

## THINKING BIG: ENDING HUNGER

By Andrew Wilson  
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Isaiah 58:6-9a  
Luke 16:19-31

You can't visit a developing nation like the Dominican Republic, as we do each year with teams of 40 or 50, without experiencing at least a bit of culture shock. You can't put on your shirt without thinking to yourself, "The person who sewed this for me probably makes barely enough to buy rice and beans for her family." You can't go to dinner and the movies without thinking to yourself, "We just spent as much on an evening's entertainment as a Haitian cane cutter makes in a month."

Yet, for me, and for most rich people, the sense of solidarity we feel with the poor starts to wane as soon as we return home. And it isn't hard to understand why. No one in the world is as isolated from the poor and their problems as is a typical American suburbanite.

One of the most important challenges we face, as rich Christians, is that of learning to empathize with poor people. There are more than 2.8 people in the world who are struggling to live on less than \$2 a day, and I believe God wants us to stand with them, in some way, in their suffering. American society – or at least the part of it that most of us occupy – has become so astonishingly wealthy that the poor have become almost invisible to us. Of course we know there are many poor people right here in Southern California. But we've managed to push them to the outer edges of our lives so we don't have to interact with them. We may be the first nation in history in which middle class people can shop, eat, travel, work and go to school without having any meaningful interaction with the poor.

The consistent teaching of the Bible, from beginning to end, is that God is on the side of the poor. Using Isaiah as his spokesman, God rebuked religious leaders who thought they could win his favor simply by skipping a few meals. I'm reading from Isaiah, chapter fifty-eight:

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke?...  
Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?..."  
(Isaiah 58:6-7)

God is on the side of the poor. Therefore, if we say we love God, but we make no effort to help the poor when we have the opportunity to do so, we're liars and hypocrites. But if we do what we can to bless those in need, God will bless us. Isaiah continues:

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression...  
and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry...  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
And your light will become like the noonday.”

(Isaiah 58:9-10)

God defends the weak and the destitute, and he commands rich people to do the same. The Book of Proverbs tells us: “He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord” (19:17). What a beautiful thought! When we assist a poor person, we’re extending a loan to the Creator of the universe!

Jesus himself was poor, even by the standards of the first century Israel. The Lord’s earthly poverty served to underscore the fact that God identifies with the weak, the hungry and the oppressed. Here’s how Paul characterized Christ’s Incarnation in his Second Letter to the Corinthians:

Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor. (8:9)

Jesus launched his ministry by preaching a sermon in a synagogue in Nazareth. In that sermon, he declared his great love for marginalized people. He explained that his preaching to the poor was a sign that he was the true Messiah. And we know that Jesus demonstrated his love for the unloved again and again. He fed the hungry. He healed the blind and the lame. He spent time with lepers, despised women, and other social outcasts.

Towards the end of his ministry, Jesus told a parable to illustrate his identification with the poor:

“I was hungry [he said] and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink... I needed clothes and you clothed me... I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these... you did for me.”

- Matthew 25:35-36, 40

Those are comforting words for anyone who has made personal sacrifices to help the poor and the oppressed. The Lord is so closely identified with the poor that we actually help *him* when we help *them*. That’s why ministering to the poor is the purest form of service to God.

Jesus’ parable also contains a terrifying word of judgment for those who’ve been blessed with plenty, but who refuse to share with those in need. The King in the parable, who represents God, declares:

“I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

- Matthew 25:45

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus that we just read has haunted me all my life. In the story, a rich man is condemned because of his selfishness, and a poor man is redeemed because of the suffering he has endured. When I read the story I think of the nameless, faceless poor people of the developing world – the 1.2 billion people in our world who are live on the verge of starvation. I think of the images of hunger we see sometimes in the media. And I think about my calling, as a Christian, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked.

To Jesus' listeners, the rich man must have seemed very rich. He had a house with a gate, he was dressed in expensive clothes, and he had more than enough fine food to fill his belly. Jesus doesn't say anything about multiple cars, health insurance, phone and internet service, cable television or trips to Disneyland. Therefore, we can assume that Jesus' rich man - as rich as he was – wasn't as rich as most of us. But still, he was very rich.

Lazarus is a pitiful character, but he's a character that Jesus' listeners had encountered many times before. In those days, the streets of every town in Israel were lined with beggars. Many of those beggars were so weakened by malnutrition and disease that they were unable to walk. In the parable, someone has the brilliant idea of carrying Lazarus to the house of the unnamed rich man. We aren't told why the person does this. Maybe Lazarus was getting in his way? Maybe he was annoying the customers in front of his shop?

Lazarus lies in the dirt, unable to move, hoping against hope that the rich man will take pity on him and give him a few scraps from his table. But the rich man ignores him, and Lazarus dies.

As we would expect, Lazarus is carried by the angels to Abraham's side. His salvation is secure. But not so for the rich man. He is delivered to Hades, where he suffers in the flames as he awaits a judgment that will end in damnation. We aren't told explicitly why the rich man is cut off from God's grace, though Luke makes it clear that it's because of his selfish neglect of Lazarus.

What would I do, I wonder, if I came home one day and found Lazarus lying in the gutter in front of my house? I'm confident that I wouldn't let him die. I'd give him more than scraps from my table – I'd make him a turkey sandwich. I'd let him use Hannah's and Holly's shower, and give him band aids for his sores. I'd make sure he got him a food bag from our Deacon's closet, and some bus tokens. I'd probably even give him a ride to the Manhattan Hotel in south Glendale and then get the church to cover his bill for two or three nights.

Most of you, I'm sure, would do all that and more if Lazarus suddenly appeared in front of your houses. I don't know anyone in this church family who would kick back and watch TV as Lazarus' life slipped away. The idea of someone dying of starvation in Glendale or Pasadena is simply unacceptable. We would be motivated to help because it would be shameful for us to do otherwise.

If you've been listening closely, you probably suspect that I'm laying a trap for you. You probably think I'm now going to ask you: "Why is starvation unacceptable when it happens in our neighborhood, but tolerable when it happens in Ethiopia, Haiti or Bangladesh?" I'm tempted to deliver that blow. But I'm not going to go there. I don't want to revisit all the ethical dilemmas that are raised as we confront extreme poverty.

Instead, I want to ask you a very personal question. And I want to challenge you to think about this question throughout the week ahead: What's your role in God's plan to rescue people from disease and starvation? Are you waiting for the Lord to drag Lazarus to your doorstep? Or are you zealously searching for that place beyond suburbia where you can make the biggest difference?

Last August I was vacationing with my family in Cleveland, Ohio. (I know what you're thinking: Why would anyone go to Cleveland for a vacation? But that's because you've never eaten ribs at the Tick Tock Tavern or toured the LTV Steel Mill.) Anyway, one night I was enjoying dinner with a group of old friends, all of whom have been active in the same ministry in the Dominican Republic that our church has been supporting. I sat next to a quiet, introspective woman in her fifties named Bonnie Lindberg. I didn't know Bonnie well; I remembered only that she was a nurse who had been to La Romana several times. She seemed interested in the plight of the Haitian people so I mentioned to her a book that I had just read about Haiti called *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. Bonnie suddenly lit up. "Yes," she said, "the biography of Paul Farmer! What a fantastic book!"

You may not have heard of Dr. Paul Farmer, but believe me, the work he has done as a physician in Haiti and in many other poor countries is nothing short of amazing.

Bonnie said to me, "It's funny you would mention that book because it really inspired me to take the next step in my work with the poor."

"Oh really?" I said. "What did you do?"

"I decided to ask Paul Farmer to come to Cleveland for a fundraiser."

"And did he come?" I asked.

"Yes, he came. We sold 350 plates at \$100 each, and all the proceeds went to Farmer's nonprofit, Partners in Health."

"Wow," I said. "You raised something like \$30,000 in one night?"

“Yeah,” Bonnie said. “I know it isn’t much when you consider how much there is to be done in the world. But I’m sure the money did *some* good. And Farmer was just so inspiring!”

Truthfully, I didn’t think Bonnie Lindberg had that in her. Frankly, she’s not a particularly charismatic person. But I clearly underestimated her. She found that place beyond suburbia where she thought she could make the biggest difference, and God used her to energize a huge portion of the medical community in Cleveland.

What will motivate us to stand with the poor and to become their advocates? The facts alone won’t do it. Nor will TV images of emaciated children covered with flies. It helps a great deal to have personal relationships with those you serve, but most of the people who need our help don’t live anywhere near us.

Our primary motivation must be our love for Christ. When we don’t have a name or a face, we must think of Christ. And when we aren’t sure if we’re making a difference, we must put our confidence in the Spirit that Christ has given his Church.

With that in mind, let me ask you again: Where’s the place where you can make the biggest difference for those who can’t help themselves?

This morning I prepared a handout for you dealing with hunger and global poverty titled, “Fifteen Astonishing Facts...” [*included below*]. Not all the information is negative. Did you know, for example, that the average life expectancy in developing countries rose from 40 years in 1950 to 64 years in 2003? Did you know that, from 2001 until 2003, the price of drugs for AIDS sufferers in poor nations dropped from \$10,800 to as low as \$140 per year? What an amazing world we live in!

I think there are three basic conclusions we can derive from the facts that I’ve listed.

*Conclusion number one:* We can’t rely on governments and market forces alone to meet people’s basic needs. Churches and other non-governmental organizations have a crucial role to play in the ongoing struggle against poverty.

*Conclusion number two:* The rich Christians of the world currently have the resources, but not the will, to rescue a billion people from abject poverty. We’re making more and more money, but we’re giving less and less of it away.

*And conclusion number three:* A middle class American Christian who’s willing to make modest personal sacrifices over a lifetime can dramatically improve life for literally hundreds of people.

The last part of the handout asks the question: “What can we do to help the poorest of the poor?” I hope you’ll take time this week to study the ten suggestions, and to devise your own

personal strategy. As you do so, be assured that God wants to use you to seek justice and rescue the oppressed. And remember that God promises to empower us for any ministry he gives to us.

*Gracious God, we want to be instruments of your love. We want to glorify you in all we do, and to make the best possible use of the gifts you have given us. Help us not only to empathize with people who are diseased and hungry, but also to do what we can to lift them up. Inspire your Church to stand with the poor, and to work towards that day when no one in your world is homeless or hungry. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.*

## **FIFTEEN ASTONISHING FACTS ABOUT POVERTY AND HUNGER**

Compiled by Andy Wilson, 11-13-05

1. 1.2 billion people are struggling to survive on \$1 or less per day. Another 1.6 billion are living on \$2 or less per day. That means that just under half of the people in the world (2.8 billion) live in dire poverty. (World Bank)
2. In 2000, 149 million children in developing countries were malnourished. (UNICEF)
3. 13 million people die every year from infectious and parasitic diseases that we know how to prevent. (World Health Organization)
4. 30,000 children die every day of hunger and disease. (Oxfam America)
5. 1 billion people don't have access to clean water. (World Bank)
6. Globally, 48 million people are infected with the AIDS virus or have AIDS. (Avert) 25 million of those are in Africa.
7. Only 3% of the 4 million Africans who urgently need anti-retroviral drugs – the only effective AIDS treatment – receive them. (DATA)
8. Only 41% of adults in Africa can read. (Feed the Minds)
9. Approximately one million children are forced into prostitution each year. (Gary Haugen)
10. The total cost of providing the most basic social services (immunizations, education, family planning, clean water) in developing countries would be about \$30-40 billion each year, less than Americans spend each year on golf. (UNICEF)

11. It costs about \$17 per child to provide lifetime protection from six deadly diseases: measles, polio, pertussis, diphtheria, tetanus and tuberculosis. For not much more, the protection can be extended to include hepatitis B, yellow fever and *Haemophilus influenza* type B. (World Health Organization)
12. The ratio of income of the richest one-fifth of countries to the poorest one fifth increased from 30:1 in 1960 to 74:1 in 1997. (World Bank)
13. An annual increase in preventive care of 75 cents per person in developing countries could save 5 million lives every year. The total cost would be less than \$3 billion. (World Health Organization)
14. In 1968 the average donation in support of God's work among Christians in America was 3.1% of income, or less than 1/3 of a tithe. By 2000 that number had dropped to 2.7%, even though incomes had gone up dramatically. (Ron Sider)
15. Americans spend \$30-\$50 billion each year on diets and other strategies to reduce their calorie intake. (National Center of Health Statistics)

#### **EVIDENCE OF PROGRESS/ SIGNS OF HOPE**

1. In 1970, chronic undernourishment plagued 35% of the people in the developing world. In 2002, in spite of rapid population growth, only 17% were chronically undernourished. This improvement is largely attributable to the economic progress made by Asian nations that have adopted market economies; over the same period, the situation in Africa has grown worse. (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs)
2. Harvests have improved dramatically over the past 30 years. Oxford economist Donald Hay estimates that a mere 2% of the world's grain harvest would be enough, if shared, to erase the problem of hunger and malnutrition around the world.
3. Health conditions around the world have also improved dramatically. In 1950, life expectancy in the developing countries was 40 years. In 1990, it had improved to 63 years. In 2003, it was 64.4 years. (United Nations Development Programme)
4. The price of drugs for AIDS sufferers in poor nations has dropped from \$10,800 to as low as \$140 per year just from 2001 to 2003. (DATA)

#### **WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP THE POOREST OF THE POOR?**

1. Use the tithe as the benchmark for giving to God's work. If every Christian simply followed this biblical standard, the Church would have the resources needed to address the problems associated with extreme poverty.
2. Teach others about the God of justice. Get them excited about serving Him!
3. Pray regularly for mission workers and Christian organizations that are helping the poor.
4. Provide financial support for front-line global workers who are sharing Christ and His love with the poor.
5. Prayerfully consider whether the Lord may be calling you to engage in short-term or long-term missions work.
6. Adopt a child through an agency like Compassion International or World Vision.
7. Participate in Operation Christmas Child – bring in a wrapped box for a child in need.
8. Encourage your Seed Group/ small group to read and discuss a book dealing with issues of poverty and justice. Check out: *Good News About Injustice*, by Gary Haugen, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, by Ron Sider, or *Earth Restored*, by John Barber. Or start a new Seed Group with a special focus on combating world poverty and injustice.
9. Sign up for LCPC's mission trip to the Gulf Coast (sometime in January), Mission Arizona or Project Dominicana (both during Holy Week), or the summertime home-building retreat in Tijuana.
10. Stay on top of issues relating to poverty and use whatever influence you have to bring about changes that will benefit the very poor.