



UNDERSTANDING POVERTY

LESSON TWO: "NOT EVERYONE DESERVES OUR HELP."

STORY FOR THE DAY

Juan and Linda Miranda and their two children drive 20 miles into their inner-city church every Sunday. They love this church because of its commitment to the needs of the community surrounding it, mostly composed of working poor families. Linda teaches ESL classes on Wednesdays and Juan volunteers weekly in the church kitchen, which offers a free meal to the community.

The past few weeks on their drive to church they have noticed a woman and her child holding a sign at a corner with a stoplight. It reads: "We are hungry. Please help us. God loves you."

"We should bring them to the church," Linda said to her husband. "I bet we could find food for them in the kitchen."

"How long do you think they stand out there each day begging?" Juan wondered.

"I don't know. I've seen them here at different times of the day. Does it really matter?" Linda asks.

"Well," Juan said, "maybe if she went to work instead of standing there all day she would be able to buy food. There are some people who deserve our help and others who don't."

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

How do we know whom to help and how best to help them? Every church has a limited amount of resources to share and yet there is so much need in the world. We have to make choices about who deserves our help and who doesn't, don't we?

Certainly the social service community makes that determination, usually through a process called "means testing." When a person comes into a nonprofit or federal service agency and requests assistance, a staff person who does intake will ask several questions about that person's income level, assets, number of dependents, current employment and employment history. In other words, the means test is used as the primary way to determine who deserves to receive assistance and who doesn't.

That leads us to ask if a church should consider itself a social service agency in its consideration of who to help and when, using its own means test to make that determination. This is what today's lesson will explore.

WORK AND WORTH

Americans, perhaps more than other civilized countries, place great value on independence, hard work, self-initiative and the idea of "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps." In many ways, that attitude is what helped America prosper throughout its history.

The roots of this belief about work and worth preexist the colonization of America, however: It dates to the ancient Greek society, which originated the concept of the "worthy" and the "unworthy" poor. The Greeks' motivation to help those in need was based on the concept of reciprocity, i.e., "We will help you only if you can give us something in return." For instance, an artisan, one who worked with his hands, was considered worthy of receiving assistance because he created something that gave back to society. On the other hand, the work of beggars was considered unworthy because it did not contribute anything tangible to society.

We don't have to look any further than America's current welfare system to see that making determinations about who deserves help and who doesn't still exists in our society. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) – the federal program we mean when we say “welfare” – mandates that recipients work as soon as they can find employment but no later than two years after first receiving assistance. The name of the Welfare Reform laws made in 1996 make this even more clear: “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.” Under TANF, recipients may only receive government assistance for a total of 60 months in a lifetime. In other words, our government wants people to take responsibility for finding opportunities to work, i.e., make a contribution to the economy and society.

As the paragraph above notes, defining “work” raises interesting questions. For most of us, work means doing hard manual labor, providing some type of service, or using our talents, gifts, and education to produce a product (a new building, a clean room, a lesson plan for a 4th grade class, etc.). We consider this “worthy” and evidence that a person is doing all he or she can to be financially independent. But what if there isn't a finished product that contributes to society? Are people in this situation less worthy?

REASONS FOR POVERTY

Sometimes we determine who is worthy and who is unworthy based on the reasons why people are living in poverty. But there are many factors that can lead to a family living in poverty, i.e., economic, environmental and educational factors. And, a fulltime job no longer means someone can escape poverty. Minimum wage, which is mandated by the federal government, does not currently ensure a living wage. One doctor's visit, one flat tire, one trip to the emergency room can blow over the house of cards that the “working poor” struggle to keep intact.

Historically societies and more recently researchers have pointed to three distinct reasons that people fall into poverty:

- **Individual defect:** an illness, becoming orphaned or widowed, having disability, possessing a lack of character.
- **Spiritual defect:** living a sinful life, being amoral, having incorrect beliefs, being slothful/lazy.
- **Environment:** the surroundings you live in impact your condition, such as the Great Depression, globalization, unstable economies, and natural disasters.

» MAKING IT REAL

In small groups, share examples of someone you know or a recent world event that encapsulates one of the three situations noted above.

- Are there differences in how you respond to each of the three categories?
- Which of the reasons seem worthy or unworthy to you?
- Do you think categorizing individuals by these distinctions is appropriate? Practical? Necessary?

WE ARE ALL WORTHY

We can argue that there are good, sound reasons for and against categorizing people as a way to determine whether or not they deserve assistance. The problem for us as Christians, however, is that nothing in scriptures supports our judging a person on these criteria.

We are all unworthy to receive God's unconditional agape love. Nor do any of us deserve the inestimable gift of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for our sins. Yet, in God's radical love, God deems all worthy to receive love and mercy. “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, NIV).

The amazing thing about Christianity is that God meets us where we are. We don't have to be perfect or have our lives all together. All of us make bad choices, but God does not use that as a means test for whether or not God will love us. In fact, we don't have to do anything to earn this love. In God's eyes, we are all worthy to be loved. As followers of Christ, we are to see the world in the same way. All people are worthy

because they are God's creation and because God loves them. That is all. There are no other parameters.

» MAKING IT REAL

Following are three scenarios. Read each aloud at your table and then discuss these questions:

- Do they deserve assistance? Why or why not?
- Which of the three reasons for poverty listed in lesson, if any, apply to this scenario? Why or why not?
- Whose responsibility, if anyone's, is it to help this person?

Scenario 1:

Angela is the mother of two toddlers who works a fulltime, minimum wage job. Her ex-husband does not provide child support and she has no family that can help her through unexpected expenses. In one month's time, both children become ill and must go to the doctor and take antibiotics. Because her low-paying service job does not provide insurance benefits, Angela must pay for these expenses herself, but there is not enough money to pay those bills and the rent for their one-bedroom apartment.

Scenario 2:

Joe has served three missions in Iraq. Now back in the States, he is suffering from nightmares, panic attacks, insomnia and depression – symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. He cannot keep his job and even though his wife continues to work, they are unable to pay all their bills. They have enough savings left to pay the rent for two more months, but then they don't know what they'll do.

Scenario 3:

William and JoAnn are in their 70s, retired and living on a fixed income. Both worked throughout their lives and carefully saved and planned for their retirement. Skyrocketing prices for gasoline and food have stretched their monthly living allowance to its maximum. They now find themselves having to choose between buying food, gasoline or their prescriptions.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Take time to reflect on the unconditional love of Christ. When have you been shown unconditional love in your own life? What affect did it have on you? Has there been a time when love has been withheld? How did this affect you?

BENEDICTION

"But what had lasting significance were not the miracles themselves but Jesus' love. Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead, and a few years later, Lazarus died again. Jesus healed the sick, but they eventually caught some other disease. He fed the ten thousands, and the next day they were hungry again. But we remember his love. It wasn't that Jesus healed a leper but that he touched a leper, because no one touched lepers."

— Shane Claiborne



CALL TO BE ATTENTIVE

Reflect on Matthew 25 this week in light of what you learned in today's lesson. Does this passage impact how you see the person standing on the street corner begging for work? Follow the news this week, looking for stories about welfare and disaster relief assistance, and be attentive to your reactions.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Begging is hard work!

Does the idea that begging might be considered work surprise you? It does most people. If you are unskilled and uneducated, how do you make enough money to feed your children? Is collecting recyclables from dumpsters all day to turn in for cash working? Think about how you define work.