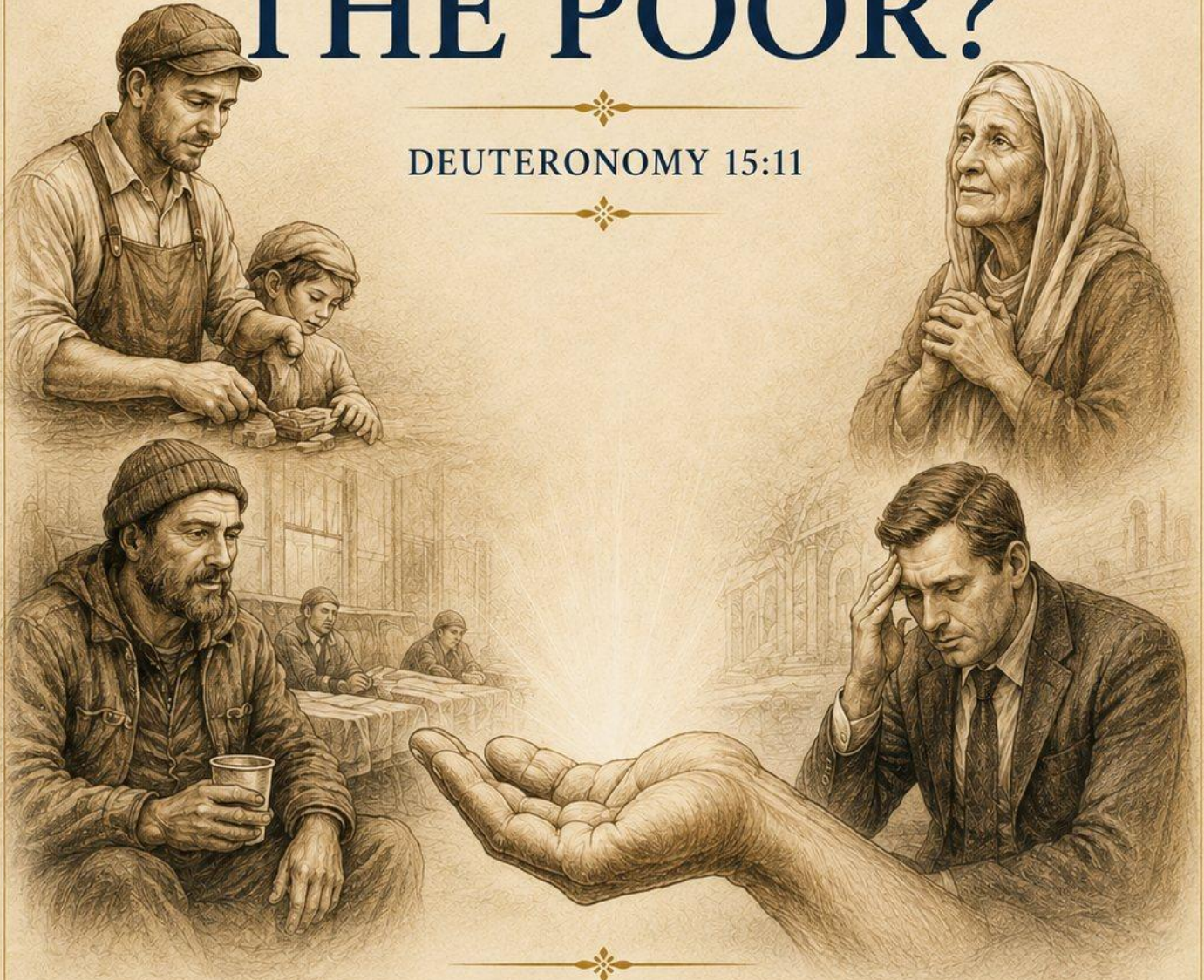


REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

WHO ARE THE POOR?

DEUTERONOMY 15:11



SERMON & PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

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Aloha.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

Whether you have been with us many times or this is your first time, we are grateful that God has brought you here today.

Our invitation is simple.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

If you are visiting with us, please know that we will not embarrass you, single you out or pressure you in any way.

We want you to feel at home.

After the service, I hope you will join us in the Reason Together Cafe for coffee, conversation and perhaps a few questions that we did not have time to answer during the message.

At Reason Together Church, coffee is free and so are the refills on conversations.

Our Keiki Kids Center is also available for our younger guests, and we are thankful for every family worshipping with us today.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for bringing us together today.

Thank You for giving us Your Word.

Please open our eyes to truth that may have been hiding inside familiar words.

Give us compassion without manipulation.

Give us discernment without hardness.

Give us generosity without pride.

Give us humility to recognize our own need before we examine the need of anyone else.

Help us see people as You see them.

Above everything else, help us see Jesus.

In His precious name we pray.

Amen.

Our opening Scripture is Deuteronomy chapter 15, beginning with verse 7.

The Bible says:

“If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother.”

“But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth.”

Verse 10 says:

“Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him.”

Then verse 11 says:

“For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.”

Before we begin the message, let me say something about giving at Reason Together Church.

If you are our guest, we do not expect you to give anything.

If you are a member of another church, we encourage you to support your home church.

We do not pass an offering plate.

There is a giving box available for those whom God leads to give, but giving should be willing, cheerful and free from pressure.

No one should be embarrassed into giving.

No one should be promised personal wealth in exchange for giving.

No one should be made to feel that the favor of God is for sale.

We have just said that no one should be pressured to give.

But that raises a related question.

If God commands us to help the poor, how do we know whom the Bible actually means by “the poor”?

That question began for me many years ago.

I was preparing a sermon for an upcoming trip to China.

I would be speaking in a poverty-stricken village through an interpreter.

In that message, I intended to make a simple reference to the poor.

I had read the Bible many times.

I had been a Christian for almost forty years at that point.

I believed the Bible was the inspired and trustworthy Word of God.

I preferred the King James Version, even though I understood that some of its language is no longer part of everyday conversation.

I thought I understood what the Bible meant when it spoke about the poor.
The Bible tells us to help them.
The Bible warns us not to oppress them.
The Bible tells us not to favor the rich over them.
Jesus said that the poor would always be with us.
It seemed simple.
Then one question interrupted the preparation.
Who are the poor?
I wanted an exact definition.
I checked dictionaries.
I compared several translations.
I examined passages from Genesis through Revelation.
I expected the answer to become clearer.
Instead, the question became harder.
Let me tell you about some of the people I considered.
The first person was me.
Few people would have called me poor.
I had a roof over my head.
My home was paid for.
I owned a vehicle.
There was food in the refrigerator.
My health was good.
I had a happy marriage.
Danielin and I had two wonderful children.
Most importantly, I knew Jesus Christ as my Savior.
I knew that if I died, I would spend eternity with Him.
On many levels, I considered myself a rich man.
Then I thought about a neighbor.
He had a beautiful home behind the walls of a guarded subdivision.
If someone drove past that home, they would probably say, "A rich man lives there."
But he was working eighteen hours a day trying to keep his business alive.
He was losing the battle.

The bank had begun foreclosure proceedings.
Was he rich because of the home people could see?
Or was he poor because everything could soon disappear?
Then I thought about another couple.
They both worked at a local theme park.
They could afford a two-bedroom apartment in a complex with three swimming pools.
By carefully budgeting their money, they could pay their bills each month.
But there was very little left when the bills were paid.
Were they poor?
Or were they simply living modestly and responsibly?
Then I remembered a woman with whom I had shared the Gospel.
She was divorced.
She received food assistance.
A government program provided her rent.
Her basic needs seemed to be met each month.
Was she no longer poor because assistance was meeting those needs?
Or did her continued dependence reveal another kind of poverty?
Then I thought about people I had met while volunteering at a shelter.
Some received a meal.
Some had a bed for the night.
For that evening, they were indoors and safe.
But they had no permanent home.
They had little privacy.
They had little independence.
They did not know what the next week might bring.
If a person has eaten today but has no security for tomorrow, is that person poor?
Then I moved to the other end of the economic spectrum.
I had visited squatter villages and dump sites where some of the poorest families I had ever met lived.
Their homes were constructed from whatever materials could be found.
Some families lived beside smoldering piles of rubbish.
Children searched through trash for anything that could be sold or reused.

Hunger, illness and exposure were part of ordinary life.
By American financial standards, there was no question that these families were poor.
Yet I noticed something that complicated my definition.
Many of them were among the happiest and most hospitable people I had ever met.
They possessed very little, but they valued what they possessed.
They were surrounded by neighbors who lived much as they did, so they were not constantly measuring their lives against another person's abundance.
Their financial poverty was real.
So was their contentment.
Could someone be poor and happy at the same time?
Then I remembered a famous athlete I had met.
He had earned millions of dollars.
People knew his name.
He had more money than most families could imagine.
Yet he was miserable.
Drugs and alcohol destroyed his career.
His home was lost.
His wife and children left.
People he had called friends disappeared.
Eventually, he moved to another state and lived in his parents' basement.
If people heard his name, they would still remember riches and fame.
But was he rich?
Was he poor?
Was he both, but in different ways?
The more people I considered, the harder the question became.
Is poverty determined by income?
Is it determined by possessions?
Is it determined by debt?
Is it determined by whether someone's immediate needs are being met?
Is it determined by security?
Is it determined by dependence?
Is it determined by happiness?

Is it determined by social standing?

Is it determined by a person's relationship with God?

I eventually wrote an article called "Who Are the Poor?"

At the end of that article, I admitted that I had posed a question I could not fully answer.

I began writing with uncertainty.

I ended with even more uncertainty.

I concluded that every person is poor in some way.

I also concluded that every person without Jesus Christ is unquestionably poor in the most eternal sense.

Those conclusions contained important truth.

But they did not completely answer the Biblical question.

Looking back, I understand something now.

That article did not record the failure of a Bible study.

It recorded the beginning of a Reason Together Study.

The difficulty begins with the English word "poor."

When we read that word in the Bible, we may assume that every occurrence means exactly the same thing.

It does not.

The Old Testament uses several Hebrew words that can be translated "poor."

Those words overlap, but they do not emphasize the same condition.

One Hebrew word is ani.

It can describe someone who is poor, afflicted, oppressed or brought low.

That person may lack money, but the word can also emphasize what hardship or oppression has done to the person.

Another word is anav.

It often describes someone who is humble, meek or dependent upon God.

Another word is ebyon.

It emphasizes need.

The person lacks something necessary and requires help.

Another word is dal.

It can describe someone who is low, weak or lacking influence.

That person may have no powerful friend to speak in court.

He may be easily ignored because he has little social importance.

Another word is *rash*.

That word is frequently used for material poverty in contrast with wealth.

The New Testament also gives us distinctions.

The principal Greek word is *ptochos*.

It can describe someone who is destitute, dependent or reduced to begging.

It may describe someone who lacks money, position, power or influence.

That is the word Jesus uses when He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

It is also the word used for the poor man in James chapter 2.

It is used for Lazarus lying at the rich man's gate.

Another Greek word, *penes*, can describe a person of restricted means who continues to survive through labor.

We might call that person part of the working poor.

Another related word describes the widow who possessed only two mites.

This is not a language class.

You will not be tested on Hebrew and Greek before you are allowed into the cafe.

But the words help us recognize something important.

The Bible does define poverty.

It simply does not describe every kind of poverty in exactly the same way.

When Scripture calls someone poor, we must ask:

What kind of poverty is this passage describing?

Does the person lack money?

Does the person lack necessities?

Has the person been oppressed?

Does the person lack protection?

Has the person been brought low by affliction?

Does the person lack social power?

Is the person humbly depending upon God?

Or is the passage describing spiritual bankruptcy?

Context determines the answer.

Now return to Deuteronomy chapter 15.

God does not give Israel a universal number and say, “Everyone below this amount is poor and everyone above it is not.”

Instead, God directs Israel’s attention to the person and the need.

Verse 8 says:

“Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth.”

Notice those words.

“Sufficient for his need.”

“In that which he wanteth.”

The old English word “want” means what he lacks.

The question is not merely, “How much does this person earn?”

The question is, “What is necessary, and what is missing?”

A person may receive a paycheck and still be one emergency away from losing everything.

A family may pay its bills until illness removes the income and adds medical expenses.

A widow may own a modest home but lack the income required to maintain it.

A worker may appear employed and stable while an employer is withholding his wages.

A person may have food today only because someone else supplied it.

Poverty is not always the absence of every possession.

Sometimes it is the absence of the margin necessary to survive the next emergency.

God’s law addressed that vulnerability in several ways.

Farmers were not to harvest every corner of their fields.

They were to leave something for the poor and the stranger to gather.

That provision supplied food.

It also preserved work and dignity.

The person was not treated as useless.

He was given access to what he needed and an opportunity to gather it.

God commanded the release of debts.

He prohibited His people from using another person’s desperation as an opportunity for exploitation.

He commanded employers to pay vulnerable workers promptly.

Deuteronomy 24 says:

“At his day thou shalt give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor, and setteth his heart upon it.”

That worker was living from one day’s wage to the next.

Delayed payment was not a minor accounting problem.

It could mean an empty table that evening.

God provided a tithe for the stranger, the fatherless and the widow.

God commanded judges not to distort justice against someone who lacked influence.

Yet Leviticus 19 also says:

“Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty.”

That is important.

The Bible forbids favoring the rich.

It also forbids distorting truth in favor of the poor.

Biblical compassion is not permission to become dishonest.

Truth and mercy belong together.

God’s provisions reveal that Biblical care does not always wait until someone has lost everything.

Sometimes the most loving assistance occurs before the struggling family becomes the homeless family.

Sometimes a small intervention prevents a temporary crisis from becoming permanent ruin.

Jonathan Edwards preached from Deuteronomy 15 almost three hundred years ago.

He observed that some people will help only after a neighbor has reached extreme desperation.

But brothers should not watch one another descend into starvation before deciding that the need has become serious enough.

An open hand may prevent the fall.

That brings us to a working Biblical description.

The poor generally include people who lack sufficient resources, security, influence or protection and are consequently dependent upon others or vulnerable to exploitation.

That is more than a number.

It is also more precise than saying everyone is poor in exactly the same way.

Everyone has needs.

Everyone experiences weakness.

Everyone needs God.

But Scripture does not call everyone materially poor.

We must preserve that distinction or the word will lose its meaning.

The next question is just as important.

Why is the person poor?

The Bible does not give one answer.

Some people become poor through calamity.

A storm destroys a home.

A drought destroys a crop.

An accident removes the family's provider.

A child becomes an orphan.

A wife becomes a widow.

Some people become poor through illness or disability.

Some are willing to work but are physically unable to do what they once did.

Some are willing and able but cannot find suitable employment.

Some people are poor because others have oppressed them.

Employers withhold wages.

Lenders exploit desperation.

Courts favor people with money and influence.

The powerful seize the land of families who cannot defend themselves.

The prophets repeatedly condemn those practices.

Isaiah pronounced judgment against those who wrote unjust laws and robbed the needy of justice.

Amos condemned merchants who manipulated their measures, raised their prices and sold the poor for a pair of shoes.

James condemned wealthy men who kept back the wages of laborers.

Some people become poor through persecution or faithful sacrifice.

The believers in Smyrna suffered for Christ.

The Macedonian churches experienced deep poverty while participating faithfully in the Gospel.

Some poverty results from foolish decisions.

Proverbs warns about uncontrolled appetite, excessive sleep, dishonest plans and refusing correction.

Some poverty is connected to addiction.

The famous athlete in my article did not lose everything because no one had ever given him enough money.

Giving him more money without confronting the drugs and alcohol might have accelerated his destruction.

Some people are poor because they refuse to work.

Second Thessalonians 3:10 says:

“If any would not work, neither should he eat.”

Please notice what Paul says.

He does not say, “If any cannot work.”

He says, “If any would not work.”

There is a difference between unwillingness and inability.

There is a difference between refusing employment and being unable to find it.

There is a difference between laziness and working every available hour while still falling short.

There is a difference between helping someone and enabling continued destruction.

Compassion and accountability are not enemies.

Truth without compassion becomes cruelty.

Compassion without truth may preserve the very condition that is destroying someone.

Different roads into poverty may require different roads out.

Hunger may require immediate food.

Disaster may require relief and rebuilding.

Exploitation may require justice and protection.

Lack of opportunity may require training, transportation or employment.

Addiction may require treatment, boundaries and a willingness to say no.

Laziness may require correction rather than continual subsidies.

Loneliness may require companionship.

Spiritual poverty requires the Gospel.

Many real people will require several of those responses at the same time.

Giving every person the same response is not Biblical equality when every person does not have the same need.

The question is not simply, “Did I give something?”

The question is, “Did I love this person truthfully?”

Now we come to one of the most familiar statements Jesus made about poverty.

Jesus said:

“For ye have the poor always with you.”

Some people have used those words to say that poverty cannot be changed.

They suggest that since poor people will always exist, attempts to help them accomplish little.

But Jesus was not giving His followers permission to become passive.

He was recalling Deuteronomy chapter 15.

Listen again to the complete thought:

“For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee.”

What does God command?

“Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.”

The conclusion is not resignation.

The conclusion is continuing responsibility.

The poor will continue to be present.

Therefore opportunities for obedience will continue to be present.

Deuteronomy contains an apparent tension.

Verse 4 says:

“Save when there shall be no poor among you.”

Then verse 11 says:

“The poor shall never cease out of the land.”

Is that a contradiction?

No.

Verse 4 describes the covenant abundance God intended if His people obeyed Him and cared for one another.

Verse 11 recognizes the continuing reality of sin, hardship and disobedience.

There should have been no abandoned poor among a people practicing God’s commands.

But because suffering and sin would continue, the command to open their hands would also continue.

Jesus did not say, “The poor will always be here, so close your hand.”

Scripture says, “The poor will always be here, therefore keep your hand open.”

We can now answer another question from the original article.

Can a poor person be rich?

Can a rich person be poor?

Jesus answered both questions in two letters to two churches.

To the church at Smyrna, Jesus said:

“I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, but thou art rich.”

Smyrna was suffering.

The believers lacked material abundance.

They faced hostility and persecution.

The world could examine their possessions and call them poor.

Jesus examined their faith and called them rich.

Then Jesus addressed the church at Laodicea.

Laodicea said:

“I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing.”

That sounds like the opposite of poverty.

It also reveals the danger of prosperity.

They had reached the point where they believed they needed nothing.

Jesus answered:

“And knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.”

Smyrna was poor but rich.

Laodicea was rich but poor.

A bank statement can measure available money.

It cannot measure faith.

It cannot measure grace.

It cannot measure humility.

It cannot measure eternal treasure.

It cannot tell us whether a person has recognized the need for God.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:3:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Luke records:

“Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God.”

Matthew emphasizes poverty in spirit.

Luke speaks directly to disciples who were materially poor, hungry, grieving and rejected.

We must not use one passage to erase the other.

If every reference to the poor becomes merely spiritual, commands about food, wages, debt and oppression lose their plain meaning.

If every reference to poverty becomes merely financial, we miss the condition of Laodicea and the first Beatitude.

What does it mean to be poor in spirit?

It does not mean that someone lacks the Holy Spirit.

It does not mean weak faith.

It does not mean pretending to have no ability.

It does not mean cultivating low self-esteem.

It means recognizing that I possess nothing with which I can purchase God's favor.

I cannot erase my own sin.

I cannot make God owe me salvation.

I cannot stand before a holy God and present my resume as payment.

The poor in spirit come with empty hands.

They say, "God, if You do not show me mercy, I have no other hope."

The materially poor may recognize dependence more readily because the illusion of self-sufficiency has already been removed.

But material poverty does not automatically produce spiritual humility.

A poor person can reject God.

A wealthy person can humbly trust Him.

Poverty is not salvation.

Wealth is not condemnation.

Our relationship with Christ is the eternal question.

Now consider Luke chapter 16.

Jesus tells us about a rich man.

He was clothed in purple and fine linen.

He ate sumptuously every day.

At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus.

Lazarus was covered with sores.

He desired the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table.

The dogs came and licked his sores.

Lazarus was not hidden in a distant country.

He was not an abstract social problem.

He was lying at the rich man's gate.

The rich man had to pass him.

The rich man may have become so accustomed to the sight that Lazarus no longer interrupted his thoughts.

That may be one of the most dangerous effects of repeated exposure to suffering.

We can begin by feeling compassion.

Then the face becomes familiar.

The need becomes part of the scenery.

Eventually, we stop seeing the person.

We live on an island where beauty and suffering can occupy the same city block.

Visitors see Waikiki's water, sand and lights.

We also see people sleeping on sidewalks, carrying everything they own and trying to survive another day.

But the person at our gate may not be homeless.

It may be the neighbor hiding a foreclosure notice.

It may be a working family quietly choosing which bill will be late.

It may be an elderly person losing independence.

It may be someone who does not primarily need money.

They may need a conversation.

They may need transportation.

They may need protection from someone exploiting them.

They may need the courage to seek treatment.

They may need someone to tell them the truth with love.

They may need to hear that Jesus Christ has not forgotten them.

God may not first ask whether we have solved poverty.

He may ask why we stopped seeing the person He placed in front of us.

Who is already at your gate?

Who has become so familiar that you no longer see the need?

Who have you classified before you heard the story?

James chapter 2 takes us from the gate into the church.

James imagines two men entering the assembly.

One wears a gold ring and beautiful clothing.
The other is a poor man wearing shabby clothing.
The church gives careful attention to the wealthy visitor.
They say, "Sit thou here in a good place."
Then they tell the poor man, "Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool."
The church had not yet refused him food.
It had already denied him dignity.
They evaluated his worth by clothing.
They considered how useful the rich man might become.
They treated the poor man as an inconvenience.
Sometimes the first thing a poor person needs from a church is not money.
It is a welcome.
It is a seat.
It is a name remembered.
It is a voice heard.
It is fellowship without embarrassment.
It is the assurance that assistance will not be used to control or display them.
It is being treated as a person created in the image of God.
When we serve through Project 860 or any other ministry, people must never become evidence that we did something good.
They are not photographs for our publicity.
They are not numbers in a report.
They are not sermon props.
They are people with histories, responsibilities, failures, abilities, hopes and eternal souls.
We do not stand above them.
We stand with them before God.
There is another mistake churches make.
We sometimes divide the congregation into wealthy people who give and poor people who receive.
Second Corinthians chapter 8 destroys that division.
Paul describes the churches of Macedonia.
He says they experienced a great trial of affliction.

He says they lived in deep poverty.
Yet their abundant joy produced rich generosity.
They did not merely agree to participate.
They begged Paul to receive their gift.
The Macedonians needed assistance in some areas.
They also possessed something that wealthier believers needed to witness.
They had faith.
They had joy.
They had generosity.
They had grace.
The same was true of many families I met in squatter villages.
They may have needed our food.
But we needed to witness their hospitality.
They may have needed medicine.
But we needed to witness their endurance.
They may have needed help constructing a church.
But we needed to witness how gratefully they worshipped beneath a tent or inside a humble home.
A person may need our bread while possessing faith that our soul desperately needs to witness.
Calling someone materially poor must never imply that the person has nothing to offer.
The poor can pray.
The poor can serve.
The poor can teach.
The poor can welcome.
The poor can give.
The poor can be rich in faith.
Now consider the widow and her two mites.
Mark chapter 12 tells us that Jesus watched people place money into the treasury.
Many rich people gave large amounts.
Then a poor widow placed two mites into the offering.
Jesus said she had given more than everyone else.
They gave from their abundance.

She gave from her poverty.

She gave all that she had.

Her devotion was extraordinary.

But we must read what happened immediately before her gift.

Jesus had condemned religious leaders who loved recognition, privileged seats and public admiration.

He said they “devour widows’ houses.”

Then a widow appears with almost nothing remaining.

The temple should have been part of a system protecting her.

Instead, the system had neglected vulnerable people while its leaders enjoyed honor.

We should see the beauty of her faith.

We should also hear Christ’s warning to religious leaders.

The widow’s mites may reveal her devotion.

They never authorize a ministry to devour what remains of a widow’s house.

A pastor must not use this passage to shame a struggling person into surrendering grocery money.

A church must not promise that giving the last dollar will force God to provide financial wealth.

The poor must never be treated as a source of revenue.

Generosity is grace, not coercion.

Discernment is also necessary.

First Timothy chapter 5 discusses “widows indeed.”

Paul teaches that families have a responsibility to care for their own members.

If a widow has children or grandchildren able to help, they should not abandon her and transfer every responsibility to the church.

The church should preserve its resources for those who are genuinely alone and dependent.

That is not hardness.

It is ordered responsibility.

The family serves where the family can serve.

The church carries those who have no one else.

The body of Christ works together so that vulnerable people are not forgotten.

The early Christians continued wrestling with the balance between generosity and discernment.

One early Christian writing advised believers to let their alms “sweat” in their hands while determining where the gift should go.

Another early Christian writing urged believers to give simply and leave a dishonest recipient accountable to God.

Those writings are not Scripture.

But they show that believers have long asked the same practical questions.

What if someone lies?

What if help is misused?

What if I make the situation worse?

What if I cannot meet every request?

The Bible does not command us to be foolish.

It also does not allow fear of making a mistake to become an excuse for never opening our hands.

We should pray.

We should listen.

We should investigate when necessary.

We should work with trustworthy people.

We should protect the vulnerable.

We should establish appropriate boundaries.

Then we should act.

John wrote:

“But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?”

Notice the connection.

He sees the need.

He possesses the ability to respond.

Then he closes himself.

The problem is not that he could not solve every need in the world.

The problem is that he saw his brother, possessed what could help and deliberately closed his heart.

John continues:

“My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.”

In deed and in truth.

Not deed without truth.

Not truth without deed.

Biblical love contains both.

At this point, we can return to the conclusion of my original article.

I wrote that in some ways every person is poor.

That is true if we mean that everyone experiences need, weakness, loss and dependence.

No one possesses everything.

No one controls tomorrow.

No one is immune from sickness, grief or death.

But we should not use that compassionate statement to flatten the Bible's categories.

Everyone is needy.

Not everyone is materially poor.

If everyone is called poor in precisely the same sense, then the widow, the oppressed worker and Lazarus disappear into a definition so broad that it no longer identifies their particular vulnerability.

We should say something more careful.

Every person has need.

Some lack material necessities.

Some lack security.

Some lack protection or influence.

Some have been afflicted and brought low.

Some recognize their dependence upon God.

Some possess earthly riches while remaining spiritually bankrupt.

And every sinner needs the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

That brings us to the richest verse in this entire study.

Second Corinthians 8:9 says:

“For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul does not begin with guilt.

He begins with grace.

“For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor.”

Jesus was rich beyond anything we can measure.
He possessed eternal glory with the Father.
All things were made by Him.
Nothing was made without Him.
Heaven was His throne.
Earth was His footstool.
Angels worshipped Him.
Yet He entered the world He had made.
The Creator accepted dependence within the womb of Mary.
The King of glory was laid in a manger.
He entered an ordinary household.
He knew hunger.
He knew weariness.
He said that foxes had holes and birds had nests, but the Son of man had nowhere to lay His head.
He was rejected by the people He came to save.
He was betrayed for silver.
He was stripped of His clothing.
He was mocked, beaten and crucified.
He was placed in a borrowed tomb.
He became poor for us.
That does not mean Jesus ceased to be God.
It means the eternal Son willingly accepted humiliation, suffering and death to rescue people who could never rescue themselves.
Why did He do it?
“That ye through his poverty might be rich.”
Paul is not promising that everyone who gives money will become financially wealthy.
He is not describing a transaction in which we place money into an offering and force God to multiply our bank account.
The riches Christ gives are greater than money.
Forgiveness.
Righteousness.

Reconciliation.

Adoption.

The indwelling Holy Spirit.

Eternal life.

An inheritance that does not fade away.

Access to the Father.

A place in the family of God.

Those riches cannot be purchased.

The materially wealthy cannot afford them.

The materially poor are not excluded from them.

Every sinner approaches the cross with empty hands.

That is poverty of spirit.

We admit that our goodness cannot erase our guilt.

Our religion cannot pay our debt.

Our generosity cannot purchase salvation.

Our suffering cannot make God owe us heaven.

Our money cannot bribe the Judge.

If Christ does not save us, we have no other hope.

But He came to save.

He died for our sins according to the Scriptures.

He was buried.

He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.

He offers salvation as a gift of grace received through faith.

The Gospel does not tell us to care for material needs instead of preaching salvation.

The Gospel also does not permit us to preach salvation as an excuse for ignoring hunger.

Jesus addressed whole people.

He fed hungry crowds.

He touched diseased bodies.

He restored excluded people to community.

He confronted oppressors.

He forgave sin.

He preached the Kingdom.

He went to the cross.

We should never offer bread without remembering the eternal soul.

We should never speak about the eternal soul while pretending the empty stomach does not matter.

Grace opens our mouths to share the Gospel.

Grace also opens our hands.

Now let me ask you several questions.

First, look inward.

Where are you poor but unwilling to admit your dependence upon God?

Have you begun to say with Laodicea, “I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing”?

Your life may look successful.

Your accounts may be secure.

Your house may be paid for.

But are you poor before God?

Second, look nearby.

Who is already at your gate?

Whose suffering have you stopped seeing because it has become familiar?

Who have you classified without hearing the story?

Third, look carefully.

What does that person actually need?

Is the need relief?

Is it protection?

Is it restoration?

Is it opportunity?

Is it accountability?

Is it companionship?

Is it the Gospel?

Fourth, look respectfully.

Do you see a person created in the image of God?

Or do you see a problem, an interruption or an opportunity to make yourself look generous?

Finally, look to Christ.

Have you admitted that you come to Him with empty hands?
You may possess very little in this world and be eternally rich in Christ.
You may possess everything this world celebrates and remain desperately poor before God.
The question is not whether you can afford salvation.
You cannot.
The question is whether you will receive what Jesus purchased for you.
If you have never accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, you can do that today.
The Bible says:
“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”
The Bible says:
“The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”
The Bible says:
“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.”
No amount of wealth can improve that offer.
No amount of poverty can place it beyond your reach.
Jesus has paid the price.
Will you trust Him?
If that is the desire of your heart, you may pray with me now.
The words themselves do not save you.
Jesus saves.
But you can use these words to express genuine faith in Him.
Let us pray.
Dear God,
I know that I am a sinner.
I admit that I am spiritually bankrupt before You.
I cannot save myself.
I believe that Jesus Christ died for my sins.
I believe that He was buried and rose again.
I ask You to forgive me.
I receive Jesus Christ as my personal Savior and Lord.
Give me the eternal life that I could never earn.

Help me follow You from this day forward.

Thank You for saving me by Your grace.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Before we close, do not leave today merely remembering that Hebrew and Greek contain several words for poverty.

Ask God to make one overlooked person visible to you this week.

Do not promise what you cannot sustain.

Do not use discernment as an excuse for indifference.

Do not use compassion as an excuse to ignore truth.

See the person.

Hear the story.

Understand the need.

Respond as God leads.

Some whom the world calls poor are rich before God.

Some whom the world calls rich are desperately poor.

Every one of us comes to Jesus with empty hands.

Those who have received His grace must never close those hands to someone in need.

If you would like to talk about today's message, ask questions or tell someone that you trusted Christ, please join us in the Reason Together Cafe after the service.

There is always room for one more conversation.

May God give us eyes that see, hearts that remain tender and hands that remain open.

Aloha Nui Loa.

The Question Behind the Study

“For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.” Deuteronomy 15:11, KJV

The public title is Who Are the Poor? The question sounds as if it should yield a short definition. Scripture instead gives a family of related descriptions. The poor may lack money, daily necessities, security, influence or protection. They may have been afflicted, oppressed or brought low. In other passages, poverty describes humility before God or spiritual bankruptcy hidden beneath material wealth.

The original magazine article recorded the beginning of this inquiry. While preparing to preach in a poverty-stricken village in China, Pastor Tom tried to define the people the Bible calls poor. He considered his own security, a neighbor facing foreclosure, a working couple with almost no margin, a divorced woman receiving assistance, shelter residents without permanence, contented families living beside dump sites and a famous athlete whose wealth had been destroyed by addiction. The examples made a single financial definition inadequate.

The article ended with two conclusions. Everyone is poor in some way and everyone without Jesus Christ is poor in the eternal sense. Both contain truth, but the first needs qualification. Every person is needy and dependent. Not every person is materially poor. If the term is stretched until it includes everyone in precisely the same sense, the distinctive vulnerability of the hungry child, the unpaid worker, the widow and Lazarus disappears.

This commentary follows the sermon’s movement while giving additional room to the Biblical words, difficult texts and pastoral judgments. Scripture governs the conclusion. The magazine article supplies the lived questions. Historical sermons and early Christian writings show how other believers have wrestled with them, but neither tradition nor noncanonical literature possesses the authority of the Bible.

GOVERNING ANSWER: In the Bible, “the poor” is not one uniform economic class. The term generally identifies people who lack sufficient resources, security, influence or protection and are therefore dependent upon others or vulnerable to exploitation. Context may instead emphasize affliction, humility or spiritual bankruptcy. Because the causes and kinds of poverty differ, Biblical love must see the person, understand the actual need and respond with both mercy and truth.

A Personal Word from Pastor Tom

The article began because I expected a definition and found people. A number can be useful, but the neighbor facing foreclosure could not be understood by the visible house alone. The working couple could pay each bill but possessed almost no margin. Shelter residents had food and a bed for one night but no settled place for the next week. Families living beside rubbish piles were materially poor and yet possessed hospitality, joy and contentment. The athlete had once possessed millions but lost home, family, health and freedom to addiction.

Those stories corrected my assumptions. They also exposed a temptation. It is easy to call someone poor after observing one part of a life. It is harder to listen long enough to learn what the person lacks, what the person still possesses, what caused the crisis and what kind of help will be truthful.

I now understand the uncertainty at the end of the article differently. It was not the failure of a Bible study. It was the moment a familiar English word opened into a larger Biblical question. The purpose of returning to it is not to make compassion more complicated until no one acts. It is to make love more accurate so that our open hands do not become careless hands, controlling hands or closed hands disguised as discernment.

PASTORAL CONFESSION: I can recognize dramatic poverty and still overlook quiet vulnerability. I can notice a person who has nothing and miss the person who is one emergency away from losing everything. I can be moved by a distant story while becoming accustomed to the need at my own gate. This study asks God to correct not only our definitions but also our sight.

1. One English Word, Several Biblical Conditions

Hebrew Words Behind “Poor”

The Old Testament does not reduce poverty to a single word. The terms overlap, and a single person may fit more than one description, but their emphases matter.

Ani commonly describes a person who is poor, afflicted, oppressed or brought low. The word can point to limited resources, but it often carries the pressure of suffering. The condition has happened to the person through hardship, oppression or humiliation. In Exodus 22:25, the poor brother must not be exploited through interest. In Deuteronomy 24:12, an impoverished borrower needs his pledged garment returned before night. The word directs attention to vulnerability, not merely income.

Anav is closely related and often emphasizes meekness, humility or dependence upon God. Moses is described as very meek in Numbers 12:3. Psalm 37:11 says the meek shall inherit the earth, language Jesus echoes in the Beatitudes. Affliction may teach dependence, but material hardship and spiritual humility must not be treated as identical. A poor person is not automatically meek and a wealthy person is not incapable of humility.

Ebyon emphasizes need or want. The needy person lacks what is required and must receive help. Deuteronomy 15 joins this word to the command for an open hand. Psalm 72 pictures the righteous king delivering the needy when he cries. The focus is not a social label bestowed from a distance. It is the unmet need that places a life at risk.

Dal may describe someone low, weak, thin or socially powerless. The person can be ignored because he has little influence. Leviticus 19:15 uses the term when commanding impartial judgment. The poor must not be favored falsely, and the mighty must not receive preference. Biblical justice refuses to let either sympathy or status corrupt truth.

Rash frequently names material poverty in contrast with wealth, especially in Proverbs. Proverbs 22:2 says, “The rich and poor meet together: the LORD is the maker of them all.” The contrast is real, but it does not create a difference in human worth. Both stand beneath one Creator.

Greek Words Behind “Poor”

Ptochos is the principal New Testament word. It can describe someone reduced to dependence, destitution or begging. It names the poor man in James 2, Lazarus in Luke 16 and the “poor in spirit” in Matthew 5. The same word can be used literally or figuratively because the context supplies the field of need. Lazarus lacks food, health and social protection. The poor in spirit recognize that they possess no spiritual currency with which to purchase God’s favor.

Penes appears in Second Corinthians 9:9 through Paul’s quotation of Psalm 112. It describes a person of limited means who survives through labor. This helps identify what modern readers often call the working poor. A paycheck does not necessarily remove poverty when the wage cannot provide sufficient food, shelter and security.

Endees appears in Acts 4:34: “Neither was there any among them that lacked.” The emphasis is lack. The early congregation responded so that no known member remained without necessary provision. Acts does not say that every believer possessed the same amount. It says grace moved those with property to answer those with need.

Why the Word Study Matters

The language does not give us permission to redefine every passage however we wish. It requires the opposite. We must let each context tell us what kind of lack is present. Is the issue bread, wages, debt, social power, affliction, humility or salvation? A responsible teacher will not turn a material text into a metaphor merely because spiritual application feels safer. Neither will a responsible teacher reduce spiritual poverty to a financial category.

WORKING DESCRIPTION: The materially poor lack sufficient resources or reliable access to necessities. The socially poor lack influence or protection and can be easily exploited. The afflicted have been brought low by suffering. The humble recognize dependence upon God. The spiritually poor possess no righteousness with which to save themselves, whether their bank account is empty or full.

2. Deuteronomy 15: The Open Hand and the Actual Need

“Sufficient for His Need”

Deuteronomy 15 does not establish a universal income line. It places a vulnerable brother “within any of thy gates” and commands Israel not to harden the heart or shut the hand. Verse 8 requires provision “sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth.” In the KJV, want means what is lacking.

This language is both generous and particular. The hand is to be opened wide, but the response is connected to the need. Hunger may require food. A delayed wage may require immediate payment.

Debt may require release. A farmer without access to land may need the right to glean. A widow may need continuing support. Justice may require protection from a powerful oppressor.

The text therefore resists two errors. A closed heart can hide behind endless investigation. An undiscerning response can offer what is convenient rather than what is needed. Biblical generosity listens closely enough to ask, “What is missing, and what response would truly help?”

No Poor Among You and Poor Always

Verse 4 anticipates a condition in which there should be no poor among Israel. Verse 11 says the poor will never cease out of the land. The statements are not contradictory. The first expresses the abundance and shared responsibility that covenant obedience should produce. The second recognizes the continuing presence of hardship, sin and disobedience in the land.

There should have been no abandoned poor among a people obeying laws about gleaning, wages, debts, justice and generosity. Yet because people would continue to suffer and other people would continue to sin, occasions for mercy would continue. The realism of verse 11 intensifies the command. Poverty’s persistence does not excuse indifference. It means the open hand must become a continuing practice.

“The Poor Ye Have Always With You”

When Jesus said, “For ye have the poor always with you,” He spoke during the anointing at Bethany shortly before His crucifixion. Mary poured costly ointment upon Him. Some objected that it could have been sold and given to the poor. Jesus defended her act as preparation for His burial.

His words echo Deuteronomy 15:11. The source text does not teach resignation. It commands generosity. Mark adds, “whensoever ye will ye may do them good.” Jesus was not setting worship against care for the poor as permanent rivals. He was identifying a unique moment. His burial was imminent. Mary’s opportunity to honor Him in that manner would not return. Opportunities to serve the poor would remain.

The passage therefore cannot support the claim that relief is futile. It also warns against using concern for the poor as a pious mask. Judas voiced the objection in John 12, but John explains that he did not care for the poor. The vocabulary of compassion can be used without the heart of compassion.

3. Poverty Has More Than One Cause

Calamity, Loss and Human Frailty

Scripture recognizes poverty caused by events a person did not choose. Drought, famine, war, accident, illness, disability, orphanhood and widowhood can remove provision or the ability to earn it. The Law repeatedly names the stranger, fatherless and widow because these people lacked the ordinary structures of land, inheritance and household protection.

Immediate relief is appropriate when the threat is immediate. A hungry person does not need a lecture before bread. A family displaced by disaster may need shelter before a long-term plan. Mercy attends first to danger.

Oppression and Withheld Wages

The prophets condemn systems and people who profit from vulnerability. Amos denounces merchants who falsify measures and sell the poor for a pair of shoes. Isaiah condemns decrees that rob the needy of justice. James announces that withheld wages cry unto the Lord of hosts.

This poverty cannot be addressed adequately by private charity alone. If an employer steals wages, replacing one meal while leaving the theft unchallenged may relieve pain without confronting its cause. Biblical love can require advocacy, truthful testimony, fair employment and the correction of unjust practices.

Folly, Addiction and Unwillingness

Proverbs connects some poverty with sloth, uncontrolled appetite, reckless schemes and refusal of instruction. Second Thessalonians 3:10 says, “If any would not work, neither should he eat.” Paul speaks of unwillingness, not inability. The distinction must remain visible. A person unable to work must not be condemned as though he refused. A diligent worker who cannot find sufficient employment must not be called lazy.

Addiction further complicates help. Money given without boundaries may finance destruction. Love may require treatment, accountability and the courage to say no to a particular request while saying yes to the person’s recovery. Correction is not the opposite of compassion when it seeks restoration.

Persecution and Faithful Sacrifice

Smyrna suffered tribulation and poverty while remaining faithful. The Macedonian believers endured “deep poverty” and nevertheless gave with abundant joy. Some loss comes because believers obey Christ or because violence and hostility are directed against them.

These examples forbid us from treating poverty as proof of moral failure. They also forbid us from imagining that poor believers have nothing to contribute. The Macedonians did not wish to be only recipients. Grace made them participants.

PASTORAL PRINCIPLE: Different roads into poverty may require different roads toward restoration. Relief, protection, justice, opportunity, treatment, correction, companionship and Gospel witness are not interchangeable. Many people need several at once.

4. Can the Poor Be Rich and the Rich Be Poor?

Smyrna: Poor Yet Rich

Jesus told the church at Smyrna, “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich).” Material loss and persecution were real. Christ did not deny their suffering by calling it

spiritual. He saw another measure of wealth that the world could not calculate: faithfulness, endurance and treasure in God.

Smyrna teaches that material poverty does not exhaust a person's identity. A believer can lack possessions while possessing grace, wisdom, courage and eternal life. Ministry that sees only deficiency will miss the gifts God has placed within the person it intends to serve.

Laodicea: Rich Yet Poor

Laodicea said, "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing." Jesus answered that the church did not know it was wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked. Wealth had become a veil over need.

The decisive phrase is "have need of nothing." Spiritual danger begins when provision becomes self-sufficiency. A full account can purchase comfort but cannot purchase forgiveness, righteousness or resurrection. Laodicea possessed resources and lacked sight.

Placed together, the two churches answer the study's paradox. A poor person can be rich in faith. A rich person can be spiritually bankrupt. These truths do not erase material poverty. They establish that no financial description is a complete description of a human life.

5. Matthew and Luke: The Poor in the Beatitudes

Matthew records, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Luke records, "Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God." The accounts should be heard together without forcing one to cancel the other.

Matthew emphasizes recognized spiritual dependence. To be poor in spirit is not to lack the Holy Spirit, possess weak faith or cultivate low self-esteem. It is to come before God without a claim of merit. The person admits, "I cannot erase my sin, purchase Your favor or make You owe me salvation." The posture is the opposite of Laodicea's claim to need nothing.

Luke speaks directly to disciples who were poor, hungry, grieving and rejected. His corresponding woes address those who were rich, full, laughing and praised. Material conditions matter because power and comfort can insulate a person from dependence while suffering can make the promises of God especially precious. Yet Luke does not teach that deprivation automatically saves or that money automatically condemns.

The materially poor need the Gospel, not romanticization. The materially rich need the Gospel, not automatic suspicion. Both enter the Kingdom by grace. The poor in spirit receive because their hands are empty of self-righteousness and open to Christ.

6. Luke 16: The Person at the Gate

The rich man in Luke 16 wore costly clothing and feasted every day. Lazarus lay at his gate, covered with sores and desiring crumbs. The gate is the moral location of the story. Need was not hidden in a remote land. The rich man had proximity, means and repeated opportunity.

The text does not say that Lazarus was righteous merely because he suffered or that the rich man was condemned merely for owning possessions. Abraham's presence and the closing appeal to Moses and the prophets place the story inside covenant accountability. The Law had already commanded an open heart and an open hand. The rich man lived as though Lazarus were invisible.

John Chrysostom repeatedly preached about Lazarus and warned that habitual exposure can harden the heart. The danger is recognizable. A person can first feel distress at suffering, then grow accustomed to it and finally stop seeing the sufferer. The need becomes part of the scenery.

The person at our gate may be visibly homeless. The person may also be a neighbor concealing foreclosure, a working family choosing which bill will remain unpaid, an elderly member losing independence, a victim needing protection or an addicted friend needing treatment and boundaries. The first question is not whether we can solve poverty everywhere. It is whether we have stopped seeing the person already within reach.

7. James 2: Poverty, Partiality and Dignity

James imagines a wealthy visitor wearing fine clothing and a poor visitor wearing shabby clothing. The congregation gives the rich man a desirable seat and tells the poor man to stand or sit beneath a footstool. Before food or money is discussed, dignity has already been denied.

Partiality measures people by anticipated usefulness. The rich visitor may become a donor, ally or source of prestige. The poor visitor appears to offer little. James calls this judgment evil because the church has adopted the world's scale inside the assembly of Christ.

The command has direct consequences for every ministry of assistance. A person must never become a photograph, a statistic, a sermon prop or evidence of the helper's virtue. Privacy should be guarded. Names should be learned. Stories should be heard with permission. Assistance should not purchase attendance, gratitude or control.

This principle governs Project 860 and every ministry that follows it. A welcome, a seat, conversation and belonging are not decorations added after "real" help. They are part of treating a person as the image of God. Sometimes the first poverty a church can address is exclusion created by the church itself.

8. Second Corinthians 8: The Poor Can Give

Paul describes the Macedonian churches as experiencing affliction and "deep poverty." Yet their abundant joy overflowed in generous participation. They gave according to their ability and beyond it, begging Paul to receive their fellowship in the ministry to the saints.

The passage breaks the false division between wealthy givers and poor receivers. A person may need help in one area and possess gifts in another. The poor can pray, serve, welcome, teach and give. They can display faith that more comfortable believers need to witness.

Paul does not exploit the Macedonians. Their willingness is repeatedly emphasized. He presents their grace to encourage Corinth, but he refuses coercion and tests the sincerity of love. Later he

speaks of equality, quoting the manna account: the one who gathered much had nothing over and the one who gathered little had no lack. The goal is not forced sameness. It is sufficiency within the body.

This guards dignity from two directions. The church must not shame a poor person for needing help. The church must not strip a poor person of the freedom to participate. Grace opens hands across economic categories.

9. The Widow's Mites: Devotion Without Exploitation

Jesus watched a poor widow place two mites into the treasury and said she gave more than those contributing from abundance. Her gift reveals extraordinary devotion. She entrusted all her living to God.

The immediate context deserves equal attention. Jesus had just condemned scribes who sought honor and “devour widows’ houses.” Then a widow appears with almost nothing remaining. Some interpreters see only commendation. Others understand the scene primarily as an indictment of a religious system that consumed the resources of the vulnerable. The text can sustain the beauty of her trust and the force of Christ’s warning without using either to silence the other.

What the passage cannot authorize is coercion. A pastor must not shame a struggling person into surrendering grocery money. A ministry must not suggest that a gift forces God to provide financial wealth. The poor must not be treated as a revenue source.

Generosity is grace, not payment. The widow’s mites show that God measures the heart and sacrifice differently from human accounting. The surrounding warning teaches leaders to protect the vulnerable rather than devour what remains of their houses.

10. Discernment Without a Closed Heart

Widows Indeed

First Timothy 5 distinguishes widows who have family able to assist from “widows indeed” who are desolate and dependent. Children and grandchildren must not abandon their responsibility and shift every burden to the congregation. The church preserves its capacity to sustain those who truly have no other support.

Ordered responsibility is not hardness. Family, church and community each have roles. Discernment asks who can help, what support already exists and where the gap remains. It seeks a durable circle of care rather than a single transaction.

“Would Not Work”

Second Thessalonians 3 addresses disorderly members who refused work while interfering in other people’s affairs. Paul does not condemn those who cannot work, those seeking work or those whose labor does not provide enough. “Would not” identifies the will.

The verse should correct intentional idleness within a caring community. It should never become a slogan used to dismiss strangers whose circumstances are unknown. We cannot identify unwillingness merely by observing need.

Early Christian Counsel

The Didache advises the giver to let alms “sweat” in the hand until the proper recipient is known. The Shepherd of Hermas emphasizes simple generosity and leaves a deceitful recipient accountable to God. These writings are not canonized Scripture and must not be quoted as Divine commands. Their value is historical. They show that early Christians recognized the same tension between wise stewardship and fear-driven inaction.

The Bible supplies the controlling balance. Believers should pray, listen, investigate when necessary, cooperate with trustworthy people, establish boundaries and protect the vulnerable. Yet possible misuse does not excuse a permanently shut hand. First John 3 places the issue plainly: a believer sees a brother’s need, possesses this world’s good and deliberately closes compassion. Christian love must be “in deed and in truth.”

11. Second Corinthians 8:9: The Richest Verse in the Study

“For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.”

Paul begins with grace, not guilt. The eternal Son possessed glory with the Father. All things were made by Him. Yet He entered the world in genuine human dependence. He knew hunger and weariness. He had nowhere to lay His head. He was betrayed, stripped, mocked, crucified and placed in a borrowed tomb.

Christ’s becoming poor does not mean that He ceased to be God. It describes His willing humiliation and sacrificial self-giving. The riches believers receive are not a promise that every donor will become financially wealthy. They are forgiveness, righteousness, reconciliation, adoption, the Holy Spirit, eternal life and an incorruptible inheritance.

The verse therefore cannot be made into a prosperity formula. Paul is forming generous believers by the pattern of Christ. Those who have received grace learn to give themselves. Christian generosity does not purchase blessing. It grows from blessing already received.

At the cross, every sinner arrives with empty hands. Wealth cannot afford salvation. Material poverty cannot earn it. Suffering cannot make God a debtor. Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again. Salvation is the gift of God received through faith.

This Gospel center keeps compassion whole. We should not offer bread while forgetting the eternal soul. We should not speak of the eternal soul while pretending an empty stomach does not matter. Jesus addressed whole people. Grace opens the mouth to speak of Christ and opens the hand to serve the neighbor.

12. Objections and Biblical Responses

If Everyone Has Needs, Is Everyone Poor?

Everyone is dependent, limited and vulnerable to loss. Everyone needs grace. But Scripture preserves particular categories for those lacking necessities, power or protection. Say, “Every person has need,” then identify the kind of poverty the passage actually addresses.

Does Happiness Prove That Someone Is Not Poor?

No. Contentment is a spiritual and relational good, not evidence that material deprivation is imaginary. Families in a squatter village can possess joy while still lacking clean water, safe housing or medical care. Their joy should be honored and their hardship should not be romanticized.

Does Assistance Mean a Person Is No Longer Poor?

Not necessarily. Assistance may be the reason today’s needs are met. A shelter bed, food benefit or rent payment can relieve immediate lack while dependence and insecurity continue. The right question is what has been supplied, what remains lacking and whether the support is stable.

Does Owning a Home or Working Disprove Poverty?

No single possession settles the question. A homeowner may be unable to maintain the property or face foreclosure. A worker may live from one insufficient wage to the next. Biblical poverty includes vulnerability and lack of margin, not only total destitution.

Is Poverty Always the Result of Sinful Choices?

No. Scripture identifies calamity, oppression, illness, persecution and structural vulnerability alongside folly and idleness. Assuming one cause before hearing the story can turn moral judgment into false witness.

Does Caring for the Poor Replace Preaching the Gospel?

No. Material relief cannot reconcile a sinner to God. Neither can Gospel speech become an excuse for withholding available help. Deed and truth belong together. Salvation is by grace through faith, and saved people are commanded to love their neighbors concretely.

13. Pastoral and Interpretive Guardrails

- Do not flatten every Biblical occurrence of “poor” into one financial definition.
- Do not spiritualize texts about food, wages, debt, land, exploitation or justice.
- Do not imply that material poverty automatically produces righteousness.
- Do not imply that material wealth automatically proves God’s favor.
- Do not use “the poor always” to justify resignation or indifference.

- Do not use Second Thessalonians 3 against people who cannot find or perform work.
- Do not use the widow's mites to coerce donations from vulnerable people.
- Do not promise financial wealth in exchange for giving.
- Do not reduce people to needs, photographs, statistics or ministry results.
- Do not confuse equality with giving every person the same response.
- Distinguish immediate relief from long-term restoration.
- Protect truth in judgment. Scripture forbids partiality toward both rich and poor.
- Preserve agency. Ask what a person can do and what gifts the person can share.
- State clearly when a source is historical or noncanonical.
- Keep Christ's saving grace at the center of generosity.

14. Application Bank

Look Inward

- Ask where prosperity has taught you to say, "I have need of nothing."
- Confess the forms of poverty you hide because admitting need feels like failure.
- Come to Christ without presenting generosity, suffering or religious effort as payment.

Look Nearby

- Identify one person already "at the gate" of your ordinary life.
- Notice quiet vulnerability, not only visible destitution.
- Learn the person's name and story before deciding what the person needs.

Look Carefully

- Ask whether the immediate need is relief, protection, restoration, opportunity, accountability, companionship or Gospel witness.
- Distinguish inability from unwillingness and crisis from chronic disorder.
- Work with family, church leaders and trustworthy organizations when coordinated help is wiser than acting alone.

Look Respectfully

- Offer welcome and fellowship without embarrassment.
- Guard privacy and obtain permission before sharing someone's story.
- Invite participation so that receiving help does not erase the person's gifts.

Open the Hand

- Respond to a need you can actually address.
- Do not promise what you cannot sustain.
- Pair immediate mercy with a realistic next step toward stability when possible.

- Let caution shape wise action rather than justify permanent inaction.

Speak the Gospel

- Explain that every sinner is spiritually bankrupt before God.
- Present Christ's death, burial and resurrection clearly.
- Make salvation a gift of grace, never a reward for poverty, generosity or church participation.

15. Reflection Questions

1. When you hear the word poor, what condition do you assume before reading the context?
2. Which Biblical category most expanded your understanding: lack, affliction, oppression, powerlessness, humility or spiritual bankruptcy?
3. How does Deuteronomy 15 turn "the poor shall never cease" into responsibility rather than resignation?
4. Who is presently at your gate, and what may have caused that person to become vulnerable?
5. Have you ever offered the help most convenient to you rather than the help actually needed?
6. How can a church preserve dignity before, during and after material assistance?
7. What is the difference between a person who will not work and a person who cannot find or perform sufficient work?
8. What do Smyrna and Laodicea reveal about the limits of financial measurement?
9. How should the context of "devour widows' houses" affect the way the widow's mites are preached?
10. In what sense did Christ become poor, and what riches does He give believers?
11. Where must your compassion become more truthful? Where must your truth become more compassionate?
12. What is one concrete act of deed and truth God may be placing before you this week?

16. Memorable Language for Teaching

- The Bible does not give one label to every lack.
- Everyone is needy. Not everyone is materially poor.
- Poverty is not always the absence of possessions. Sometimes it is the absence of margin.
- The poor are not a problem category. They are neighbors with names.
- The persistence of poverty keeps the command alive.
- Scripture says the poor are always with us, therefore our hands must remain open.
- Different roads into poverty may require different roads toward restoration.
- The gate is where repeated opportunity becomes moral responsibility.
- A person may need our bread while possessing faith our soul needs to witness.
- The widow's devotion must never become a pastor's permission to devour her house.
- Discernment should guide an open hand, not disguise a closed heart.
- A bank statement can measure money. It cannot measure grace.
- Smyrna was poor but rich. Laodicea was rich but poor.

- The poor in spirit come to God with empty hands.
- Grace opens our mouths to share Christ and opens our hands to serve our neighbor.

17. Commentary Synthesis

Who Are the Poor? begins with a definition but ends with a way of seeing. The Hebrew and Greek words prevent us from assuming that every occurrence means the same thing. Some passages identify material lack. Others emphasize affliction, oppression, weakness, social powerlessness, humility or spiritual bankruptcy. Context determines the sense.

Deuteronomy 15 supplies the governing ethic. The heart must not harden, the hand must not close and the provision should answer the actual lack. “The poor shall never cease” is not permission to surrender. It is the reason the command remains necessary. Jesus’ words at Bethany preserve that background while recognizing the unique moment of His burial.

Scripture also asks why a person is poor. Calamity, illness, widowhood, oppression, persecution, folly, addiction and unwillingness do not call for an identical response. Mercy can provide relief. Justice can confront exploitation. Wisdom can establish boundaries. Accountability can seek restoration. Biblical love acts in deed and in truth.

Smyrna and Laodicea expose the limits of financial categories. A materially poor believer may be rich in faith. A materially wealthy person may be blind to desperate spiritual need. Matthew calls the spiritually bankrupt to receive the Kingdom with empty hands. Luke refuses to let comfortable hearers forget the materially poor.

Lazarus places the question at the gate. James carries it into the church and asks whether clothing determines dignity. Macedonia refuses the division between givers and receivers. The widow’s mites reveal sacrificial devotion while warning religious leaders never to exploit the vulnerable. First Timothy orders responsibility. First John refuses compassion that remains only in words.

The study reaches its center in Second Corinthians 8:9. Jesus Christ, though rich, became poor for our sakes so that through His poverty we might be rich. The riches are not a promised bank balance. They are the treasures of salvation purchased by His death and resurrection. Every sinner needs that grace. No sinner can buy it.

FINAL ANSWER: The Bible calls people poor when they lack sufficient resources, security, influence or protection and are consequently dependent or vulnerable. In other contexts, poverty describes affliction, humble dependence or spiritual bankruptcy. A faithful response does not classify a person from a distance. It sees the person, hears the story, identifies the actual need and answers with mercy, truth and dignity. Some whom the world calls poor are rich before God. Some whom the world calls rich are desperately poor. Every one of us comes to Christ with empty hands, and those who have received His grace must not close those hands to a neighbor in need.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for seeing us completely and loving us truthfully. Forgive us when we have judged people by possessions, clothing, usefulness or appearances. Forgive us when caution became indifference, when generosity became pride or when religious words replaced obedient love.

Give us eyes to see the person at our gate. Give us patience to hear the story. Give us wisdom to understand the need, courage to confront oppression, tenderness to relieve suffering and humility to establish boundaries that seek restoration.

Keep us from trusting in riches or romanticizing poverty. Teach us to come before You poor in spirit, with no claim except the grace of Jesus Christ. Thank You that He became poor for our sakes so that through His poverty we might be rich.

Open our mouths to proclaim His Gospel. Open our hands to serve our neighbors. Let our love be in deed and in truth.

In Jesus' precious name we pray.

Amen.

Selected Sources for Further Study

- The Holy Bible, King James Version: Deuteronomy 15 and 24; Leviticus 19; Psalms 37, 72 and 112; Proverbs; Isaiah 58; Amos; Matthew 5 and 26; Mark 12 and 14; Luke 4, 6 and 16; Acts 4; Second Corinthians 8 and 9; First Timothy 5; Second Thessalonians 3; James 2 and 5; First John 3; Revelation 2 and 3.
- Hawksley, Thomas W., "Who Are the Poor?" Ministry magazine. The personal account that originated the question developed in this study.
- Jonathan Edwards, "The Duty of Charity to the Poor, Explained and Enforced," an exposition of Deuteronomy 15 emphasizing continuing responsibility and preventive care.
- John Chrysostom, homilies on Lazarus and the rich man, especially his warnings about habitual indifference to nearby suffering.
- Basil of Caesarea, sermons concerning famine, wealth and responsibility to the hungry.
- The Didache, chapter 1. Noncanonical early Christian counsel concerning generosity and discernment.
- The Shepherd of Hermas, Mandate 2. Noncanonical early Christian reflection on simple giving and the recipient's accountability.