

**Should we remember the poor?**  
**Dr Brian Rosner**  
**Micah Challenge Leaders' Breakfast 2006**

Is assessing the Bible's stance towards the poor as simple as noticing a few famous texts and mentioning that the word "poor" occurs a couple of hundred times?

Not all Christians see socio-economic poverty as a major focus of concern in the Bible:

- The term for "poor" in the Bible frequently does not refer to material poverty. "Poor" is used as a metaphor to depict the person of faith as a helpless beggar before God and the need in question is protection from enemies or healing of bodily weakness or the forgiveness of guilt before God.
- The "poor" that Jesus came to preach to according to Luke 4:18 and Matthew 11:5 are not those in social and economic deprivation. The term denotes the whole people of Israel, as in Isaiah 61.
- Matthew 5:3 reads: "blessed are the poor *in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The phrase "in spirit" points us to an understanding of poverty here in terms of knowing one's need of mercy before God. The blessing on those who "hunger and thirst" also points us in the direction of a metaphorical interpretation: "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled."

Luke 6:20 is addressed directly to the disciples: "blessed are you who are poor." What Jesus is saying is not that everyone who is poor is blessed but only the disciples in their sufferings or material need.

Should the church just concentrate on preaching a spiritual gospel of forgiveness of sins? After all, didn't Jesus say: "*the poor you will always have with you.*"

**Remembering the poor is an integral part of Christian faith**

The Bible does sometimes use "the poor" as a metaphor for spiritual poverty and need. But the success of the figure of speech assumes that God is concerned about those in physical poverty!

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The Bible does sometimes use "the poor" as a metaphor for spiritual poverty and need. But the success of the figure of speech assumes that God is concerned about those in physical poverty!

A concept is bigger than a single term; *widows, orphans, strangers, refugees, the blind, the lame, the crippled* and so on = subgroups of the poor.

Every corpus of books in the Bible tells us to remember to help the poor:

- Many commandments in the law are intended to help the poor.
- The historical books narrate stories of social injustice.
- The prophets frequently rail against the oppression of the poor (e.g., Amos) and recommend doing justice and loving mercy – Micah 6:8!
- The wisdom lit pronounces God’s blessing on those who care for the helpless and warns those who close their hearts to the poor.
- Jesus told the rich man to sell all he had and give to the poor.
- The early church in Acts consistently looked after the poor.
- Along with preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, “the very thing [Paul] was eager to do [was] to *remember the poor*” (Gal 2:9-10).
- James warns not to discriminate against the poor (2:1-13).
- When Jesus says “the poor you will always have with you” he was alluding to Deuteronomy 15:7-11:

“If there is a poor man among you ... do not be hardhearted or tightfisted. ... Rather be openhanded. ... Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart. ... *There will always be poor people in the land.* Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.”

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