

Poverty

Money, relationships and justice: what does it mean to be poor?

Poverty is a serious global problem. Something approaching a billion people are hungry worldwide. One in six people have inadequate access to water and a quarter live without electricity.

Global inequality is increasing. The richest one percent of people in the world own nearly half of the world's wealth, and the proportion is expected to grow in the coming years.

In higher income countries like the UK, we tend not to experience poverty in the same way as many of those in low-income countries, but it is still a feature of life for many. Charity foodbanks supplied people with emergency food for three days on over a million different occasions in 2014-15, with around 500,000 unique users.

The Bible has much to say about poverty. How should we understand and apply its teachings today?



Thinking Biblically About...

What's the problem?

Poverty is a pervasive and global problem, but it exists in different forms and has many different effects.

Like so many other things, we are used to seeing poverty from the perspective of its material dimensions. Generally speaking, we understand it as a financial issue: poverty simply involves not having enough money. Whilst this is true, a lack of financial resources is only one aspect of poverty. It is arguably a symptom, rather than a cause in itself – and the causes may be many and complicated.

Not only that, but a further problem is that we typically judge levels of poverty in terms of other people. Especially in wealthier countries, we tend to focus less on the absolute needs of individuals and families themselves, and more on their levels of income compared to everyone else. Poverty is framed in terms of other people's wealth. For example, the official poverty line used by the UK government is 60 percent of median national household income.

How we understand poverty determines how we address it – and how effective we are at helping people overcome it.



Q: Beyond a lack of financial resources, what does the idea of 'poverty' bring to mind for you?

The nature of poverty

There are many ways of describing poverty. Three of the most commonly-used definitions today are **Absolute Poverty**, **Relative Poverty** and **Social Exclusion**.

- **Absolute poverty** is defined as the lack of sufficient resources to meet physical needs for health.
- **Relative poverty** defines income or resources in relation to the national average. It is concerned with the absence of the material needs to participate fully in daily life.
- **Social exclusion** is a fairly new term, broadly similar to relative poverty but including both the causes and effects of poverty. It includes many different factors that can drive and result from poverty: unemployment, substandard housing, education, low income, addiction, crime, health and family breakdown.




The last of these, social exclusion, has the most in common with the biblical understanding of poverty. God is a relational being and the relationships of the Trinity existed before Creation. We are relational creatures, made in God's image.



'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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'
(Luke 4:18-19)

In these verses, Jesus quotes Isaiah, describing poverty chiefly in emotional/spiritual terms. In the Bible, then, poverty is seen as a lack of emotional, relational, physical *and* financial support.

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<p>ABSOLUTE POVERTY</p>		<p>Lacking the resources to live and maintain health</p>
<p>RELATIVE POVERTY</p>		<p>Income compared to others – typically 60% of median income</p>
<p>SOCIAL EXCLUSION</p>		<p>Poverty understood as a complex combination of causes and effects</p>

What does the Bible say?

Poverty is one of the most important themes in the Bible. By some counts there are over 2,000 verses that mention poverty and justice.



'Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 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?'

(Isaiah 58:6-7)

The first part of Isaiah's message concerns 'structural' problems – the society-wide injustices that lead to ingrained poverty. The second half concerns personal responses: specific actions to address individual cases of poverty.

Although the Bible frequently talks about 'the poor', very often certain groups of people are mentioned – those who are particularly vulnerable for various reasons:



'Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt. Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry!'

(Exodus 22:21-24)



'Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns.'

(Deuteronomy 24:14)



'Thus has the Lord of hosts said, "Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another."'

(Zechariah 7:9-10)

All of these groups had something in common: they had no land of their own. Land was owned by extended Israelite families, and foreigners, orphans and widows typically had no direct access to it. They lacked the economic independence that, especially in an agrarian economy, came from land ownership. They were therefore dependent on employment and charity from other people. They were also the most marginalised of people, because they did not have those networks of relationships, and were vulnerable to being exploited. This holds true today: those most on the margins of society relationally also tend to be the poorest financially.

Q: How does the Bible's view of poverty as being linked to injustice change the way you engage with it?

Different approaches to poverty in the Bible

The Bible has different ways of understanding poverty, depending on the main concerns of the books in which it is mentioned.

The Law, contained in the first five books of the Old Testament, emphasises how to address poverty. It recognises that poverty will be a permanent feature of life, and that people must act generously and honestly to alleviate it.



'There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.'
(Deuteronomy 15:11)

The prophets are more focused on the reasons that poverty exists, and frequently criticise the rich for oppressing the poor and vulnerable. They see injustice as a common factor or cause for poverty.



'For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.'
(Amos 2:6-7)

Proverbs acknowledges that poverty is often a result of oppression, but it also blames those who bring ruin upon themselves.



'Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.'
(Proverbs 23:20-21)

Although there is therefore some idea of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor in Proverbs, this is not at odds with the rest of the Bible – which sees poverty significantly as a result of injustice. As a nation, God promises the Israelites prosperity if they keep his commands and warns of ruin if they do not (Deuteronomy 28). There is a sense that poverty is an outcome of collective sin, including the oppression of the vulnerable by the powerful and the removal of the protections that were supposed to benefit everyone.

In the New Testament, there is the same emphasis on charity and generosity, as well as personal responsibility: 'For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."' (2 Thessalonians 3:10)

Addressing poverty

Unlike our welfare state approach and mentality, which seeks to make poverty a political problem, poverty is addressed at every level of society in the Bible. Responsibility is shared by everyone, rather than assigned to someone else.

- **Individual.** The Israelites were commanded to be generous on an individual level, as well as corporately. Many sacrifices, tithes and offerings were made personally and distributed to the poor and the Levites. Zero-interest loans, rather than outright gifts, maintained ongoing relationships and the dignity of the borrower, though loans were cancelled every seven years if they could not be paid (Deuteronomy 15:9-12).
- **Extended family.** Land was owned by extended families and this formed the basis of economic prosperity and independence, as well as the welfare system. Families supported landless people by hiring temporary workers and 'adopting' migrants and poor people for the long term.

- **Community.** Harvesting laws allowed anyone to gather leftover crops (gleaning) as they had need.
- **The poor themselves.** Gleaning laws meant there was the opportunity to work, and the expectation that people should work if they were able.
- **Nationally.** The Israelites had collective responsibility to keep the laws that created and maintained a just society. Debts were limited to seven years, interest was banned and land that had been sold was periodically returned to its original owners so that everyone had a chance of economic independence (Leviticus 25).

The Bible is not anti-wealth. The creation of wealth is a blessing from God (Deuteronomy 8:8), but it also comes with the responsibility of proper stewardship. 'Trickle-down economics' (the idea that increasing wealth at the top will benefit everyone because the effects are passed down through society) is not a biblical idea: everybody should have the opportunity to create and share wealth through entrepreneurship, employment, lending and giving.

Where do we go from here?

Addressing poverty means not only addressing the lack of resources but the marginalisation and absence of supportive relationships that often lie behind it. When Jesus healed the sick and demon-possessed, he also restored them into community (e.g. Mark 5:1-34).

Personal

On a personal level, the Bible encourages us to be open-handed towards the poor. Although there is no formal system of tithes any more, our generous giving is still an appropriate response to God's own generosity.



'Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.'

(2 Corinthians 9:7-8)

We are also called to engage with people who are lonely and isolated – giving our time as well as our money. In our churches, there is the need and opportunity for us to build strong communities with a wide range of different relationships. People can share each others' lives, not just meet for an hour or two on Sunday mornings. Through these networks of relationships, where people genuinely know one another, opportunities for support, advice and even employment can arise.

'A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing.'

(Psalm 68:5-6)

'Research has shown loneliness impacts on health in a greater way than smoking or obesity' – *The Independent*

Church

Churches are uniquely placed to address poverty by serving and becoming a part of their local communities – through organising food banks and community lunches; starting credit unions and arranging zero-interest loans; prison visiting; offering debt counselling; giving practical and legal assistance to asylum seekers; and by being involved in all kinds of community groups. In many cases poverty is accompanied by illness and exclusion for other reasons – issues individual Christians and churches can also address.

National

Perhaps most challenging is change on the national level. We complain about inequality, but it is essentially the price of doing business in our current economic system. Capitalism demands the lowest-paid employees and the highest shareholder returns. Living wages are considered a luxury, not a responsibility. Consumerism makes us focus on the price of the product or service to us, not on the producers. Our approach to the national debt will have far-reaching implications for future generations. Addressing these often begins with the individual but ultimately requires fundamental social reform.

Q: Who are the poor near you and in your life?

What does the **Bible** say about **poverty**?



- We generally see poverty as a financial issue: the state of not having enough money.
- In the Bible, poverty is both a relational and a material condition. The poor are those who are most marginalised, who lack support and opportunities for employment, and who are most vulnerable to exploitation.
- Addressing poverty means taking action on many different levels – to alleviate relational and financial needs directly, but also to tackle the underlying relational issues of injustice and marginalisation that contribute to it.

Thinking Biblically About... is a series of 2,000-word guides that unpack modern-day issues from a biblical perspective. The **TBA** series aims to give Christians a firm foundation for engaging with some of the most difficult questions of our times: money and debt, sex and marriage, how we spend our time, how we treat the environment and what the role of government is.

You can also read our **Long Distance Christian** series, a collection of 10,000-word booklets looking at key issues in more depth including *Immigration and Justice*.

The Jubilee Centre is a Christian social reform charity based in Cambridge, UK. We believe that the Bible's teaching applies to every area of modern life and has enduring relevance for Britain and the world in the 21st century. At the heart of this social vision is a concern for right relationships, expressed by Jesus in his summary of the Old Testament, *'Love the Lord with all your heart... and love your neighbour as yourself.'* (Matthew 22:37-40)

Find out more at www.jubilee-centre.org/poverty