

1. From Matthew 25, In what way have Christians given food and help to Jesus? By giving to the “least of these”
2. Name one blessing that comes to those who help the poor. A. the Lord delivers him from trouble, b. Lord will protect and deliver him in times of trouble, c. preserve his life d. sustain him in his sickbed.
3. How were the poor to be blessed in times of harvest? A. land lie fallow every 7th year. B. Every third year bring tithe to towns of levites for widows and needy.
4. Name one qualification required to be a widow on the “widows list” a. over 60, helpful to those in need, raising children.
5. Who had first responsibility for a widow? Her family.
6. What two metaphors does Proverbs use for poverty on those who sleep and slumber . “A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—34 and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man.”

The Bible and Poverty in Public Policy

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Among Christians, there seems to be general agreement that the poor should be helped. In Judaism and in Christianity helping the poor is seen as among the top three priorities of the righteous life. There are scores of passages in the Bible that reinforce this idea but Proverbs 28:27 will illustrate it here. *“He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses.”*

Jesus laid out the key conditions for eternal reward. He said in Matthew 25:35-36 *“I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”* He went on to say and inasmuch as you did it to the least of people you did it for Jesus himself. Upon that basis of service to those in need they were granted access to an eternal reward.

Even though Christians are united on the outcome, they divide according to the method of getting there. In Europe where there was a long history of unity between Church and State, many Christian denominations accepted the idea that taxation and the resultant government provision was a sufficient response to the mandate to bless the poor. In the United States, where our principle of freedom of religion raised questions about government involvement in religious ideas, we tended to rely upon individual acts of charity rather than government sponsored charity. Christians continue to divide on whether the call to charity is satisfied through a function of government or should primarily happen as a function of individual acts. Some very conservative Christians even oppose “faith-based” government charity as a violation of the individually-based charitable obligations. These will be our general topics for consideration in this study.

First, God is very concerned for the poor and expresses this throughout Scripture. Blessings are promised for those who care for the poor and weak. (Ps 41:1-3) *"Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the LORD delivers him in times of trouble. 2 The LORD will protect him and preserve his life; he will bless him in the land and not surrender him to the desire of his foes. 3 The LORD will sustain him on his sickbed and restore him from his bed of illness.* In our earlier study in Daniel 4:27 we have this: *"Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue."*

Care for the weak even extended to no interest charged. Leviticus 25:35-38 *"If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you. 36 Do not take interest of any kind from him, but fear your God, so that your countryman may continue to live among you. 37 You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit. 38 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God."*

Harvesting the land was regulated so even aliens would be cared for. Exodus 23:9-11 *"Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt. 10 "For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, 11 but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove."* This included a provision so that every third year the tithe from your produce would be brought into town for the Levites, aliens, fatherless, and widows could be provided for (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

Isaiah 58:6-7 is particularly powerful: *"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"*

These Old Testament ideas might be summarized in Proverbs 29:7 *"The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern."*

In the New Testament many of these ideas were applied. In Romans 12:13 Paul urged the Christians to *"Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality."* James 2:15-17 *"Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."*

Even with all these directives, not everyone was entitled to help from the church. They had to meet qualifications. 1 Timothy 5:9-13 *"No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, 10 and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds. 11 As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. 12 Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge. 13 Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house.*

And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to.”

First responsibility to help belonged to the family, with the second responsibility for qualified widows belonging to the church. 1 Tim 5:16 *“If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.”*

The Bible also makes clear that personal choices can impact a person. Alcohol and gluttony have always been issues. Proverbs 23:20-21 *“Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, 21 for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.”* Proverbs 24:33-34 targets another contributor. *“A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—34 and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man.”*

In 2023, 36.8 million people in the United States were living in poverty, which is 11.1% of the population. The poverty level is defined as annual income for 1 person: \$15,060, 2 people: \$20,440, 3 people: \$25,820, and 4 people: \$31,200. For those 36.8 million people the combined federal and state expenditure is estimated to be around \$1.8 trillion with the federal government spending over \$1.1 trillion and state and local governments adding approximately \$744 billion more. A simple division of expenditure by people served would yield \$48,913 per person per year. If the government simply wrote everybody below the poverty line a check every year they could live at three times the poverty level. The poverty industry of government is comprised of literally millions of government bureaucrats, caseworkers, and service providers who all must be paid to deliver the money to the impoverished. Of course we must also pay for the tax collectors to get the money from the public to give to the bureaucrats to give to the people below the poverty line. We do this year after year but poverty apparently keeps getting worse or at least does not get better. Food cures hunger, and money solves poverty, but what are the long term impacts of giving these things away? Is the current approach working?

Dr. Marvin Olasky in *The Tragedy of American Compassion* offered some historical perspective on how these issues have been addressed in the past in America. He said poverty has been viewed as having ten causes.¹ Personal traits were among the first six causes: 1. Ignorance, 2. Idleness, 3. Intemperance, 4. Want of economy 5. Imprudent and hasty marriages and 6. Lotteries. Then institutions: 7. Pawnbrokers, 8. Brothels, 9. Gambling houses, 10. “Charities that gave away money too freely.”

There were three main institutions that should help: First, the family, then the Church, then neighborhood were essential to change the poverty picture. At every level positive role models were to be held up so people would see good examples to follow. Then, personal involvement was essential. Olasky writes, “Furthermore, it was important to impregnate American society with the idea of small-scale, personal involvement, rather than large-scale administered relief. Children from their earliest school years were given texts with concepts that taught far more than the particular subject matter. William H. McGuffey placed in an 1844

¹ Dr. Marvin Olasky in *The Tragedy of American Compassion* provides the information for this section.

McGuffey's Reader a wonderful little dialogue between a 'Mr. Fantom ' and a 'Mr. Goodman.' Parts of it went like this:

Mr. Fantom: I despise a narrow field. O for the reign of universal benevolence! I want to make all mankind good and happy.

Mr. Goodman: Dear me! Sure that must be a wholesale sort of a job: had you not better try your hand at a *town* or *neighborhood* first?

Mr. Fantom: Sir, I have a plan in my head for relieving the miseries of the *whole world*.

Mr. Goodman: The utmost extent of my ambition at present is, to redress the wrongs of a poor apprentice, who has been cruelly used by his master

Mr. Fantom: You must not apply to me for the redress of such petty grievances It is provinces, empires, continents, that the benevolence of the philosopher embraces; everyone can do a little paltry good to his next neighbor.

McGuffey gave Mr. Goodman a good comeback: "Everyone *can*, but I do not see that everyone *does*. . . . [You] have such a noble zeal for the *millions*, [yet] feel so little compassion for the units."²

All answers of the Social Calvinists involved Work. The "Protestant Work Ethic" was deeply imbedded in the culture. During this time they had workhouses. Olasky describes these workhouses: "In practice, since work was readily available, there was no talk of structural unemployment; instead, the major type of poverty dealt with was caused by a calamity such as fire and earthquake, or by crippling accident or early death (often by disease). Sufferers of that kind were to receive personal care, often in neighbors' homes. For those who were alcoholics or of "disorderly" temperament, and refused to work, towns built workhouses. Rules were strict; by-laws seven through twelve of the Chelmsford workhouse noted that:

7. The master of the workhouse shall have power to reward the faithful and industrious by granting favors and . . . to punish at his discretion the idle, stubborn, disorderly and disobedient by immediate confinement without any food other than bread and water.
8. The master of the workhouse shall cause said house and furniture to be kept clean and in good order, and shall cause habits of cleanliness, neatness and decency to be strictly observed by all persons received into said workhouse.
9. The master of the workhouse shall cause the LORD's Day to be strictly observed.
10. Every person who may be received into said workhouse or be a member thereof must obey the orders and regulations thereof and the commands of the master, and will be required by him diligently to work and labor as he shall direct, according to age, health and capacity.
11. Every person who shall absent himself from the said workhouse . . . shall be deemed to be an idle, stubborn and disorderly person, and punished accordingly.
12. The use of spiritous liquors is strictly prohibited except when the master, physician or overseers of the workhouse shall otherwise order; and no person

² Ibid, p.20.

shall be allowed to have or keep in their possession or bring or receive any spiritous liquors into said workhouse.”³

Ministers taught involvement with the poor as well as cash contributions. Ministers told their congregations that it was fine to contribute money, but the larger need, and more difficult task, was personal. “To cast a contribution into the box brought to the hand, or to attend committees and anniversaries, are very trifling exercises of Christian self-denial and devotion, compared with what is demanded in the weary perambulations through the street, the contact with filth, and often with rude and repulsive people, the facing of disease, and distress, and all manner of heart-rending and heart-frightening scenes, and all the trials of faith, patience, and hope, which are incident to the duty we urge.”

Churches and charity organizations understood that professionals should be facilitators of aid, not major or sole suppliers. Ruffner agreed that ‘there must, of course, be officers, teachers, missionaries employed to live in the very midst of the wretchedness, and to supervise and direct all the efforts of the people.’ But he added, ‘Mark you, these officers are not to stand between the giver and receiver, but to bring *giver and receiver together*.

The city could reflect the countryside when discipline and love were twins, not opposites; when obligations as well as rights were emphasized; when mutual obligation rather than mere transfer of material was the rule. Effective help in the cities, as in the countryside, had to be personal; those who were better-off were to *suffer with* the troubled. It had to be conditional; when the recipient was responsible for his plight, he was to indicate a willingness to change.”⁴

Beyond the work requirement and the necessity of personal involvement a third element was to distinguish between the two classes of poor, the “worthy poor and the unworthy poor.”

Philadelphia Alms House officials in the mid-1800s, after visiting Baltimore, New York, Providence, Boston, Salem, and Hartford, concluded that “the poor in consequence of vice, constitute here and everywhere, by far the greater part of the poor. The experience of every Institution your committee has visited is decisive on this point. From three-fourths to nine-tenths of the paupers in all parts of our country, may attribute their degradation to the vice of intemperance.” Today we refer to drug addiction and alcoholism rather than the older term of “intemperance” but the issues are the same. The *American Quarterly Review* considered the higher figure, nine out of ten, more likely. Worse still, the *U.S. Commercial and Statistical Register* reported that only one out of sixty-nine paupers supported by the city of Portland, Maine, in 1841-42 was poor for a reason other than intemperance.⁵

Their vision of worthy and unworthy poor, and the importance of distinguishing between the two is also the view of Scripture. Paul, in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 wrote, “*In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to*

³ Ibid, p. 10-11.

⁴ Ibid, p. 31.

⁵ Ibid, p. 44.

such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.' We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right. If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."

Studies from the early American period indicated that alcohol equals poverty 75 to 90% of the time in 1824.⁶ Contemporary studies reflect similar numbers. As they observed these trends in the last century, their conclusion was not to be indiscriminate. Their saying, "As the supply is, so shall the demand be." Even worse, their view was that Government money dries up private money. When the unworthy poor are indiscriminately funded, it discourages proper help.

To distinguish the unworthy poor from the worthy poor they developed principles of support. Their principles of support involved a work test. A person should do as much as they could. So they gave them wood to chop or clothes to sew to see if they were willing to work. There were other principles which Olasky summarizes as the **seven marks of compassion**.

1. Affiliation. Restore the person to their previous natural affiliations of family and church. The important question to be asked was "Who is obligated to help?" Then to hook them back up with that natural support base which too often had been broken.

2. Bonding with volunteers. Compassion was not a feeling, but coming alongside someone, suffering with them. No long distant help, or money only help.

3. Categorization. Deciding who was worthy of relief and who was not.

4. Discernment, or watching for fraud. Social Calvinists believed in the sinful nature of man. If given a chance, a lot of people cheat just because they are sinners. Modernists believe man is good. It is the system which creates evil. From this they developed rules

"To give relief only after personal investigation of each case

To give necessary articles and only what is immediately necessary

To give what is least susceptible of abuse.

To give only in small quantities in proportion to immediate need; and less than might be procured by labor, except in cases of sickness.

To give assistance at the right moment; not to prolong it beyond duration of the necessity which calls for it . . .

To require of each beneficiary abstinence from intoxicating liquors . . .

To discontinue relieving all who manifest a purpose to depend on alms rather than their own exertions for support."⁷

5. Employment. "Labor is the life of society, and the beggar who will not work is a social cannibal feeding on that life." (Charities Review) People should work if they are able.

6. Freedom. "The opportunity to work and worship without government restriction," was their definition of freedom. "In 1894, Amos G. Warner's mammoth study *American Charities* compiled what had been learned about governmental charity in the course of the nineteenth century:

⁶ Ibid, p. 46.

⁷ Ibid, p. 108.

1. It is necessarily more impersonal and mechanical than private charity or individual action.
2. There is some tendency to claim public relief as a right, and for the indolent and incapable to throw themselves flat upon it. This feeling will always assert itself whenever it is given an opportunity to do so . . .
3. In public charities, officialism is even more pronounced than under private management. The degradation of character of the man on a salary set to the work of relieving the poor is one of the most discouraging things in connection with relief-work .
4. It is possible to do so much relief-work that, while one set of persons is relieved, another will be taxed across the pauper line . . . the burden of supporting the State tends to diffuse itself along the lines of the least resistance; consequently, money which is raised for the relief of the poor may come out of pockets that can ill spare it
5. . . . The blight of partisan politics and gratuitously awkward administration often falls upon the work Charitable institutions are spoils of an insignificant character, thrown frequently to the less deserving among the henchmen of the successful political bosses.”⁸

7. God. The causes of poverty are mostly spiritual. Therefore a spiritual answer is essential to really help the person. Unfortunately, there has long been a debate on how a person went “bad” and what was necessary for his “redemption”. Was the problem personal or systemic. The same conflict exists today. Some believe it is the fault of the system that people do wrong.⁹ Therefore, if the system is changed, man’s natural goodness will emerge. In this way of thinking, we would never try to correct a person, because that would infer that we knew better, or that there was a “better” way. We should not ask a person to stop using drugs or alcohol. We should not expect a person to abstain from sex before marriage or if pregnant to get married and take care of their family. Bourgeois values must not be forced on others. Today they say the homeless are just like us, just without a home, ignoring the fact that the homeless are typically not like us, unless the us you refer to are alcoholic, addicts, mentally ill, and have a 75% rate of substance abuse.

These wrong ideas spring from the notion of the goodness of man without reference to God. However, once God is allowed into the discussion, we find that man is a sinner, and there is a right and wrong. Behavior problems are all mental illnesses now. “Similarly, we need to move from sentimentality to clear thinking about the problem of the mentally ill, who may constitute up to a third of the homeless. All estimates of mental illness among the homeless need to be taken skeptically. Psychiatrist Schiff notes that the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III-R) lists alcohol and substance abuse as a mental disorder, as indeed they are, but not necessarily in the psychiatric sense. Schiff points out that mental health budgets depend on diagnosing patients as mentally ill, so that someone who is basically nasty or aggressive is no longer just nasty or aggressive, he’s an Intermittent Explosive Disorder (DSM 312.34). Similarly, drug addicts have a way of becoming Dysthymic Disorders (DSM 300.40) . . . to let them be detoxified at general-hospital psychiatric units About the only diagnosis I’ve rarely seen employed is No Pathology (DSM V71.09).”¹⁰

⁸ Ibid, p. 111-112.

⁹ Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics*, 1992. He founded the liberal Christian organization, Sojourners.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.211.

In this last part I have quoted almost exclusively from Olasky's work. The value of his work is to take us back to how we have handled poverty in the past, when the Christian ethic influenced our approach. Christianity has a long history of responding to the cry of the needy. As Christians, we must return to righteousness by helping the poor. When we take our personal righteousness more seriously, we will be able to diminish the role of government and increase the role of Christ.