter, examine what the Bible teaches about poverty, re-consider the purpose of missions, and reflect on its application to us. Stretching across a variety of perspectives and applications, this paper should furnish as a thoughtful and comprehensive study - albeit un-exhaustive. As Karl Barth would name systematic theology a “contradiction in terms,”³ I do not believe this will or can be a systematic dissertation of how to best bless the poor among us, but hopefully a fair and meaningful conversation that confronts some of the epistemological, ideological, and existential lenses that subtly construe our focus from Jesus' upside-down-kingdom.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

In the wild and earthy air of Swaziland, Africa, I had an opportunity to witness something very

1 Or “Sermon on a flat place,” per Luke.

2 New Living Translation (NLT), emphasis mine. Others translate *But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position*. (New American Standard Bible).

3 Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 180.

different from the States. On the rocky red earth, I played soccer with some of the most joyous barefoot athletes, I played tag with some of the most enthusiastic competitors, and I played “jumping”⁴ with some of the most excited young children. There is certainly a different spirit there. Even when the games were over, the respect, patience, and passion that the children exude is hard to match from any of my experiences at home. However, many of these children also had blended families, missing parents or siblings. Many did not own shoes and had two meals or less a day. Any material voids, however, were replaced and deeply filled up instead by games, songs, and each other. They had an intangible good and joy that no person could purchase or own.

Returning from this experience, a passage from the book of James came to mind. “Hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones who will inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him?”⁵ Perhaps this is a testimony of Jesus' upside-down-kingdom, the poor being rich in faith. It's hard to imagine my neighbors' children from California to share the same faith, joy, and gratitude for life as the children from Swaziland.

Another experience that comes to mind was my encounter with a homeless man from Santa Ana. He slept decently bundled, had access to public restrooms, and ate between two to three meals a day. Talking with him, he shared of this new peace he enjoys while being homeless. He spends much of his time in the public library, reading or writing, spending time without an agenda, and making friends with those he finds. In his opinion he is much freer, not 'conformed to the patterns of this world,' unlike his contemporary counterparts, being liberated from complex finances, social expectations, and the systems of the world that imprison us. Again, I'm left to wonder if this follows Jesus' kingdom in which the last are first, the weak are strong, and the poor are rich. After all, even though foxes have holes and birds have nests, Jesus was a dissident and homeless too, with no place to lay his head.

Personally, I began to have a deep identity crisis while considering poverty and how to address

⁴ Simply jumping up and down. No rope, no toys.

⁵ James 2:5, NLT.

it this semester. In particular, I would ask myself, “What distinguishes me, a nice, socially concerned Christian, from a nice, socially concerned atheist who is also deeply convicted about humanity and peoples' well being?” Surprisingly little, I assumed. The way I sought to help people seemed to follow the same pattern of logic that the world would follow. The way I would approach the issue of poverty wasn't much different than how Christopher Hitchens would approach it. What difference does it mean to be an 'efficient' Christian humanitarian or just a humanitarian? As our focus shifts to the Bible, however, the scriptures present a more distinct contrast.

SCRIPTURE

Scripture has much good news for the poor, with Jesus himself proclaiming he's been anointed for the very purpose of sharing that good news.⁶ In the view of this paper's brevity, however, we will only discuss some of the most apposite selections: the Beatitudes, James 1:9, and James 2:5.

The Beatitudes, presented in Matthew as well as Luke, express distinct blessings to the poor, hungry, mourning, and persecuted. Matthew's perspective is rather spiritual and symbolic, expressing blessings towards the “poor in spirit” and those “hungry for righteousness” while Luke simply addresses these blessings to the poor and hungry. Luke additionally includes four woes that reflect the opposite of the blessings.

These verses strike a very different chord than the blessings spoken of in contemporary Christian circles today. At APU, for example, students pray with thanks for the blessing of *not* being persecuted - a comfort, certainly - but also in contradiction with the Beatitudes. Another example would be a student that thinks “I've been so blessed to have an easy life” - a statement that I've heard more than once at APU. Through the lens of the beatitudes, however, an “easy life” is not blessed!

The first Beatitude is that the poor shall inherit the kingdom of heaven. John Nolland, a respected Australian theologian and author of the Luke volumes of the Word Bible Commentary, shares

⁶ Luke 4:18a “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.” (NIV).

valuable insight into this particular teaching. First, he acknowledges Jacques Dupont's perspective on this passage: that the kingdom is not especially for the poor, but the poor have the most to benefit from it.⁷ Nolland adds to this notion that the poor have an advantage: they have a “freedom from that state of mind which ensnares the rich in the limited perspectives of this world, lulls them into a foolish self-confidence, and beguiles them into thinking that their material prosperity has its goal simply in their own rich enjoyment of the good things of life.”⁸ John Wesley, a distinguished influence at APU, shares a similar opinion, commenting that “generally, prosperity is a sweet poison and affliction a healing, though bitter medicine.”⁹ The Old Testament additionally supports this sympathy towards the poor and oppressed, Nolland remarks, but not as poignantly. On the other hand, Nolland also affirms that poverty is not to be glorified in the beatitudes. “To be poor, hungry, and weeping is not at all the situation that Luke envisages in the ideal state of Christian existence,”¹⁰ citing Acts 2:43-47 and 4:34.¹¹ This counter helps shape the context of poverty and its blessing, but not glorification. The reconciliation between poverty's blessing yet dissonance from ideal Christian existence will be explored further in the discussion of missionary purpose.

In regards to the following two beatitudes in Luke, blessing the hungry and weeping, Nolland regards them not as “separate conditions from poverty but as characteristic manifestations of poverty,”¹² so in other words an extension of the first beatitude. The fourth beatitude has a particular emphasis on persecution and suffering for the sake of following Christ, accompanied with the notion to “leap for joy” in relation to this oppression. Nolland suggests that the joy may be from God's approval and that the mark of true prophets is rejection (ie. Jesus).

7 Jacques Dupont, *Les Béatitudes*, volume 3 (Louvain: Nauwelarts, 1958).

8 John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20* (Texas: Word Books, 1989), 282.

9 John Wesley, *John Wesley's Commentary on the Bible* (Michigan: Francis Asbury Press) 412.

10 Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, 283.

11 Acts 2:43-47, colloquially referred to as the “first century church” depiction, it writes about believers being united, worshipping, sharing meals, praising God, and enjoying the goodwill of the people. Acts 4:34a says, “There were no needy people among them,” referring to the believers according to the New Living Translation.

12 Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, 283.

The beatitudes, despite their familiarity, present an alarming dissonance between their teachings and contemporary Christian opinions – a dissonance worth discussing. Poverty suffers from a material lacking, but what can fill that lack, that space, is an immaterial hope and conviction. In the context of eternity, having this space for an intangible wealth of faith is a distinct blessing.

The author of the book of James seems to agree. In verse nine of the first chapter, James asserts that “Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has honored them.”¹³ Ralph P. Martin, director of the graduate program at Fuller Theological Seminary, remarks that “the pressures of poverty will lead persons to humble themselves before God and to place their total dependence in him, not only for survival on earth but also for vindication in the world to come.”¹⁴ In a more eschatological perspective, these chosen ones (James 2:5), do have something to boast about.

James 2:5 addresses its readers, “Listen to me dear brothers and sisters. Hasn't God *chosen* the poor in the world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones to inherit the Kingdom he promised to those that love him?” This verse follows the notions presented in the previous chapter and also ties back to Luke 6:20 when Jesus pronounces that the poor shall inherit the kingdom of God. In this case, James makes the connection that it's not necessarily poverty, but the faith that poverty germinates is what receives this inheritance.¹⁵ Again, it is brought to note that poverty isn't exactly ideal, but has a special favor and deeper inclination to place one's faith in Christianity rather than money or material. Navigating this balance between the blessings and the afflictions of poverty, however, is a divergent but important issue to discuss in relation to Christianity's emphasis on serving the poor and oppressed.

MEANING FOR MISSIONS AND HUMANITARIAN WORK

In the context of today, missions and humanitarian efforts are focused on efficiency and effectivity, much like a business. Guided essentially by utilitarianism, efforts are directed to accomplish

¹³ NLT

¹⁴ Ralph P. Martin, *James* (Waco: Word Books, 1988), 24.

¹⁵ David Nystrom, *The NIV Application Commentar: James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 118.

the greatest good for the greatest number. On paper, this makes sense and seems like the most practical way to address some of the atrocities in the world. Ideas of installing capitalist mechanisms and other monetary systems in developing nations are some of the brightest theories offered by the world to address poverty. Christopher Hitchens would agree as well, supporting organizations that cultivate more opportunities, more empowerment, and more wealth.¹⁶

On the other hand, religious figures such as Mother Teresa have a very different approach towards poverty. One of her more prominent quotes is that “We can do no great things, but small things with great love,” an impression that is contrary to the big ideas of obliterating world poverty. In a quote from *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*, Christopher Hitchens cites Mother Teresa in a 1981 press conference when asked if she taught the poor to “endure their lot.” In her response, she replied, “I think it is very beautiful for the poor to accept their lot, to share it with the passion of Christ. I think the world is being much helped by the suffering of poor people.”¹⁷ Hitchens attacks this perspective and its counter-intuitive appearance, arguing her efforts promoted suffering and discouraged structural measures to end poverty, despite her legendary life of service and compassion. In the midst of such great discrepancy, what should help guide our thoughts and actions as a Christian college student?

In the case of such a disturbing dissonance, I find it propitious to seek guidance from none other than the great Stanley Hauerwas. The chapter *Why Justice is a Bad Idea for Christians* explores some of the issues between Christianity and justice in a liberal society. In particular, he argues that “Christian appeals to justice on behalf of the poor and needy may only reinforce those practices that are implicated in the creation of poverty in our society,” proposing that enlightenment thoughts mislead

16 In a debate with Tony Blair, Christopher Hitchens mentioned his money would be towards Oxfam and other institutions that help the poor through grounded economic guidance and development. Additionally, he believes that empowering women would significantly benefit the world economy.

17 Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (UK: Verso, 1995), 11. Notice the intentional pun in the title. Terrible, Mr. Hitchens.

Christians with the concept of “justice qua justice” and “rationality qua rationality,” which “blinds us to the tradition-dependent character of any account of justice.”¹⁸ Furthermore, he follows Mother Teresa's perspectives on suffering as a Christian:

For the salvation promised in the good news is not a life free from suffering, free from servitude, but rather a life that freely suffers, that freely serves, because such suffering and service is the hallmark of the Kingdom established by Jesus. As Christians, we do not seek to be free but rather to be of use, for it is only by serving that we discover the freedom offered by God.¹⁹

Identifying Christianity with suffering connects with Mother Teresa's position, but he also directs this suffering as a constructive aspect towards sacrificial service. Hauerwas also reminds his readers that Christians are called to be dissidents in the sense of thinking outside the box of liberal societies. “We forget that the first thing we have to hold before any society is not justice but God.”²⁰

In *Theology, Spirituality, and the Market*, Jung Mo Sung further argues that the world's proposal to exterminate poverty: capitalism, generates social problems, suffering, and death for millions. Increased profit in a nation does not mean decreased poverty. Neither is the free market a source of human freedom, but is a “modernization [that] presupposes a *cruel mystique* in the worship of efficiency.”²¹ It is a form of utilitarianism benefitting those in power, and is a market idolatry which must be exposed. The market is not an answer towards Another World. Unlike Mother Teresa, Sung believes that our struggle isn't to merely do small things within a sinful economic structure, but that our struggle is against the *structural sin* of capitalism. The challenge, then, “is to imagine the tension between social solidarity and the self-organizing market without falling into either idolatry of the market or its demonization.”²²

18 Ibid., 49.

19 Ibid., 53-54.

20 Ibid., 68.

21 Jung Mo Sung, “Theology, Spirituality, and the Market,” in *Another Possible World*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid, Ivan Petrella, and Luiz Susin (London: SCM Press, 1988), 73-75.

22 Ibid., 79.

APPLICATION

So what does this mean for us – Christians at a top Christian college in Southern California? If the people we seek to help are already blessed by the nature of their helplessness, what is our role? How can we bless them any better than the promises and blessings Jesus proclaims? Well, essentially, we can't. However, when we return to the concept of missionaries in their original sense, sharing of the gospel was what blessed people the most.

In a defense of missionaries, Les Pederson recorded stories from tribe members who were encountered and blessed by the good news from the missionaries. Many of the stories reflected the fear, violence, and cruelty of their pagan cultures being replaced by a peace and happiness that resulted from the transmission of the gospel by missionaries. Juan Diaz, from the Piaroa Tribe in Venezuela, reflects on the freeing peace and happiness of asking Jesus into his life. No longer does he “drink, sniff dope, and chant,” but find joys and his blessings in the real but intangible truths of God.²³ This contrasts from the contemporary shift of mission work to identify with volunteering or supporting social justice movements.

CONCLUSION

As students today, we may have less of an opportunity to reach the unreached, but we do have an important calling to continue reaching out, however with goals deeper than social justice in mind. Whether it be trips to Mexico, Kenya, or Uganda, our primary focus shouldn't be on imparting some wealth, bourgeois comforts, and the economic system of capitalism, but perhaps bestowing faith, hope, and love. Although the notion that faith without deeds is dead,²⁴ the deeds we are called to are not merely towards social justice and humanitarianism but the spiritual and theological work behind it. Otherwise, what distinction would our help be from the help of a completely secular organization?

Ultimately, these verses and theological reflections remind us that God's kingdom is upside-

²³ Les Pederson, *Missionary Go Home?* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1980), 21.

²⁴ James 2:26

down, and our goal isn't to turn it right-side-up, like a worldly kingdom. Our lives here are temporary, and our citizenship belongs to heaven,²⁵ where our source of hope should resonate with and our service should orient with. As the Beatitudes instruct and James affirms, poverty is a blessing that guides believers away from the world and towards the heavenly inheritance. In our responsibility to help those in need, we need to thoughtfully remember that in our approach.²⁶ Simply giving money or materials isn't what creates true joy or hope (as witnessed in our wealthy yet disturbed culture), but gifts and service oriented towards cultivating a person's hope, faith, and love are the true blessings that transcend the economy, the moth, and the world.

²⁵ Philippeans 3:20

²⁶ And perhaps, even reconsider the value of our current state of living in regards to the paradigms Jesus implies.