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Seek Justice, Encourage the Oppressed

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Seek Justice, Encourage the Oppressed

Abstract

"Many of us can easily be convicted to be compassionate in these ways; to give food, money, clothing and even our time. We know that we are doing what God calls us to. But is this all that God is calling us to in our response to the poor and vulnerable?"

Posting about poverty and justice from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/seek-justice-encourage-the-oppressed/>

Keywords

In All Things, justice, poor, poverty, social problems, Christianity and justice

Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Seek Justice, Encourage the Oppressed

 [all in allthings.org/seek-justice-encourage-the-oppressed/](https://allthings.org/seek-justice-encourage-the-oppressed/)

Abby Foreman

When I was growing up, the day after Thanksgiving was not spent scouting for sales but rather was a day when my cousins and I helped my grandma sort the food that had been collected during the Thanksgiving food drive. We would sort through the cans of soups and build precarious towers of Jell-O boxes in helping to organize the food pantry. All of this food—given by good, compassionate Christian folks—would go to feed hungry people and I was excited to take part in the mission. This experience, and others, opened my eyes to the needs of God’s people nearby and around the world, and also exposed me to one of the ways we attempt to meet needs of “the least of these” as identified in the often-quoted Matthew 25. God’s word is full of commands to love one another and to care for what Wolterstorff calls the “quartet of the downtrodden”: the widows, orphans, aliens and the poor.¹ Many of us can easily be convicted to be compassionate in these ways; to give food, money, clothing and even our time. We know that we are doing what God calls us to. But is this all that God is calling us to in our response to the poor and vulnerable?

In the Old Testament God gives various commands about how to live in community with one another. These are not commands to be acted upon haphazardly when we are convicted or feel passion, but rather it outlines the plans for a just and merciful community where all may flourish. In the Israelite community, it was understood that care and protections be given towards those on the margins of their society. These Old Testament commands include insights into equality of opportunity (the year of Jubilee) and opportunities for the poor to provide for themselves (gleaning). Both justice and mercy (or charity in this case) are biblical concepts. As the prophet Micah proclaims: “He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humble with your God.” (Micah 6:8). Part of our walk with the Lord is our dedication to “stop doing wrong and learn to do what is right,” which Isaiah says is to “Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isaiah 1:17). This involves a recognition that we live in a world that is home to numerous, complex levels of organizational, societal and political relationships that have been developed over time. In Reformed circles we talk of this as creational development and we also recognize that these developments can include elements of both justice and injustice—wholeness and brokenness. We live in a world where signs of God’s reconciliation and redemption coexist alongside signs of brokenness and evil.

When we begin to talk about these things, many of us become overwhelmed, or we get turned off by the partisan politics that too often make any discussion about structural change divisive and nasty. As a result, we are tempted to yearn for the good old days of the Garden of Eden. A simple garden, where all relationships flourished and man and woman cheerfully took care of the creation. But as Bierma notes in his book *Bringing Heaven Down to Earth*, the book of Revelation speaks not of a return to the garden but of the New Jerusalem.² A city—which we might infer signifies creational development, and a place likely full of complex and interwoven organizational, economic, political and social relationships. When we think of relationships in community we often think almost exclusively of interpersonal relationships. And here is where we may not be fully grasping the extent to which we can make a difference for those in need. We can advocate for changes in law or policy that benefit the poor like the [Earned Income Tax Credit](#), we can run businesses that provide adequate salaries and benefits for workers, we can mentor and coach young families to be successful as healthy and safe parents. We can also commit to helping strategically and according to our gifts and expertise.

What I mean here is that if you are a web designer, a graphic designer or bookkeeper that you think seriously about contributing your expertise to help a local nonprofit that works with the poor in your area. If you walk in to offer these services to a nonprofit, do not be surprised if someone hugs you immediately. The behind the scenes activities are just as important, and sometimes more important, than the face to face need-meeting that takes place. Behind each

sack pack that is given to a food insecure child in Sioux Center's schools, there are multiple volunteers, all part of a nonprofit organization that has been created to meet needs of food insecure children in Sioux Center, Iowa. Such organizations are just one part of a massive multi-level system of nutrition assistance programs and organizations in the United States-some government, some state and others community-based.

The young-me did not grasp the extensiveness and complexity of such a system, but I was certain at that time that I was doing a good, Christian thing in helping to provide food for the hungry. I still think these activities are good, Christian things to do. But it is also a good thing to recognize my response should not stop there—I am also called to seek justice. To ask broader, systemic questions about why people are increasingly turning to food pantries to feed their families. To consider different solutions, to advocate for solutions that work to promote a flourishing community where no one needs to use a food pantry, where people are engaged in meaningful, honoring work which allows them to provide for their families. Our work in both justice and charity can bring about redemptive glimpses, or in-breakings, of what will be when Christ returns.



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Footnotes

1. Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Justice, not charity: social work through the eyes of faith*. [Social Work and Christianity](#): 33 (2006) 2. ↩
2. Bierma, Nathan L.K. [Bringing Heaven Down to Earth: Connecting this Life to the Next](#) (P & R Publishing: Phillipsburg, NJ, 2005). ↩

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