

# *Bless the Poor and Needy*

JOHN K. CARMACK

**M**y first memory of staring poverty in the face came about 1936, during the great economic depression. About that same time Maynard Dixon painted a poignant picture called *Forgotten Man*. This is a man with holes in his shoes, downcast eyes, and hands hanging down. He is without work or hope, sitting on the curb. Well-dressed men and women walk by, paying no more attention to him than to the fire hydrant next to him. The faces of the passersby are deliberately not shown—representing, I think, their lack of humanity and compassion. I hope this captures your full attention and introduces my remarks in a memorable way.

I would have been about five years old when a man dressed in tattered clothing came to our door in Winslow, Arizona, asking: “Could you spare some food or money? I am on the road, cold and hungry.” The concern and empathy I felt never left me. During those years poverty was widespread. As I remember, Mother always found something to spare for the poor.

We had few luxuries and guarded our meager resources closely. We always had a comfortable home, however, and good food on the table. Mother canned fruit, vegetables, and meat. She made all of our bread and many

of our shirts. I never remember eating at a restaurant. We did not consider ourselves poor. Nearly everyone around us was in similar circumstances. We enjoyed a good life. In reality, measured by standards through most of the world’s history, we were rich. We had clean running water, indoor plumbing, space to live in, and clothing that in most ages would be robes only the rich could afford.

Today many of us enjoy unprecedented abundance. We see it here and nearly everywhere. We can easily forget that a major percentage of the world’s people live in poverty, seriously lacking necessities. What should we do about this gap between those with plenty and those living in poverty? Do we have an individual responsibility to help alleviate poverty? Does the Church, now a worldwide institution, have a responsibility to help? Is caring for the poor merely a good thing to do or an imperative duty? These are the issues I will address.

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One of the phrases we often hear in prayers is “Bless the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted, and those who have cause to mourn.” I hope we always pray for the poor and needy, but isn’t there more to this than dashing off that phrase? And why should I even bring up this subject with university students?

Although material abundance may come for many of you, those days are probably in the future. Nevertheless, this is a good time to be thinking about these things. I have sensed a great spirit of compassion here. I felt it when I spoke at the hunger banquet on campus 11 months ago. I am aware that some of you struggle daily. The overall impression, however, is one of amplex. And if we compare our comfortable circumstances with such places as Bangladesh, Haiti, and Bolivia, we know we are blessed. Conditions of poverty are widespread. I sense that in the years ahead you would like to do something about the great gulf separating individuals and communities. I believe you will!

I hope to touch your hearts, increase your understanding, and engage your interest about this subject. The gulf between the affluent and needy worries me. The scriptures on this issue cut to the core. Both our opportunities and duties arise out of these teachings. How we act in relation to them is of the utmost importance, even tied closely to our individual salvation.

Let’s start with the teachings of Jesus and His Apostles. Poverty was even more evident in those days. The Apostles often ran into it among their Gentile converts. In his second epistle to the Saints at Corinth, Paul urged those with abundance to share with those in poverty around them. He reminded the Saints how gracious the Lord had been to them. They enjoyed every benefit of the gospel. To use Paul’s own words, they abounded “in faith, and utterance, and knowledge” (2 Corinthians 8:7). And now, in the spirit of love, Paul urged them to take practical steps to care for the poor.

To dramatize their duty to the poor, he used the greatest moral act in history as an example they should follow. These were his words: “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich [referring to his high and holy premortal station], yet for your sakes he became poor [meaning that he came down from that high station to earth], that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). The Atonement was the crowning act of love. Christ had rescued them from spiritual and physical death.

By using the words *rich* and *poor* to describe Christ’s great gift, Paul helped them understand their loving duty to help the poor. In this way, he explained, they could prove their sincerity. Paul continued: “Now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality” (2 Corinthians 8:14).

Simply put, others now need your help. And you may at another time need their help. Helping each other leads to equality. These words triggered another thought. As Paul said, both the abundant giver and the needy recipient had their needs supplied in the process of giving. Those with abundance gave food, clothing, shelter, and money to those in need. On the other hand, those in poverty shared their love, appreciation, humility, and simplicity. This process of sharing with each other promoted greater justice and equality. And the process brought them closer to the spirit of the great plan of reconciliation.

We can have the same blessings today. Sharing blesses both the giver and the receiver, and both feel good when it happens. The Lord is also pleased. Everyone wins!

The desire to help others comes, not just as a duty, but also through our love of others. And it extends to those we don’t even know. Joseph Smith’s grand understanding of love’s reach and power is captured in this tremendous statement: “A man filled with the love of God, is not content with blessing his family alone,

but ranges through the whole world, anxious to bless the whole human race" (HC 4:227).

We find an interesting declaration of these principles in the Doctrine and Covenants. The Lord said: "I, the Lord, stretched out the heavens, and built the earth, my very handiwork; and all things therein are mine" (D&C 104:14). Yes, we may enjoy temporary possession of many good things, but we are merely stewards of those things because all things belong to our Lord.

He then explains that "the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare" (D&C 104:17). The Lord intends to provide for His Saints, but in His own way. The Lord's way is "that the poor shall be exalted [that is, lifted up and their wants supplied], in that the rich are made low [that is, those with abundance share with those in poverty]" (D&C 104:16).

As the Lord concluded these very clear teachings, He declared something designed to capture our complete attention and underline the critical importance of caring for the poor: "If any man shall take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion, according to the law of my gospel, unto the poor and the needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment" (D&C 104:18).

That, indeed, is plain language. The Lord warned and motivated us to take care of His children. And lest we choose to brush this warning off, we find the same warning repeated often in the scriptures. For example, Jesus gave the same teaching and warning in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. The unnamed rich man in the parable is described as clothed in purple and fine linen. He also enjoyed sumptuous food every day. Lazarus, on the other hand, lay at the rich man's gate, hungry and covered with sores, hoping somehow to pick up crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. On Judgment Day Lazarus "was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom" (Luke 16:22). When the rich man died, he was consigned to hell, where he burned in torment. The tables had turned. The rich man was now

the needy one. What had he done to deserve such a judgment? Obviously it was what he did not do for Lazarus that, at least in part, doomed him.

Perhaps he rationalized: "This beggar brought his condition on himself. He is lazy. Anyone can work if he wants to." He may have told himself: "I gave at the office. I have helped build the temple with my contributions. I was honest in business."

When the Lord repeats the same warning in direct statements and powerful parables, we are wise if we pay attention. It is obvious that we must help those needy souls that cross our paths, if we have the ability to do so. My experience is that most Church members with abundance would like to find a way to share with those in poverty but are looking for the best ways to do it. They have discovered that giving in the wrong way often causes more problems than it solves. Our giving can be wasted, even when given with the best of intentions. And handouts often weaken more than they strengthen. Also, so much that we do provides only temporary help and fails to solve problems on a basic level. We want to help in the worst way and often do! Is there anything we can do that will have a lasting effect in helping the poor and needy?

This is where we turn to the issue of the responsibility owed to the poor and needy by the Church as an institution. I remember when Ethiopia experienced the terrible drought in 1984. Thousands died daily, and there was no end in sight. The Brethren designated a special Sunday to fast and make contributions for the relief of the people of Ethiopia. The Saints in 1984, as did the Saints in Corinth in Paul's time, raised money—millions of dollars—to be used to alleviate suffering. Part of the money was used to develop an irrigation system to store and distribute water in times of good rainfall. This was more than just a Band-Aid approach to alleviating poverty. The possibilities for basic long-range benefits made that help particularly

valuable. The Brethren assigned me to investigate the value of the project by traveling to Ethiopia when the irrigation project was well along. I was thrilled then with our involvement. Individuals could not easily provide such help. The Church as an institution needed to organize and promote the effort.

Let me share some keys that help me understand this subject.

### The First Key

The first key to understanding our duty in relation to abundance and poverty is that we should not set our hearts on riches. Why? Because “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21). Remember the rich man who came to Jesus in the night seeking to know what he must do to enjoy eternal life? He had lived a good life, but that was not enough to ensure that he would reach his goal. Probably sensing his pride and selfishness, Jesus told him: “Sell that thou hast, and give to the poor” (Matthew 19:21). Jesus perceived that the rich man had his heart set on the wrong things. If he really wanted eternal life, he had to repent of his pride and love of riches. Likewise, we can be in danger if our major focus is on amassing more and more wealth.

Jacob summarized this first key in these words:

*Before ye seek for riches, seek ye for the kingdom of God.*

*And after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good—to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted.*  
[Jacob 2:18–19]

Follow Jacob’s counsel and you will be on the right path. Keep your priorities straight. Doing so will not deprive you of financial success—if that is important to you—but your heart will be anchored on the rock of Christ.

### The Second Key

The second key is to keep your eyes open for opportunities to do what you can to alleviate situations of suffering that come your way. We have already sufficiently reminded you of this simple, but vitally important key in such teachings as the parable of Lazarus and the rich man.

### The Third Key

The third key applies to those fortunate enough to enjoy material abundance. We should voluntarily share some of it with institutions and programs that help those in need. I have mentioned as an example the help the Church gave to alleviate suffering in Ethiopia. Since then a tremendous outpouring of contributions have come to the Church for such causes, enabling the Church to help with needs and crises all over the world. Of course, we should not forget our responsibilities to donate to the fast-offering fund, an enormously vital and successful way for the Church to care for its poor globally.

Something very profound and exciting happened on March 31, 2001. The Church established the Perpetual Education Fund (PEF) to help bring a whole generation of young adults out of poverty. The PEF is not just another humanitarian project but is uniquely postured to meet deeper and more fundamental needs of young adults mired in poverty. When he introduced the PEF, President Gordon B. Hinckley counseled us succinctly and directly on our duties to help the poor. He said: “I believe the Lord does not wish to see His people condemned to live in poverty. I believe He would have the faithful enjoy the good things of the earth.” He invited those with enough and to spare to share with the fund: “It is our solemn obligation, it is our certain responsibility . . . to ‘succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees’ (D&C 81:5).”

He added, giving the manner in which we can best help: “We must help them to become self-reliant and successful” (“The Perpetual Education Fund,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 53).

Church members seemed to instantly sense that the prophet had acted under the inspiration of God. He had provided Church members with a simple and marvelous way to bring our people out of poverty and want, gain financial stability, and become successful citizens in their own lands. In showing the way, he dodged the give-away approach to helping the poor by establishing a loan program rather than offering grants. He explained his firm expectation that members receiving loans would repay them to help others who would come after them.

In explaining the purposes of the loans, President Hinckley boldly declared: “Education is the key to opportunity” (“The PEF,” 53). We might do many good things, but to educate a generation of young adults in their own countries is the key to real opportunity.

When he announced the creation of the PEF, President Hinckley cited the former PEF, the Perpetual Emigrating Fund and Company, as a precedent. Historians have written extensively of its beneficial effect, enabling Church members from Europe to join the body of the Church trying to make a go of it in these valleys. When the organization of the Perpetual Education Fund was announced, many Church members experienced a sacred feeling that it was right and inspired. Some had the reaction: “Why didn’t we think of this before?”

Helping young people get education leading to good employment is one of the finest ways conceived thus far to liberate a generation of young adults in less-advantaged areas of the world. So many good things can and will follow from such a program. The Church is interested in perfecting the whole person.

A recent convert to the Church in Peru faced severe parental disapproval when she was baptized. Later, when she received a PEF

loan and started a wonderful educational program, her parents experienced a complete change of heart. Her father said: “Your new Church is not only concerned about the spiritual welfare of its members but also their temporal welfare.”

### **The Fourth Key**

A fourth key is obvious, but it needs to be said. It is that we don’t intend for those with family responsibilities to forget them in following the other three keys. Perhaps all we need to do is remind ourselves of the advice Paul gave Timothy: “If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (1 Timothy 5:8). The Lord wants us to have a reasonable share of the good things of the earth and to become self-sufficient, never forgetting the source of all good things.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, I submit that those four keys will guide us in meeting the issues we all face in helping the needy. We want all of you to become the best you are capable of becoming. We hope you will strive to incorporate these four keys in your lives.

The PEF is already bearing fruit. There are 300 young people from Peru who are benefiting from this initiative. When you look at their faces, you see that they are our brothers and sisters.

Perhaps one example will illustrate the power of the PEF to lift our young people from conditions of poverty. A young man in South America came home from his mission with a great desire to make his mark in the Church and in his community. He knew he needed an education and, since he lived close to an excellent technical school, desired to enroll there. He visited the school and learned that the cost to attend was far beyond his means. “Perhaps next year the cost will be reduced,” he thought. For eight years he visited and asked for the opportunity of attending there, to no avail.

Then came the announcement of the PEF. He applied for a loan that would enable him to attend the school. He graduated first in his class as an occupational safety engineer. When he graduated, the school was about to build a new campus for 10,000 students. They hired him as their safety engineer at three to four times any income he had previously enjoyed. In turn, he reduced their accidents by 80 percent. His ability to serve in the Church increased. His wife and children now have sufficient for their needs. This is an example that could be replicated hundreds of times.

May we individually and as a Church family bless the poor and needy. As leaders of the Church, we have shared the keys as we see them. May we now all act well our parts in these matters. Imagine what 30,000 of you, spanning the world, living these principles, can mean to the Church and to the world. I envision this happening under the inspired direction of our leaders and under the inspiration of the Spirit. Perhaps this is the way Enoch and his people eradicated poverty completely from their great city. And in doing these things, we bridge the gulf between those enjoying material abundance and those mired in

poverty. Perhaps recalling the words of the opening hymn is a way to sum it up:

*Because I have been given much, I too must give;  
Because of thy great bounty, Lord, each day I live  
I shall divide my gifts from thee  
With ev'ry brother that I see  
Who has the need of help from me.*

*Because I have been blessed by thy great love,  
dear Lord,  
I'll share thy love again, according to thy word.  
I shall give love to those in need;  
I'll show that love by word and deed:  
Thus shall my thanks be thanks indeed.  
["Because I Have Been Given Much," Hymns,  
1985, no. 219, verses 1 and 3]*

Let's return to Maynard Dixon's painting, *Forgotten Man*. By all means let's continue to pray for the poor and needy, the sick, and those who mourn. But let's all—every one of us—do more than pray. Let's do what we can, according to our circumstances, to lift those arms that hang down. Let's *act* in a way that will bless the poor and needy. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.