

renewing neighborhoods restoring lives



RENEWING NEIGHBORHOODS, RESTORING LIVES

Like a doctor with healing medicine, God steps into need, brokenness, and injustice with a promise to restore all things and make all things new. The gospel rights wrongs, restores peace, and reverses the effects of sin, allowing humanity to once again flourish under God's rule. Like the Great Physician, we are invited to apply the healing medicine of God's Spirit as we love our neighbor, do justice, and serve others by providing for their most basic and simple needs.

This promise of restoration does not mean we are immune to suffering. We all hurt. Spiritual warfare is real. God never promised us a life without need or hardship, but he has promised us something greater – his presence and power. God's presence and power enable us to step into other's needs, not only with words but also with action, as we live openly, equitably, and generously together (Jeremiah 30:27, Micah 6:8, Galatians 6:10, 1 Peter 5:10, Revelation 21:1-5).

The Poor Among Us

The numbers of world poverty are staggering. 1.22 billion people in the world live on less than \$1.25 a day.¹ Part of the challenge is that many of us never see the poor; we do not see their faces or hear their stories. They are invisible to us, or we picture them as living so far away that they have nothing to do with us. So it's not surprising that when we do interact and relate with the poor, we lack discernment. We simply don't know what to do.

What is Poverty?

The Bible challenges our assumptions about the nature and causes of poverty. We think we understand poverty because we see images on TV or hear stories from missionaries or non-profits. "Poverty," "justice," and "the poor" can also be confusing terms because they are often

used with emotional appeals for money.

The Bible teaches that poverty is ultimately spiritual, stemming from a broken relationship with God, ourselves, others and creation. This separation, resulting from our sin, is universal in scope, making everyone "poor" in the deepest sense.

And yet, we must not over-spiritualize poverty. The Bible also describes poverty as the lack of resources and relationships to meet basic human needs such as food, clothing, and housing. Injustice, selfishness, greed, and oppression are just a few of the devastating results of sin.

Causes of Poverty

The causes of poverty are complex and it's easy to be reductionist in our thinking. Many people, for example, might suggest personal sin (such as laziness or addiction) or even natural disasters (such as a tornado or flood) as chief among the causes of poverty. It's true that these are indeed biblical causes. Failure to work, foolish choices, and acts of God can all lead to poverty. Yet, lesser known to us, Scripture points to the reality of injustice.

The Bible challenges us to see that the societies we build and the social systems we develop are broken in such a way that they can lead to oppression and exclusion, leaving entire neighborhoods and nations powerless to change their desperate circumstances. This is difficult to accept because many of us do not see or do not want to believe that the very systems that benefit us are often the same ones contributing to the poverty of others.

Doing Justice Out of Merciful Love

God says in Deuteronomy 15:4 that "there need be no poor people among you." This doesn't mean that we exclude the poor from our church family or ignore the needs of those around us. Quite the contrary, God is inviting us to do justice – to care for the vulnerable – out of merciful love.²

1. The World Bank, 2013.

2. Adapted from Tim Keller, *Generous Justice*, 3.

WHAT IS MERCY?³

1. *Mercy is an attribute of God.* God's mercy is His kindness toward those in misery and distress (Jer. 3:12). Mercy is what moves God to alleviate and remove suffering.
2. *Mercy is at the heart of the gospel.* Each Christian is by definition someone who has needed mercy and forgiveness, and has received it (Titus 3:3-5).
3. *Mercy is action with attitude.* You can't just feel mercy without showing it, or else it does no one any good. At the same time, just doing acts of mercy without love profits you nothing.
4. *Mercy is proof of love.* Love is the mark of the church, and mercy ought to be our consistent response to need.
5. *Mercy is for every believer.* Mercy in Scripture is never spoken of as an option or an add-on to the life of a Christian, but rather as an invitation and expectation for every believer.

God calls every Christian to hold firmly to the Word of life and shine like stars in our dark world. Many grumble and complain about the poor and the crime and problems that poverty brings into their neighborhood. As believers, we get a chance to put off grumblings and step into mercy (Philippians 2:14-16). Restoration happens when we sacrificially serve our neighbors in word and deed, using our gifts and resources to meet the needs of others, especially the poor. When faced with need in the world, God calls us to Remember, Receive, Relate, Respond and Renew.

Remember

Restoration begins with remembering. We are all spiritually poor and bankrupt before a holy God. The good news is that Jesus meets our deepest need and restores us to God. When we begin to understand this, our attitudes toward the materially poor shift from one of condescension (or paternalism) to a humble affection, humility, and empathy. God the Father commands us, Christ's love compels us, and the Holy Spirit empowers us to go and show the love of

God among the poor and vulnerable (Matthew 5:3, Luke 1:50, Galatians 2:10, 2 Corinthians 8:9).

Receive

Through Jesus Christ, God has opened to us the door of heaven. When we remember the love that God has shown us, we long to show that same love to others. God freely receives us in Christ, so freely we receive and embrace those around us. We invite the needy and vulnerable into our homes, lives, and relationships (Matthew 10:8, 22:9, 25:34-36).

Listening

Receiving the poor and vulnerable begins with listening. It's too easy to just walk on by or quickly give what the person wants. If we are to love well, then we must learn to listen well.

Listening is a form of love.⁴ By listening, we put aside our agenda, we take a break from what we are doing, and we give our attention to the other. Listening requires selflessness and humility. It is a form of love, and love is good for relationships.

Relate

Not only does God receive us into a relationship with Himself, he personally relates to us with kindness, compassion, and care. This means we treat everyone, even our enemies, with kindness, fairness, dignity, and respect (Proverbs 14:31, Luke 6:32-36, 14:12-13, 1 Peter 2:17). Some practical ways we relate with others is respecting one another, eating and drinking together, and caring for one another.

Respect – We are God's personal handiwork and we are to respect and honor his image in every person. We show respect by treating others as we want to be treated. We

3. Adapted from Randy Nabors, Mercy Seminar, 2008.

4. This section adapted from The Art of Listening by Bart Velthuisen.

don't judge others before we get to know them. And we don't insult people or make fun of them regardless of their circumstances. If you respect others, they will respect you.

Eat – Salvation is pictured as a bountiful feast and God satisfies the deepest hungers of the soul. Take the next step and share a meal. When we eat or have a drink with people outside our family and offer friendship and community, we are demonstrating God's invitation to salvation. Eat a meal, grab a cup of coffee, or as time passes, enjoy cooking something together.

Care – As we enter into a new relationship with the poor or vulnerable, we actively seek ways to advance their well-being. This happens when we feel empathy toward others, especially those who have been wronged. This means emotionally identifying with them: feeling anger with their anger, humiliation with their humiliation, hurt with their hurt (Wolterstorff).

Respond

God remembers us, receives us and relates to us through his son Jesus. Jesus saw our need and responded with radical generosity. He healed the sick, befriended the poor, and forgave sin. We are called to respond to the poor and vulnerable among us with the same radical generosity through material giving, social reform, and spiritual care (Deuteronomy 15:4, Acts 4:34-35, 1 John 3:17-18, James 2:15-17).

Material Giving: A gift can bring healing. Good news can bring health. And a blessing is like cold water given to a weary person. We respond by using our money and material possessions to bless others.

Social Reform: Respond by advocating, using your education, job search skills, financial counseling, or social networks.

Spiritual Care: The weak and the poor, just as much as the rich and the powerful, need to hear the gospel, repent,

believe in Christ, and be saved. The poor are not exempt from this requirement, as if their poverty somehow atoned for sins. Central to every response must be the proclamation of Jesus Christ and his redemptive work for sinners.⁵

Renew

Imagine the world without hunger. Wouldn't that world be a better place? When multitudes of Christians practice rhythms of remembering, receiving, relating, and responding, corporate renewal in society is possible. We acknowledge common grace and that non-Christians share with us common intuitions about the good, the true, and the just. We appeal to those common values and work alongside our neighbors in an effort to improve justice in society and fight against the effects of sin in the world.⁶ We seek the peace in our cities by prayer, our powerful presence, and public action (Psalm 37:6, Job 29:14, Nehemiah 2:17-18, Jeremiah 29:7).

Envision: We envision the world without poor health, poor education, sex trafficking, slumlords, payday lending, slavery, joblessness, etc.⁷

Embody: We live justly and work for justice according to our gifts.

Entrust: We equip others for the work and release them into the world.

WHAT YOUR CHURCH CAN DO

Trying to guess the needs of your neighborhood will cause you to waste a lot of valuable time. There is a better way. The best way to know the needs around you is to personally go and ask individuals in the area. Here are five questions we recommend asking:

1. How long have you lived in this community?
2. What do you like best about this community?

5. Greenway and Monsma, 1989:174

6. Tim Keller, Center Church.

7. Sometimes a disease can be knocked out; sometimes sex traffic can be considerably reduced; sometimes slavery can be abolished in a region; sometimes more equitable laws can foster justice and reduce corruption... In these and countless other ways cultural change is possible. More importantly, doing good to the city, doing good to all people (even if we have a special responsibility for the household of faith), is part of our responsibility as God's redeemed people... - Don Carson

(Identifies areas where God is already at work.)

3. What changes would you like to see that could make life better in this community? (Indicates their greatest felt needs.)
4. Do you have any ideas about ways a caring church could make a difference? (Helps you discern how you and your church can meet those needs.)
5. Can you share a story when people or organizations helped one another out or had a positive impact on the neighborhood? (Indicates acceptable pathways for service.)

CONCLUSION

When any church—whether new or old, large or small—decides to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly, the Lord’s blessing is near. The size of your response is not what matters most. To be shining stars of restoration, our deeds and words need only point to our Savior Jesus, who upon his return will restore all things. A cup of cold water on a hot day to a thirsty homeless man can be just as powerful evidence of Christ’s mercy as restoring multiple homes in an old forgotten neighborhood. With all of the increasing demands of life and ministry, all we ask at Sojourn Network is that you continue to remember the poor, do not forget to do good, and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased (Galatians 2:10; Hebrews 13:16).

APPENDIX A

Resources for further study:

Ministries of Mercy & Generous Justice by Tim Keller. This is the most helpful theology of mercy that I have come across. I use these books in my six-week introduction to mercy class.

When Helping Hurts by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. The book includes a simple overview of poverty and distinguishes between charity and development.

Walking with the Poor by Bryant Meyers. This is a good introduction to the nature of poverty and different ways of viewing and addressing poverty.

Churches that Make a Difference by Sider, Olson and Unruh. Here is a great resource for community ministry. Topics include social outreach, evangelism, community surveys and demographic study.

Beyond Charity and Restoring At-Risk Communities by John Perkins. Perkins is a pioneer in community development and is required reading in the field of study.

To Live in Peace by Mark Gornik. This book presents a theological argument for community development and highlights New Song Community Church in Baltimore, Maryland.

APPENDIX B

Doing Justice Out of Merciful Love

1. What was it like experiencing God's mercy when you first believed?
2. In what ways have your own sufferings kept you from stepping into the needs of others?
3. Share a time when you have experienced injustice, poverty, or when your needs were not met.
4. What picture comes to mind when you think about Jesus' promise "I am making everything new!"

Remember

1. What are the results of remembering that we are all

poor in spirit?

2. What genuine fellowship is possible given that Jesus meets the deepest need of anyone and everyone who trusts him?
3. Why is it so hard to take seriously God's command to love the poor?
4. Reflecting on the above Scriptures, what does God feel toward the poor and vulnerable? How does this differ from how you feel toward the poor and vulnerable?

Receive

1. How much effect does someone's physical appearance have on your first impressions of him or her? How often do your first impressions change once you get to know a person?
2. Share a time when you were able to bless someone and they were not able to pay you back. How were you blessed?
3. Sometimes we need to be intentional about locating the poor before we can receive them. Where in your neighborhood or city do the poor live? How can you – as a group – go, invite and receive them?
4. What are the risks and rewards of doing what Jesus says here about receiving the poor?

Relate

1. How do you think racial and class divisions affect your life today?
2. What are some of your personal barriers to effective listening?
3. What do you sense the Holy Spirit is saying to us about how we relate to those economically, racially or socially different than us?
4. What can we do to become a significantly more caring community group among the poor and vulnerable?

Respond

1. God gives each of us many gifts that we take for granted. What gifts has God given you that you often hide or fail to use for his glory?
2. What objections might a person raise to God's command that there be no poor among you?
3. Jesus was mighty in Word and deed. We typically prefer one to the other, yet Scripture calls us to a balanced approach. Are you Word or deed driven and why?
4. How can we, as a group, obey God's call to radical

generosity and cultivate the habit of responding to need?

Renew

1. Have you ever taken the time to dream about what your community could be?
2. What do your neighbors dislike about your neighborhood? How can you help bring about change?
3. If you inherited ten thousand dollars, what social injustice would you use it to address? Why?
4. How are we as a group living justly and working for justice in the world? What areas do we want to grow in?