

Kidnapped Girls Forced to Become Brides

The Wired Word for the Week of February 11, 2018

In the News

Ambiguous loss.

That term describes a special kind of hell on earth. It applies to individuals and families who have a loved who has gone missing and who may never have an answer as to what happened to that person or if he or she is even alive. It's an *ambiguous* loss because there is little possibility of closure. Those suffering the absence of the loved one may fluctuate between despair and hope, with the long-term impact being profoundly negative.

Ambiguous loss, a term coined by psychologist Pauline Boss in 1999, affects a lot of people worldwide, where 8 million children go missing every year. In the United States, the number of missing persons is currently about 900,000.

Psychologist Marilyn Mendoza, writing in *Psychology Today*, tells of working with people who have lost loved ones to unknown circumstances, and says that some are "like the walking dead."

Such sufferers "do what they have to do but basically withdraw from life," Mendoza said. "They often begin to feel unsafe themselves, which only reinforces their desire to withdraw from the outside world. They stop going to family functions because they are too painful and they stop celebrating holidays. They are unable to enjoy being with their spouse, children, or grandchildren. Sometimes one member may want to talk about the missing one all the time while another does not want to bring it up. This can create more distance and conflict in a relationship."

What brought this topic to our attention was an article in *BBC* about girls, some as young as 13, being kidnapped from small Vietnam villages and taken to China where they are sold into marriage. Reportedly, China's decades-long one-child policy, coupled with the preference for sons, has led to a growing gender imbalance in that country, which contributes to bride trafficking.

Economics may also be a factor. In some countries, buying a kidnapped bride is nearly one-tenth the price of hosting a traditional wedding.

In one Vietnamese village of only 50 people, four young girls have been taken. As a result, the sister-in-law of one of these girls no longer allows any female family members to leave the village alone, and she herself will only go to the market if accompanied by her husband.

Fear of kidnap is also cited as a reason in some locations for the lower participation of girls in the education system.

The mother of one of the kidnapped girls has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, and her only wish is to see her daughter again before she dies. But the girl has been missing for two years.

Although in most nations, bride kidnapping is considered a sex crime rather than a valid form of marriage, it is still practiced in many places, and has a long history. It continues to occur in countries in Central Asia, the Caucasus region and parts of Africa, and among peoples as diverse as the Hmong in Southeast Asia, the Tzeltal in Mexico and the Romani in Europe. We were unable to locate any worldwide figures, but according to one

report, in Kyrgyzstan alone, nearly 12,000 young women and girls are thought to be kidnapped for marriage each year, although it is not known how many of these are actual kidnappings instead of *pro forma* marriage customs.

Even so, in 2014, a *Wired Word* lesson covered the kidnapping of over 270 girls in Nigeria by the Muslim group Boko Haram. Many of the girls were used as sex slaves or forcibly married to Boko Haram members. Although many have escaped, been rescued or died, the whereabouts of many is still unknown.

In all cases, clearly what is being trampled on by those committing these crimes is the freedom and wishes of the girls and women snatched for this purpose.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Coping With Life After a Daughter's Disappearance. BBC](#)
[It's Hard to Believe That Bride Kidnapping Exists in 2017. News.com.au](#)
[Ambiguous Loss. Psychology Today](#)

Applying the News Story

The Bible nowhere contains the statement that "every human being has divine worth." Yet from the reading of scripture, most Christians conclude that to be true.

Treating girls and women as objects for capture and sale, denying them freedom and forcing them into marriage, while considered crimes in most places, also seems to be a denial of individual worth and a statement that the wishes of the man buying the "bride" are more important than the wishes of the woman or girl.

This news and lesson give us an opportunity to consider the value God places on each person.

The Big Questions

1. What is the value of a human life? How do you calculate it and upon what do you base your answer? Does your answer apply to all human beings equally? Why or why not?
2. What value does God place on human life? How do you know?
3. Why might we say that ambiguous loss is a special kind of hell on earth? If you know anyone who has a missing loved one, how might you best be a friend to that person? How might faith in God help a person facing ambiguous loss.
4. Do you agree that every human being has divine worth? If so, is it possible for individuals to forfeit that worth? Would you agree that such actions as kidnapping and forced marriage are sins against the divine worth of the victims?
5. What policies in our country would seem to deny the divine worth of all persons?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 1:27

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (For context, read 1:24-31.)

Being made in God's image makes humans unique in God's creation. Most Bible interpreters conclude that being made in God's image means that the divine worth of each person is a given.

Following the terrible events of 9/11, Congress established the Victim Compensation Fund. It committed the nation to compensate both the families who lost a loved one in the 9/11 horror and the more than 4,400 survivors who were physically injured.

The fund, however, was not designed to give all families the same amount of money. Realizing that, because of 9/11, there would likely be thousands of lawsuits against the airlines, the World Trade Center and other companies who could in any way be held accountable, Congress set up the fund in a way that would discourage lawsuits. It took into account how lawsuits might play out. If survivors took their cases to court and won, tort law would dictate that the cash awards would be decided individually based on specifics of the life and potential earning power of the person who was injured or had died. In that scenario, the family of a stockbroker who perished on 9/11 would get a lot more than the family of a busboy or even of a firefighter who died in the same attack. So the fund was set up to make some of the same kind of distinctions so as to encourage families to accept the cash from the fund in lieu of filing a lawsuit. The way the law was written practically forced families to have to plead their cases before the fund.

The administration of the fund fell to Kenneth Feinberg, an attorney skilled in negotiating difficult cases. He gave every family an opportunity to present their case and tell about their loved one. He discovered that for many surviving families, being able to talk about the loss and the life of the departed was a way for them to say "This person meant something" or "He or she was a person of great worth, a valuable person." Feinberg sat through literally thousands of these presentations and heard that quite apart from potential earning power, these 9/11 victims were valuable because of the ways in which they had touched the lives of those they had left behind. He soon concluded that although people sometimes disputed the amount of their awards, they usually were not motivated by greed, but by a desire to assert the value of their lost loved one. In his book about the experience, *What Is Life Worth?*, Feinberg writes:

... these meetings were rarely limited to reviews of raw data that would go into computing their awards. Instead, the applicants wanted to discuss the unquantifiable value of their lost loved one. They wanted to talk about the victim, about his commitment to family, her generosity, their heroism on 9/11. Their loved one was different from the others; she was unique ...

Feinberg and his staff did a good job, and by the close of the fund, the great majority of those who came to the fund felt they were fairly dealt with. But in one sense, Feinberg was never able to answer the question posed by the title of his book, "What is life worth?" His work with the fund required him to assign a dollar figure to the life of each victim, and he did that. But what he observed in those family hearings is that there is always something about human life that cannot be valued with cash.

That it is a characteristic stamped on us by God, when he made us in his image.

Questions: What things would you point to about your loved ones to tell others of their worth? How do you live so as to keep faith with the value God has placed on you?

1 Peter 1:18-19

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. (For context read 1:13-20.)

Here, the biblical author is saying that human beings are so valuable to God that he allowed his Son to die, to shed his "precious blood," to ransom them from the futile ways they were following.

We can deny that, we can fail to value it in anybody but ourselves, and we can behave as though God has no claim on us. But amid all the things that threaten life and freedom, it is always good to remind ourselves of the God-given worth of each human being. For when we understand and affirm that, then we have every reason to work for peace and justice, and every reason to help those in danger of losing their lives or of being treated as worthless.

Question: How does the principle of God-given worth apply in circumstances where some lives are saved by taking other lives?

Genesis 21:17-18

And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." (For context, read 21:8-21.)

Hagar comes close to the definition of being a forced bride. She was a slave from Egypt (Genesis 16:1), meaning she was in Abraham's household against her will. She was given no choice about having relations with Abraham, a union that resulted in the birth of their son Ishmael. And then, when Abraham's wife Sarah had her own son, she insisted Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away, which to his shame, Abraham does.

But alone in the desert, and out of water, with Ishmael near death, God comes to Hagar and tells her that he will save them. Hagar then finds a previously unnoticed well of water nearby. She and her son are saved.

Hagar knew neither she nor her son were among the people called "chosen" by God, but she learned that day that she and Ishmael were valuable to God nonetheless.

Questions: What convinces you of your worth to God? What convinces you of the worth to God of people unlike yourself?

Psalms 8:3-6

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet ... (For context, read 8:1-9.)

Questions: What is the comparison being made in these verses? What do these verses suggest about God's view of humankind?

Romans 5:6-8

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person -- though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (For context, read 5:1-11.)

Questions: What is the logic of these verses? Whom does the "us" at the end of the verses include? How do you know?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to this: A Christian bishop and theologian of the fourth century, Athanasius, who was a major influence in shaping Christian thought as we know it today, said some important things about this matter of our humanity. Starting with the fact that Christ existed as God's Word before his birth, Athanasius said that to bring

salvation to us, God took "to himself a body capable of death" -- that is, he "put on" humanity -- but in this form he defeated death so that we might gain eternal life. In other words, said Athanasius, God "was humanized that we might be deified."

In essence, Athanasius was saying that we are most truly human when we are at one with God, and that people who fall into sin are actually rejecting their humanity.

2. In case you find Athanasius difficult to understand, here's the same idea presented in the comic strip, *Arlo and Janis*. In one particular strip, Arlo, the father, has just confronted his young son, Gene, about some infraction or other. Gene protests, "But Dad! I'm only human!" Arlo responds, "That's no excuse, son!" Gene says, "It isn't? I thought I'd found a loophole."

What do you mean when you say, "I'm only human"?

3. Have you heard of "Factor X"? It's a term coined by political scientist Francis Fukuyama in his 2002 book, *Our Posthuman Future*, as a shorthand way to sum up the essence of what makes people human, what differentiates us from other mammals.

Fukuyama felt the need to define Factor X because, in his book, he was writing about the wave of bioengineering that was coming, some of which is now here. Bioengineering works from the results of DNA research that will let, for example, expectant parents have the DNA in their fertilized egg altered to "design" their baby with certain preferred characteristics. In addition, related research could delay aging and eradicate some diseases and physical infirmities, extending our average lifespan to 150 years or more.

Fukuyama wrote not to promote the science, but to help readers think through the ramifications of such practices. He was concerned that along the way, we could unbalance some of the fundamentals of what it means to be human, and so his book was intended to be cautionary.

Fukuyama's definition of Factor X, the essence of human nature, is "the capacity to combine reason, language, moral choice and emotions in ways that produce politics, art and religion."

What would you add or subtract from that definition? Why?

4. Psychologist Pauline Boss, who coined the term "ambiguous loss," identified two types. One, which is the subject of this lesson, is when the loved one is physically absent but psychologically present in the emotions of those who love the person. The other is when the loved one is physically present but psychologically absent, as in the dementias. If the latter describes someone you love, speak about why the term ambiguous loss does or does not seem to apply.

5. There is a story of bride kidnapping in the Bible. The full story is in Judges 19-21, but you can get the gist of the kidnapping from chapter 21, where the Israelites of 11 of the tribes, who had vowed that they would not let any of their daughters marry men from the tribe of Benjamin, devised a plan whereby 200 Benjaminite men without wives would kidnap girls from the Israelite city of Shiloh during a wild festival, thereby obtaining wives without the girls' families breaking their vow.

While this story is somewhat similar to the news story in today's lesson, it comes from a primitive time. As someone has said, "The past is a different country; they do things differently there." The book of Judges offers the story as history, not as a model for how things should be done, and concludes by saying "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (21:25). This set the stage for new leadership and cultural changes when the people learned that their own judgment about "what was right" was not sufficient.

The author of Judges seems to be suggesting a strong authority is needed for a moral compass. What is the best sort of society that humans can form? What is the worst sort of society as you observe it? Do you think there is a strong moral authority where you live? Discuss how history can teach us where we need to make changes in the present.

Responding to the News

This is a good time to think about what matters we would support or oppose to keep faith with the value God places on each one of us.

Prayer

Help us, O Lord, to live up to the value you place on us, and to treat others the same way. Enable those suffering ambiguous loss to find closure. Be with those who have been stolen from their loved ones, that in some way, they might be reunited with those from whom they have been separated by force or unexplained circumstance. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Other News This Week

Severe Poverty Impacting More Americans, Report Says

In the News

"The American Dream is rapidly becoming the American Illusion." That was the finding of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Philip Alston, in his preliminary report on poverty in the United States released at the end of 2017.

Alston based his conclusions on a 15-day fact-finding mission his team conducted in California, Alabama, Georgia, West Virginia and Washington, D.C., as well as Puerto Rico, in cooperation with the present and previous administrations.

The team sought to learn whether people in poverty are able to live with dignity, and to discover what governmental agencies are doing to protect those who are most vulnerable.

Alston admitted that it was not within the purview of the brief report to fully address all the causes and consequences of poverty. The team's research led them to conclude, however, that many social ills, such as homelessness, unemployment or employment without adequate compensation, lack of adequate sanitation and access to healthy food and medical care, criminalization and stigmatization of the poor, appear to stem from and reinforce a cycle of deepening poverty.

People who lack the means to pay rent or a mortgage may lose their housing, which can lead to conviction for "crimes" they would not have committed had they not become homeless. Some of these "low level infractions" include sitting, sleeping, or defecating in public places when they have little to no access to bedrooms or bathroom facilities.

Such behavior often results in greater incarceration rates for the poor who can't pay burdensome fines and high bail. Extended imprisonment and the stigma of a criminal conviction can lead to loss of employment or greater difficulty in securing or keeping jobs, possessions, housing and even children. All too often, poverty breeds deeper poverty.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 40 million Americans (or more than 1 of 8) lived in poverty in 2016. The rate of those living in deep poverty (with an income below one-half of the poverty threshold) rose from 40 percent in 1999 to 46 percent in 2015. Today 1.5 million American households live in extreme poverty (subsisting on less than \$2 a day per person), nearly double the number in that situation 20 years ago.

Many of the poor are women, children and the elderly, who may live in urban centers or rural areas. One in four children live in poverty in the United States, the worst rate among the 37 nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). One-third of all poor people are children.

People of color are disproportionately affected by the rise in poverty, but white Americans also feel the impact of inadequate income. 17.3 million non-Hispanic whites live in poverty, compared with 11.1 million Hispanics, 9.2 million African-Americans, and 1.9 million Asian-Americans. The highest poverty rate (22 percent) belongs to blacks, while non-Hispanic whites have the lowest rate (8.8 percent).

Even when working full time, many of the working poor can't make ends meet, live paycheck to paycheck, unable to save up for a rainy day.

Alston argues that depictions of the poor as "wasters, losers, and scammers" and the rich as "industrious, entrepreneurial, patriotic, and the drivers of economic success" are inaccurate stereotypes at best and caricatures that give politicians the cover they need to justify defunding programs designed to alleviate poverty.

But his investigation led him to conclude that the majority of poor people "had been born into poverty, or ... had been thrust there by circumstances largely beyond their control such as physical or mental disabilities, divorce, family breakdown, illness, old age, unlivable wages, or discrimination in the job market."

Alston's final report on his U.S. visit will be presented to the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva in June 2018.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Statement on Visit to the USA, by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. *Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, United Nations*](#)
[U.S. Poverty Statistics. *Federal Safety Net*](#)
[U.N. Investigator On Extreme Poverty Issues A Grim Report -- On The U.S. *NPR*](#)
['American Dream' Quickly Becoming an 'Illusion,' Says UN Human Rights Expert. *UN News Centre*](#)
[Extreme Poverty Returns to America. *The Washington Post*](#)

Applying the News Story

Whether or not we agree with the conclusions of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights laid out in his preliminary report, it is important for us to consider what the Bible teaches us about God's attitude toward the poor, and what responsibility Christians have toward people who have fallen on hard times.

The Big Questions

1. What circumstances might lead to poverty? What obstacles may make it difficult to escape poverty? What factors may help people live with dignity even while on a limited income? What factors are needed to overcome chronic, deep or extreme poverty?
2. Are you now, or have you ever been, poor? In what sense? How do you think poverty (especially chronic poverty) shapes a person's view of the world? One's view of God? To the extent that you have experienced poverty, what, if anything, have you learned from that experience?
3. What role, if any, should the government have with regard to alleviating poverty? What is the scriptural basis for your opinion?
4. What is the responsibility of the individual Christian toward the poor? How should the corporate church respond to the needs of those in poverty?
5. What is God's attitude toward the poor? Why doesn't God eliminate poverty in the world?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Luke 4:18-19, 21

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ...*

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (For context, read 4:16-30.)

At the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus read from Isaiah 61, which he used to define the nature of his mission. By claiming the fulfillment of that scripture that day, Jesus made clear that the prophecy applied to his own ministry to heal the brokenhearted, free prisoners, and provide for the poor.

The larger context of Isaiah 61:1-6 contains the promise that the oppressed would be empowered to restore cities ruined by war and generations devastated by years of exile. People would be gainfully employed in rebuilding infrastructure, and foreigners would be hired as shepherds, farmers and vintners.

In Luke 4:22-30, we learn that reaction to Jesus' statement was mixed: Some found his words gracious, and others took offense at his claim.

Questions: For whom might Jesus' message seem to be "bad" news? Why would they object to his message? What makes the news Jesus brings to the poor "good"?

John 12:8

Jesus said, "... You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." (For context, read 12:1-8.)

Deuteronomy 15:11

Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land." (For context, read 15:7-11.)

Shortly before Jesus was crucified, he was honored at a dinner in the home of siblings Mary, Martha and Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. No doubt filled with gratitude for the recent restoration of her brother, Mary anointed Jesus' feet with a pound of costly perfume.

Judas Iscariot was offended by her action, ostensibly because the perfume could have been sold for a large sum of money to be given as alms to the poor. But, as the biblical narrator tells us (John 12:6), Judas' criticism of Mary hid his lack of love for the poor and his love of money. John said he used to steal from the common purse to line his own pockets.

In a sermon on this passage recorded in his book *Palm Sunday*, author Kurt Vonnegut commented that Jesus intimated that one reason the poor would always be around was because Judas' hand was regularly in the cookie jar where funds for the poor were kept.

Using the saying from Jesus to suggest that we have no obligation toward the poor, Vonnegut said, frees us up "to say that the poor are hopeless because they were so lazy or dumb, that they drank too much and had too many children and kept coal in the bathtub, and so on." If we believe that people are to blame for their poverty,

or even that poverty is God's judgment upon people for their bad choices or their sin, we might convince ourselves that it would be wrong to try to contravene God's judgment by trying to alleviate poverty when we see it.

But Jesus' statement in John 12:8 recalls Deuteronomy 15:11, where God's people are told that there will always be needy people on the earth. In that context, we learn that the people of God should "not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward [their] needy neighbor, but "open [their] hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be." They were not to "entertain a mean thought" or "view [their] needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing" but instead "[g]ive liberally" without begrudging their neighbor what they might need.

Questions: How does the love of money impact love for God and others? How do you see that impact in the life of Judas Iscariot?

What reasons do people give for not helping the poor? Are these legitimate? Why might we seek to rationalize withholding aid to the poor?

Mark 10:21-23, 25

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ... It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (For context, read 10:17-27.)

A wealthy man came to Jesus, asking what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. The man believed that he had already kept the commandments of God, but the hold of gold upon his heart kept him from fulfilling the two greatest commandments of all: to love God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love his neighbor as himself (Matthew 22:36-40).

In this world, we tend to see wealth as a key to happiness. Yet this man "went away grieving" even though he kept his possessions.

Elsewhere Jesus said it is impossible for a slave to serve two masters; "[y]ou cannot serve God and wealth" (Luke 16:13).

Questions: Jesus told the man to go sell all his goods. Did he mean that to be a universal answer applicable for all wealthy people or was he simply identifying this particular man's problem and sin and a solution to it?

How and why can wealth become such a hindrance to entrance into God's kingdom? What does it mean to enter that kingdom? How do we gain admittance to God's kingdom?

How do you handle the allure of money and temptation riches present? What should be our attitude toward earthly riches and possessions? What can we do to grow a more godly perspective about money?

1 Corinthians 9:7, 9-10

Who at any time pays the expenses for doing military service? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not get any of its milk? ... For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Or does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was indeed written for our sake, for whoever plows should plow in hope and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share in the crop. (For context, read 9:1-14; see also Deuteronomy 25:4 and 1 Timothy 5:17-18.)

Here Paul lays out his rationale for the material support of those who minister to God's people. He bases his argument on a Mosaic law about animal husbandry. When an ox is treading out grain, it should be allowed to eat from the grain on the floor. That is only fair. It is also smart, since if the ox is deprived of adequate sustenance, it will not be able to function well in its work.

But Paul says this law is not mainly about how we should treat oxen. Rather it is applicable to how employers should treat their employees. The worker hopes for a share in the profits, but when that hope is dashed, the worker loses the motivation to work.

Paul applies this principle narrowly to argue that the church should willingly support its workers. But the broader principle still applies, that workers in civic society deserve a living wage.

Alston suggests that one of the contributing factors in the growth of poverty in America is the increase in income inequality. Since 1981, earnings for the top 1 percent of adults rose from an average of 27 times more than the bottom 50 percent of adults to the current rate of 81 times more than the bottom 50 percent. To some people, that imbalance suggests that workers are being "muzzled while they are treading out the grain."

Questions: How would we expect an ox to react if it were expected to work without adequate food or proper care? How might the working poor react if pressed in a similar way? What should we do as a society to avoid the danger and loss that could result from unwise treatment of the American working poor?

James 2:15-17

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (For context, read 2:14-26.)

This passage follows James' teaching about the error of showing favor to the wealthy while dishonoring the poor (2:1-7).

Questions: Where do you see this kind of behavior in our day? How are the poor dishonored in our society? How can we show the poor respect?

What kind of works does James indicate should accompany our faith? How well are you doing in this area of your own discipleship? How well is your local church doing in this area? How can you grow in these kind of works? When is telling someone "I'll pray for you" a cop-out?

For Further Discussion

1. What is your own congregation doing to alleviate poverty in your community and in your church? Is it helping individuals, attacking the systemic causes of poverty, both, or something else?
2. In his book *Toxic Charity*, Robert Lupton suggests that what many good-hearted people do to help the poor works against those in poverty because it takes away their dignity and fails to provide opportunities for them to take responsibility for their own lives. Do you agree that helping the poor robs them of dignity? Why or why not?
How can those in a position to help the poor do so in a way that preserves their dignity and empowers them to greater self-sufficiency in the future?
3. Someone has said, "Give a person a fish, and he eats for a day. Teach him to fish, and he eats for a lifetime."
How might this proverb apply to how governments, agencies, churches, and individuals respond to people in poverty?

4. Do you ever interact with poor persons? In what way? If not, what factors have kept you from such interaction? How do you think interaction with poor people (or lack thereof) has shaped your faith?

5. Respond to this: "Jesus sees the need, not the cause." Does it matter to Jesus how someone became impoverished? How does Jesus view the poor?

6. Apparently there was a problem with idleness and sloth among some of the Christian fellowship in Thessalonica. Paul didn't mince words, but stated, "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10b; for context, read 3:6-15).

How can you distinguish between someone who is truly needy and needs temporary assistance over a troubled spot, or who is willing but permanently unable to work for some reason, from someone who is unwilling but able to work? Is it necessary to make such a distinction every time someone appears to be in need of our help? Why or why not?

Responding to the News

For further study on how poverty is treated in scripture, check out Dan Buttry's *The Poor in the Bible*.

Prayer (suggested by John 3:16, 2 Corinthians 8:9 and 1 Timothy 6:17-19)

Gracious God, fountain of life, thank you for giving us your only Son that we might have eternal life.

Lord Jesus Christ, though you were rich, yet for our sakes you became poor, so that by your poverty we might become rich in good works. Remind us not to be haughty or to set our hopes on the uncertainty of earthly riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

By the transforming power of your Spirit at work within us, make us rich in love for God and as generous to others as you have been to us. Amen.