

CARING FOR THE POOR

THE LAW OF GOD AND PUBLIC POLICY: PART 7



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Caring for the Poor
The Law of God and Public Policy: Part 7
T. M. Moore
Susie Moore, Editor and Finisher

Copyright, 2024 T. M. and Susie Moore
The Fellowship of Ailbe
www.ailbe.org

Except as indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version. © Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Caring for the Poor

Contents

Welcome to <i>Caring for the Poor</i>	4
1 With Us Always	5
2 Who Are the Poor?	7
3 No Preferentialism	9
4 A Local Concern	11
5 The Dignity of Work	13
6 Tithes and Loans	15
7 Escaping Poverty	17
Questions for Reflection or Discussion	19

Welcome to *Caring for the Poor*

Jesus explained that there will always be poor people in our midst, and we can care for them whenever we wish. The Law of God teaches us to make caring for the poor part of who we are as communities, both of believers and otherwise.

But our responsibility to care for the poor does not relieve the poor of working to care for themselves. A delicate and fruitful balance exists in the Law of God to make sure that how we care for the poor expresses the love of God, preserves the dignity of individuals, and contributes to a good and just society.

Let's take a closer look.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 With Us Always

“For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.’” Deuteronomy 15.11

The goal of public policy

The goal of a good society and, thus, of public policy, is to pursue and maintain justice.

Justice, as we have seen, is not defined in terms of material wealth or political advantage, but of love for God and neighbors. It is not the goal of a good society to ensure equal material prosperity, but equal justice for all its members. In the divine economy, outlined in the Law of God, what people need above all else is the security of *love*, not of *wealth*, much less of *political power*.

This being so, the ideal of material equality being unattainable at any rate, every society must expect that there will be a certain amount of inequality of income and wealth among its members. Such a situation is not inherently evil, although it can be, if justice is compromised. A society can be just and still contain inequalities of wealth. The fact that such inequalities will exist, which means that there will always be a presence of poor people in society, must not be allowed to be a cause for complacency, indifference, scorn, or neglect toward the problem of poverty and the needs of our fellow citizens.

We turn now, in our consideration of the ways God’s Law can speak to public policy issues of our day, to consider the question of the poor, and of society’s responsibility toward those who struggle to sustain themselves materially. Are we our neighbors’ keeper?

The answer offered in the Law of God is both Yes and No.

Justice for all

No society can be good where inequality of justice is accepted as normal. God reaches to all people with His grace, and we must reflect that same consideration for the people in our communities. Members of a good society will not be content for their neighbors to be deprived of the respect and care they deserve as image-bearers of God simply because they are poor. They will take care to ensure that neighbor-love is extended to all members, according to their situation and need.

Justice will thus require that communities give due concern to helping to alleviate the material want of those of their members who, for various reasons, are not able to provide sufficiently for themselves. While merely being poor does not qualify one for a broad range of entitlements at the expense of one’s neighbors, the needs of the poor should be a concern of all members of a good society.

Justice, according to the Law of God, entails certain specific obligations on the part of a good society toward the poor in their midst, whether they are temporarily or chronically in need.

“For you have the poor with you always,” Jesus explained, thus affirming the teaching of God’s Law (Mk. 14.7). Jesus went on to insist that, as often as we have opportunities, we should address the needs of the poor. He understood that the Law of God had outlined specific approaches to this situation, and He seems to have regarded these as sufficient. The apostle Paul likewise indicated that caring for the poor (Gal. 2.6-10) was high on his list of priorities, as it was with the rest of the apostles.

Concern for the poor is an essential component of pure and undefiled religion (Jms. 1.27) and a good society.

Caring for the Poor

“War” on poverty

It will thus not be a goal of a just society to eliminate poverty. Declaring a “war on poverty”, and other such virtue-signaling rhetoric, is impractical and self-serving. It assigns poverty to the class of things evil, things to be eliminated, when, in fact, the Scriptures teach no such thing. Such bold and high-sounding aims play well in political campaigns, but they fly in the face of what God has plainly revealed. To undertake a “war on poverty” is to deny the authority of God’s Word and the teaching of Jesus Christ. To care for those entangled in poverty is just and loving and fulfills an important aspect of the divine economy.

Our aim is not to wage war on poverty, as though poverty were some sort of enemy which we might isolate, attack, and destroy. Poverty is no such thing, but a condition inherent in the human situation through which we must work to discover ways of loving our neighbors as ourselves.

No society can be just in which indifference to, scorn toward, or neglect of the poor is considered acceptable, or where people are encouraged to remain in poverty when escaping it is possible. The poor in any community are the neighbors of all members of the community, and all the members of any community thus are responsible to “open wide” their hands to meet the needs of the poor. Rather than warring against the poverty of the poor, the members of a just society accept the condition of poverty as a call to serve their neighbors in love.

Let us take it as a matter of public policy, therefore, to discover the Biblical teaching concerning the poor and to adopt policies that will enable us to fulfill the responsibilities of neighbor-love toward them. To its credit, the Church has consistently demonstrated a concern for the poor, because it has believed the teaching of Jesus and the Law of God that neighbor-love demands it. That is, Christians, operating from within the divine economy, have taken it on themselves to embrace public policies of caring for the poor, irrespective of what any other institutions or governments have done.

And this is a record that we can build on in our day.

For reflection

1. Does your church provide any ministry or services for the poor in your community? What?
2. Are all poor people truly poor? Explain.
3. Besides your church, what other Christian entities exist in your community to help care for the needs of the poor?

Next steps—Preparation: Compile a list of Christian agencies in your community that serve the needs of the poor. Create a prayer list to pray for these groups regularly.

2 Who Are the Poor?

“You shall not pervert justice due the stranger or the fatherless, nor take a widow’s garment as a pledge.” Deuteronomy 24.17

For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread. 2 Thessalonians 3.10-12

Poverty and neighbor-love

There will always be poor people in any society. This is the teaching of Scripture, and it fairly describes the experience of human societies from the beginning. The poor will be with us always, as Jesus explained, and neighbor-love requires that the poor be cared for by those who have means. Churches and church-related organizations maintain policies and programs to help relieve the needs of poor people, both in their communities and around the world. In a good society, where justice and love pervade the economy, policies will exist to provide relief for the poor. This is a function of good government, beginning at the local level.

People fall into poverty for various reasons, some just, and some not. It seems strange, perhaps, to say that there might be “just” reasons for being poor. But let’s keep in mind that a society is just when love for God and neighbor are the defining features, not material prosperity. Even a society where perfect love obtains will contain poor people. This should not be taken to mean, however, that somehow injustice exists, just because material blessings are not “evenly” distributed. There will always be poor people in any society, but the presence of poor people does not make that society unjust. A good society will consist of both wealthy and poor alike. But in a good society neighbor-love prevails for all people, regardless of their social or economic status, and policies and programs will operate to help people in their times of need.

The challenge to a good society is making sure that neighbor-love, in all the appropriate forms, is extended to all members, the poor included. For Christians, such policies are part of the warp and woof of our existence. Caring for the poor is a “policy” embraced by individual believers and their churches. This has been so from the very beginning.

But in the larger society, caring for our poor neighbors may require additional policies and programs. Some of these will be provided by private entities, and some will be the result of government programs.

The truly poor

Not all who suffer from a lack of material blessings should be regarded as truly poor. The Law of God teaches us how to think about those who are truly poor, and offers guidance in how a community should care for them (cf. Prov. 29.7).

Some people become poor because of deprivation or loss, whether of persons or property. Orphans lose their parents; still, their basic needs must be met. Widows lose their husbands. The early Church was particularly diligent in caring for those who were true widows (cf. Acts 6.1-6; 1 Tim. 5.1-16). People whose property is destroyed by fire or storm may temporarily fall into poverty and thus require short-term assistance.

Poverty can also befall those who become ill and are unable to work, such as lepers in both the Old and New Testaments. Some may be poor because, being refugees (sojourners) or those who have recently lost their jobs, they have been unable to secure steady work.

These are, in Biblical terms, the truly poor. They deserve the love of their neighbors to sustain them during

Caring for the Poor

their season of impoverishment, until they can take responsibility for their lives once again. Those who will never be able to attain that state of taking care of themselves must be cared for indefinitely and ungrudgingly.

Poverty

Those who become poor because they are unwilling to work or otherwise to take responsibility for meeting their needs, or because they prefer a life of indolence or revelry, should not be considered among the poor for whom society has a responsibility. As we see from the apostle Paul, Scripture teaches against supporting people in their laziness, indolence, or wastefulness. Such people must be encouraged—and if necessary, helped—to take responsibility for their needs by replacing bad habits with good (Rom. 12.21) and taking on appropriate work.

The word “poverty” must not be regarded as a universal term to describe people whose only common characteristic is a lack of income or material wellbeing. Some who seem to be poor may have fallen into that condition because of refusing to exercise good stewardship. In a very real sense, they do not deserve to have their status dignified by being referred to as “poor.” They are not poor; they are irresponsible. Social policy must discourage such practices by refusing to reward an irresponsible lifestyle. And the Church should be ready with ways and means of helping such people lay aside bad habits and learn edifying ones.

The truly poor, however, deserve our compassion and our diligent efforts to care for them. This includes working to establish policies—whether civil or ecclesiastical—that make it possible for the poor to have their basic needs met daily.

The poor will be among us always, and we must always be ready to help them according to the teaching of God’s Law.

For reflection

1. Why is it inevitable that there will always be poor people in any society or community?
2. What is our responsibility toward those who are poor by choice, that is, who are poor because of an irresponsible life?
3. How would you counsel a new believer to pray for the poor in your community?

Next steps—Preparation: Some people are poor in spirit—discouraged, without hope, giving up. What can you do to help any who are poor in spirit?

3 No Preferentialism

“You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor.” Leviticus 19:15

Worthy because poor?

Over the last century or so a false view has been advocated by certain members of the Christian community and others concerning the Church’s—and society’s—responsibility toward the poor. This view holds that all poor people are worthy of our care and have a right to expect a certain measure of deference and public support, simply by virtue of their status as falling below a certain level of material wellbeing.

This view is sometimes spoken of in Christian circles as the “preferential option” for the poor, and it insists that caring for the poor—all poor people—is the Church’s first and most pressing duty.

This view comes from the spirit of an egalitarian age, not from the Spirit of God. While on the surface it may seem like a noble idea, in practice it spawns policies that can rob the poor of their dignity as human beings, impose unjust requirements on the rest of society, encourage rather than relieve the causes of poverty, and create a community in which justice and love are compromised and undermined.

There are legitimate reasons why people become poor, as we have seen. And truly poor people should expect a just society to show them neighbor-love in ways that enable them to maintain their dignity and their place as contributing members of the social order. We’ll have more to say about this a bit later in in this series.

But to treat all poor people as worthy of special attention simply because they are poor does not line up with the divine economy and the teaching of God’s Word.

Poor with dignity

The Law of God expects even those who are poor to work and tithe from the fruit of their labors. Thus, though they may be poor, they do not forfeit their dignity, and they are not excused from being responsible and contributing members of the community, just like everyone else.

Not all those who are poor, however, deserve the same consideration as those who are truly poor, as we have also seen.

Some people are poor by reason of reckless living or an unwillingness to take responsibility for their own wellbeing. Those who are poor because they squander the gifts of God and those who will not work should not expect the same attention and care as those who are truly poor.

And even those who *are* truly poor have no right to expect that society will ensure them a particular “standard of living.” They may be truly poor, but they are also truly responsible for their own wellbeing and stewardship.

Robbing the poor

Public policies that make the poor wards of the State are unjust for two reasons.

First, they rob the poor of their true dignity by creating an entitlement mindset, making the poor *dependent* on society—or, more specifically, on the political class—rather than *contributors* to society who depend on God and His goodness and justice for their needs. When we, in effect, pay people to be poor, simply because they are poor, why should we expect them to seek any other way of living?

Caring for the Poor

Second, such policies go beyond the requirements of what God's Law requires with respect to distributive justice, setting the State over God to determine what the norms of justice should be.

Nowhere does the Law of God approve of the State seizing the property of one group of citizens to bolster the material wellbeing of another group, even if that group is chronically and justly poor. And even in situations in which the property of one group is to be made available for the needs of the poor, as in the third-year tithe in ancient Israel, this is to be done voluntarily, under the eyes—and thus the approval or disapproval—of local communities.

The State has no right to seize property, which it typically does through taxation, and distribute it through its channels and bureaucracies, each siphoning off a measure to support its own existence, until the remainder reaches the poor. Everyone is called upon to fulfill certain duties *vis à vis* the poor, and to receive the gratitude their faithfulness provokes or the shame and stigma for their cold indifference.

As we shall see, the poor have a “right” to the property of the non-poor only if they work for it themselves. Thus, the poor in any community should expect to be loved as neighbors and cared for according to their true needs; however, they must not expect to be elevated as equals in any kind of material sense or sustained in poverty unnecessarily.

The poor should be protected and served by the laws and policies of the community and the free interventions of those who care for their wellbeing; but they must not be favored by public policy or ecclesiastical ministry any further than what the Law of God requires.

For reflection

1. Do you agree that programs to relieve poverty can rob the poor of their dignity? Explain.
2. What might be some constructive ways local churches could help the poor?
3. Why would we not classify the prodigal son as justly poor?

Next steps—Preparation: Pray for the churches in your community, that they might work together more in helping the truly poor and in proclaiming the Gospel.

4 A Local Concern

“If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs...For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.’” Deuteronomy 15.7, 8, 11

An impossible task

In an economy in which material prosperity is the defining ideal, the State increasingly assumes the role of ensuring the attainment of that ideal for all its members. The State abhors the idea that there must always be poor people among us, and those who make and enforce public policy cannot help but notice the political opportunity caring for the poor affords.

In the present climate, the State carefully monitors the conditions and numbers of the poor, and it employs an army of agencies and agents to ensure that all who fall below a certain income level shall be cared for by government largesse.

Thus the State increases its ability to transfer wealth from those who produce it to those who consume it, always in the name of some putative war on poverty. Present public policy has done little to alleviate the needs of the truly poor, while it continues to increase the ranks of the poor among those who have become addicted to one or another form of entitlement.

Hoping to eradicate poverty is an impossible task, and one that divides societies along class and economic lines. This is because the injustice and futility of such an effort are patent, since such policies contradict the Biblical teaching both about the role of government and how to respond to the needs of the poor.

A community concern

In the Law of God, poverty is regarded as a local problem and inevitable. Granted, in the New Testament, when the Body of Christ began to take on universal proportions, the needs of impoverished communities in one part of the world were embraced as the responsibility of all Christians everywhere. But the members of the Body of Christ maintain a special unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4.3) and citizenship (1 Pet. 2.9, 10) which other communities and societies do not possess. The unity of the Body of Christ makes every *local* church a full-fledged member of the *universal* Church. Thus, in the Church, everything that pertains to the needs of local churches is also to be the concern of the universal Church, and *vice-versa* (for example, in the areas of doctrine, mission, and church order, as well as in relieving the needs of the poor or oppressed).

Poverty in ancient Israel was regarded as a local problem, to be resolved at the local level. The lines of response whenever someone fell into poverty were, first, family, then, immediate neighbors, and, finally, the resources of the community as a whole. It is likely that communities would have shared resources with one another if necessary, as we see among the churches in the New Testament; however, we do not see in the Law of God any explicit instruction or policy requiring this.

And no role is given for a centralized state government to take up this task.

Nor do we find any stipulations empowering magistrates beyond the local level to ensure that the needs of the poor were being met. Typically, if a community could not—or would not—care for its own poor, those poor would move on to some other place to meet their needs.

Poverty in ancient Israel was not to be an excuse for failing to be a contributing member of the community.

Caring for the Poor

The poor were not “dependent” in ancient Israel; laws and policies were enacted to ensure that poor people would continue to give what they could for the justice and wellbeing of a community. Thus, it was in the community’s best interest to provide for the poor so that they could overcome the bonds of poverty and continue their stewardship within the community even while they remained poor.

Local solutions

Local solutions to poverty outlined in the Law of God were designed (1) to facilitate the expression of neighbor-love in tangible ways, (2) to engage the dignity of the poor by enabling them to care for their own needs, and (3) to alleviate the immediate needs of the poor, without making them perpetually dependent upon the generosity of their neighbors.

Those solutions took the form of work and charity, as we shall see, and were to be engaged as needs came to light, but never with the intention of creating a class of permanently poor people. And these policies were enforced locally and without interference from larger civil authorities.

In our day, leaving the problem of the poor for someone else to solve has become commonplace. Local communities seldom demonstrate a heart for their poor; they long ago lodged that responsibility with the federal government. If effective local policies are to be enacted to care for the poor, someone will have to lead the way, both in calling for a renewal of neighbor-love and for demonstrating that love in action.

And here a great opportunity for showing Jesus to their communities awaits the attention of local churches and other Christian agencies. Indeed, in most communities Christians are already at work caring for the poor. But more could be done if churches were to embrace policies and programs that would bring them more effectively together to show neighbor-love locally to those who are in need. And even if we were more consistent in caring for the poor of the Church, would not the world find that such an attraction that Jesus would draw more of them to Himself?

For reflection

1. Federal bureaucracies and agencies tend to produce waste and promote inefficiency. Why do you suppose this is so?
2. Does your church cooperate with any other churches or Christian agencies to help meet the needs of the truly poor? In what ways?
3. Do you pray for the poor in your community? How should you pray for them?

Next steps—Conversation: Talk with a Christian friend about the needs of the poor in your community. Enlist your friend to join you in praying for the poor.

5 The Dignity of Work

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleaning from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the LORD your God.” Leviticus 23:22

The glory of work

God created human beings to work (Gen 1.26-28; 2.15). Put another way, work is not a curse resulting from the fall; it is a human being’s highest calling, but only when that work is done unto the Lord.

Through their work men and women invest the strength, skills, and intelligence God has given them in bringing out the goodness and rich potential of God’s creation. We reflect the creative and fruitful character of God by emulating His works in our own. Thus God is glorified by our work and we are enabled to meet our own needs and to share with our neighbors (cf. Eph. 4.28).

Work is inherent to being human and a source of dignity and fulfillment inasmuch as it allows us to participate with God in His project of upholding the creation, glorifying Himself, and blessing humankind. All legitimate occupations and vocations share in this ability to glorify God and bless our fellow human beings. All work has the potential to further the Kingdom and economy of God and to contribute to the creation of a good society; and thus no human being who is able should expect or be encouraged *not* to work. Instead, all must seek the work for which God has fitted them and take up that work for His glory (1 Cor. 10.31).

And this includes those who are poor in our communities.

Work and the poor

The poor must not be deprived of the dignity of work simply because they are poor. In the Law of God, the poor in Israel were expected to work to overcome their impoverished condition, whether that condition was for a short or long term. And it was the duty of the rest of the community to provide meaningful work for the poor to do.

Gleaning fields was the most common form of labor for the poor. It could also be highly productive for them, as we see in the case of Ruth (Ruth 2). Israelite society was based in agriculture. Every community would have had plenty of fields, gardens and orchards, and each landowner was responsible to make sure that, when the harvest came in, food was left on the stalk or vine for the poor to glean. The produce was not gathered for them nor delivered to them. The poor, like all their neighbors, were expected to work in line with God’s design for all people.

By extension, we might suppose that some measures were taken to make it possible for the poor to find work in those fields before the harvest was realized. And that other opportunities for the poor to work were also held in store, community by community, for those who might have needs. There were always buildings to repair, errands to run, animals to tend, and doubtless many other everyday chores. It is likely that poor people were called upon to meet these needs and thus to provide for themselves and realize a valuable aspect of their reason for being.

Resources were not distributed to the poor by local governments at centralized collections centers. Nor were the poor sought out and “counseled” by government agents to enroll for local assistance, or given vouchers to use in purchasing necessities, as is often the case today. The poor were expected to go and retrieve their sustenance, at their own initiative, through the dignity of honest labor.

Caring for the Poor

In our day, when communities are no longer so directly based on agriculture, policies could be adopted and programs created which provide other means whereby the poor can work to provide for their needs. The practice of giving “hand-outs” to those who meet some government-decreed standard for being poor does not fulfill the principal of gleaning; instead, it may serve to foster a mindset of dependency, if not entitlement. And it lacks the dignity that comes from work.

One who had become poor in ancient Israel might choose to contract himself into the service of another, especially, it seems, a close relative (Lev. 25.39-43). This was not slavery but more a form of indentured servitude in which, for a specified period, one who had fallen on hard times would contract with another to serve in whatever ways might have been needed. During the tenure of such contracts the one serving was to be treated with love and respect, as unto the Lord (Lev. 25.43). He was not to be treated scornfully or in a manner that assaulted his dignity as an image-bearer of God.

Justice and work

A just society requires all members to contribute love for their neighbors, whether they are poor or wealthy. Those who will not work when they can do so should be left to the consequences of their sluggardliness (2 Thess. 3.10). It is incumbent on local community leaders to discover ways, analogous to the work of gleaning, of helping to meet the needs of local poor. These might include keeping part-time work available, identifying “community work” opportunities and helping to fund them, offering job counseling and training, and so forth. Churches certainly could pioneer the way in this, creating opportunities for work on their campuses, on behalf of needy members, and for the community at large.

The poor in any community are both the legitimate concern of the community and a source of blessing, and not a burden, to it. Because even the poor are expected to contribute to the wellbeing of their community, making sure that work opportunities are available for those who have fallen on hard times is a way of helping them to fulfill their God-given purpose and of allowing communities to practice neighbor-love in truly edifying and contributing ways.

But work is not the only option a local community can employ in helping to meet the needs of its poor.

For reflection

1. Can you think of some work opportunities that might be analogous to gleaning?
2. Churches could provide educational services to help those who are out of work or preparing to enter the workforce. Such as?
3. If you were poor, what kinds of work would you be willing to do to support yourself and your loved ones?

Next steps—Preparation: What are some things your church could do to help people who need work?

6 Tithes and Loans

“At the end of every third year you shall bring out the tithe of your produce of that year and store it up within your gates. And the Levite, because he has no portion nor inheritance with you, and the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who are within your gates, may come and eat and be satisfied, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do.” Deuteronomy 14.28, 29

Charity

According to the Law of God, charity is an important tool for helping to meet the needs of the poor in local communities. It is a necessary supplement to dignified work and is the duty of all members of the community.

Charity, by definition, is not something which can be coerced; charity must not be confused with taxation. It should be seen to be a community responsibility in which all are encouraged to share.

Freely giving to relieve the needs of those who are truly poor is a measure of justice—both obligatory and distributive justice—which helps to ensure that neighbor-love will be a defining characteristic of any community. To neglect charity, or to substitute taxation for charity, is to short-circuit the practice and flourishing of love, and does not reflect the intent of the Law of God.

Charity in ancient Israel

In ancient Israel charity toward the poor was practiced through tithes and offerings, distributed by the spiritual leaders—priests, Levites, and judges or elders—of each community. A part of the regular offerings of the people was set aside to be available to the poor, widows, orphans, and sojourners.

In addition, every three years the communities of ancient Israel took up a special offering to replenish their “community chests” of goods. At least some of these resources were made available for the needs of the poor.

This measure seems to have been more along the lines of what many communities practice today, through the charitable services and free goods we typically see today in many cities and counties. By soup kitchens, food pantries, and clothes closets, the poor are provided for on a short-term basis.

Such charitable efforts must not be the only means of meeting the needs of the poor; nor should they be the first line of defense. As we have seen, helping the poor to find meaningful and productive work is the first obligation of any community toward its poor neighbors.

Short-term, interest-free loans could also be used to care for those who had fallen on hard times (Ex. 22.25, 26). These appear to have been personal loans between friends or family members or close neighbors and were to be repaid without interest and in a timely manner. Those who loaned to the poor were not to charge interest, except possibly a fee to cover the lost opportunity costs the loan would incur.

Churches and public policy

Neighbor-love requires that communities accept responsibility to care for the needs of the poor among them. This is a responsibility we should expect all churches to embrace. And, indeed, many churches recognize caring for the poor, if only among their own members, as an important part of their ministry, either through the efforts of individual congregations or through church-supported mercy ministries and relief agencies

Local non-faith-based charities also exist to help in this area, and depend on the gifts of individuals and corporations to fulfill their missions. These also should be supported and assisted by the members of the

Christian community.

In caring for the poor, public policy should perhaps be more by consensus than legislation. But for such a consensus to exist, some will have to argue its position and demonstrate their commitment to what is proposed. This is an area where churches and believers individually can lead in their communities without having to invoke the aid of local government.

Policies that seek to address the needs of the poor will work best when they follow Biblical guidelines. Practices to relieve the poor fail the test of justice when they (1) treat the poor indiscriminately, on the basis of income or wealth only; (2) deny the dignity of the poor by failing to create opportunities for work; (3) make the poor dependent on government programs and largesse; (4) violate the property rights of the non-poor (as through taxation); (5) create a class of people who make their living on the poor or on being poor; (6) create a political environment which either encourages poverty or links it to political power; or (7) bypass or supplant local agencies in offering solutions to the needs of the poor.

Community leaders and agencies should carefully monitor the presence and needs of the poor to encourage a public policy framework for individuals, corporations, and private charitable agencies to do the work for which they are best fitted. Work, charity, and short-term financial assistance are all valid and important ways to bring justice to the poor and practice neighbor-love with those in need.

For reflection

1. Caring for the needs of the poor provides churches an excellent opportunity to practice what Jesus taught in John 17.21-23. Why is this important?
2. In his book, *Ministries of Mercy*, the late Tim Keller called for deacons in churches to work together in caring for the poor. Does this exist in your community? Do you think the deacons of your church would be open to it? Why or why not?
3. As you see it, how could your community improve the services it offers to the poor and needy?

Next steps—Preparation: Pray for the poor and needy in your community, and for the various ministries and agencies that serve them.

7 Escaping Poverty

“Therefore hear, O Israel, and be careful to observe it, that it may be well with you, and that you may multiply greatly as the LORD God of your fathers has promised you—a land flowing with milk and honey.” Deuteronomy 6.3

No complacency

While the Law of God counsels us always to expect there to be poor people in our communities, and that we must be ready to assist the truly poor in their time of need, it does not counsel complacency about poverty. There will always be poverty, just as there will always be sin; however, a just society will struggle mightily to overcome each of these ills.

Let us insist, however, that being poor is not inherently sinful. Jesus Himself became poor for our sakes, so that we through His poverty might be made rich. People do not need an abundance of material possessions to know true joy in the Lord or to love God and their neighbors. Poverty is not necessarily a sinful condition, but it is a condition that requires the loving attention and care of every community.

God’s plan for justice includes sufficient material prosperity to care for all the members of a community. This is not the same as saying that God wants us all to be wealthy. In a just society, work is only one contributor to material prosperity. Obedience to God’s Law is the greatest form of insurance that a community or society will never want for material sustenance. The more societies shape their policies and practices after the requirements of God’s Law, the more they can expect to realize the favor of God in providing for their welfare and peace.

No salvation, no guarantees

This is not the same as saying that obeying the Law of God, and framing policies that reflect the Law, are either the way to salvation or a guarantee of prosperity for a community or a people.

But God is faithful to His promises. The way to realize blessing from the Lord is to walk the path of His covenant. When His people work for the welfare and pray for the peace of their community (Jer. 29.7), and when, following their example and lead (Ps. 81.13-15), their communities adopt policies which reflect the just laws and statutes of God, those communities have every good reason to expect, not that there will be no poverty in their midst, but that the needs of the truly poor will be met and the pathway out of poverty will be clear for as many as are able to walk it.

Obedience to God’s Word, beginning with His Law, is the surest guarantee that all members of the community will know mercy and grace from the Lord sufficient for their every need. And that obedience must begin and be conspicuous in (Matt. 5.16) the household of God.

The Church as key

The Church is thus the key to any community realizing the blessing of God. Through its worship, example, leadership in carrying out the Law of God, faithfulness in working for justice, zeal to bring the blessings of God to its community, and diligence in prayer, a local church may help its community to regard poverty, not as a problem or blight, but as an inducement to neighbor-love and a means for realizing the blessings of God.

On the other hand, churches that disregard the Law or downplay its significance will have little to offer their communities, whether for the relief of the poor or for any of the other matters we have discussed in this series. Jesus explained that greatness in the Kingdom of God depends on hearing, obeying, and teaching the Law of God (Matt. 5.17-19). If we will not hear Him in this, we will never fulfill the role of salt, light, and leaven He has appointed for us in the world.

Caring for the Poor

Obedience to God's Law must begin within the household of faith. However, it must not be restricted to the church, as we have seen. The Law of God commends practices and policies which contribute to making good societies in which love and justice flourish. Thus, those who know, love, and obey the Law of God must work to bring its benefits, as far as that is possible, to all their neighbors as well.

The way out of poverty is not difficult. It begins with opportunity—for work with dignity, education and training, and the patient assistance of a loving community—and it progresses through improved self-image, responsibility, and stewardship, just as these are taught in the Law of God and all His Word. All of this must be modeled and taught within local churches and by their members as they are disbursed throughout the larger community.

But Christians must also work to support public policies that guide the poor onto such paths, and to resist those which have the effect of creating a permanent “underclass” in which the ultimate beneficiaries are not the poor who will be with us always, but the politicians and bureaucrats who obscure the image and calling of God under a veneer of taxes and entitlements.

For reflection

1. Why is being poor not necessarily a sin?
2. God promises that, when His people obey His Word, even those who hate Him will follow in their example (cf. Ps. 66.1-3; Ps. 81.13-15). Do you believe this? What does this require of you?
3. How should you pray for the poor people in your community?

Next steps—Preparation: Make sure you are walking in the path of obedience to God's Law. How might you improve in this?

Caring for the Poor

For reflection or discussion

1. Why is caring for the poor an excellent opportunity for shaping public policy?
2. How would you summarize the teaching of God's Law concerning how we should care for the poor?
3. Why is work an important component? How can churches help poor people find work?
4. What are some things a Christian should pray about concerning the poor?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this part of our study on "The Law of God and Public Policy"?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 103 Reynolds Lane, West Grove, PA, 19390.

Thank you.