

Blessed to be a blessing.... we are **Givers by Design**



Connecting the Church
with the World's Poorest People



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Answering the Call

If we could share just one sermon on the biblical call to help the least and last, this would be the one. Illuminating some of Scripture's most revealing passages concerning God's heart for the desperately poor and His expectations for His people, this sermon illustrates how our churches, together with their members, could step up and answer His call to compassionate generosity towards the world's poorest people. We-the-Church can make a difference; indeed, He intends us to... Let's answer the call!

Answering God's Call to Help the Least and Last

Please pray with me:

Father, Sovereign Lord, this is a hard message to preach, and to hear. So we'll start by giving you thanks and praise for the gospel that binds us to you - this marvelous good news that we are saved by grace, through faith - and that even this is not of ourselves, but a gift from you. And we know too, Father, that this salvation, accomplished through your Son, is not the end of the story, but just the beginning - that we are created anew in Christ Jesus to help build for your kingdom. What an awesome privilege we stand in -- saved by grace and used for your good purposes in the world... Thank you! We pray your spirit's special presence here this morning, working in each heart and mind to shine a light upon the path that you desire for each one of us.... to your glory. We ask this humbly, and gratefully, in the name of Jesus, our Lord..... Amen



Good Morning!

Our message today spotlights the biblical mandate for helping the desperately poor. My own journey through scripture on this subject began with a stunning warning given to God's chosen people through the prophet Ezekiel..... in chapter 16, verse 49, we read:

Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.

Wow! That's surprising, isn't it? It's true that Sodom and Gomorrah were known for a pervasive degeneracy that permeated every aspect of their day to day lives - but in this verse from Ezekiel, God Himself shines a light on one of the aspects of degenerate living that troubles Him most....

“they did not help the poor and needy.”

Did you know that there are over 2000 verses, throughout all 66 books of the Bible, that deal with issues of poverty and wealth? Throughout scripture, we see very clearly that God has a special heart for the poor, the weak, the vulnerable.... and it's a concern that He expects His people to share.



And God's heart must simply break for the 20,000 children, living in extreme poverty, who will die today - due entirely to preventable causes....

20,000 children - today, tomorrow, every day.

The contrast, the incredible disparity, between our own lives here in America, and the lives led by those in extreme poverty around the world - it's so enormous, so far outside of our own experience, that it's hard for us to even grasp. Try to imagine living on less than one dollar per day for your entire family, the unimaginable choices you would have to make.... which of us, as parents, have ever had to decide which of our children gets to eat today?

Try to imagine the desperation, the daily suffering, and in the end, the hopelessness and despair that comes from knowing that there is nothing they can do to change it.

Suffering, desperation, hopelessness - versus comfort, security, convenience, and options.... plainly, this abundance we've been blessed with is a grace.

I certainly do not deserve it; do any of us, really?

And the world's poorest - do they somehow **deserve** their lot???

Have you ever paused
to wonder at it -

this accident of birth?

Have you ever wondered:

Why am I so blessed,
while others suffer so?



Most of us have, at some point.... I know that I have....
and I know also that I, and my place in this world, am no accident....
it's confusing, and troubling. Why am I so blessed, while others suffer so?

I suspect that many of us, myself included, push this train of thought into the background where it will not bother us overmuch - because if we don't, it leads to another, more disturbing question:

And that is.... ***What???*** ***What am I supposed to do with this ???***

Scripture tells us that our Father has a special heart for the desperately poor....
and, that we have been *blessed* in order to be a *blessing*....

So, again, the question: What am I supposed to do with this?


Or, as Richard Stearns puts it on the cover of his award-winning book, *The Hole in our Gospel*:

What does God expect of us???

In a nutshell, this.....

God expects His people to show intentional, compassionate generosity towards the least and the last.

We could focus on heart-wrenching stories and difficult pictures of what extreme poverty is like.... but that would miss the larger point. So instead, we will concentrate on what **Scripture** has to say on the subject, the Church in America's response, and a biblical prescription for how to take action. Let's dig in....



**God expects His people to show
intentional, compassionate generosity
towards the least and last.**

Scripture references: Micah 6:8; James 1:27; James 2:15-16; 1 John 3:17-18; Luke 3:10-11

What does God expect of us with regards to “the poor and needy?” Looking to Scripture for guidance, we find a remarkable consistency....

The Old Testament prophet Micah summed it up nicely when he said:
He has showed you, oh man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

The New Testament writer James, brother of Jesus, puts it more plainly: *Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*

And then, just in case we missed the obvious point, he elaborates with a warning against superficial religion, religion that’s just for show: *Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food, he writes. 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?*

What good is it? That’s an excellent question... in the very next verse, James goes on to explain that *faith without deeds is dead...*

The apostle John must have had this very same thought in mind when he asked:
If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?

And to this he adds:
Dear Children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

What does God expect of us?

We find John the Baptist teaching the crowds about bearing fruit that goes with repentance, saying: *The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.*

Wow - he put that one in terms that any of our kindergarteners would understand....

The list of scriptures that speak directly to issues of poverty and wealth goes on and on.....

Verses like these shine a light for us on this “accident of birth” we’ve been pondering....

Why are we so blessed, while others suffer so?

Perhaps this accident of birth is no accident at all - perhaps our Father wants to use us, to partner with us, in blessing these desperate mothers, these hopeless fathers, these suffering children.



The abundance that we’ve been blessed with, graced with, in this country is truly remarkable when you stop to think of it. Did you know that just a \$10,000 income makes one wealthier than 90% of the rest of the world?

You see, most of the people on this planet simply cannot offer much help to those who suffer in extreme poverty.

And in this gap God has placed the wealthiest church in the world, the Church in America.

Here’s an interesting bit of perspective:

Did you know that we, here in America, spent over 700 billion dollars last year on entertainment and recreation alone??? And just one tenth of that amount - or about 1% of our incomes - would be enough to ensure that the world’s poorest billion people all had safe water, enough food, and basic medical care.

Think of it - just 1%!!! What an incredible **opportunity!!!**

An **incredible** opportunity - one that we do not want to let slip by....

In Matthew chapter 25, Jesus is teaching His disciples about the coming end of the age. He tells them the parable of the Talents, in which three servants are entrusted with their master’s wealth, to manage for him until he returns. When the master returns, each is called give an account for what they did with his wealth, what they produced with it.

As Brian pointed out last Sunday, we are the stewards, not the master - we have only been entrusted with the wealth that we enjoy in this country. He expects us to use it to produce good things for Him.

We have been blessed, to be a blessing.

Imagine hearing the words “*Well done, good and faithful servant*” - from the Lord himself!



Let's take a look at the very next parable in Matthew 25 - the one about separating the sheep and the goats. The Son of Man returns in all His glory, with the peoples of the world assembled before Him... He has come to claim his own.

Picking it up in verse 34, we read: *Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." For 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 visited me.*

The righteous ask Him when all of this happened - they don't remember ever seeing the King in this kind of need. In verse 40, the King replies:

I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.

One of the most revealing things about this passage is that Jesus identifies Himself not with the rich and powerful, but with the poor and needy -- and more importantly, most importantly,

He goes on to equate loving and serving them.... with loving and serving Him.

At the Throne, compassionate generosity towards the "least of these" is seen as hard evidence of loving God.

So how are we, Christ's followers here in America, doing in terms of answering His call to intentionally and compassionately serve the "least of these" - the world's desperately poor? I'm sorry to have to say this next bit, but, sadly, it's true. And the truth, the bigger picture, is this - the American Church's response to the world's desperately poor has looked a lot more like *Sodom's* than the one God has asked us for throughout His Word.

Now, I know that there are many followers of Christ, many right here in this church, today, that are sacrificially and joyfully giving to help the least and the last. And that's a very real "*Well done, good and faithful servant.*"

But for the broader Church in America, well, the picture is not so good.

Here's the bottom line, taken from "The Hole in Our Gospel," citing information developed by Empty Tomb, a highly respected Christian research organization: America's Christians give, individually and through their churches, an average of less than one tenth of one percent of their incomes towards the work of helping those who suffer in extreme poverty. That's less than a **dime** out of every **hundred dollars** we earn.



.... out of



"They did not help the poor and needy."

That's what I meant when I said the Church in America's response to the desperately poor looked more like *Sodom's*. I don't know if we haven't ever gotten God's message about helping the poor and needy, or if we've just chosen to ignore it.

One thin dime out of every \$100 of our collective incomes? Really?

To continue in this way would be unconscionable, even to an atheistic morality.

Surely we can do better than **this!**



In Luke chapter 16, Jesus tells a story about a suffering beggar named Lazarus who was laid outside of a certain rich man's gates, longing for the **scraps** that fell from his table.

Yet, day after day, the rich man passed the beggar by -- self absorbed, and unconcerned...

It would seem that Lazarus is lying at our gates, and we-the-Church are passing him by.

Again: Please, please understand that my intent in sharing this with you is not to make anyone feel guilty -- but, rather, to help all of us realize just how unacceptable this state of affairs really is...



This lack of response on the part of the American Church.... it looks a lot like indifference.

And this apparent indifference - this failure to answer our Lord's clear call to help the world's least and last - it threatens to deform our discipleship, compromise the integrity, relevance, and reputation of our churches, and is a profoundly negative witness to a watching world.

A **profoundly** negative witness.... because our global neighbors, the unchurched, the next generation, a society and culture suspicious of (or even hostile to) Christianity - all of these watch us, the Church in America, to see if we really are different, or just talk a good spiritual game.

A profoundly negative witness....

in that this watching world could easily mistake our indifference for God's.

Think about that - wouldn't that be **tragic**? Is **this** the witness that we wish to give?

“....they did not help the poor and needy.”

Much has been written lately about the decline of the Church in America. As we read God's words from Isaiah 58, ask yourselves how they might be relevant for the broader Church, today.... *You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is this not 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? 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 turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.*

We, here in America, are the richest church on the planet.

We've been blessed with more than enough to answer our Lord's call to help the "least of these." And we have in front of us the **opportunity** to not only make a meaningful difference for the desperately poor, but to give a credible, powerful, and enduring witness to the reality of the Kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim...



Awareness Access Ability

In this 21st century, we can no longer plead geography, the miles that separate us from the world's poorest people, as an excuse.

Blessed with an abundance of resources in a hurting world, our awareness of, access to, and ability to help the world's desperately poor have never been greater. Lazarus has indeed been placed at our gate; the question facing us is the same one faced by the rich man

Will we share?

Will we share? Imagine with me a desert island where you and a handful of other survivors have been stranded. For some reason, you, and only you, have been blessed with a trunk full of bottled water, granola bars, and first aid supplies.

→ ***Would you share? Of course you would!***

Let's shift scenes, to our lives right here and now. Experts estimate that just 1% of our incomes would be sufficient to ensure that those who suffer in extreme poverty **all** had:

enough food,
safe water, and
protection against preventable disease.

With this startling fact in mind, might we be willing to share just a tiny bit of our incomes, maybe \$1 out of \$100, to come alongside of God in His concern for the least and last?

It sounds reasonable.....



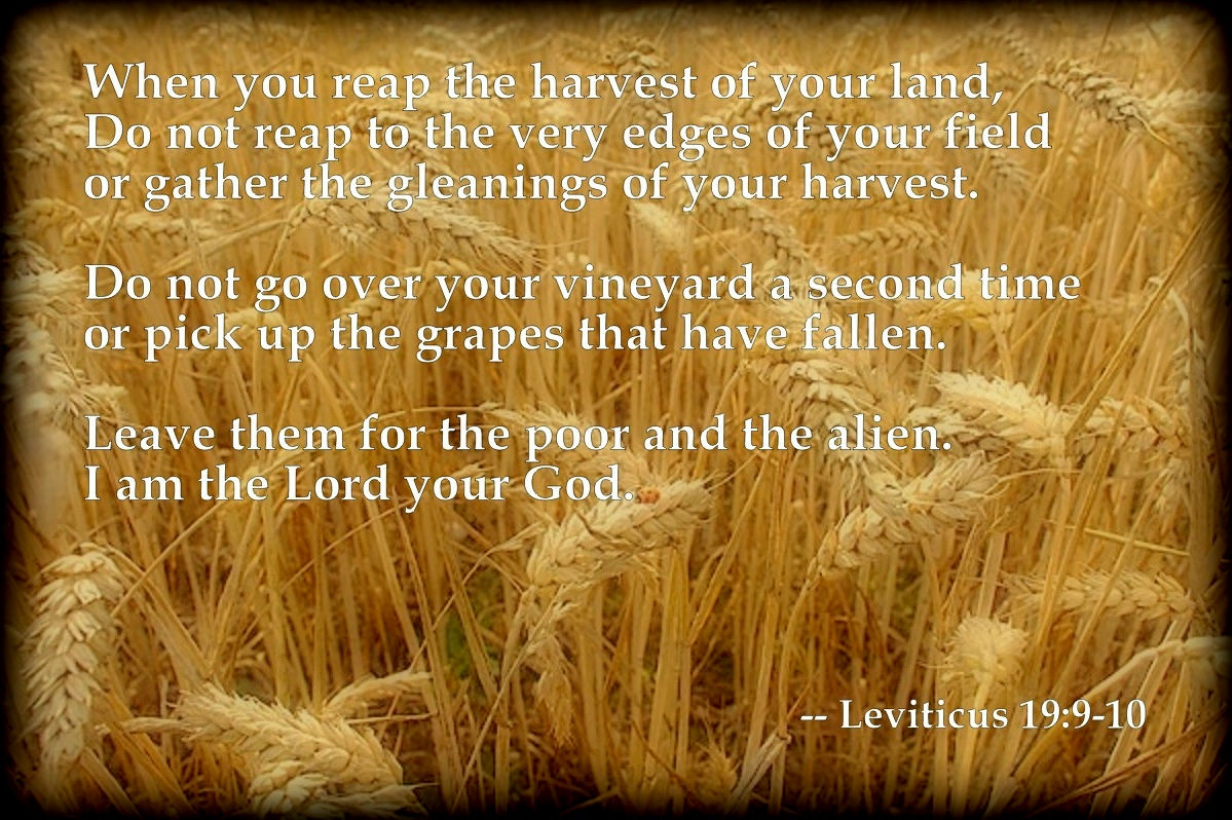
Yet... most of us feel the weight of competing demands here, don't we?
On the one hand, we have a limited amount of money to work with, and on the other,
a lot of needs and wants competing for those funds.

I've struggled with this for years, do now, and, I suspect, always will.
Yet the biblical mandate to help the least and last is unmistakably clear...

And in our heart of hearts, we really would like to *make a difference* for them...

Our Father knows our frames, our challenges, our needs. And in Leviticus chapter 19,
He has written a remarkably sensible, workable prescription for us -
a clear, simple "*what to do and how to do it.*"

This prescription is found in verses 9 and 10, and is repeated later on in Leviticus,
and in Deuteronomy as well. It goes like this:



When you reap the harvest of your land,
Do not reap to the very edges of your field
or gather the gleanings of your harvest.

Do not go over your vineyard a second time
or pick up the grapes that have fallen.

Leave them for the poor and the alien.
I am the Lord your God.

-- Leviticus 19:9-10

The context in which this command is first given, in the early part of chapter 19, is crucial to understanding its importance - and it's relevance to us, today....

To begin with, this passage opens with the injunction *Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy* -- a foundational principle that is expressed repeatedly throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Then, these first 18 verses of chapter 19 go on to tell us what God expects His people's lives in the promised land to look like. He commands them to respect their mothers and fathers, to honor the Sabbath, to not worship idols, or lie, or steal, or take his name in vain - sounds a lot like the Ten Commandments, doesn't it??? And then there's this one, in verse 18: God commands them, and us, to *love your neighbor as yourself*. Did you know that? The words "love your neighbor as yourself," the second half of Jesus' Great Commandment, appear here in Leviticus?

Let's drill a bit deeper – amidst these basic instructions for how His people are to live, we find verse 14: *do not curse the deaf, or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God*. Now this sounds like what we call simple human decency -- I mean, who would abuse a deaf person, or try to trip a blind man?

→ Be holy, worship God not idols, keep the Sabbath, don't lie, don't steal, love your neighbor as yourself, practice simple human decency.... And in the middle of all of this, is this command to *not harvest to the very edges of our fields, to leave some for the poor and alien*.... Given the verses that surround it, this command would indeed seem to be relevant for us, today.

In contemporary language, it might sound like this:

*If the Lord has blessed you with an income,
don't spend all of it on yourself --
set a little bit aside for helping the desperately poor.*

We are blessed, to be a blessing.

Ok, this is making sense... what to do (*leave some for the poor*) and how to do it (*don't harvest to the very edges*)...

What God is commanding here is a very intentional act, isn't it?

The modern word is budget: Budget, just a little, around the edges, (maybe 1%?) for giving to help the "least of these"



*So here's the nuts and bolts application question for we-the-church in 21st century America:
Have we packed our budgets so full, to the very edge, that we've nothing left to share ???*

Mine sure feels that way sometimes.... Yet, our Father has told us, quite clearly, what He expects of us with regards to helping the poor and needy.... and exactly how we can go about doing it.... Pretty straightforward; so.... what shall our reply be?

This idea of sharing, of giving just a bit - It's really a question of making small sacrifices, isn't it? And sacrifice is a word that I have an instinctive aversion to... I don't like giving things up. Yet, intentional sacrifice is precisely what Jesus calls His followers to.....

And so many of these followers of Christ have described their giving to help "the least of these" as a joy. They've said that they honestly relish writing those checks, knowing that they are making a difference in a suffering someone's life....

It's True. It is a Joy.

The joy of sacrificial giving is a joy that our Lord intends for each of us to know.



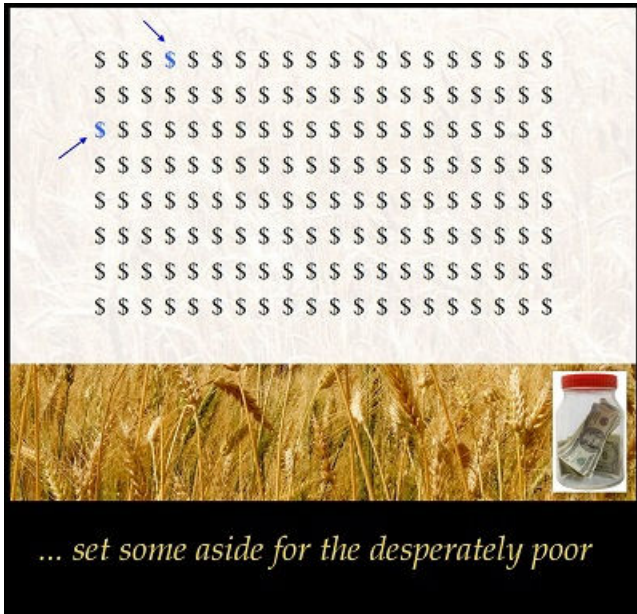
It takes so little, by our standards, to make a real difference for the desperately poor. A child in Africa can be sponsored for \$35 a month, with spillover effects that benefit the entire community. Clean, safe water can be provided for just \$1 per person, for a year. Anti-Malaria bed nets for a whole family -- 20 bucks. Or twenty egg-laying, meat producing baby chickens for \$30 ... All of these gifts, and many more, can be given for less than it costs my wife and I to go out for a modestly priced dinner.

Might there be one or two little luxuries, *around the edges, so to speak*, that we might be willing to sacrifice in order to answer our Lord's call to help the "least of these" ???

Some of the little things we spend our money on over the weeks and months, can add up to make a meaningful gift - one that makes a real difference for the desperately poor.

- It might mean eating out 3 times a month instead of 4, and sponsoring a child with the savings.
- Maybe it means using the cash from our credit card rewards program to make a gift.
- Or clipping grocery store coupons and donating the savings each month.
- It could mean a few less clothes, or buying some of my clothing at thrift stores.
- It might mean foregoing my morning Starbucks and drinking homebrewed instead.
- It could *even* mean driving an older or less expensive car.

Or, maybe it just means remembering the world's least and last, intentionally setting a bit aside, as we sit down to budget our household finances.



My favorite story is of an older woman, living on a retirement income of less than \$10,000 a year.

She put a single dollar, every week, into a jar on the counter, so that she could make a \$50 gift at the end of every year *to help put an end to human trafficking.*

Her JOY was absolutely infectious!

The list of possibilities goes on and on - there are as many ways to set something aside for the desperately poor as there are followers of Christ who wish to say *yes* to our Lord's call on His people to show intentional, compassionate generosity in helping the "least of these."

Why is this important?

Because it matters, to our Lord. And, to the poor.

And beyond issues of obedience, simple human decency, hope, and the joy of making a real difference in lives that desperately need it, there is this - intentional, compassionate generosity towards the least and last is a credible, powerful, and enduring witness.

Imagining what we-the-church's response to the problem of extreme poverty could look like, Mark Labberton writes in *The Dangerous Act of Worship*:

"Meanwhile our suffering world waits for signs of God on earth...."

***God's plan is that we, the church,
are to be the primary evidence of God's presence."***

This goes to the **very heart** of the Great Commandment and the Great Commission -- which of course work **best** when they work **together**.

So Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, when He said:

*...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds
and praise your Father in heaven.*

We have been blessed, to be a blessing.

What an incredible privilege - *to be used of God* for His work in the world!

When we join together in supporting organizations that lend a compassionate hand to the world's least and last --- in the name of Christ --- we bring a hopeful bit of the kingdom to a hurting world... and honor the prayer taught us by our Lord Jesus:

“...thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”



So much of our world needs that hope,
needs that light shining in the darkness.
Let's be that light!

- Soli Deo Gloria!

If this message has struck a chord in you, we would encourage you to take 3 actions:

- Give - generously, sacrificially, joyfully - to the organization of your choice. For an in-depth look at how to give with true effectiveness, read [Helping Well](#); or, skip straight to our list of [Top Parachurch Organizations](#) to see who is making the most impact on the lives and communities of the desperately poor.
- Help us to spread the message - Share this Page! Imagine the difference Christ's followers, His Church, could make for the world's desperately poor if this message, and others like it, were to "go viral!"
- Add your name to the "Call" at <http://www.GiversByDesign.org/Sign-the-Call>