

# MAKING POVERTY PERSONAL

Dear Friend,

Mother Teresa stated, “It is very fashionable to talk about the poor...unfortunately it is not as fashionable to talk to the poor.” Shane Chairborne in the book Make Poverty Personal stated, “ God is in the business of rescuing people from the hells they experience on earth, and God is asking us to love people out of these hells. God is asking us to taste the salt in the tears of the broken, to hunger for justice with the starving masses of our world, to groan with all of creation in the birth pains of the kingdom of God. God is asking us to make poverty personal.”

Many in a pursuit of comfortable Christianity purposely avoid making poverty personal lest they start feeling depressed because they can't meet all the needs of the poor they get to know personally. Such a fear is the result of the inability to experience the personal needs of the poor and then transfer them to God through prayer.

It is a dangerous thing for one to claim to be a follower of Jesus Christ and then ignore the 2000 Scriptural references to the poor. Passages like Proverbs 14:31 explicitly declare, “those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the need honor Him.” Making poverty personal is a central part of Christianity. In Matt. 7:21-23 Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord have we not prophesied in your name, cast out demons in your name, and done many wonders in Your name? ‘And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness!’”

Jesus made it very clear that following Him meant being obedient to His directives which involves making poverty personal to the extent He declares in Matt. 25:40, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren (that includes you sisters also), you did it to Me.”

As Barker in his book, Make Poverty Personal stated, “Jesus experienced poverty personally. Jesus was conceived out of wedlock. He fled persecution as a refugee to Egypt. He lived in an oppressed land as part of an oppressed people at

the hands of the colonizing Romans. Jesus experienced hunger (Matt.12) and homelessness (Matt 8:20), and was discriminated against by both Romans and other Jews because He was from Nazareth. He was tortured, falsely tried, and murdered. Jesus taught insights that offered authority to transform poverty on 'earth is in heaven.' Jesus prayed for God's reign to come here on earth as in heaven (Matt. 6:10) and warned of a final day when the sheep and goats will be separated according to how they treated the 'least of these.' The goats included people like the rich man who missed the beggar, and the rich fool who stored up wealth. Jesus taught that the lure of wealth was like weeds that choke seeds. He cursed the rich and blessed the poor, but offered a kingdom community life where labels of rich and poor were not allowed." The Christian faith is not a invitation to join a club but a call to die to oneself and follow Jesus as He stands in solidarity with the poor.

During the past 10 years, the political economics have intensified the inequality and pain for the poor with the unprecedented growth of wealth among the upper-bracket. It doesn't matter whether it is Democrat or Republican, their golden rule remains the same "he who has got the gold makes the rules." As a result, their rich political donors get the gold mines while the poor and struggling middle class get the shaft.

Today, the two most striking economic groups are the billionaires and the homeless. With over 100,000 decamillionaries (people with over 10 million dollars) the words of Charles Dickens cry out, "...it was the best of times, it was the worst of times." The same is true today. The rich and powerful have access to the governor's mansion and the Lincoln bedrooms in the White House, while the poor and mentally ill are led to the execution chambers in record numbers. As 10,000,000 rich American move into exclusive neighborhoods with private gates and security 2,000,000 poor and struggling middle class people are locked behind prison walls without adequate legal defense.

Even though commercial success is brutally Darwinian as it favors skills, enterprise and imagination, many who fight the teaching of evolution in the classrooms remain strangely quiet as this evolutionary process is lived out daily in the economic market place. Charles' lyrics as they declare, "Them that's got is them that gets, and I ain't got nothing yet." "Them that's got", the CEOs, are sure getting more and more when they receive 326 times the pay of the average worker. As tax subsidies remained high for affluent business owners, the tax burden continues to grow for the poor and struggling middle class. For example, in the State of Missouri state laws 353 and 99 and others give major tax breaks to big

companies when it comes to paying property taxes. As a result, a larger burden is placed upon middle-income homeowners to carry the tax burdens for school and other community services.

The question is how much longer are God-fearing people going to allow Jesus to be crucified on the cross of gold as they refuse to make poverty personal?

The time has come to retrench and take back our communities inch by inch. It's time for compassionate people to arise and retake the reigns of government from those who have sold their souls to the rich devils for whom Jesus said, "...it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for one of these rich people to get in the Kingdom of God." The time for change is now. As Christians we can't stand by and let government policies kill more and more people, whether it is those on death row or those in those in the row houses without utilities, or those on the streets who are homeless, it is time to see that in spite of their rhetoric their policies are not about compassion but about greed.

The time has come for us to make poverty personal and return to a politics of meaning where the individual is cherished, not used. Where it is recognized that people are not clogs in a commercialistic machine but are individuals created in the image of God. Such a politics of meaning will reconstruct our state in a way that gives value to each and every human being. It will recognize that "The Lord maintains justice for the poor," (Psalm 140:12) that "God exalts the poor needy." (1 Samuel 2:8) and He "lifts the poor from the dust." (Psalm 113:7) When everyone recognizes this, then we begin to see that no state is stronger than its weakest member is. Policies of increased sales taxes which most adversely affect the struggling middle class and the poor, along with exorbitant telephone rates for those incarcerated calling their poor families, fly in the face of the One who said, "...what do you mean by grinding the face of the poor." (Isaiah 3:15) It's time to turn from Sodom's sin which resulted in her judgment of destruction because she did not help the poor and needy (Ezekiel 16:49). The time for action is now.

"And will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night? Will He keep putting them off?" (Luke 18:7) As we encounter injustice, we must never forget the importance of earnest prayer. Never underestimate the power of crying out to God day and night concerning the injustice you are aware of. I can't help but recall the miracle resulting from the Missouri inmates who were being abused in Texas, some years back. After they cried out to the Lord, a video was miraculously released showing this abuse, and before long the Missouri inmates were returned to Missouri.

As we pray, we must believe God and know that He cares about the issue of justice. As Psalms 140:12, in the Amplified Bible states, “I know and rest in confidence upon it that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and will secure justice for the poor and needy.” When we pray we must also seek God as to what He wants us to do to address these issues of injustice.

Much of religious broadcasting today concerns itself with the two issues of abortion and homosexuality. As a result many Christians vote for candidates exclusively on how they relate to these two issues. This allows oppressors and perpetrators to use these two issues to exploit the Christian vote as they continue to engage in actions of injustice against the poor and elderly. What does the Scripture say that God desires of His people? “To do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man, who is of the earth, may not terrify them any more”(Ps.10:18). “Learn to do right! Seek justice, relieve the oppressed, and correct the oppressor. Defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.”(Is. 1:17) As you read these words you need to ask yourself what you believe that needs to be done to correct the oppressor, defend the fatherless and plead for the widow? How do we respond to the on going misuse of eminent domain, which takes the homes of the poor and elderly in order that rich developers may make more money? What do we do about the control of big utility and oil companies, whose ever-increasing rates not only cause the poor and elderly to become slaves, but also continue to pollute the environment with their use of fossil fuels? Then there is the issue of justice for the homeless in communities like St. Louis, Springfield and Kansas City where the powers that be would love to drive them out, not only from their downtown areas but their from cities as a whole. “Thus says the Lord: Execute justice and righteousness, and deliver out of the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong; do no violence to the stranger (homeless) or temporary resident, the fatherless, or the widowed, nor shed innocent blood in this place.”(Jer.22:3)

Medicaid services during the past few years have been cut in Missouri under the leadership of senators, representatives and a governor who say they are pro-life. As these cuts prevent the poor from getting dental services, eyeglasses, hearing aids, and rehabilitation services, what do you think should be the response of the Christian community? The Medical Assistance for Workers with Disabilities program has been discontinued. Is this something we should concern ourselves with? When do budget cuts move into the area of injustice? What does it say about a society when programs for the needy continue to be cut, while

services for the rich and powerful continue to expand in the name of economic development?

Being on the front lines in behalf of those in need, as advocates for justice, does not mean that we have to become bitter angry people. The Bible tells us to be angry but sin not. This means we can direct our anger in a productive way at the source of the injustice with the knowledge that God is in control. This knowledge keeps us from becoming bitter insecure people, for we are anchored in God's love. "He is the Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are law and justice. A God of faithfulness without breach or deviation, just and right is He."(Dt.32:4)

Jesus has called each of us to be "salt" and "light" in our community. If the people of God remain silent in the light of injustice the result is, "justice is turned away backward, and righteousness (uprightness and right standing with God) stands far off; for truth has fallen in the street and uprightness cannot enter (the courts of justice) Is. 59:14". "They have grown fat and sleek. Yes, they surpass in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge and plead with justice the cause of the fatherless, that they may prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy"(Jer.5:28).

God has created enough for all. With that in mind we see that there is no real energy crises, food shortage or water problem. The problem is a greed problem that can and will be overcome as each one lets Jesus fill them with that sense of purpose, power and presence with a satisfaction that all the things in the world can never provide. As this truly happens, we will "let justice run like waters and righteousness as a mighty and ever-flowing stream."(Amos 5:24) It is by faith that justice will flow forth. "Who by faith subdued kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promised blessings, closed the mouths of lion."(Heb.11:33) Let us speak the truth in love, closing the mouths of the lions and allowing justice to be administered. We must remain faithful in our service to our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ during this trying hour. Remember, "He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun"(Psalms 37:6). "The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern"(Proverbs 29:7).

Realizing the sins of indifference and self-centeredness causes us to cry out to God in godly sorrow. This godly sorrow produces within us a desire to repent. "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you; what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what

alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done.” (1Cor 7:10,11) We have a new concern for others and a desire to see justice done. We have been set free from the bondage of sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As a result of being set free, we have a longing and a deep earnestness to serve our Risen Lord as we make poverty personal and reach out to others through His love and power.

Rick Warren, author of the Purpose Driven Life, stated that he has had the re-examine Scripture with “new eyes.” He said, “ I found those 2000 verses on the poor. How did I miss that? I went to Bible College, two Seminaries, and I got a Doctorate. How did I miss God’s compassion for the poor? I was not seeing all the purpose of God. The Church is the body of Christ. The hands and feet have been amputated and we’re just a big mouth, knowing more for what we’re against.” God, would you use me to re-attach the hands and the feet to the body of Christ, so that the whole Church cares about the whole gospel in a whole new way—through the local Church.”

Will you make poverty so personal that you will work to help reattach the arms and feet of the local Church so it will help others? Will you earnestly and passionately pray for the poor, fight for justice and directly help those in need?

This is the hour God has given us. Let us seize the day and be all He has called us to be.

Yours in Christ

Larry Rice