

SHAREing with the Poor and Disadvantaged Marvin Bryant

Helping the poor is strongly emphasized in some quarters today while it continues to be neglected in others. Based on Matthew 9:35-38, Empowering Subjects uses the word **SHARE** as an acronym to remind us of our calling to share the kingdom with others (see empoweringsubjects.org). Scripture makes clear we are to share the kingdom with the poor and disadvantaged as well as everyone else. Though we are all needy and perhaps even pitiful in some way, the special focus of this article is on those with obvious physical or material need. I don't propose to address every issue concerning our relationship with such folks, but I will indicate some ways our general responsibility to SHARE applies to them in particular.

1. **See People** (Matthew 9:36). This includes both noticing people and seeing them as Jesus does. Noticing them deserves some special emphasis here because it is easy to not notice the poor and disadvantaged. Sometimes we seem oblivious to them, and sometimes we literally avert our eyes. It's easy to avoid people we may not understand, know how to help, or even fear. But to be like Jesus, we must notice all people (Matthew 8:14; Luke 13:12; John 5:6).

We must also see them as harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. The devil is harassing people, and people are powerless to resist him on their own. In some cases they are complicit and in other cases they are not, and that applies to the poor as well as anyone else. Regardless, Christ-followers don't take a stance of blame but a stance of helping those who are harassed by Satan and powerless to resist him. We want to help them find The Shepherd who can change their lives.

Along the lines of how Satan is harassing people, one particular distinction that is important to see about the poor is what kind of poverty they are suffering. There are nuances of this that are beyond my understanding, but all of us can discern a difference between those caught in the debilitating web of chronic, generational material poverty and those suffering from situational material poverty. The latter is caused by a sudden crisis or loss and is usually temporary. In contrast, those families where people have been born into poverty for at least two generations often do not have the tools to make their way out of their situation. This distinction will affect how we help them.

Finally, Jesus also saw broken people as a "harvest" (Matthew 9:37-38), which seems to indicate that many of them will be open to entering the

kingdom. We must consciously remember that the poor and disadvantaged are a harvest. It is tempting for us to think their obvious physical and material needs are their primary or perhaps even their exclusive needs. Such needs are indeed real and important (see on #3 below), but we must not neglect their spiritual needs. We'll say more about this below (on #4).

2. **Have Compassion (Matthew 9:36).** Too many of us have spent too much time and energy rationalizing why we don't really need to help people with material or other great needs. I'm afraid I have done that myself. Even so, I was shocked by the callous remark of an elder upon seeing a number of homeless people in a urban area. He stated matter-of-factly, "Life is a series of choices." For him that statement explained why all those people were homeless. I understand what he meant, and there is some truth in it. Sometimes people do make bad choices that put them in a bad way. But that hardly explains the variety of events and reasons why people end up being poor or on the street. It reflects a lack of awareness of the multifaceted and complex dynamics involved in homelessness and poverty.

Further, it has none of the compassion of Christ. Throughout Scripture, the poor, oppressed and disadvantaged have a special place in the heart of God (Leviticus 19:10; Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Proverbs 14:31; Isaiah 10:1-2; Jeremiah 22:15-16; James 1:27), and Jesus had compassion for them as well. We must develop God's heart for these people.

If we learn to see the poor and disadvantaged like Jesus did, we may feel compassion welling up in our hearts. It is hoped that this will then lead to actual deeds of compassion (more on the deeds below on #3). Conversely, for us to be like Christ, any deeds we do must be borne of compassion. If we do good deeds in disrespectful or patronizing ways, sort of like holding your nose and taking medicine, it is not the way of Christ. It is not enough to feel compassion and not show compassion, nor is it enough to do deeds of compassion without feeling the compassion. We must let our hearts go out to people and then act accordingly.

Not only is compassion the way of Christ, it is also very important to the people who experience it. It may be even more important in the case of the poor and disadvantaged because they have often suffered not only from material needs but also emotional, social, and sometimes mental or other kinds of needs as well. Treating them with compassion and respect addresses some of these other needs and can be very helpful to them.

Most people seem grateful for the help they receive, but occasionally people in need can be demanding, cynical, angry, or even caustic. If we stop and think about this, it is easy to understand how some could become angry due to the ways they have been mistreated. Sandra Wilson has reminded us that *Hurt People Hurt People*. If we proudly view ourselves as the great benefactors who are nobly administering undeserved help to poor souls, we will likely withdraw it if they don't appreciate it. But if we are like Jesus, we will show compassion regardless of the response (cf. Luke 17:11-19). Remember, God himself is kind to the ungrateful and wicked (Luke 6:35), and we are called to be like him (Ephesians 5:1). People's attitudes aren't the deciding factor in whether we help them. The decision is made by our Lord and his compassion.

3. **Attest to the Kingdom with our Deeds (Matthew 9:35).** One important way of doing this is to give to the poor. The Bible clearly teaches that we are supposed to do so (Luke 12:32; 18:22; 19:21; Romans 15:26; Galatians 2:10). One of the most common rationalizations for not giving to the poor is that they will just spend the money we give them on alcohol and drugs. A friend who invested significantly in helping some people who are homeless earned enough credibility with them that they invited him to visit their camp. There he learned that, sure enough, when they ran out of alcohol, they would go do "fund-raising" on the street corner to buy more. Alcohol and drugs are indeed a problem for many people, including the homeless, poor and others who are disadvantaged. Yet this does not free us from our responsibility to give to them.

Part of me wants to say that we should just give anyway. The Lord told us to give but did not tell us to monitor. Besides, I certainly cannot claim I have always used the money God has given me for truly noble purposes. There's a sense in which the giver is not responsible for what the receiver does with the money.

Another part of me, however, wants to say that stewardship calls us to be wise in how we give and also that we should not risk placing undue temptation before people. We need what my friend Keith Lape calls "holy discernment." Such discernment might lead us to give people food instead of money. The above-mentioned friend who was welcomed into the homeless camp sometimes respectfully asks people holding signs at intersections whether they are hungry, and if so, he invites them to meet him "over there at that MacDonald's." He then buys them food, and sits with them while they eat. Another way to give helpful resources is to keep in our cars bags or containers with appropriate and well-thought-out supplies such as non-perishable food, water, and socks. For folks facing

situational poverty, one time or short term help with rent or a bill may be especially appropriate.

Regardless, we do need to realize that sometimes helping can hurt. For example, we may unwittingly create unhealthy dependencies, (further) rob people of self-esteem, or disempower them by doing for them what they are able to do for themselves. Again, however, we must guard our own hearts lest these very real dangers become very convenient excuses for not helping at all.

It is also important to remember that there are multiple kinds of poverty with multiple causes. Because of this, truly helping people who are poor or disadvantaged requires wisdom and often a long-term investment. We do well to think and pray about the best way to help them. In addition to the possibilities mentioned above, we might also consider giving our financial or other material resources to godly people who are wisely involved in helping others while then focusing our own efforts on **Seeing** those in need, **Having** compassion on them, and being ready to give them food. We do not merely giving money to a ministry to the poor and then just dust off our hands. Rather, noticing people, having compassion, and showing respect are also a part of what needy people need.

Alternately, if we are gifted and feel so called, we may want to immerse ourselves in reading, observing, and otherwise learning what is really involved in poverty and effective ways to help, and then making this kind of mercy our primary ministry. If you are interested in this, I recommend you contact my above-mentioned friend Keith Lape at the River City Church in North Little Rock for resources and questions (klape@me.com).

We should also note here that, while we give to both Christians and non-Christians, we have a special responsibility to give to Christians. We are to do good to all, *especially* the household of faith (Galatians 6:10). The early church likewise showed special efforts to take care of their own poor (Acts 6:1-6; Romans 15:25-33). Again, this must not become an excuse for not helping those outside the church, but it does seem like there is a priority on those within. This leads to another important realization.

God's way of increasing justice in the world is to establish his kingdom. When people submit to his kingship, they will imitate their King, and this includes treating others justly and fairly. It also includes giving to and serving others, especially their fellow-subjects in the kingdom. By all means, justice, righteousness, and peace must be found among those who have submitted to Christ's kingship. In the Old Testament God envisioned justice increasing on the earth as his law went forth to other

nations (Isaiah 2:2-5). Today we have the greater power of the gospel and Spirit that can change people's hearts and lives so that they treat others right. Justice outside God's rule will be partial at best, but it must by all means be found among God's people.

4. **Relate** the message of the Kingdom with our Words (Matthew 9:35). In a former day, some Christians were guilty of **Relating** God's gospel to people with words but failing to **Attest** to it with their lives and deeds. Today, in contrast, some are guilty of **Attesting** to the kingdom with their deeds but avoiding any attempt to **Relate** the kingdom with their words. Jesus did both. He believed in "show and tell" (Matthew 4:23; 9:35). Both are integral to how Jesus changed the world, and that should settle the matter for us.

I understand that different ones of us will be gifted and better at different kinds of ministry. Because of that, a person may do more showing or more telling. Even so, both **Attesting** to the kingdom with our deeds (Luke 17:7-10) and **Relating** the kingdom with our words (1 Peter 3:15-16) are responsibilities of every Christian. We must develop a healthy balance between showing and telling in our own lives, and certainly such balance should be found in a church and in the church as a whole.

God's chosen one in Isaiah said the Spirit anointed him to proclaim the good news specifically to the poor. He was to minister to other disadvantaged people as well, including the brokenhearted, captives, prisoners, and those who mourn and grieve (Isaiah 61:1-4). The context suggests the specific people referred to in the passage were God's people who were suffering in captivity in Babylon but who were soon to be released to return to their homeland (cf. 61:4).

Ultimately, however, the passage was fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. In the synagogue in Nazareth, He read those words and said specifically that the passage was being fulfilled (Luke 4:16-21). Similarly, Jesus would also tell John the Baptist that his own preaching of the good news to the poor was one of the things that showed he was indeed the one who was to come (Matthew 11:1-5; Luke 7:18-23). The Messiah not only helped those in great need, he also preached the good news to them. We, too, then, are called to preach the good news to the poor.

A number of influences, however, may cause us to resist doing this. One is the trend in both society and church to place such a premium on taking care of the material needs of the poor that we neglect telling them the good news. We've already noted that it is right and necessary for us to **Attest** to the kingdom with our deeds, and this applies to the poor and

disadvantaged as much as anyone else—perhaps even more. Rarely do you walk up to anyone and just start **Relating** the message. With the poor and disadvantaged you may well also face the hindrance of their not even being able to hear any message at first, due to hunger, distress, drunkenness, or mental issues. These are variations of the old adage that applies to pretty much everyone—people won't care what you know until they know that you care. So **Attesting** to the Kingdom with our Deeds is certainly appropriate and may well be prerequisite, especially with disadvantaged people. Still, this does not free us from the responsibility to follow Jesus by preaching the good news to the poor.

Similar to this, we may also be hindered from **Relating** the message to the poor with words if we think poverty or whatever disadvantage they have is their primary issue. I certainly do not want to minimize any such issues, and again, Jesus did indeed minister to the whole person. But in the grand scheme of things, spiritual issues are always more important than any other issues of any kind. Further, in the case of poverty or other disadvantage, sometimes spiritual issues contribute to the person's other issues. Or stated positively, spiritual truths and realities can help them overcome some of their other issues. For example, coming to Christ and receiving the Spirit can help people with their self-esteem, self-discipline, and relationships, all of which can help them deal more effectively with a variety of hardships. This is not to say, of course, that baptizing someone will make all their problems go away or that our goal is to make all their problems go away. Salvation is something that people have to "work out" (Philippians 2:12), and this is often a long, difficult road. Still the wisdom and power of Christ will help a person become whole in many areas.

Related to the danger of thinking material needs are the most important ones, we need to think clearly about what message we are to speak to the poor. The message is not that they are entitled to their piece of the pie. Nor is it that God is going to make life better for them by helping them with their material needs. While it is true that the circumstances of the poor and disadvantaged may improve in this life, due to the kindness and benevolence of other citizens of God's kingdom and to their own personal growth, that is not our primary message to them. The blessedness for the poor is not that they will gain income but that they gain the kingdom of God (Luke 6:20), and their satisfaction, laughter, and joy are said to be in the future, in heaven (vv. 21-23). There is no reason for thinking the good news we are to speak to the poor is anything other than the good news we are to speak to anyone else—the good news of the kingdom of God (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:43; 8:1). Again, I'm not advocating that we speak empty words to people with empty stomachs, but neither are we to fill their stomachs and leave their

hearts empty. God has sent Jesus as the anointed ruler to establish his kingdom, and this is good news in a variety of ways, including forgiveness and mercy, wise counsel, someone to face the enemy for us, and more.

Another reason the God's kingdom is good news has special relevance to the poor and disadvantaged, namely, it is open to all! *Anyone* who will humble himself or herself before him is welcome! In contrast, it is clear that the poor and disadvantaged are not always welcomed by secular people. In Bible times the poor or disadvantaged were sometimes thought to be under a curse from God and not considered worthy of his blessings (John 9:1-3). Today, even some who are willing to "go out" and serve the poor are not really open to having them "come in" and be with us. They view the poor as something of a project to use to make them feel better about themselves but don't want to associate with them regularly.

But God has a different perspective. God has always had a special place in his heart for the poor and disadvantaged, and Jesus saw them, had compassion on them, and welcomed them. In the parable of the banquet, it is surprising that those one would expect to be invited and who apparently had previously agreed to come, made excuses instead. Even more surprising than this, however, is that the invitation was extended to the "poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame"—people who would not be considered worthy from a worldly point of view (but cf. Luke 14:12-14). By the way, the end of this parable apparently refers to the surprising inclusion of another group often considered unworthy—the Gentiles (Luke 14:15-24).

So, when we preach to the poor as we ought, it is good news in at least two ways—the good news of God's reign and the very fact that they are receiving an opportunity to hear it instead of being shunned as so often was and is the case.

Another important realization concerning preaching the good news to the poor is that people at disadvantage are often more open to God and the good news than others. People who feel like they can take care of their own needs often become self-sufficient and feel no need for God while those whose needs are painfully obvious to them often turn to him. You'll recall that not many of the Corinthians who responded to the gospel were wise, influential or noble (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). God hides his truths from the wise and learned and reveals them to little children (Matthew 11:25-26). James tells us specifically that God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith (James 2:5). The point of all this is that we dare not fail to speak the word to those who are often most open to it.

Because they are often more open to Christ than seemingly more self-sufficient people, we should not be surprised to find poor people who already have faith in Christ. That faith may be shallow, immature, tainted, toxic, or profound, even profound enough to help them endure horrific life experiences, sometimes with noticeable joy and peace. Regardless, it is important to recognize the poor may have faith so that we don't assume they are complete unbelievers when we seek to relate the message of the kingdom to them. At the same time, however, the variety in the health and strength of their faith reminds us that they may still be lacking in a basic understanding of the good news and may also need a great deal of teaching after they come to saving faith.

We also need to recognize that the poor are not the only ones open to the gospel. Though rich people frequently reject God and riches often present a great spiritual danger, still, there were in fact some rich followers of Christ in the New Testament (Matthew 27:57; 1 Timothy 6:17-19). Ultimately, the issue is not whether a person is rich or poor but the condition of their heart, sometimes described as whether they are poor in spirit. *Anyone* who will humble themselves can grasp the good news and enter the kingdom (Matthew 5:3; 11:25-26; 18:1-5). Those who are literally poor do indeed seem more willing to do this, but God will accept anyone who comes to him on their knees.

So we should preach the good news to all, knowing that the poor in spirit will receive the message. For multiple reasons, we should make certain we don't neglect to share it with the literal poor who seem to be poor in spirit more often. Of course we can't know the condition of a person's heart in advance. We won't really know until we relate the news to them.

5. **Explain/Equip the Subjects of the Kingdom (Matthew 9:35).** We must explain the subjects (topics) of the kingdom to all who are a part of it and equip the subjects (citizens) of the kingdom to live and serve in it.

It seems to me that all new subjects of the king need much explaining and equipping. We are all broken and needy in multiple ways. It is no different for who are poor and disadvantaged. If they are suffering chronic, generational poverty (see third paragraph on #1 above), they will likely come into God's kingdom with extraordinary amounts of baggage, hurt, pain, distorted thinking, bad habits, sins, etc. This is not to shame them or look down on them but to underscore the fact that they will need a great deal of help. It will require a large investment of time, teaching, prayer, energy, people, and help. The poor will often need help learning how to get and keep a job, as well as help with all that hinders them from doing so. They may also need help with issues of self-control

and self-discipline. Less obviously, people who have been poor or disadvantaged may be handicapped relationally due to isolation, disrespect, or disempowerment. Again, the point is that much teaching, example, and help will likely be needed to equip them to live under Christ's rule..

To do this we must be prepared to welcome and accept all people who come to Christ, even if they are very different from us (Luke 9:48; Acts 10:35; Romans 14:1; 15:7). A part of the power of the witness of the church is that all different kinds of people are welcomed and included. We are not defined by our outward differences but our inward unity of the Spirit. It is imperative that we practice the justice promised in God's kingdom among the church where he reigns. This means that those who seem different, including the poor and disadvantaged, are not merely "tolerated" but sincerely welcomed. Are there any poor, disadvantaged or "nobodies" in your church? Are there any in your small group? Or is your small group just for "cool" people? Do you invite to your personal "banquets" the above-mentioned "poor, crippled, lame, and blind?"

In this unique fellowship of subjects of the kingdom, we will all sometimes fall short of God's will for our lives. In such cases we need to be merciful toward each other, but we also need to help each other grow up in our salvation. One special aspect of this is that if any of us is caught in sin, those of us who live by the Spirit are to restore them, gently, looking to ourselves lest we also be tempted (Galatians 6:1). This is what needs to be done if a believer gets caught up in sins of oppression and withholding justice from the poor or disadvantaged. Such sins were so common among God's people in the Old Testament that we find numerous denunciations of those sins in the prophets (Isaiah 10:1-2; Ezekiel 22:29; Amos 4:1-3; 5:10-13). As noted, it is imperative that subjects of the King practice not only the unity, joy, and peace that are characteristic of God's kingdom but also the righteousness and justice that God desires.

On the other hand, if *unbelievers* oppress or treat others unjustly, including the poor or powerless, we handle matters somewhat differently. There are some things we can do to advocate for the poor in these cases, especially since they sometimes do not really know how to communicate and negotiate in middle class environments. It seems to me appropriate to ask people in power to act justly or even love mercy. If I saw a tough guy bullying a nerd at school, I would ask them to stop what they were doing. Similarly, I think we can ask an unjust landlord to do the same toward a poor person, for example. Or if a person or organization claims to be guided by faith or justice, it seems fitting to appeal to those values.

As we speak to people who are in power, however, we must be careful not to use the weapons of the world. Pressure, intimidation, threats or other secular means are totally inappropriate for us as subjects of the kingdom. It is wrong for us to practice the sinful ways of the world period, and we certainly must not think we can advance God's kingdom that way. Any effort to get a secular person to show justice or mercy to the disadvantaged must be done with gentleness and respect. We do not advance the kingdom of God by living like the kingdom of the world.

We must also remember that our ultimate mission and calling is not to correct the bad behaviors of unbelievers. We cannot and should not try to force Christian morality on non-Christians. Our commission is not to stop the sinful practices of those who swear, commit fornication, or oppress the poor. If we are asked or have an opportunity to share what we know of such things, we may wisely and prayerfully share them in appropriate ways as mentioned above, but we must remember that unbelievers have neither the basis nor power to live godly lives.

Instead, our ultimate calling with unbelievers, including unjust landlords and crooked employers, is to **Attest** to the kingdom with our deeds and **Relate** the kingdom with our words. Long ago, in response to the mess of the world, God did not establish a behavior modification system; he established the kingdom of God. The way he seeks to bring about better days among us is not by mere behavior modification but is heart deep. He established and declares the good news of the kingship of Christ and invites people to repent and believe this good news. We must do the same.

I might add that, as we consider how we should be toward those in power who are acting unjustly, we would do well to pray for more of that above-mentioned holy discernment that we also need for knowing how to give to the poor and many other aspects of living faithfully as subjects of the King.

So, what do we do in regard to the poor and disadvantaged? First, we make sure we take our instructions about them from Jesus and not from secular society, trends in the church, nor tendencies in our own hearts. And second, our calling toward them is essentially the same as the calling Jesus has given us toward everyone else. We are to **SHARE** the kingdom with them—**See** them, **Have** compassion on them, **Attest** to the Kingdom with our lives and deeds, **Relate** the kingdom with our words, and **Equip**/explain the subjects of the kingdom. There are some unique or special applications of this calling to people who are poor or disadvantaged, but our basic calling is to **SHARE** the kingdom.