

The Solution to World Poverty

It has been said that if you want to know how good a society is, you should look at the way it treats its poorest members.

Look at the world today. At one extreme there are nations which are run by corrupt, powerful elites for their own benefit, and the poor are exploited and abused. At the other extreme there are nations which spend a large proportion of their national income on welfare, with a genuine concern that the poorest in society should be looked after.

When God designed His own nation, He put in place a welfare system which was probably the most enlightened and benign the world has ever seen. The nation was Israel, and its birth is described in the Bible book of Exodus, and its system of government was what we know today as the Law of Moses.

The welfare system under the Law of Moses tackled the issue of poverty on two fronts – it set ways in which the poor were to be treated, and also it provided ways in which people were to be helped out of poverty. Here are some examples:

Laws to Aid the Poor

- ❖ The Law contained a specific commandment to be generous to the poor:

If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your

hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs (Deuteronomy 15:7-8).



- ❖ When you harvested your crops, you were only allowed to go through your field once. Anything that you missed was to be left for the poor to harvest (Deuteronomy 24:19-21). This law can be seen in operation in Ruth chapter 2.
- ❖ You must pay your employees at the end of each day for that day's work (Leviticus 19:13).
- ❖ Every seventh year you must leave your land uncultivated (fallow), to allow the ground to rejuvenate. While your land lay fallow, anyone was welcome to help themselves to anything that grew there (Leviticus 25:6-7).
- ❖ You were not allowed to lend to a fellow Israelite with interest (Leviticus 25:36).

- ❖ You were not allowed to have a fellow Israelite as a slave, only as a paid employee (Leviticus 25:39).
- ❖ You must invite your poor neighbours to your feasts and celebrations (Deuteronomy 14:29, 16:11).

Laws to Help People Out of Poverty

Release of Servants

If anyone fell on hard times and was sold as a servant to their fellow Israelite, they would serve for a maximum of six years. In the seventh year they must be released – what's more, their master must send them out with gifts to help them re-start their lives (Deuteronomy 15:12–13).

Release of Debts

One of the main reasons why people are trapped in poverty is debt. It's a vicious cycle – you don't have the means to buy what you need, you have to borrow to live. Very easily you can find that all your spare earnings are spent repaying your debts. The Law dealt with this problem very neatly – every seven years there was a Year of Release, when all debts would be cancelled (Deuteronomy 15:1–2).

Year of Jubilee

Every fifty years – approximately once per generation – was a special year called the Year of Jubilee. The Jubilee Law is described in Leviticus 25.

On this year, all land which had changed hands would revert to its original owner, and all Israelite servants would be set free.



Perhaps the biggest cause of wealth inequality is the fact that wealth is accumulated through generations. So someone does well and becomes rich, they build on their wealth and pass it on, and dynasties form. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer – it's a fact of life. Except that the Law of Jubilee effectively blocked this from happening. Every fifty years the 'playing field would be levelled': both those families which had fallen on hard times and those which had amassed property would make a fresh start.

What Happened to the Law of Moses?

When God gave His law to Israel, He said:

This is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people' (Deuteronomy 4:6).

Sadly, this did not work the way it should have worked – being people just like you and me, Israel neglected and misused their Law. Their history was largely one of disobedience. The Bible records the decline and then the

destruction of God's nation because of its godlessness.

The Law of Moses, as it is described in the Bible, no longer operates as a national law. However, the principles of attitude and behaviour it laid down – principles of a life which is centred on a love and respect for God and works out in love and respect for other people – are very much at the heart of the Christian life today.

After the Law of Moses

The New Testament is the second part of the Bible, which deals with the life and teachings of Jesus and his followers. The letter to the Galatians explains that it's not necessary for the Christian to keep the Law of Moses with all its commandments, but the principles it taught still apply:

For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Galatians 5:14).

This was what Jesus taught, and the way he lived. For example, he said to one rich man who came to him:

If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me (Matthew 19:21).

The accounts of the activities of the early Christians abound with references to their generosity. For example, Paul writes with huge fondness about the believers in Macedonia:

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their



extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people (2 Corinthians 8:1-4, New International Version).

If everyone lived by this simple Bible principle, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself', what a different place the world would be!

We saw that the Law of Moses did not just command generosity to the poor, it also provided solid workable measures to help people out of poverty. In the New Testament we find the same principle.

Sometimes poverty is not entirely due to external factors. The fact is there are people who are just lazy and would prefer not to work, letting others support them. This can lead to poverty for themselves and their dependants. Paul recognised and addressed this:

For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

It is a Bible principle that those who have must help those who have not –

and those who have not must do what they can to help themselves.

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In 2005 a coalition of charitable and other organisations was formed under the banner 'Make poverty history'. It's a noble statement, and much good work has been done in its name. But will it ever work?

Jesus said, "You have the poor with you always" (Matthew 26:11). The reason? Human nature – whilst there is opportunity to act selfishly, people will always do so, and there will always be others who lose out! Despite the best efforts of governments, charities and hard-working individuals, the scourge of poverty is still with us.

However, the Bible does promise a time when poverty will really be history. That will be in the Kingdom of God. God's Kingdom will put an end to all the ills and evils of this present age of human misrule. It will not be by human efforts, however well-meaning and hardworking we may be – but by the ultimately wise and powerful rulership of the King – Jesus Christ, of course. Here are some glimpses we're given of society in the Kingdom of God:

He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken (Micah 4:3-4).

Give the king Your judgments, O God, and Your righteousness to the king's Son. He will judge Your people with righteousness, and Your poor with justice. The mountains will bring peace to the people, and the little hills, by righteousness. He will bring justice to the poor of the people; He will save the children of the needy, and will break in pieces the oppressor (Psalm 72:1-4).

The Bible gives us the promise that this will happen. And it extends to us the invitation to be there and to be part of it. Will you accept the invitation?

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