

Our Distinctive ***Advancing the Kingdom among the Urban Poor***

God Has Chosen the Poor

The words “chose” and “chosen” in James 2 and 1 Corinthians 1 come from the Greek word *eklégomai* which means “giving favor to the chosen subject. . . It involves preference and selection from among many choices.” In other contexts, it is used to describe God’s choice of the “elect” (Mark 13.20) and Jesus’ choosing of his disciples (Luke 6.13).

One does not have to read many pages into the New Testament to discover where the early Church got the idea that the poor were specially chosen by God to receive the Gospel and spread it throughout the earth. Jesus, himself, had announced publicly that he was intentionally preaching the Gospel to the poor (Luke 4.18, Luke 6.20) and even suggested that this action helped demonstrate that he was, indeed, the Messiah (Matt. 11.2-6).

Building on Jesus’ teaching, it is not unusual to find very explicit statements in the Epistles about God’s choice of, and expectations for, those who are without power, resources, or money. For example, James teaches:

Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

~ James 2.5

In a similar manner, Paul writes:

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

~ 1 Corinthians 1.27-29

These ideas are not a new theme introduced by the New Testament writers. Instead, they faithfully reflect the Old Testament teachings about how God relates to the poor. One scholar summarizes the Old Testament teaching about the poor in three principles.

1. God has a particular concern for the poor.
2. God’s people must manifest a similar concern [for the poor].
3. The poor are frequently identified with the pious and the righteous.

Douglas J. Moo,
*James, Tyndale Old
Testament Commentary
Series*, Gen. Ed. Leon
Morris. Leicester,
England-Grand Rapids,
MI: IVP-Eerdmans,
1985. pp. 53-54.

Who Are the Poor?

In the teaching of Jesus, material possessions are not regarded as evil, but as dangerous. The poor are often shown to be happier than the rich, because it is easier for them to have an attitude of dependence upon God.

~ R.E. Nixon. "Poverty." *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. eds. J.D. Douglas, et al. Leicester, England: IVP, 1980. p. 1255.

To understand God's choice of the poor it is necessary to understand who the "poor" are. The way that Scripture uses the term "poor" is both alike and different from the way we often use the term.

1. The Greek word used in the New Testament means essentially the same thing as our English word "poor." It describes someone who is economically deprived, someone who doesn't have enough money or resources. However, when this word is used by the New Testament writers, they seem to also rely on the Old Testament understandings of the word "poor." Thus, in the New Testament, the poor are both "those who don't have enough money" (Greek understanding) plus "something else" (the Hebrew understanding).
2. This "something else" was an understanding developed over time in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Old Testament, "the poor" are those who are so powerless and dependent that they are vulnerable to being misused by those who have influence in the society. The emphasis is on *being on the wrong end of a relationship* with those in power. Therefore, in the Old Testament, the poor came to mean those people who were characterized by three things:
 - a. They lack the money and resources they need,
 - b. They are taken advantage of by those who do have money and resources, and
 - c. The result is that they must humbly turn to God as their only source of protection.
3. Therefore, from a theological point of view, we could say that Scripture defines "the poor" as:

Those whose need makes them desperate enough to rely on God alone.

Biblical scholar Robert A. Guelich makes exactly these points when he writes about the development of the term “poor” in the Old Testament.

The most common of these words [for the poor], *'ny* and its later relative, *'nw*, have a much broader scope than simply to denote a socioeconomic status. . . . The *'ny* refers to one so powerless and dependent as to be vulnerable to exploitation by those who have the power base. Thus the accent falls on a socioeconomic relationship rather than on material possessions as such. Yet this powerless and dependent relationship caused one to rely upon God for one's needs and vindication. This humble posture of the poor devoid of pretension before God reflects the religious dimension and comes out frequently in the Psalms. . . . But the religious dimension is never exclusive of the socioeconomic. Both elements are integral to *'ny*. . . . In summary, the poor in Judaism referred to those in desperate need (socioeconomic element) whose helplessness drove them to a dependent relationship with God (religious element) for the supplying of their needs and their vindication.

~ Robert A. Guelich. *The Sermon on the Mount*. Waco: Word Books, 1982. pp. 68-69.

This understanding helps us perceive how Luke can record Jesus' teaching as “Blessed are *the poor* for yours is the Kingdom of God” (Luke 6.20); while Matthew records “Blessed are the *poor in spirit* for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5.3). In both accounts the point is the same: blessed are those who have become desperate enough to rely on God alone. Only people who are willing to acknowledge their helplessness can receive this help from God. As Clarence Jordan points out:

When one says ‘I don't need to be poor in things; I'm poor in spirit,’ and another says, ‘I don't need to be poor in spirit; I'm poor in things,’ both are justifying themselves as they are, and are saying in unison, ‘I don't need.’ With that cry on his lips, no man can repent.

~ Clarence Jordan. *Sermon on the Mount*, Rev. ed. Valley Forge: Koinonia-Judson Press, 1980. p. 20.

Obviously, people who are not poor can come to this point of being desperate enough to rely on God alone. (The Bible records many examples, such as Zaccheus or Joseph of Arimathea, to make this

What are some life experiences besides poverty that often help people realize their desperate need for God?

apparent.) *It is also clear that many poor people may refuse to acknowledge their need before God.* However, Jesus and the apostles consistently teach that it is even more difficult for the affluent to acknowledge their need for God (Matt. 19.24; Mark 10.23; James 2.6-7) and that the poor should be expected to respond with faith. This confidence in God's choice of the poor is so profound that one scholar can say: "In the New Testament the poor replace Israel as the focus of the gospel" (C.M.N. Sugden, "Poverty and Wealth," *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson, et al. [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988], p. 524).

Four Fundamental Responses

To live in radical obedience to Jesus Christ means to be identified with the poor and oppressed. If that is not clear in the New Testament, then nothing is.

~ Jim Wallis. *Agenda for Biblical People*.
New York: Harper & Row, 1976. p. 94.

When we recognize that the Scriptures treat the poor as a group with theological significance, it forces us to consider what our response will be. Both as Christians, and as missionaries, there are at least four responses that we should make.

1. Respect

God's choice of the poor fundamentally challenges the normal way that people respond to the poor. Within society, people avoid the poor, disdain their ways, and expect little from them in any area. Certainly they are not seen as the natural place to search for leaders.

God, however, identifies himself with the poor. The Scriptures say that to oppress the poor is to show contempt to God himself (Prov. 14.31). God's identification with the poor and God's choice of the poor (James 2.5) should make a profound difference to anyone who acknowledges Christ as Lord. Simply put:

- If we respect God, we will respect the poor.
- If we obey God, we will identify with the poor.
- If we believe God, we will see the poor as the potential leaders of his Church.

Sadly, many people look at those who are poor and see them primarily as objects of benevolence. Such people view the poor only as those who need their help. While it is certainly right to help the poor (see point two below), such help will create dependence and a loss of dignity if it is not firmly coupled with deep respect for the poor as those that God has chosen. We believe it is not a sacrifice, but rather, a privilege and delight to be called to make disciples among the unreached urban poor.

2. Love, Compassion, and Justice

Christians are called to respond to others with love, compassion and justice. This response to the poor is the same response that Christians give to all people everywhere. What makes it unique is that the world system mitigates against applying this concern to the poor. Theologian Thomas C. Oden says:

Although Christian charity is due everyone, the poor are Christ's particular concern, precisely because they are the neediest.

~ Thomas C. Oden. *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry*.
San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983. p. 268.

God emphasizes our response to the poor, not to play favorites, but because otherwise they would be overlooked.

One of the ways that St. Francis described his relationship with the poor (and others) was through the word "cortesia." We use the word 'courtesy' to mean manners. Originally, it meant the behavior and etiquette expected of one who served at a noble court For St. Francis . . . cortesia was a way of seeing and acting towards others.

~ Lawrence Cunningham. *St. Francis of Assisi*.
San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981.

The Scriptures constantly underscore the responsibility of God's people to share with the poor and help them escape from the grinding effects of poverty. God's Word places responsibility on us to work for justice for the poor. Working for shalom (peace, fullness, abundance, wholeness) means that we will never be content to leave the poor to their poverty while any of us have the means to affect change.

3. Preach the Gospel

Out of all our responses to the poor, none is more important than preaching the Gospel. It is exactly what Jesus himself did. Nothing is more revolutionary in liberating the poor than bringing them into relationship with God through Christ.

No project or program can ever achieve what salvation does for the poor. In coming to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior, the poor experience radical liberation through the acquisition of an entirely new identity.

- They move from being at the bottom of the social structure to being an adopted child of the King of kings.
- God's favor, protection, and resources are made available through Christ.
- They are given authority over sin, hell, and death, and every evil thing that would seek to destroy them.
- They are incorporated into a new community (the Church) which offers equality, respect, love, sharing, fellowship, and the opportunity to exercise their gifts and calling from God.

Salvation means that the presence of the living God is active among the poor bringing freedom, wholeness, and justice. It means that they are now part of a "royal priesthood," "members of a holy nation," in which they serve as "Christ's ambassadors" announcing hope and reconciliation to those around them who have not yet experienced liberation.

4. Expect Great Things

There is, perhaps, no more surprising statement that comes from Jesus' lips than the word he gives to his disciples in John 14:12-14:

I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask for anything in my name, and I will do it.

The intercession of a poor man is acceptable and influential with God.

~ The Pastor of Hermas. Bk. 3. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2.
Eds. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson.
Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995. p. 32.

On the surface, the idea of accomplishing greater things than Jesus seems absurd. And yet, in just a few short years the Book of Acts records more conversions than ever happened within the life and ministry of Jesus.

Two principles underlie this amazing statement. First, Jesus said discipleship reproduces students who are like him (Luke 6.40). Second, when Jesus returned to the Father and sent the Holy Spirit (John 14.16; Acts 2.38), he made his power universally available to all who believe (John 14.14).

It would be easy to expect little from the poor because of their lack of resources. However, when Scripture disciplines our thinking, a new dynamic emerges. We expect congregations of the urban poor to do greater works than Jesus did on earth because they enter into a discipling relationship with Jesus who freely gives them his Holy Spirit.

As we plant churches we must:

- ***Encourage the poor to believe in the calling, gifts, and abilities that God has given them*** (both individually and corporately). We must have faith in what God will do through them even before they believe it themselves.
- ***Set high standards.*** The only acceptable goal for any Christian is to become like Jesus. Being poor is never an excuse for ignoring God's commands or shirking the responsibilities he gives every believer.
- ***Teach people to rely on Jesus, not on us.*** Missionary resources are limited. God's resources are unlimited.
- ***Instill a passion for reproduction*** (evangelism, follow-up, discipleship, and church planting). "You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (John 15.16).

One veteran missionary, who has served in both U.S. and Brazilian cities, describes successful churches among the urban poor in this manner:

Churches . . . that used a “we-help-you-in-your-need” methodology were not winning the lower, working class. People were helped but the spiritual direction of their lives did not change . . . [whereas] churches that lacked financial and earthly resources were filled with poor people, were led by barely literate lay preachers, and made hard demands on people. New members were expected to be faithful tithers, to wear clothes that conformed to a rigid dress code, to carry their Bibles to church, and to dedicate a large amount of time to worship services, healing services, home prayer meetings, street meetings, and outreach visitation. The churches that gave the most and expected the least were not growing, but those that gave the least material benefit and demanded the most were growing fastest. They demanded conversion from sin and preached that Christ had the power to make it happen, and that this power could be received through faith and prayer.

~ Charles D. Uken. “Discipling White, Blue-Collar Workers and Their Families.”
Discipling the City: A Comprehensive Approach to Urban Mission, 2nd ed.
Ed. Roger S. Greenway.
Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992. p. 180.

We honor both God and the poor when we respect them enough to believe that they will function as full-fledged disciples of Jesus Christ.