

The Burden of Wealth

1. Warm-up question: When you were a kid, what did “rich” mean to you?

2. Most of us don’t consider ourselves rich, but here’s some data that puts things in perspective. One billion people in the world don’t have access to clean water, while the average American uses 132 gallons of water per day. Every 7 seconds, somewhere in the world a child under 5 dies of hunger, while here in American we throw away 14% of the food we purchase. More than half the world lives on less than \$2 per day, while the average American spends \$165 per day. The vast majority of people in the world own no car, virtually everyone here does. We Americans spend more annually on trash bags than nearly half the world spends on everything. If we took the money that we Americans spend annually on just potato and tortilla chips (\$13.6 billion), we could feed nearly all the malnourished children in the 36 poorest countries of the world. More than one billion people in the world live in shack-like homes with no appliances, running water, or electricity. They live without phones, books, fire departments, or realistic access to medical care. If you make \$20,000 per year, you’re in the top 10% of wealth in the world. If you make \$50,000 per year, you’re in the top 1.5%. (To check your wealth status, go to HowRichAmI.org.)
 - a. As you absorb all this data, what are your thoughts, feelings, or observations?
 - b. When in your life have you felt most impoverished or financially challenged? What did that feel like?
 - c. The Bible says, “If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard.” In other words, as people of faith, it is imperative that open our hearts to the suffering of the poor. In his sermon, Jeff shared the story of two poor people: an American woman named Kim Stradone who went from prosperity to homelessness when she became seriously ill, and a Malawi girl named Nyamiti who lacks sufficient food. Who is the poorest person you’ve ever known? What was the most difficult or gut wrenching aspect of their poverty?

3. By any objective measure, most of us are rich. That means when the Bible addresses rich people, it’s talking to us – as uncomfortable as that may feel. In our Gospel lesson from Sunday, Jesus had some pretty bracing words for us rich folks. Read Luke 6:17-26, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. When Jesus said, “Blessed are you who are poor. . . ,” what did he mean, as best you understand? In what sense is it a blessing to be poor? What was Jesus trying to say to those who are poor?
 - b. When Jesus said, “Woe to you who are rich,” what did he mean? Did he mean all rich people are doomed? If not, what did he mean? In what sense is it “woeful” to be rich?

- c. Given what Jesus says here, would you rather be rich or poor? If God gave you the choice, which would you choose – and why?
4. When we open ourselves to the pain of poverty, the question becomes: How does God expect me to respond? Jeff suggested that we should respond on three levels. **First, the personal level.** I John 3:17 says, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help.” We can’t help everybody, but each one of us can help somebody.
 - a. The Bible says, “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the lord, and will be repaid in full.” Proverbs 19:17. What do you think that means?
 - b. Tell us about a time when you personally have been able to do something kind for someone in poverty. How did that feel?
 - c. Tell us about a time when you regret not helping someone in poverty. How did that feel? Are there ever times when we shouldn’t help someone in need?
5. **Second, we should respond to poverty by being part of a church where we can pool our resources and do even greater things for the poor.** On Sunday, Jeff listed a number of things we’re doing for the poor collectively as a church family.
 - a. What letter grade do you think Jesus would give us at present in our collective efforts as a church to help the poor? Explain the grade you choose. Do you think Jesus is delighted or disappointed or somewhere in between?
 - b. As we continue to grow as a church, what’s your dream for how we might have an even greater positive impact for the poor?
6. **Third, we should respond to poverty by supporting major governmental programs to help the poor.** Jeff said, “As people of faith, we should debate which policies for helping the poor are most effective, supporting some and opposing others. But what’s not debatable is that, one way or another, our government should mount a strong response to systemic poverty.” Jeff said the foregoing statement was not political, but Biblical. In support, he gave examples of how God commanded Israel to have nationwide anti-poverty programs. Examples include laws requiring farmers to leave grain for the poor, laws prohibiting interest on loans, and laws requiring periodic forgiveness of debt and the return of land to its original owners.
 - a. Do you feel we’re doing enough in the United States right now governmentally to respond to the pain of poverty? Explain your answer. In your view, is there something more we should do? If so, what?
 - b. How important should it be for us, as people of faith, to vote for candidates who are passionate about the poor?

Luke 6:17-26

17 Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

`Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ `Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

`Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

22 `Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

²⁴ `But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ `Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

`Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

26 `Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.