



Focus verses

"The King will reply, Truly, I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brother and sisters of mine, you did for me."
Matthew 25:40 (TNIV)

"This is how we know what real love is: Jesus gave his life for us. So we should give our lives for our brothers and sisters. Suppose someone has enough to give and sees a brother or sister in need, but does not help. Then God's love is not living in that person. My children, we should love people not only with words and talk but also by our actions and true caring."
1 John 3:16-18 (NCV)

Teaching Leaflet C
"Timeline of
Social Ministry"

Teaching Leaflet D
"Perspectives
of Care"

LEGACIES OF CARE

LESSON FOUR: PHILOSOPHIES OF CARE

Opening prayer

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. – 2 Thess. 2:16-17 (NIV)

Introduction to the lesson

Last week, we looked at ancient civilizations and at how people in need were labeled as "worthy" or "unworthy." This concept of merit would continue to be the basis for how societies allocated care for those in need as evidenced in the English Poor Laws of the 1600s, which American colonists later adapted as the basis of the American welfare system. This duality of care, which still pervades our society, is not scripturally based. It is a perversion of the agape love embodied in the life and teachings of Jesus.

In today's lesson, we will examine the emergence of three philosophies that gripped America from its earliest days and came to define the young nation's independence, self-sufficiency and energy. These approaches also impacted the nation's approach to caring for those in need in ways that are still with us today.

Last week's challenge

Share from the challenge you chose to do during this past week.

Church and government

Beginning with Constantine in the fourth century, governmental systems and the organized church have struggled to define their roles, responsibilities and resources in their efforts to address escalating needs. Historically, it was the church's mission to care for the poor. After the Reformation, the church and the state were one so it was difficult to discern the differences in roles.

At times, governments would contract to offer systems of support; at other times, they would back away from these commitments. Similarly, in some eras, the local church would take the lead. Care would shift from provision for individual need to addressing systemic ills, from locally focused congregational ministries to institutionalized efforts, such as schools, hospitals, prisons and orphanages. *(For a more thorough overview of these efforts, see Teaching Leaflet C titled "Timeline of Social Ministry.")*

Reasons for poverty

Why and how do people become poor? Beginning with the ancient societies and evident to some degree in America since, the common theory was that a person is poor either because of:

- **individual defect** such as illness, being orphaned or widowed, disability or lack of character; or
- **spiritual defect** such as sin, amoral beliefs or sloth, i.e., laziness.

Later in history, another factor was acknowledged – a person’s **environment**. The Great Depression of the early 1930s is the prime example of environmental poverty in America. Other examples would include global expansion, unstable economies, natural disasters and mass migrations.

These accepted reasons for why people are poor center on judgments about who merits care and who is responsible for providing care. *Neither* is relevant to the Great Commandment, which is given to every believer of Christ. Every person deserves care and every believer is responsible for offering it.

Dominant philosophies of care

The legislation described in Teaching Leaflet A, “Systems of Care Overview” (Lesson 3), shows us the many ways in which societies and governments attempted to provide care. These laws were shaped by three primary ideologies – perspectives – that impact the way we think about what we do, with whom, and how we provide care as individuals and through government, as local communities and as the church, to this day. More information is available in Teaching Leaflet D titled “Perspectives of Care.”

- **Protestant Work Ethic**
- **Social Darwinism**
- **Social Gospel and Evangelicalism**

Protestant Work Ethic

Key words: *good works, predestination, earning salvation, idleness as sin, determining merit*

The Puritans brought to American colonies the English views about care of the poor and built upon those systems for their new world. The Puritan view of work was derived from doctrine developed by prominent church reformers such as John Calvin. Calvin relied heavily on 2 Thessalonians 3:6-10 to support his theology, with its warning against idleness: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (3:10; NIV). Calvin believed that a person’s willingness to work provided evidence for his or her salvation and that care for others was a way to “earn” salvation.

The Puritans also believed that people should pursue wealth as a means of giving God glory. A person’s ability to become wealthy and successfully pursue his or her calling provided evidence of God’s favor and selection, i.e., that God predestined a person’s societal status. Puritans identified an unwillingness to work as one of the highest sins, and begging was viewed as a sin.

Prior to the Reformation, the Catholic Church provided structure for provision for the poor. After the Reformation, diminished church roles in offering care created the need for new systems. The Elizabethan Poor Laws in England were attempts to shift this responsibility from the church to the government. Modeling the early Greek society, people in need of support were divided into the “worthy” and “unworthy.”

Social Darwinism

Key words: *survival of the fittest, moral defect, demonstrating one’s fitness for salvation*

In his 1859 book, *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin outlined his theory of evolution based on natural selection and competition. From his theory came what is commonly known as “the survival of the fittest.” It espoused that “the poor” were responsible for their poverty and were so by moral defect or choice and thus were considered to be inferior socially and morally.

This scientific theory strongly influenced society's view of work and the church's willingness to care for those in need. The Protestant Work Ethic combined with the Survival of the Fittest worldview affected the church's view of ministry and faith as well. Although salvation might be "by grace through faith," ministry and caring often became tools by which to demonstrate the faithful Christian's fitness for salvation.

American Expressions of the Gospel

Following the Civil War in the United States, the church began to struggle with new social realities and developed different religious ideologies. The Gospel was expressed through the following perspectives:

Evangelicalism – This philosophy developed out of the teachings of evangelists such as D.L. Moody, who believed that alcohol use and homelessness resulted from not knowing God. The evangelicals, then, focused on individual salvation first and providing for needs later.

Key points: *individual salvation first, providing for needs later*

Perfectionism – This Wesleyan-influenced movement called individuals to right the ills of society, such as poverty, unfair labor practices, alcohol abuse, inadequate housing and racial divisions. Christian leaders such as Charles G. Finney believed that churches could not grow in faith while ignoring social needs.

Key points: *spiritual maturity depended upon helping those in need*

Social Gospel – this approach emerged following the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century in which new pockets of poverty developed in North American urban centers. Walter Rauschenbusch and other social reformers taught that Christianity should be reflected in a faith that leads to the church's responsibility for social transformation. It was common for people who were wealthy to believe that people were poor because of individual choices, and this theology challenged that assumption.

Key points: *faith and one's spiritual growth results in social transformation*

»» Class discussion

We're beginning to see the many factors that can influence our personal and church response to providing for those in need.

- What new information on this subject did you learn today?
- What did you find most interesting? Disturbing? Surprising?
- How has your philosophy been shaped by these ways of thinking about poverty? Do you see your personal philosophy fitting, or not fitting, into these ideologies?
- What other perspectives do you believe shape our response to the needs of people around us?

»» Small group activity

Break into small groups with each choosing one of the following scriptural references (encourage use of different translations to enrich the discussion):

- 1 Corinthians 12:25-27
- Ephesians 2:8-10
- James 2:14-17



Authentic abundance does not lie in secured stockpiles of food or cash or influence or affection but in belonging to a community where we can give those goods to others who need them - and receive them from others when we are in need.

– Parker Palmer



To believe you can approach transcendence without drawing nearer in compassion to suffering humanity is to fool yourself. There can be no genuine personal religious conversion without a change in social attitude.

— William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*

In your group, explore how your scriptures address the three philosophies about care for the poor described in the text above. How do you see the influence of these philosophies on your understanding of these passages? Share your thoughts with the class when you reconvene.

»» Context for Today

Ask a volunteer to read the scenario and then discuss the questions following:

Tom, a man in his 70s, had been volunteering weekly at a local food kitchen for almost five years. His job was to fill the glasses with ice at the front counter. Some 250 people a day came through the line to receive a hot, freshly made meal for a donation. Probably fewer than a handful ever had anything to donate.

Tom mentioned his volunteer work to a recent acquaintance. Joe, also a wealthy, retiree, was interested. "So most of these folks don't donate anything?" he asked.

"No, most can't, you know." Tom said.

"Do they come every day?" Joe asked.

"Yes, whenever we open the doors. For some, it's the only food they have for the day."

*Joe was quiet for a moment. "Well, how many of those do you think **could** pay but don't? I imagine many of them are just taking advantage of you all."*

Tom was surprised by this comment, but answered, "I guess that's between them and God. I'm just giving them a cool drink."

- Do you see elements of any of the three philosophies described in today's lesson in this scenario? What are they and how do they apply?
- Has there been a time in your service to others when you felt taken advantage of or that a recipient didn't deserve your charity? Describe.
- How does this experience influence how you provide service to people in need today?

»» Silence before God

After the verses are read aloud, quietly reflect on today's focus verses. Think about a time in your life when someone helped you, or did not. What did that experience feel like? Did it change you in any way?

»» Challenge

Choose one of the following options for the coming week:

- Use as your meditation this week the passage on Jesus washing the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper (John 13:1-10). Use commentaries to inform your study.
- Reflect on the times and ways throughout your life you have used your talents or finances to help those in need. What were the challenges? What were the blessings? Where are you currently in your life of service?

Key points from today's lesson

- Determining who merited care became the underpinning of most social and religious provision of care.
- Church and government passed responsibility for this provision of care back and forth.
- Merit and assignment of responsibility are not scriptural considerations; every person is deserving of care and every believer is responsible for offering it.



To find the kingdom is the easiest thing in the world but also the most difficult. Easy because it is all around you and within you, and all you have to do is reach out and take possession of it. Difficult because if you wish to possess the kingdom you may possess nothing else. That is, you must drop all inward leaning on any person or thing, withdrawing from them forever the power to thrill you, or excite you, or to give you a feeling of security or well-being. For this you first need to see with unflinching clarity this simple and shattering truth: Contrary to what your culture and religion have taught you, nothing, but absolutely nothing can make you happy. The moment you see that, you will stop moving from one job to another, one place, one spiritual technique, one guru to another. None of these things can give you a single minute of happiness.

– Anthony de Mello, *The Way to Love*



The Gospel is handed down from generation to generation but it must reach each one of us brand new, or not at all. If it is merely "tradition" and not news, it has not been preached or not heard - it is not Gospel.... If there is no risk in revelation, if there is no fear in it, if there is no challenge in it, if it is not a word which creates whole new worlds, and new beings, if it does not call into existence a new creature, our new self, then religion is dead and God is dead.

– Thomas Merton,
Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander