

## **Building a Church That Helps The Poor**

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Rich Nathan

April 21-22, 2007

Building a Church For Others Series

James 1:27

About 35 years ago there was some first year seminary students at an evangelical seminary called The Trinity Evangelical Divinity School up near Chicago, who decided to do a Bible study on the poor and God's response to injustice. What they did, these 21-22 year-old first year seminary students, was to scour the Bible and to underline every single verse in the Old Testament and New Testament that dealt with the issue of poverty and injustice. And the incredible thing was that they found several thousands Bible verses regarding the poor and God's response to injustice. They found in the Old Testament that it was the second most prominent theme in the Hebrew Bible next to idolatry. In fact, the two – idolatry and injustice, especially to the poor, were often united. One out of every sixteen verses in the New Testament is related to the poor or money. One out of ten verses in the gospels is related to the poor and money; and one out of seven verses in the book of Luke is related to the poor and money.

Let me give you some illustrations from the Pentateuch that Jews call The Torah.

SLIDE – Deut. 15:10-11

10 Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. 11 There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward those of your people who are poor and needy in your land.

From the book of Proverbs, we read in Proverbs 19:17,

SLIDES – Prov. 19:17

17 Those who are kind to the poor lend to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done.

Prov. 22:29

29 Do you see those who are skilled in their work? They will serve before kings; they will not serve before officials of low rank.

From the Prophets:

SLIDE – Isa. 58:7-11

7 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 them, and not to turn away from

your own flesh and blood? 8 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. 9 Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, 10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. 11 The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

From the words of Jesus:

SLIDE – Lk. 4:18-19

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

From the practice of the early church:

SLIDE – Acts 11:27-30

27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) 29 The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the believers living in Judea. 30 This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

From the Epistles:

SLIDE – James 1:27

27 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.

SLIDE – 1 John 3:16-19

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17 If any one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. 19 This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence:

Now, these last passages are particularly significant. What the New Testament is telling us is you can't be a follower of Jesus if you don't help the poor. You

can't call yourself a Christian if you don't help the poor. I've given you just 6-7 passages out of more than 2000 in the Bible regarding the poor and God's response to injustice.

Then these seminary students sat around and talked about their experience in evangelical churches. And none of the people could remember even a single entire sermon devoted to the subject of the poor. They had heard messages about tongues, of which there are only a few verses in the Bible. They had heard messages about the millennium, again, in which there are just a few verses in the Bible. They heard about Anti-Christ, about homosexuality. But this major theme, the poor, they couldn't recall even one whole sermon in their entire lives.

So one of the seminary students decided to engage in a little experiment. He took out a pair of scissors and began to cut out every single verse in the Bible that dealt with the poor and with injustice. Snip, snip, snip – out came the story of the Good Samaritan, all of the references in the Torah to the Year of Jubilee, and the practice of leveling the society in which slaves would be periodically set free, and debts would be cancelled, and the land would be redistributed, all of that, cut out. Mary's famous prophetic word in her Magnificate in which she says in Luke 1.52-53

SLIDE – Luke 1:52-53

52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

Snip, snip – cut out. All of the passages in which Paul and Peter and James urge us to be generous to the poor; get rid of them.

At the end of this experiment, the Bible was absolutely shredded. One of the men carried that shredded Bible around for years. And when he preached on the subject of the poor, he said, "This is the evangelical Bible. It is a Bible full of holes."

SLIDE

The problem of a Bible filled with holes.

In the evangelical church, we have closed our eyes to one of the major themes in the entire scripture.

Last week I started a series that I titled "Building a Church for Others." The title of the series comes from something that a German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote when he was imprisoned in the Flossenburg Concentration Camp during WWII. He wrote a letter to a friend saying,

SLIDE

*The church is only the church when it exists for others.*

Building a church for others has been a repeated theme here at Vineyard Columbus. In fact, our Vision Statement that we teach at every Newcomers Class and every leaders class reads this way:

SLIDE

Our vision is to be R.E.L.E.V.A.N.T church that does not exist for itself, but for Christ and for the world.

A church is only a church when it gives itself away. We have to live for something bigger than ourselves. If we don't exist for others and for God, but we only exist for our own members, then whatever else we are, we are not a church. We are a religious club. We are a gathering of friends. We are a box of puppies that lick each other. But we are not a church.

Today, I want to continue this theme about building a church for others. I've called today's talk, "Building A Church That Helps The Poor." Let's pray.

Now, who are the poor according to the scriptures? When we talk about the poor, who are the poor in the Bible? As you read through the Old Testament, there are three groups of people that are mentioned over and over again as the poor, who needed to be helped. They are:

SLIDE

In Scripture: The Foreigner, the Fatherless, and the Widow

SLIDE – Deut. 24:17-22

17 Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. 18 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. 19 When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. 20 When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. 21 When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. 22 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.

Why did the Old Testament single out these three groups: The foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow, as being special objects of concern for the community of God's people?

Well, understand that in ancient Israelite society, men, especially the head of a clan, would be the providers and protectors for their wives and children. As was often the case, the provider and protector would die and leave behind a wife and

children who had no provision, no protector. The foreigner was literally the refugee, the person who was escaping from famine in their country, or war in their country. The widow, the fatherless, the foreigner were three categories of people who were living on the knife's edge of survival. Almost anything could push them over into complete destitution. If the larger society didn't help, they could starve, or go without shelter. We are talking about the dependent, the vulnerable, those who can't make a go of life by themselves, but need assistance.

Now, who are the poor today? It is not hard to find the poor around the world, or the poor in America.

SLIDE

Today: The uninsured, the homeless, the hungry, and the unborn

Tony Hall, who is one of my heroes, served in Congress for 24 years.

SLIDE – Picture of Tony Hall

He is a Democrat from Dayton; a thorough-going Christian; completely committed to the pro-life cause; made eliminating hunger his focus in Congress. He chaired the House Select Committee on Hunger. He was the founder and chair of the Congressional Hunger Center, which was a non-governmental organization dedicated to fighting hunger in developing nations. He authored legislation supporting food aid and child survival and primary health care, development assistance for the world's poorest countries.

President Bush appointed him to be the U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. agencies that fight hunger around the world. Tony Hall has been nominated for the Nobel Prize three times. He is an incredible human being. Tony Hall said that when he went to Ethiopia a few years ago, what was striking as he went around the country was everywhere there was a low moan, human beings sitting by the side of the road, wailing and moaning because they were starving to death. Women weeping because they had nothing to give to their children.

Tony Hall said, "But you know, it is not just around the world. Of course, America has an infinitely higher standard of living than the rest of the world, but I don't think Americans know about the hunger in America. But you can see it everywhere. Just talk to Senior Citizens to discover they are making \$800 a month on Social Security, but their medical bills are \$750 a month. Just talk to the work poor to discover they are making \$6-7 an hour and have a couple of kids. The people are shy and embarrassed. They don't want to be on welfare."

Tony Hall said, "If Americans found about this, I think they would change."

Let me tell you about a woman in Columbus named Viola Casey. Viola was part of our community for ten years. She was from Appalachia. She used to receive food stamps. At the age of 95 the government reduced her food stamps to \$28 a month. Here is this wonderful woman; she is 95 years old, living in the city of Columbus and she is completely others-centered. Viola, at age 95, used to go to Senior Citizen shelters in her words, "to visit the old people." She never considered herself old. She died at age 100. If the church hadn't come along and supplemented what Viola had by way of food, Viola would have starved to death.

There is a Senior Citizen shelter on the Eastside of town called "Barnett Plaza." The women there are as young as 70 and as old as 101. They receive food stamps. I want to read to you a letter from these women.

SLIDE – Letter

*Dear Pastor Rich,*

*We the Ladies of Barnett Plaza would like to thank you for all your help at our Senior Independent Living Apartments. We appreciate the food bags that are delivered to us twice a month by Deseree Middlebrook, who runs our senior activities group voluntarily every Monday and Wednesday. Some of us receive only \$10-40 dollars a month in food stamps, and because of our incomes, the food that is provided to us helps a great deal. We also have a "giving table" where we share some of the food with others in the building.*

*We would like to thank the small group of Cyndia Garris for taking an interest in us, by keeping us active in worshiping and various craft activities. We also met Patricia Mason. We hear from Deseree that she is active in our receiving food and helping the senior ministry. Thank the staff at the Fruit of the Vine for being there for us. We have been blessed by the warm hearts of the Vineyard Pantry.*

*We also like the ministry that Deseree provides for us. We start our group with prayer and devotional ministry. We then have exercise class on Monday, in which we have a workout and on Wednesday's she takes us out to lunch each month, play bingo, and all sorts of games. She also provides us with speakers, physicians (a podiatrist, a physician that makes house calls!) to come to the center.*

*Pastor Nathan, it is with deep gratitude that we write this letter to you. Your church has been a blessing to us and our building. We have invited others in the building to come and worship with us, so hopefully they will come and see the gifts from your church. We hope to visit your church and meet you soon. Again, thank you and the special people of Vineyard Church of Columbus, and may God bless you all.*

*Sincerely,*

*The Ladies of Barnett Plaza*

Unfortunately, our outreaches have been shut down by the management there and so we are praying that God would open that up for us again.

It is not hard to find the poor in America. Nearly 200,000 of Franklin County residents don't have any health insurance. And, if you are a parent, and you've got sick children and you don't have the money to take those sick children to the doctor, you know how vulnerable you feel, how absolutely powerless you feel, how dependent you are.

We've been running our free medical clinic down on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue for the last 8 years or so. But we have every week a line up of people who have no access to medical care. And to be able to go into a clinic where someone treats you kindly, you don't have to feel ashamed because you don't have insurance, you are treated with dignity; if you are an immigrant, we have someone who reads all of the announcements in Spanish every week. We have a row of folks who are Latino who come to the clinic. And they know that there is going to be someone there that they can connect to. And it is done in a Christ-centered environment. There is hardly a week that goes by that we don't see 3-4 people come to Christ week in and week out for 8 years. We're talking about thousands of people who have been helped medically and also helped spiritually.

But it is not hard to find people in America who are poor. There is a study done recently by HUD in which they said that there were  $\frac{3}{4}$  million Americans who are homeless on any given night in the US. They are either living in shelters or on the streets. Nearly  $\frac{1}{4}$  of those folks are children under the age of 17. The Community Shelter Board here in Franklin County just put out a report that said that this past year there were over 1600 homeless children in our community. Homelessness is not just an issue for men who struggle with alcohol or drugs. Homelessness is an issue that impacts families; it impacts children; it impacts women; it impacts men. We simply have a lot of people in our community who are vulnerable. They are a lay-off away; an illness way; a divorce away from being out on the streets.

Praise God that hundreds of people here in the Vineyard have chosen to open their eyes to the issue of homelessness. Just this past month by the grace of God the church was able to assist four people to get off the streets. And we couple everything we do with not only maximum love, but maximum truth.

Who are the vulnerable? Who are the powerless? Who are the people living on the knife's edge? Certainly in America this includes the unborn. The head of our pro-life ministry, Diane Bauman, met this week with Mt. Carmel West. They found out about our pro-life ministry and were totally blown away that we would help people who were not members of our church, who were in at-risk pregnancies. They kept asking questions:

## SLIDE

- Well, what if they are Catholic, would you help them? YES!
- What if they need a crib, could you find a crib? YES!
- What if they had a baby and are not married, would you still help them? YES!
- Well, what if they had an abortion before? Yes!

One of the social workers there was in tears. She said, “Your church does more than the government to help women who are thinking about getting an abortion. Other places have so many guidelines and the wait is so long.” She couldn’t believe that there was a place where someone would come along side of a woman who was in an at-risk pregnancy.

Just this past Monday someone in the church dropped off a crib, a new mattress, baby clothes that they had just purchased.

Who are the poor today?

What does the Bible teach us about having money? We understand that the biblical message about money is different than the world’s message. Biblically we understand that we can be materially wealthy and be spiritually impoverished. Biblically we understand that we can be materially wealthy and be relationally impoverished. Biblically we understand that we can be materially wealthy and have no sense of purpose. We understand that we can be materially wealthy and have no sense of meaning.

I like what Mother Teresa said in her book, *No Greater Love*, which we have copies of in our bookstore. She said:

## SLIDE

*Poverty doesn’t only consist of being hungry for bread, but rather it’s a tremendous hunger for human dignity. We need to love and be somebody for someone else.*

*The world today is hungry not only for bread, but hungry for love, hungry to be wanted, to be loved. They’re hungry to feel the presence of Christ. In many countries people have everything except the presence of Christ and an understanding of Christ’s love.*

This week brought back all the terrible memories of the school shootings over the last couple of decades: the Columbine shooters. They were materially well off, suburban kids, living in Littleton, Colorado, which has been described as “every burb in the USA with a view of the Rockies.” Dylan Klebold drove a BMW. Eric Harris lived in a perfect suburban home with a privacy fence, his mom gardening all the time, materially well off, spiritually impoverished.



Seung-Hui Cho's life was different. His family emigrated from South Korea, so the kids could have a great education like so many Korean immigrants. There is this passion for getting your kids educated. They seemed right on the verge of achieving the American dream. They have a 26-year old daughter, who graduated from Princeton. Their 23-year old son was going to Virginia Tech. Educationally well off; spiritually, emotionally, relationally utterly impoverished.

So, what does the Bible teach about wealth? Here is what we read in 1 Tim. 6.17-19,

SLIDE – 1 Ti 6:17-19

17 Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. 19 In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

We read several things about our money. We read first of all that money is dangerous.

SLIDE

17 Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

We may think we're better than other people because we have more money than they do. Many Christians have fallen into the trap of believing that the fact that they are prosperous materially means that they must be prospering spiritually. So we are told that there is a danger in wealth. Because I am wealthy, God is pleased with me and I will certainly inherit heaven when I die.

But the Bible avoids two extremes which every culture falls into regarding money and wealth: the danger of materialism, and the danger of asceticism. Concerning the danger of materialism, v. 17 says:

SLIDE – 1 Ti 6:17

17 Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

Shopping never gave anyone a sense of ultimate meaning despite what all the advertisers and marketers say to the contrary. You will never fill your spiritual needs at Easton or Polaris. Another pair of shoes, another purse, and another item for your home will not satisfy your hunger for God or your hunger for

relationship with other people. Having a good income does not make you a good person. And living the good life does not mean that you have a good conscience.

So the Bible never sinks into the error of materialism. But it also avoids the error on the other side of the road, of asceticism. V. 17,

SLIDE

17 Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

The Bible doesn't say that things are bad in themselves, or that you should get rid of everything you own to become a spiritual person. At least it certainly doesn't say that for everyone, even if a few are called to that kind of life. So how should we feel about having a good income? How should we feel about having a nice house, or a nice car, or a nice savings account? Does the Bible say you should feel guilty because you've done well, because you've prospered?

Nowhere are we taught that you should feel guilty because you have some money, or some property. But we are taught that you should feel responsible for people outside of your family. That if you have money, if you have property, if you've prospered in any way, don't feel guilty the Bible teaches, feel responsible to those in need. V. 18:

SLIDE – 1 Ti 6:18

18 Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.

Use your abundance to help others who have less than you. See, this is one of the places that I differ with those who teach "prosperity teaching." Many folks are impacted by that teaching and come away with the notion that well; God has blessed me so my only responsibility is for me and my family to consume the blessing for ourselves. The biblical teaching is God has blessed me so that I might be a blessing to others. God has shown me grace so that I might be gracious to others. God has been generous to me so that I can be generous and open-handed to others. And I know that I can't take my wealth with me when I die. You've never seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul in back of it. I can't take my wealth with me when I die. But we are taught in this passage, when I am generous, help the poor, I'm sending my wealth ahead. V. 19:

SLIDE – 1 Tim. 6:19

19 In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

I can't take it with me, but I can send it ahead.

So why should we help the poor? I'm just going to tick off the reasons for you. I'm not going to explain these passages. But as I said, there are over 2000 verses regarding the poor and God's concern about injustice in the world. I easily could have come up with several dozen reasons from those 2000 verses about why we should help the poor. Here are 8:

- Because we were poor and God helped us (Dt. 10.19; 2 Cor. 8.9)

SLIDE – Deut. 10:19

19 And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.

SLIDE – 2 Cor. 8:9

9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

The Bible continually reminds us of what state we were found in when God found us. And if you don't believe that you were rescued from a state of need, then you don't understand salvation, and it may be that you are not yet a Christian. All of us come to God in a state of need, or we don't come at all.

Why should we help the poor?

SLIDE

- Because God identifies with the poor (Prov. 19.17; Mt. 25.34, 35)

SLIDE – Pr 19:17

17 Those who are kind to the poor lend to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done.

SLIDE – Mt 25:34-35

34 "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. 35 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 recognize that that text is not just about the poor in general, but the poor who are members of the family of God. But I love this notion that there is such a close identification of God with the plight of the poor that when we give to the poor, we are lending to the Lord. God, who had need of nothing; God who owns everything; God who give us the ability to make our money; this God says: I have so closely aligned myself with the poor that when you give to the poor, I am putting myself in your debt.

That is an outrageous statement. It is a shocking statement. It is one that we shrink back in saying, yet, God says it.

Why should we help the poor?

SLIDE

- Because God protects the poor (Deut. 10.17, 18)

SLIDE – Deut 10:17-18

17 For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. 18 He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigners residing among you, giving them food and clothing.

God defends the poor. And we don't want to be on the other side of God's activity.

Why should we help the poor?

SLIDE

- Because God won't hear our prayers, if we don't help (Prov. 21.13)

SLIDE – Prov. 21:13

13 Those who shut their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered.

Friend, you know there are a lot of Bible verses regarding why our prayers may be bouncing off the ceiling. We pray and pray and we don't get any answers. We say: What's wrong here. God says: Your prayers are blocked. When we are at odds with our spouses, God says your prayers are blocked. When we are living in sin, God says your prayers are blocked. When we shut our eyes and close our ears to the cry of the poor, God says your prayers are blocked.

Well, Lord, I want you to hear my prayers. God says: Well, then you be the answer to the prayers of the poor.

Why should we help the poor?

SLIDE

- Because we can't call ourselves Christians, if we don't help (1 John 3.16-19)

SLIDE – 1 John 3:16-19

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17 If any one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. 19 This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence:

SLIDE – James 2:14-17

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

You mean, Lord, I can’t call myself a follower of Jesus if I don’t help someone in need? See, the way that we prove that we have genuine faith, that our faith is more than just mere profession, but that I really possess Christ is because I am willing to help someone in need.

Why should we help someone in need?

SLIDE

- Because caring for the poor leads to blessing and eternal reward

SLIDE – Prov. 22:9

9 The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.;

SLIDE - Luke 12:33

33 Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.

There are dozens of promises in the Bible that link blessing in this world and in the New Creation with giving to the poor. God regularly says: You will be blessed.

Why give to the poor?

SLIDE

- Because caring for the poor is what good people do

SLIDE - Acts 9:36

36 In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor.

You want to be a decent human being? You want to think of yourself as having a good heart, that you are a good person? Be generous to the poor.

Why give to the poor?

SLIDE

- Because we are commanded to

SLIDE - Luke 10:36-37

36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" 37 The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Over and over and over God tells his people in the Bible to not just store up what he has given us; to not hoard up our wealth, but to give it away, to be a channel of his blessing, to be generous. There is reason after reason piled up in many, many passages. The Spirit of God speaks to us and says: Give. Help the poor. Give. Be generous. Open your hand. Care about others. Let your heart be touched. Feel the pain of other people in this world.

So, what keeps us from helping? Let me suggest three things. Politics keep us from helping. We say: I am not a bleeding heart liberal.

SLIDE

I am not a bleeding heart liberal.

So many evangelicals are shaped more by political considerations, by our identification with certain political perspectives than we are by the Word of God. Politics keeps us from helping. There is so much debate politically about why poor people are poor. What are the causes of poverty? Let's be honest and say that there are verses in the Bible that liberals won't look at. A person can become poor through self-indulgence. Prov. 21:17 says:

SLIDE – Prov. 21:17

17 Whoever loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich.

We can make a decent living and yet waste it on drugs, alcohol, or eating out at restaurants, or with the unwise use of credit, or cigarettes, or costly furniture, jewelry, or gambling. The Bible teaches that you can become poor through self-indulgence.

The Bible teaches that you can become poor through laziness. God's Word explicitly says that the result of laziness will be poverty.

SLIDE – Prov. 10:4

4 Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth.

SLIDE – Prov. 20:4

4 Sluggards do not plow in season; so at harvest time they look but find nothing.

People on the conservative right are correct in saying that we won't be able to break the problem of poverty until we deal with the problem of broken families. Family breakdown is a cause of poverty. We can't just approach poverty as an economic issue. We've got to support marriage and stable two-parent families. The two-parent family is an anti-poverty measure. And sexual promiscuity can't be helped by money. And bad personal choices can't be covered up by money.

But friends, it is also the case that people make terrible choices in the suburbs. And there is family breakdown in the suburbs. And there is drug use by kids in the suburbs, and self-indulgence in the suburbs, and sexual promiscuity in the suburbs. So the well-off are not well-off simply because of great moral choices.

And it is a horrible, dreadful misreading of scripture of the most incredibly selective kind to suggest that the entirety of the biblical message is that the poor are poor because of their own bad choices. People are poor because the homes and businesses have been wiped out in a flood. People are poor because of oppression and injustice in America. People are poor because of historic racism. People are poor because of catastrophe and illness and a lack of education; and around the world, insufficient natural resource such as rain; insufficient technology; insufficient skills. Oppression figures much more prominently in the Bible as a cause of poverty than does laziness.

So, helping the poor is not a matter of being liberal or left-wing. It is a matter of being a Christian. In the church we have the capacity to bring together the two sides of the coin that politics keeps apart – personal moral choices and social justice. We understand in the church that bad moral choices will not lead to a good life. But we also understand that good moral choices won't necessarily lead to a good education in the inner city, or the relief of hunger around the world.

There is a man named Floyd Flake, who is the pastor of an enormous church in Jamaica Queens, very near where I grew up in NYC. Floyd was a congressman for years while he pastored this church. Here is a man who gets along with people on both sides of the political aisle. He is thoroughly pro-life, thoroughly committed to family values. He calls people to personal holiness. Listen to some of the things that Floyd Flake's church has done:

SLIDE

- They've built hundreds of apartments for seniors

- They've built 100 two-family houses

They did this to deal with the issue of affordable housing.

#### SLIDE

- They opened a retail complex to help people find good jobs.
- They run a drug-counseling center.
- They have a Head-Start pre-school
- They assist in a battered women's shelter

Floyd says poverty is not a political issue; it is a human issue. He doesn't spend a lot of time trying to figure out who is to blame for people being poor. He says: We are all responsible to help – the government, business, non-governmental organizations and the church. We're all responsible to find solutions.

Why don't we help despite the many commands in the Bible to help the poor? Because we say:

#### SLIDE

I am only one person.

It is the problem of inadequacy. When Representative Tony Hall went to Calcutta on one of his many trips to visit Mother Teresa, he said: Mother Teresa, as I look around India, the problem of poverty is so staggeringly huge and even with what you are doing, it is just a drop in the bucket.

Mother Teresa said: No, it is not just a drop in the bucket. It is a drop in the ocean. But if I didn't do something, there would be one less drop.

She went on to say: We can't do everything, just do what is in front of you

Why don't we help despite the many verses in the Bible commanding us to help the poor?

#### SLIDE

I don't need a plan or a budget.

Here is the problem of intentionality. A budget, whether your own family budget, or the national budget, is a spiritual document. Many years ago I heard someone say: I can tell you in five minutes what you really care about by just examining your checkbook and Day-Timer. What a convicting statement.

In other words: Don't tell me about how much you love Jesus and how you put him first in your life. I can tell what is first in your life by just flipping through your checkbook and going through your Day-Timer. Where do you spend your money



and where do you spend your time? That is what you value no matter what you say.

And so when we look down our national budget, what do we discover? We discover that we spend more on our military than the next 19 nations in the world combined. And much of the spending is not to care for soldiers or their families or their medical needs. We shortchange soldiers and their families. Many soldiers who are fighting in Iraq have families living on food stamps. My niece is one of those people. She lives in a trailer on an enlisted man's pay with two little boys. And her husband is back in Iraq on his second tour.

What are we spending money on? Incredibly expensive weapons systems for umpteen billion dollars. Pet projects of congressmen to help wealthy supporters. What don't we spend money on? Hunger. The government just cut a program that provides monthly boxes of food to low-income seniors.

About a decade ago Christian Rep. Tony Hall was overseeing a subcommittee on hunger in Congress. The subcommittee cost the government \$600,000. In an effort to save money, they cut Tony Hall's subcommittee. He couldn't believe it. We are wasting hundreds of billions of dollars as a government and we can't find \$600,000 to investigate better ways to deal with hunger in America? Some college students found out about this. They began to organize other college students to declare a fast. Rep. Hall also fasted with them. And the folks who were responsible for cutting the program decided to restore the program.

You can tell what someone values by looking at their budget. Friends, do the poor show up in your checkbook?

So, what can you do? On your outlines I have listed several things that you can do to respond to this message. First of all:

SLIDE

Read and study, especially the Bible.

Let me make one book suggestion. It is the book by Tony Hall that we will have in the bookstore. It is titled

SLIDE

*Changing the Face of Hunger: One Man's Story Of How Liberals, Conservatives, Democrats, Republicans, and People of Faith are Joining Forces to Help the Hungry, the Poor, and the Oppressed*

Read and study.

SLIDE

Get to know someone in need.

You know, we stop speculating about the reasons why the poor are poor when you actually know someone who is poor, homeless, or living on a fixed income, who are working hard to meet ends meet, yet still can't afford medical attention for their children or for themselves. Find out how you, or you and your kids can connect with someone in need in our community. Get to know someone.

#### SLIDE

Plan to give to the poor.

Week by week I say to you at the end of the service: Put some money in the boxes in the back for the poor. Start doing that. That money flows through our Fruit Of The Vine ministry to purchase food and to assist our homeless friends and working families who are seeking medical attention.

But I would say, friends, over and above that, whether you give to the community center, or you choose to give to a mission this church is supporting, or you find something outside of the church that is accountable and responsible with funds, have the poor show up in your checkbook month after month.

#### SLIDE

Advocate for laws that help the poor.

Some of you can write letters to the Editor. Some of you can petition or call congressmen and state representatives. Find out about the situation involving the uninsured, the homeless, the hungry and the unborn and start getting politically involved.

#### SLIDE

Be a Christian voice in the workplace

Some of you have hiring influence at your firm or at your company. One of the greatest anti-poverty measures is helping a person to find a decent job so that they are not dependent on the church or on government. We have a couple in the church who work for a company in town where they have hiring influence. And this couple has worked with the church in getting decent paying jobs with benefits for a few single moms in the church.

You say: Well, I'm not running a charity, Rich. I'm running a business. I need to know that people are going to show up; that they are going to work hard; that I'm not going to be embarrassed if I hire them.

If you have a job opening, you call our community center. We'll get the people. We'll work together with you to make sure that you have folks who are hard working, who show up on time. If you have hiring influence, give people a chance. Partner with this church.

## SLIDE

- Join Kingdom Builders Group

If you have extra resources, then join our Kingdom Builders Group. If you have extra resources, if God has prospered you, email me. Say: Rich, tell me more about the Kingdom Builders group. We have about 20-25 men and women who have joined the group. Our group is working together to fund certain projects, but also to strategize about ways to leverage our resources for the Kingdom of God.

Finally,

## SLIDE

Do something.

Don't walk away from this message and do nothing. Do something. Here are two practical things, two practical ways from today's message:

On Saturday, May 12<sup>th</sup>, we are going to have an all-church volunteer effort that we are calling SERVE Columbus.

## SLIDE

SERVE Columbus

We will be deploying approximately 30 mini-teams all over our community to "do the stuff" and serve the people of our city. Projects will fall under 3 categories: Kindness, Service & Mercy Ministry.

And at the end of the service, on your way out the door, we are going to handing out bags with a label on them with food items that you can buy and bring back to the church to stock our food pantry.

## SLIDE

- Fill a food bag!

If you are not planning to go to the grocery to fill that bag, don't take a bag. But if you say: Yes, I will fill a bag for hungry people in the community, then take a bag. If you have children, show them what you are doing. "Honey, we are filling this bag. It is not going to us. It is going to go to a poor person in our city." Take one of the bags on your way out.

We want to be a church that helps the poor! God bless you!

## **Building A Church That Helps The Poor**

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Rich Nathan

April 21-22, 2007

Building A Church For Others

James 1.27

### ***I. The Problem Of A Bible With Holes***

### ***II. Who Are The Poor?***

A. In Scripture: The Alien, The Fatherless, and The Widow  
(Dt. 24.17-22)

B. Today: The Uninsured, The Homeless, The Hungry, The Unborn

### ***III. What Does The Bible Teach About Wealth? (1 Tim. 6.17-19)***

### ***IV. Why Should We Help The Poor?***

- A. Because we were poor and God helped us (Dt. 10.19; 2 Cor. 8.9)
- B. Because God identifies with the poor (Prov. 19.17; Mt. 25.34, 35)
- C. Because God protects the poor (Dt. 10.17, 18)
- D. Because God won't hear our prayers, if we don't help (Prov. 21.13)
- E. Because we can't call ourselves Christians, if we don't help  
(1 Jn. 3.16-19)
- F. Because caring for the poor leads to blessing and eternal reward  
(Prov. 22.9; Lk. 12.33)
- G. Because caring for the poor is what good people do  
(Acts 9.36; 10.24)
- H. Because we are commanded to (Lk. 10.36, 37)

### ***V. What Keeps us From Helping?***

- A. I Am Not A Bleeding Heart Liberal. The Problem of Politics
- B. I Am Only One Person. The Problem of Inadequacy
- C. I Don't Need A Plan or a Budget. The Problem of Intentionality

### ***VI. What Can We Do TO Help The Poor?***

- A. Read and Study (Especially the Bible)
- B. Get to Know Someone in Need
- C. Plan to Give to the Poor
- D. Advocate for Laws That Help the Poor
- E. Be a Christian Voice in the Workplace
- F. Join our Kingdom Builders Group
- G. Do Something!