



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

📖 Global Poverty:
Beyond Utopian Visions
(*Global Wealth*, pp. 11-17)

📖 Do Justice —
Keep It Simple
(*Global Wealth*, pp. 60-64)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Global Poverty: Beyond Utopian Visions

The crisis of poverty in the world's largest cities, which is growing exponentially worse in the era of globalization, should not paralyze us. Scripture may not offer an easy answer, but it provides a consistent moral imperative.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 6:20-26

Meditation

The earth belongs not to the rich. It is not from your own possessions that you are bestowing alms on the poor, you are but restoring to them what is theirs by right. For what was given to everyone for the use of all, you have taken for your exclusive use. The earth belongs not to the rich, but to everyone. Thus, far from giving lavishly, you are but paying part of your debt.

Bishop Ambrose of Milan (340-397)

Reflection

Biblical scholar Tom Phillips admits that often when he faces the growing despair of the urban poor — like in the slums of Tijuana, just twenty miles south of his comfortable San Diego home — he “would like to flee to the Bible and retrieve a simple and permanent solution to the crisis of global poverty.”

Some have claimed there is a simple solution in the communitarian practice of the early Jerusalem church, where “no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common” (Acts 4:32). However, soon those Christians needed financial aid from churches outside Judea (Acts 11:27-30). “In Luke’s eyes, the entire Jerusalem project was likely viewed as a well-intentioned failure,” Phillips notes. “Such extraordinary generosity provided relief in the short term, but also planted the seeds for a longer-term disaster.”

Looking further in Luke-Acts (the two biblical books he researches), not to mention the rest of Scripture, Phillips finds “a flood of competing and conflicting answers to the problems of wealth and poverty.” Unfortunately, he warns, we too often allow this great diversity of biblical responses to distract us from the deeper truth that pervades Scripture: “the integrity of the people of God, as the people of God, is dependent upon their sustained and concerned effort to eliminate the affront of poverty from the goodness of God’s good creation.”

Phillips notes that while it provides no “comprehensive program for a Christian economic system,” Scripture teaches:

- ▶ *we must alleviate poverty.* It calls for a “tangible commitment to ensuring that all of God’s people be freed from the privations of hunger, homelessness, nakedness, and economic exploitation,” he says. “For those who would hear the Bible, ignorance about and disregard for the plight of the world’s poor are not options.”



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- ▶ *wealth is not the problem; poverty is.* “The intrinsic goodness of God’s creation and our own privilege of participating in the maintenance of creation make the production of wealth a pleasing activity in the eyes of God,” Phillips believes. “Ill-gotten gain undoubtedly is sin, but not all gain is ill-gotten.”
- ▶ *alleviation of poverty is about helping those in need, not developing the virtue of the wealthy.* If we reduce the poor to objects of our good will and opportunities to obey God, he warns, they “(that is, the real people with lives and loves, with real heart and minds) get lost in shuffle. Even the very good practice of helping the poor can become an act of paternalistic self-regard, focusing upon the privilege and responsibilities of the rich rather than upon the lives and needs of the poor.”

The first step toward addressing global poverty is to really notice and “speak about poverty and the moral challenge that it presents,” Phillips believes, for “oppression and despair feed on a diet of silence and neglect.” That is, we must develop what the Wild Goose Resource Group’s Alison Adams calls *epiphany eyes*.

“To have epiphany eyes is to have eyes that see through the façade to the real. Most of us do not recognize wrongness or injustice, even when we are staring straight at it,” Peter Vander Meulen writes. “Epiphany eyes are eyes that pay attention, eyes that look twice, eyes that ask the ‘why’ questions. Epiphany eyes see by the light of Christ’s word. They are eyes that we can only receive as gifts from God. They are eyes that can only be sharpened through use and by others.”

Study Questions

1. According to Phillips, why was the “community of goods” approach in the Jerusalem church (Acts 4:32-37) bound to fail to alleviate poverty? Do you agree?
2. Briefly discuss the other responses to the problems of poverty that Phillips finds in the Gospel of Luke and Book of Acts. Does God call individuals to follow these approaches today? Is there one approach that everyone should adopt?
3. The lack of a biblical “system” for addressing poverty may be unnerving in another way: we can become overwhelmed by the world’s need. Discuss Peter Vander Meulen’s observation: “God has other options, lots of disciples, and unlimited creativity. Most of the time my role in God’s providence is just a walk-on role. Personally, I have stopped planning grand outcomes requiring massive efforts and started looking for the next right thing to do—the thing that is in front of me, the thing that looks too simple.”
4. How does Peter Vander Meulen describe *epiphany eyes*? How can this way of seeing be “only received as gifts from God” and yet “sharpened through use and by others”?
5. Carolyn Winfrey Gillette’s “If Only I Had Known” alludes to Jesus’ parable of the rich man who failed to notice and care for Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). What sorts of oppression and poverty are we failing to notice, according to this hymn?

Departing Hymn: “If Only I Had Known”

Global Poverty: Beyond Utopian Visions

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Micah 6:8
Meditation	Meditation	Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss approaches to poverty in Luke-Acts	Discuss habits to “act justly”
Questions 3, 4, and 5	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3, 4, and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider that the Bible explores a diversity of responses to the problem of poverty and offers no “comprehensive program” for a Christian economy.
2. To explore Scripture’s consistent imperative that we should alleviate poverty.
3. To examine how the gift of “epiphany eyes” and the habit of humility enable us to recognize the oppression and injustice of poverty and to act justly.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Global Wealth (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

“Each Friday I meet with a group of colleagues for a free lunch supplied by the university where I teach,” writes Tom Phillips. “Our lunchtime agenda is to bring our collected wisdom and expertise to bear on the social issues of our day....

“After reading Mike Davis’ depressing book *Planet of Slums*, a forlorn chronicle of urban poverty across nearly every point on the map, we...looked around the table for some word of hope. Ultimately, I felt as if all eyes were turned toward me. ‘Surely,’ my colleagues must have been thinking, ‘the Bible has the answer. Why doesn’t Tom say something?’

“I’m not new to reflection upon issues of wealth and poverty. I have published a dissertation and several scholarly articles on issues of wealth and poverty in early Christianity. Yet when faced the brute fact that just twenty miles south of my comfortable San Diego home nearly one million people live in the poverty-ridden slums of Tijuana, my scholarly sensibilities become overwhelmed. And, according to Davis, the problem of urban poverty – the problem of slums – is growing exponentially worse in the new era of globalization. Sitting at lunch with my colleagues, I longed for some Biblical elixir to heal the planet of slums” (*Global Wealth*, 11).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give the group “epiphany eyes” to notice the poverty and injustice around them.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 6:20-26 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

When, as Christians, we consider the problem of global poverty, we naturally turn to the Bible for guidance. Yet we do not find in Scripture a comprehensive program for the world economy. Tom Phillips makes the point by gleaning a variety of recommendations from Luke-Acts, but his procedure could be extended to the entire Christian canon. If we are to alleviate global poverty, we must critically examine the work of economists whose habits of seeing, thinking, and feeling have been shaped by the themes and stories of Scripture. Phillips and Peter Vander Meulen help us to articulate these scriptural habits.

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one, discuss how Phillips finds a consistent way of thinking about poverty behind the diversity of biblical resources. In the other session, examine with Vander Meulen how the gift of “epiphany eyes” and the habit of humility enable us to recognize the oppression and injustice of poverty and to act justly.

Study Questions

1. “We intuitively understand that any such divestment scheme is bound to fail,” Phillips says. “Either the economy collapses because no one any longer owns and manages any resources or else the economy falls under the domination of the world’s most selfish persons because all of the truly benevolent persons have divested themselves of all wealth.”

Would this approach work in a small, face-to-face Christian community? Would the community’s economy have to be isolated from others? Encourage members to discuss Christian generous communitarian (not communist) experiments that they are familiar with.

2. Phillips mentions (1) giving up everything (Luke 14:33) and “checking out of the whole capitalist system of acquisition”; (2) not abandoning our possessions, but giving them to the needy when we are asked to do so (Luke 6:30); (3) giving half our possessions to help the poor (Luke 19:1-9) and cultivating “a spirit of ongoing concern for the poor”; (4) learning to be content with our wages (Luke 3:12-14) and avoiding greed; (5) working to “overthrow the structures of political and economic domination in our world” to advance the Kingdom ends in Luke 1:51-53; and (6) working hard within the existing economic structures, like the Apostle Paul, to take care of ourselves and to give generously to others (Acts 20:34-35).

What seems attractive to you about each option? Since they are conflicting, which one(s) would you pursue? Does God call individuals to follow these approaches today? Is there one approach that everyone should adopt?

3. Vander Meulen offers two winsome illustrations of people who did the simple thing that was at hand—a missionary in Mali who asked Christians in the U.S. to pray and to contact their congressmen about a misguided U.S. agriculture assistance policy, and a bookstore manager in Guam who looked up a refugee settlement agency online to assist the illegal refugees seeking asylum from Burma that he met in his jail ministry. In each case, the people did not look away from the injustice before them and did not try to solve the problems by themselves. Vander Meulen highlights their *humility* in seeking help.

Invite members to share similar (though, perhaps, less dramatic) stories of this sort. Have they asked another individual or group to help to confront injustice or alleviate someone’s poverty? Or have they assisted in a small way others who are doing this?

4. Vander Meulen says that epiphany eyes “see the truth of the matter behind the smoke and mirrors” because they look carefully and are guided by Christ’s word. Consider his personal example of finally realizing what a grocery meant by its sign, “We do not take food stamps or WIC coupons!” (*Global Wealth*, 62). On the one hand, such attentiveness is pure gift of God’s spirit (and we cannot take credit for it); on the other, we must use the gift and develop it in community. How do members of your congregation help one another see oppression and injustice more clearly?
5. Gillette mentions that we fail to notice *unjust labor practices* when shopping for clothing bargains (verse 2) and *unfair resource management* when purchasing the foods we enjoy (verse 3). How can we shop more wisely and compassionately?

Departing Hymn

“If Only I Had Known” is on pp. 43-45 of *Global Wealth*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.