



Study Questions

1. How is the gap between rich and poor different from what you had thought?
2. What are some of the best measures of that gap?
3. How does advertising contribute to our problem? What are some of the theological questions raised by advertising?
4. How does solving poverty help reduce overpopulation?
5. What rationalizations of affluence are most convincing? For yourself? Your friends?
6. Is there any sense in which this book is about joy and self-fulfillment? Explain.

Part Two

A Biblical Perspective on the Poor and Possessions

"If you preach the gospel in all aspects with the exception of the issues which deal specifically with your time you are not preaching the gospel at all."¹



Social scientists who examined the factors that shape American attitudes on matters related to the development of the poorest nations discovered that religion plays no significant role at all! Those with deep religious beliefs are no more concerned about assistance and development for the poor than are persons with little or no religious commitment.²

Most wealthy Christians have failed to seek God's perspective on the plight of our billion hungry neighbors—surely one of the most pressing issues of our time.

But I refuse to believe that this failure must inevitably continue. I believe there are millions of affluent Christians who care more about Jesus than anything else in the world. There are millions of Christians who will take any risk, make any sacrifice, forsake any treasure, if they see clearly that God's Word demands it. That is why Part Two—A Biblical Perspective on the Poor and Possessions—is the most important section of this book.

Part Two is full of Scripture. But even so it is only a small selection of the vast volume of biblical material. My book *For They Shall Be Fed* contains almost two hundred pages of biblical texts that relate directly to the four chapters in this section.³

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God and the Poor

He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD (Proverbs 19:17).

I know that the LORD maintains the cause of the afflicted, and executes justice for the needy (Psalm 140:12).



Is God biased in favor of the poor? Is he on their side in a way that he is not on the side of the rich? Some theologians say yes.¹ But until we clarify the meaning of the question, we cannot answer it correctly. Does it mean that God desires the salvation of poor people more than that of the rich? Does it mean that God and his people treat the poor so much differently from the way the ungodly treat them that God seems to have a special concern for the poor and oppressed? Furthermore, just who are "the poor" in the Bible?

The Hebrew words for the poor are *ani*, *anaw*, *ebyon*, *dal*, and *ras*. *Ani* (and *anaw*, which originally had approximately the same meaning) denotes one who is "wrongfully impoverished or dispossessed."² *Ebyon* refers to a beggar imploring charity. *Dal* connotes a thin, weakly person such as an impoverished, deprived peasant.³ Unlike the others, *ras* is an essentially neutral term. In their persistent polemic against the oppression of the poor, the prophets used the terms *ebyon*, *ani*, and *dal*. In the New Testament, the primary word for the poor is *ptochos*, which refers to someone, like a beggar, who is completely destitute and must seek help from others. It is the Greek equivalent of *ani* and *dal*.⁴ Thus the primary connotation of "the poor" in Scripture has to do with low economic status usually due to calamity or some form of oppression.

The Scriptures also teach that some folk are poor because they are lazy and slothful (e.g., Prov. 6:6-11; 19:15; 20:13; 21:25; 24:30-34). And, of course, the Bible speaks of voluntary poverty for the sake of the kingdom.

The most common biblical connotation of "the poor," however, relates to those who are economically impoverished due to calamity or exploitation.⁵ This chapter deals with this last category.

We can answer the questions about God's alleged bias toward the poor only after finding biblical answers to five related questions: (1) What concern for the poor did God disclose at pivotal points in history when he revealed himself (especially the Exodus, the destruction of Israel and Judah, and the Incarnation)? (2) In what sense does God identify with the poor? (3) Of what significance is the fact that God frequently chooses to work through the poor and oppressed? (4) What does the Bible mean by the recurring teaching that God frequently destroys the rich and exalts the poor? (5) Does God command his people to have a special concern for the poor?

Pivotal Points of Revelation History

The Bible clearly and repeatedly teaches a fundamental point that we often overlook. At the crucial moments when God displayed his mighty acts to reveal his nature and will, God also intervened to liberate the poor and oppressed.

The Exodus

God displayed his power at the Exodus in part to free oppressed slaves. When he called Moses at the burning bush, part of God's intent was to end suffering and injustice: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians" (Ex. 3:7-8 NRSV).

This text does not reflect an isolated perspective on the great event of the Exodus. Each year at the harvest festival the Israelites repeated a liturgical confession celebrating the way God had acted to free their poor, oppressed nation.

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there. . . . The Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; The LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. (Deut. 26:5-8 NRSV)

The God of the Bible cares when people enslave and oppress others. At the Exodus, God acted to end economic oppression and bring freedom to slaves.

The liberation of slaves was not, of course, God's only purpose in the Exodus. He also acted because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In addition, God wanted to create a special people to whom he could reveal himself.⁶ Both of these concerns were central to God's activity at the Exodus. The liberation of a poor, oppressed people, however, was also at the heart of God's design. The following passage discloses God's multifaceted purpose in the Exodus:

I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant [with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob] . . . I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. (Ex. 6:5-7 NRSV)

Yahweh wanted his people to know him as the One who freed them from slavery and oppression.

The preamble to the Ten Commandments, probably the most important portion of the entire law for Israel, begins with this same revolutionary truth. Before he gives the two tables of the law, Yahweh identifies himself: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Deut. 5:6; Ex. 20:2 NRSV). Yahweh is the one who frees from bondage. The God of the Bible wants to be known as the liberator of the oppressed.

The Exodus was the decisive event in the creation of the chosen people. We distort the biblical interpretation of this momentous occasion if we fail to see that the Lord of the universe was at work correcting oppression and liberating the poor.

Destruction and Captivity

Soon after the Israelites settled in the Promised Land, they discovered that Yahweh's passion for justice was a two-edged sword. When they were oppressed, it led to their freedom. But when they became the oppressors, it led to their destruction.

When God called Israel out of Egypt and made his covenant with them, God gave them his law so that they could live together in peace and justice. But Israel failed to obey the law of the covenant. As a result, God destroyed Israel and sent his chosen people back into captivity.

Why?

The explosive message of the prophets is that God destroyed Israel because of their mistreatment of the poor. Idolatry was an equally prominent reason, but too often we remember only Israel's "spiritual" problem of idolatry and overlook the startling biblical teaching that economic exploitation also sent the chosen people into captivity.

The middle of the eighth century B.C. was a time of political success and economic prosperity unknown since the days of Solomon.⁷ But it was precisely at this moment that God sent his prophet Amos to announce the unwelcome news that the northern kingdom of Israel would be destroyed. Behind the facade of prosperity and fantastic economic growth, Amos saw oppression of the poor. He saw the rich "trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth" (2:7). He saw that the lifestyle of the rich was built on oppression of the poor (6:1-7). Even in the courts the poor had no hope because the rich bribed the judges (5:10-15).

Archaeologists have confirmed Amos's picture of shocking extremes of wealth and poverty.⁸ In the early days of settlement in Canaan, the land was distributed more or less equally among the families and tribes. Most Israelites enjoyed a similar standard of living. In fact, archaeologists have found that houses as late as the tenth century B.C. were all approximately the same size. But by Amos's day, two centuries later, everything had changed. Bigger,

better built houses were found in one area and poorer houses were huddled together in another section.⁹ No wonder Amos warned the rich, "You have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them" (5:11 NRSV)!

God's word through Amos was that the northern kingdom would be destroyed and the people taken into exile (7:11, 17): "Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall . . . Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away" (6:4, 7 NRSV).

A few years after Amos spoke, it happened just as God had said. The Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom and took thousands into captivity. Because of their mistreatment of the poor, God destroyed the northern kingdom—forever.

God sent other prophets to announce the same fate for the southern kingdom of Judah. Isaiah warned that destruction from afar would befall Judah because of its mistreatment of the poor: "Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees . . . to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right . . . What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away?" (Isa. 10:1-3 NRSV).

Micah denounced those in Judah who "covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance" (2:2). As a result, he warned, Jerusalem would one day become "a heap of ruins" (3:12) (NRSV, both).

Fortunately, Judah was more open to the prophetic word, and the nation was spared for a time. But oppression of the poor continued. A hundred years after Isaiah, the prophet Jeremiah again condemned the wealthy who had amassed riches by oppressing the poor:

"Wicked men are found among my people; they lurk like fowlers lying in wait. They set a trap; they catch men. Like a basket full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no bounds in deeds of wickedness; they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things?" says the LORD, "and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?" (Jer. 5:26-29)

Even at that late date Jeremiah offered hope if the people would forsake injustice and idolatry. "If you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow . . . then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors for ever" (Jer. 7:5-7 NRSV).

But they continued to oppress the poor and helpless (Jer. 34:3-17). As a result, Jeremiah persisted in warning that God would use the Babylonians to destroy Judah. In 587 B.C. Jerusalem fell, and the Babylonian captivity began. The destruction of Israel and Judah was not mere punishment. God used the Assyrians and Babylonians to purge his people of oppression and injustice. In a remarkable passage, Isaiah showed how God would attack his foes and enemies (that is, his chosen people!) in order to purify them and restore justice.

How the faithful city [Jerusalem] has become a harlot, she that was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross, your wine mixed with water . . . Every one loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them. Therefore the Lord says, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: "Ah, I will vent my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself on my foes. I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city." (1:21-26)

The catastrophe of national destruction and captivity reveals the God of the Exodus still at work correcting the oppression of the poor.

The Incarnation

Christians believe that God revealed himself most completely in Jesus of Nazareth, so to understand God's work in the world it is important to understand how the Incarnate One defined his mission.

Jesus' words in the synagogue at Nazareth, spoken near the beginning of his public ministry, throb with hope for the poor. He read from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to

preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19).

After reading these words, Jesus informed his audience that this Scripture was now fulfilled in himself. The mission of the Incarnate One included freeing the oppressed and healing the blind. (It was also to preach the gospel, which is equally important, but the focus of this book precludes further discussion of it.)¹¹ The poor are the only group specifically singled out as recipients of Jesus' gospel. Certainly the gospel he proclaimed was for all, but he was particularly concerned that the poor realize that his good news was for them.

Some try to avoid the clear meaning of Jesus' statement by spiritualizing his words. Certainly, as other texts show, he came to open our blinded hearts, to die for our sins, and to free us from the oppression of guilt. But that is not what he means here. The words about releasing captives and liberating the oppressed are from Isaiah. In their original Old Testament setting they unquestionably referred to physical oppression and captivity. In Luke 7:18-23, which contains a list similar to the one in Luke 4:18-19, it is clear that Jesus is referring to material, physical problems.¹²

Jesus' actual ministry corresponded precisely to the words of Luke 4. He spent considerable time ministering to lepers, despised women, and other marginalized folk. He healed the sick and blind. He fed the hungry. And he warned his followers in the strongest possible words that those who do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoners will experience eternal damnation (Matt. 25:31-46).

At the supreme moment of history, when God took on human flesh, the God of Israel was still liberating the poor and oppressed and summoning his people to do the same. That is the central reason for Christian concern for the poor.

It is not just at the Exodus, captivity, and Incarnation, however, that we learn of God's concern for the poor, the weak, and the oppressed. The Bible is full of passages that speak of this. Two illustrations from the Psalms are typical of a host of other texts.

Psalms 10 begins with despair. God seems to have hidden himself far away while the wicked prosper by oppressing the poor (vv. 2, 9). But the psalmist concludes with hope: "The hapless commits himself to thee; thou hast been the helper of the fatherless . . . O LORD, thou wilt hear the desire

of the meek . . . thou wilt incline thy ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed" (vv. 14, 17-18).

Psalms 146 is a ringing declaration that to care for the poor is central to the very nature of God. The psalmist exults in the God of Jacob because he is both the creator of the universe and the defender of the oppressed.

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul . . . Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith for ever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless; but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. (vv. 1, 5-9)

According to Scripture, defending the weak, the stranger, and the oppressed is as much an expression of God's essence as creating the universe. Because of who he is, Yahweh lifts up the mistreated.¹³ The foundation of Christian concern for the hungry and oppressed is that God cares especially for them.

God Identifies with the Poor

God not only acts in history to liberate the poor, but in a mysterious way that we can only partly fathom, the Sovereign of the universe identifies with the weak and destitute. Two proverbs state this beautiful truth. Proverbs 14:31 puts it negatively: "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker" (NRSV). Even more moving is the positive formulation: "He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD" (19:17). What a statement! Assisting a poor person is like helping the Creator of all things with a loan.

Only in the Incarnation can we begin to perceive what God's identification with the weak, oppressed, and poor really means. "Though he was rich," Paul says of our Lord Jesus, "yet for your sake he became poor" (2 Cor. 8:9).

Jesus was born in a small, insignificant province of the Roman Empire. His first visitors, the shepherds, were viewed by Jewish society as thieves. His

parents were too poor to bring the normal offering for purification. Instead of a lamb, they brought two pigeons to the Temple (Luke 2:24; cf. Lev. 12:6-8). Jesus was a refugee (Matt. 2:13-15). Since Jewish rabbis received no fees for their teaching, Jesus had no regular income during his public ministry.¹⁴ (Scholars belonged to the poorer classes in Judaism.) Nor did he have a home of his own. Jesus warned an eager follower who promised to follow him everywhere, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20). He sent out disciples with very little to sustain them (Luke 9:3; 10:4).

God did not become flesh as a wealthy aristocrat. However, it is also true that Jesus' family probably was not from the poorest class. At Jesus' birth, Joseph and Mary must have been fairly poor—as their sacrifice shows. And as refugees in Egypt they probably had very little. But Jesus lived much of his life in a carpenter's family in Nazareth, and Galilean carpenters in Jesus' day normally earned a reasonable income. So we should not think of the family in which Jesus grew up as living in poverty.¹⁵

Jesus, however, identified with the poor in important ways. He insisted that his preaching to the poor was a sign that he was the Messiah. When John the Baptist sent messengers to ask him if he were the long expected Messiah, Jesus simply pointed to his deeds: he was healing the sick and preaching to the poor (Matt. 11:2-6). Jesus also preached to the rich. But apparently it was his particular concern to preach to the poor that validated his claim to messiahship. His extensive engagement with the poor and disadvantaged contrasted sharply with the style of his contemporaries. Was that part of the reason he added a final word to take back to John: "Blessed is he who takes no offense at me" (Matt. 11:6)?

The clearest statement about Jesus' identification with the poor is in Matthew 25: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. . . . I was naked and you gave me clothing. . . . Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (vv. 35-36, 40 NRSV).

What does it mean to feed and clothe the Creator of all things? We cannot know. We can only look on the poor and oppressed with new eyes and resolve to heal their hurts and help end their oppression.

If Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:40 is startling, its parallel is terrifying: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it

not to me" (v. 45). What does that mean in a world where millions die each year of starvation while rich Christians live in affluence?

What does it mean to see the Lord of the universe lying by the roadside starving and walk by on the other side? We cannot know. We can only pledge, in fear and trembling, not to kill him again.

God's Special Instruments

When God selected a chosen people, he picked poor slaves in Egypt. When God called the early church, many of the members were poor. When God became flesh, he chose, for our sakes, to become poor (2 Cor. 8:9). Are these facts isolated phenomena or part of an important pattern?

God could have selected a rich, powerful nation as his chosen people. Instead he chose impoverished, oppressed slaves to be his special instrument of revelation and salvation for all people. (See also the story of Gideon in Judges 6:15-16; 7:2.)

In the early church, many members were poor. In a book sketching the social history of early Christianity, Martin Hengel points out that the early Gentile Christian communities "were predominantly poor."¹⁶ The apostle Paul marveled at the kind of people God called into the church:

Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor. 1:26-29)

Likewise James:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the

fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. *Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?* But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? (James 2:1-7 NRSV, italics added)

The rhetorical question in verse 5 (in italics) indicates that the Jerusalem church was far from rich. But the passage illustrates how the church so often forsakes God's way and opts instead for the way of the world. At both the Exodus and the emergence of the early church, God chose poor folk as his special instruments.

We must, however, beware of overstating the case. Abraham seems to have been well off. Moses lived at Pharaoh's court for forty years. Not all the early Christians were poor. Paul and Luke were educated and at least reasonably well-to-do. God does not work exclusively through impoverished, oppressed people. There is, nonetheless, a sharp contrast between God's procedure and ours. When we want to effect change, we almost always contact people with influence, prestige, and power. When God wants to save the world, he often selects slaves, prostitutes, and sundry other disadvantaged folk. He sees potential that we do not. And when the task is done, the poor and weak are less likely to boast that they deserve the credit. God's frequent selection of the lowly to be his special messengers of salvation to the world is striking evidence of his special concern for them.

Again, the Incarnation is important. God might have entered history as a powerful Roman emperor living in luxurious power at the center of the greatest empire of the time. Or he could have appeared at least as an influential Sadducee with a prominent place in the Sanhedrin in the holy city of Jerusalem. Instead he came and lived as a carpenter in the small town of Nazareth—a place too insignificant to be mentioned either in the Old Testament or the writings of Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian.¹⁷ Yet this is how God chose to effect our salvation.

Why Does God Cast Down the Rich?

Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus illustrates a fourth teaching prominent throughout Scripture. God actually works in history to cast down some rich, powerful people. Does that sound too strong? Listen to the biblical texts.

Mary's Magnificat puts it simply and bluntly: "My soul magnifies the Lord . . . He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away" (Luke 1:46, 52-53). Centuries earlier, Hannah's song proclaimed the same truth:

There is none holy like the LORD, there is none besides thee . . . Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth . . . The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger . . . The LORD makes poor and makes rich . . . He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap. (1 Sam. 2:2-8)

Jesus pronounced a blessing on the poor and a curse on the rich: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied . . . Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger" (Luke 6:20-25).¹⁸

"Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you" (James 5:1) is a frequent theme of biblical revelation.

Why does Scripture declare that God sometimes reverses the good fortunes of the rich? Is it because creating wealth is bad? No. The Bible says exactly the opposite. Is God engaged in class warfare? Not at all. Scripture never says that God loves the poor more than the rich. But it does regularly assert that God lifts up the poor and disadvantaged. And it frequently teaches that God casts down the wealthy and powerful in two specific situations: (1) when they become wealthy by oppressing the poor; or (2) when they fail to share with the needy.

Casting Down Rich Oppressors

Why did James warn some rich folk he knew to weep and howl because of impending misery? Because they had cheated their workers: "You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter" (James 5:3-5).

God does not have class enemies. But he hates and punishes both oppression and neglect of the poor. And the rich, if we accept the repeated warnings of Scripture, are frequently guilty of one or both.¹⁹

Long before the days of James, the psalmist knew that the rich were often rich because of oppression. He took comfort in the assurance that God would punish such evildoers:

In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor . . . His ways prosper at all times . . . He thinks in his heart, "I shall not be moved; throughout all generations I shall not meet adversity." . . . He lurks in secret like a lion in his covert; he lurks that he may seize the poor, he seizes the poor when he draws him into his net . . . Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up thy hand; forget not the afflicted . . . Break thou the arm of the wicked and evildoer . . . O LORD, thou wilt hear the desire of the meek; thou wilt strengthen their heart, thou wilt incline thy ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed. (Ps. 10:2-18)

God announced the same message through the prophet Jeremiah:

Wicked men are found among my people; they lurk like fowls lying in wait. They set a trap; they catch men. Like a basket full of birds their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no bounds in deeds of wickedness; they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things? says the LORD. (Jer. 5:26-29)

Nor was the faith of Jeremiah and the psalmist mere wishful thinking. Through the prophets, God announced devastation and destruction for both rich individuals and rich nations who oppressed the poor. And it happened as they predicted.

Jeremiah pronounced one of the most biting, satirical diatribes in all of Scripture against the unjust King Jehoiakim of Judah:

"Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages; who says, 'I will build myself a great house with spacious upper rooms,' and cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the LORD. But you have eyes and heart only for your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence." Therefore thus says the LORD concerning Jehoiakim . . . "With the burial of an ass he shall be buried, dragged and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem." (Jer. 22:13-19)

Jehoiakim, historians think, was assassinated.²⁰

God destroys whole nations as well as rich individuals because of their oppression of the poor. We have already examined a few of the pertinent texts.²¹ One more is important. Through Isaiah, God declared that the rulers of Judah were rich because they had cheated the poor. Surfeited with affluence, the wealthy women had indulged in self-centered wantonness, oblivious to the suffering of the oppressed. The result, God said, would be destruction.

The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: "It is you who have devoured the vineyard, the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?" says the LORD GOD of hosts. The LORD said: Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet; the LORD will smite with a scab the heads of the

daughters of Zion . . . In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents . . . Instead of perfume there will be rotteness; and instead of a girdle, a rope; and instead of well-set hair, baldness; and instead of a rich robe, a girding of sackcloth; instead of beauty, shame. Your men shall fall by the sword and your mighty men in battle. (Isa. 3:14-25)

When the rich oppress the poor and weak, the Lord of history is at work pulling down their houses and kingdoms.

Neglecting the Poor

Sometimes Scripture simply accuses the rich of failure to share with the needy and does not suggest that the wealth was acquired in unjust ways. But the result is the same.

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus does not say that the rich man exploited Lazarus (Luke 16). He merely shows his lack of concern for the sick beggar lying outside his gate. "Clothed in purple and fine linen [the rich man] feasted sumptuously every day" (Luke 16:19). Lazarus, on the other hand, "desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table" (v. 21). Did the rich man deny hungry Lazarus even the scraps? Perhaps not. But obviously he had no real concern for him.

Such sinful neglect of the needy infuriates the God of the poor. When Lazarus died, God comforted him in Abraham's bosom. When the rich man died, torment confronted him.²² The meaning of the name Lazarus, "one whom God has helped," underlines the basic point.²³ God aids the poor, but the rich who neglect poor neighbors go to hell.

Clark Pinnock is surely correct when he notes that the story of the rich man and Lazarus "ought to explode in our hands when we read it sitting at our well-covered tables while the third world stands outside."²⁴ It is not merely the Law and the Prophets but also Jesus our Lord who declares the terrifying word that God destroys the rich when they fail to assist the poor.

The biblical explanation of Sodom's destruction provides another illustration of this fearsome truth. If asked why Sodom was destroyed, most Christians would point to the city's sexual perversity. But that is a one-sided view of what Scripture teaches. Ezekiel says that one important reason

God destroyed Sodom was that it stubbornly refused to share with the poor: "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them, when I saw it (Ezek. 16:49-50; see also Isa. 1:10-17). The text does not say that they oppressed the poor, although they may have. It simply accuses them of failing to assist the needy.

Affluent Christians remember Sodom's sexual misconduct and forget its sinful unconcern for the poor. Is it because the former is less upsetting? Have we allowed our economic self-interest to distort our interpretation of Scripture? Undoubtedly we have. But to the extent that our affirmation of scriptural authority is sincere, we will permit painful texts to correct our thinking. As we do, we will acknowledge in fear and trembling that the God of the Bible wreaks horrendous havoc on some kinds of rich people—not because he does not love those who are rich (God loves everyone equally), but because the rich sometimes oppress the poor or neglect the needy.

God's Concern and Ours

Since God cares so much for the poor, it is hardly surprising that God wants his people to do the same.

Equal justice for the poor in court is a constant concern of Scripture. The law commanded it (Ex. 23:6). The psalmist invoked divine assistance for the king so that he could provide it (Ps. 72:1-4). And the prophets announced destruction because the rulers stubbornly subverted it (Amos 5:10-15).

Widows, orphans, and strangers also receive frequent attention: You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless" (Ex. 22:21-24).

"The fatherless, widows, and foreigners," John F. Alexander has observed, "each have about forty verses that command justice for them. God wants to make it very clear that in a special sense he is the protector of these weak ones. Strangers are to be treated nearly the same as Jews, and woe to people who take advantage of orphans or widows."²⁵

Rare indeed are Christians who pay any attention to Jesus' command to show bias toward the poor in their dinner invitations: "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors . . . But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you" (Luke 14:12-14; see also Heb. 13:1-3).

Jesus was using hyperbole, a typical technique of Hebrew literature to emphasize his point. He did not mean to forbid parties with friends and relatives. But he did mean that we ought to entertain the poor and disadvantaged (who cannot reciprocate) at least as often—and perhaps a lot more often—than we entertain friends, relatives, and "successful" folk. Have you ever known a Christian who took Jesus that seriously?

The Bible specifically commands believers to imitate God's special concern for the poor and oppressed. In the Old Testament, Yahweh frequently reminded the Israelites of their former oppression in Egypt when he commanded them to care for the poor. God's unmerited concern for the Hebrew slaves in Egyptian bondage is the model to imitate (Ex. 22:21-24; Deut. 15:13-15).

Jesus taught his followers to imitate God's mercy in their lending as well.

If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? . . . If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? . . . Lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:33-36 NRSV)

Why lend without expecting return? Because that is the way our Father acts. Jesus' followers are to reverse normal human patterns precisely because they are sons and daughters of God and want to reflect his nature.

When Paul took up the collection for the poor in Jerusalem, he pointedly reminded the Corinthians that the Lord Jesus became poor so that they might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). When John called on Christians to share with the needy, he first mentioned the example of Christ: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16 NRSV). Then, in the very next verse, he urged Christians

to give generously to the needy. It is the amazing self-sacrifice of Christ that Christians are to imitate as they relate to the poor and oppressed.

We have seen that God's Word commands believers to care for the poor. In fact the Bible underlines the command by teaching that when God's people care for the poor, they imitate God himself. But that is not all.

God's Word teaches a very hard, disturbing truth. *Those who neglect the poor and oppressed are really not God's people at all*—no matter how frequently they practice their religious rituals nor how orthodox are their creeds and confessions.

God thundered again and again through the prophets that worship in the context of mistreatment of the poor and disadvantaged is an outrage. Isaiah denounced Israel (he called it Sodom and Gomorrah!) because it tried to worship Yahweh and oppress the weak at the same time:

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? . . . Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; . . . even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood." (Isa. 1:10-15)

What does God want? The very next verses tell us. "Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (vv. 16-17).

Equally powerful are Isaiah's words against mixing fasting and injustice:

Why have we fasted, and thou seest it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and thou takest no knowledge of it? Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers . . . Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house? (58:3-7)

God's words through the prophet Amos are also harsh: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them . . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (5:21-24).²⁶

Earlier, the prophet had condemned the rich and powerful for oppressing the poor. They even bribed judges to prevent redress in the courts. Their worship was a mockery and an abomination to the God of the poor, who wants justice, not mere religious rituals.²⁷

God has not changed. Jesus repeated the same theme. He warned the people about the scribes "who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers" (Mark 12:40). Their pious-looking garments and frequent visits to the synagogue were a sham. Jesus was a Hebrew prophet in the tradition of Amos and Isaiah. Like them he announced God's outrage against those who try to mix pious practices and mistreatment of the poor.

The prophetic word against religious hypocrites raises a difficult question. Are the people who call themselves by Christ's name truly God's people if they neglect the poor? Is the church really the church if it does not work to free the oppressed?

We have seen how God declared that the people of Israel were really Sodom and Gomorrah rather than the people of God (Is. 1:10). God could not tolerate their exploitation of the poor and disadvantaged any longer. Hosea solemnly announced that, because of their sins, Israel was no longer God's people and he was no longer their God (1:8-9). In fact, God destroyed them.

Jesus expressed it even more pointedly. To those who do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoners, he will speak a terrifying word at the final judgment: "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). The meaning is clear. Jesus intends that his disciples imitate his own concern for the poor and needy. Those who disobey will experience eternal damnation.

But perhaps we have misinterpreted Matthew 25. Some people think that "the least of these" (v. 45) and "the least of these who are members of my family" (v. 40 NRSV) refer only to Christians. This exegesis is not certain. But even if the primary reference of these words is to poor believers, other aspects of

Jesus' teaching not only permit but require us to extend the meaning of Matthew 25 to both believers and unbelievers who are poor and oppressed. The story of the good Samaritan teaches that anybody in need is our neighbor (Luke 10:29-37). Matthew 5:43-45 (NRSV) is even more explicit: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."

The ideal in the Qumran community (known to us as the place where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found) was indeed to "love all the sons of light" and "hate all the sons of darkness" (1 QS 1:9-10, the Essenes' Community Rule). Even in the Old Testament, Israelites were commanded to love the neighbor who was the child of their own people and ordered not to seek the prosperity of Ammonites and Moabites (Lev. 19:17-18; Deut. 23:36). But Jesus forbids his followers to limit their concern to the neighbors who are members of their own ethnic or religious group. On the other hand, he commands his followers to imitate God, who does good for all people everywhere.

As George Ladd said, "Jesus redefines the meaning of love for neighbor; it means love for any man in need."²⁸ In light of the parable of the good Samaritan and the clear teaching of Matthew 5:43-48, one is compelled to say that part of the teaching of Matthew 25 is that those who fail to aid the poor and oppressed (whether they are believers or not) are simply not the people of God.

We find the same message in 1 John 3:17-18 (NRSV): "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (See also James 2:14-17.)

Again the words are plain. What do they mean for rich Christians who demand increasing affluence while poor Christians in developing nations suffer from malnutrition, deformed bodies and brains, even starvation? The text says that if we fail to aid the needy, we do not have God's love—no matter what we may say. It is deeds that count, not pious phrases and saintly speeches. Regardless of what we do or say at 11:00 AM on Sunday morning, rich Christians who neglect the poor are not the people of God.

But still the question persists. Does continuing sin mean that professing believers are really not Christians? Obviously not. The Christian knows that

sinful selfishness continues to plague even the most saintly. Salvation is by grace alone, not works of righteousness. We are members of the people of God not because of our own righteousness but solely because of Christ's death for us.

That response is true—but inadequate by itself. Matthew 25 and 1 John 3 surely mean more than that the people of God are disobedient (but still justified all the same) when they persistently neglect the poor. These verses pointedly assert that some people so disobey God that they are not his people at all in spite of their pious profession. Neglect of the poor is one of the oft-repeated biblical signs of such disobedience. Certainly none of us would claim that we fulfill Matthew 25 perfectly. And we cling to the hope of forgiveness. But there comes a point (and, thank God, he alone knows where!) when neglect of the poor is not forgiven. It is punished. Eternally.

Is it not possible that many rich "Christians" have reached that point? North Americans and Europeans earn about seventy-five times as much as the people in poor countries, but we give only a tiny fraction of our affluence to the church. Most churches spend much of that pittance on themselves. Can we claim we are obeying the biblical command to have a special concern for the poor? Can we honestly say we are imitating God's concern for the poor and oppressed? If the Bible is true, can we seriously hope to experience eternal love rather than eternal separation from the God of the poor?

The biblical teaching that Yahweh has a special concern for the poor and oppressed is without ambiguity. But that does not mean, as some assert today, that God is biased in favor of the poor. In fact, Scripture explicitly forbids partiality. "You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor" (Lev. 19:15; also Deut. 1:11). Exodus 23:3 contains the same injunction: "Nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his suit."

The most crucial point for us, however, is not God's impartiality, but rather the result of his freedom from bias. The text declares Yahweh's impartiality and then immediately portrays God's tender care for the weak and disadvantaged. "For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of Lords, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing" (Deut. 10:17-18).

God is not partial. He has the same loving concern for each person he has created.²⁹ Precisely for that reason he cares as much for the weak and

disadvantaged as he does for the strong and fortunate. By contrast with the way you and I, as well as the comfortable and powerful of every age and society, normally act toward the poor, God seems to have an overwhelming bias in favor of the poor. But he is biased only in contrast with our sinful unconcern. It is only when we take our sinful preoccupation with the successful and wealthy as natural and normative that God's equal concern for all looks like a bias for the poor.

Is God on the Side of the Poor?

Before we can answer whether or not God is on the side of the poor, we need to remember some things God is not. First, as mentioned above, God is not biased. Second, material poverty is not a biblical ideal. Third, being poor and oppressed does not make people members of the church. (The poor disobey God just as much as the rich and middle class; they, too, need to repent and be saved by God's justifying grace.) Fourth, God does not care more about the salvation of the poor than of the rich. Fifth, we dare not start with some ideologically interpreted context of oppression (for example, Marxist analysis) and then reinterpret Scripture from that ideological bias. Sixth, God does not overlook the sin of those who are poor due to sloth or alcoholism. God punishes such sinners.

God, however, is not neutral. His freedom from bias does not mean that he maintains neutrality in the struggle for justice. The Bible clearly and repeatedly teaches that God is at work in history exalting the poor and casting down the rich who got that way by oppressing or neglecting the poor. In that sense, God is on the side of the poor. He has a special concern for them because of their vulnerability.

God demands that all people have the opportunity to earn a reasonable living. For that reason, he works to empower the poor. The God of the Bible is, in the sense just indicated, on the side of the poor precisely because he is not biased, precisely because he is a God of impartial justice who cares equally about everyone.

The rich often neglect or oppose justice because it demands that they end their oppression and share with the poor. God actively opposes that kind of rich person and society, but that does not mean God loves the rich any less than the

poor. God longs for the salvation of both and desires fulfillment, joy, and happiness for all his creatures. He knows that neither those who are oppressed nor those who do the oppressing find those things.

God's equal concern for everyone, however, does not mean that God is neutral in contexts of neglect and oppression. Genuine biblical repentance and conversion lead people to turn away from all sin—including economic oppression.³¹ Salvation for the rich includes freedom from the sin of being unjust. Thus God's desire for the salvation and fulfillment of the rich is in complete harmony with the scriptural teaching that God is on the side of the poor in the specific sense that God actively seeks justice for those who are oppressed and neglected. (In fact, by pulling down oppressors and lifting up the oppressed, God does what is good for both groups.)

In light of this biblical teaching, how biblical is our theology? I think we must confess that rich Christians are largely on the side of the rich rather than the poor. But imagine what would happen if all our church institutions—our youth organizations, our publications, our colleges and seminaries, our congregations and denominational headquarters—would all dare to undertake a comprehensive two-year examination of their programs and activities to answer this question: Is there the same balance and emphasis on justice for the poor and oppressed in our programs as there is in Scripture? If we were to do this with an unconditional readiness to change whatever did not correspond with the scriptural revelation of God's special concern for the poor and oppressed, I predict that we would unleash a new movement of biblical social concern that would transform the world.

I hope and believe that in the next decades millions of Christians will allow this important biblical truth to fundamentally reshape our culturally conditioned theology and our unbiblically one-sided programs and institutions. If that happens, we will forge a new, truly biblical theology of liberation that will change the course of modern history.