

The Problems of Poverty

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Date: 27 September 2026

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[0:00] Well, I'm sure each of us knows the following scenario all too well.! You're at home, you're just potting around after a long day, and you hear that clank at the gate or that ringing, followed by that familiar, Hello, madam. Hello, sir. Oh, and you drop your head. Oh, your heart drops. Here comes another unwelcome request for something.

And it's always a long story, but it always ends with, can you just give me a five grand? Well, you either grudgingly give the money just to get rid of the irritation, or you send them on the way with nothing but with harsh words.

Either way, you're never quite sure how to respond or what is really going to help, and how you're going to stem this seemingly endless tide of people that need help.

You hate giving money that will be wasted, and you hate not really being able to help. Well, that's what our two-part series on helping the needy is here to help us with.

Helping the needy, it's not a small topic. It's a big issue. It's messy, and unfortunately, there are no easy solutions. But it's important for us to look at the problem of helping the poor for two main reasons.

[1:27] And firstly, it's to understand God better. And so to understand God better, we need to understand His heart for the poor and the needy. And so as we look at this topic, we'll understand more about who God is and how He thinks about us.

And the second follows on from that. Christians are those who see themselves who have been helped by God, but have also been uniquely empowered by Him to help others. And we need to be encouraged that we are the best solution to helping people's lives change, because we ourselves have been changed by God.

And so just to give you a roadmap of where we're going for the two talks, this week we're looking at the problems of poverty. We need to unpack how big and how complex the problem is.

That's not to scare us away from helping. It's just we need to appreciate the difficulty we face so we can find better solutions. And then next week we'll drill down into sort of practicals, do's and don'ts, looking at helping that helps versus helping that doesn't help so much.

So for starters, we're looking at the problems of poverty, the problems of poverty. Well, I realized that the problem of homelessness, of the poor, of the needy, of poverty in Cape Town, was it was much more complex than I realized when I first started working at U-Turn.

[2:56] And U-Turn is the NGO that was started out of St. Stephen's in Claremont to help the homeless. And I thought if I just went out there and told them about U-Turn, they would flock.

Because all they needed, a homeless person is homeless, what he needs is a roof over his head, and he obviously didn't know about us, otherwise he'd come and get a roof over his head. And to my surprise, many didn't want that.

And so I soon realized that the problem of homelessness, the problem of poverty, the problem of people needing stuff, isn't that they're homeless, isn't the drugs, and it isn't the lack of money.

Those are problems, but the real problem is the problem behind those problems, if that makes sense. The problem behind the problem. You see, I was like many who have grown up in kind of more affluent suburbia in Cape Town, and we tend to struggle to see how deep the issues go, and how much intervention and support is needed to bring about lasting change.

Now when you look at the problem of poverty in Cape Town, it can seem overwhelming. Now U-Turn undertook a survey a few years ago, and the findings are jaw-dropping.

[4:13] So I'm going to put some stats up on the screen for us. And so what they did is they did a count of the homeless to get an idea. How bad is it in Cape Town? They counted 3,000. You know, one of the kind of like census taking that one often gets in our country.

But there's no way you can capture everyone who's on the street at that one snapshot. And so using sort of algorithms and things, they estimate that there's actually about 14,000 homeless in Cape Town alone.

They found that the average number of years spent on the street is eight years. That's a long time. That's the average.

But the big problem is what they call chronic homelessness. Oh, sorry, that might say chronic homeless. It does say chronic homeless. It means the same thing. Okay. Chronic homelessness, chronic homeless, is up to 50%.

So that means people who are on the street their whole entire lives and they may never leave. So half of those 14,000 are likely to spend their entire lives on the street.

[5:19] That's compared to an average chronic homelessness issue of between 5% and 25% in other cities. So it's a big problem in Cape Town. Substance abuse. They found that 65% who are on the street are using or abusing substances, alcohol, drugs.

And the guys can make money on the street. The average income per day between 50 to 100 rent. That's whether it's begging, whether it's standing at the robots, whether it's what they call scurrying out of the bins and going to sell stuff, or whether it's their grants as well, because they do get grants.

But, I mean, we all know you can't survive on 50 to 800 a day. But what's more jaw-dropping is the amount of money it costs the city to, I'm going to just say it in air quotes, help the homeless.

And now these are conservative figures I'm going to give, but what Uten did is they just calculated, they went to everyone who has a say in how the homeless or what money goes towards homelessness and poverty and the poor in Cape Town, and they divided it into three categories. The first category is what they call reactive or punitive. That's when you get the government, the city, and law enforcement involved. It costs R355 million a year.

[6:50] Now, when it costs the city, that means it costs us, because we're the taxpayers. Humanitarian giving or handouts, that's the handouts that comes from the private sector, from us, the public.

Almost 300 million Rand a year, 287 million Rand a year. And then the last category is what they call developmental, and those NGOs like U-Turn that are designed to help people leave homelessness, to grow out of that situation and to stand back on their feet.

Only 122 million Rand is spent on that part of the homeless problem. And so 45% is spent on sending people to jail, and then they come out of jail.

It's spent on moving people along, and then they come back. So that's a cycle that doesn't end. So it's helping that's not helping, if that makes sense. Or nearly half of the spending is on helping that doesn't help.

40% is handouts. Again, that's helping that doesn't help, in one sense. It does help a little bit.

There's immediate relief, but there's no long-term change.

[8:04] And only 16% is spent on long-term change, so that people stop being homeless. So can you see, that's a big problem. The companies, the NGOs that help with homelessness, are nearly all Christian.

Christians do the most work at actually helping end homelessness. Now, just to give the total, here's another slide.

So just to add it all up for us. This is from their survey. Finding number four. We are spending in excess of 744 million Rand a year on homelessness in Cape Town.

And that equates to 51,000 Rand per person per year, or 4,300 Rand per person per month. And most of that money is going to keep them there.

It doesn't stop them being homeless. So there's got to be a rethink, and a replanning, and another way to do this. Otherwise it's going to continue. That's a lot of money.

[9:16] You say, okay, now, I thought this was about how to help us end homelessness. How are we going to match 744 million?

Why am I showing you these stats? Is it to make you feel that the problem is so big you don't want to get involved? Well, no. It's to make sure you do get involved. But I think it's to show that short-term solutions are not going to work long-term.

So you need patience, and lots of it when you're helping the poor. And you need to think clearly about what kind of help you're giving. What actually, is there help that's helping change, or is help

helping them stay the same?

Now those caught in a poverty mindset themselves don't see easy solutions. They just see problems that they can't handle themselves. It takes time to help change that.

Just to give you an illustration, we've seen this in the people that we've helped at St. Mark's. The number one thing is it takes time. Months, if not years, before positive change is seen.

[10:34] And we're talking about many, many, many man hours of phone calls, looking online for places they can go to, making the phone calls.

Have you got a place for them to stay? Yes, we've got a place for you to stay. Okay, jump in the car. Let's go. Drive them there. Drop them off. No, there's no place to stay. Okay, bring them back. It takes money.

It takes time. It takes effort. If you want to see lasting change. And so for us, that means we need patience.

We need humility. And we need to not get frustrated. And there needs to be a shift in the way we think about how change takes place. Often I hear people say, No man, they may just sort themselves out.

What's wrong with them? If you find yourself without any money, you've got resources that you can access that can give you money fairly easily. And then you will use the money properly.

[11:45] But five rand here, ten rand there is not going to do a lot for a person. But they also don't have the mentality that says, okay, I can take this money and do something with it that can change me.

There's an immediate, very short-term need basis where homeless people live. They must get shelter.

And then they must get their drugs. And until you break that mindset, most of the money that we give is going to go towards that. So, now I'm not saying don't give money. I'm going to deal with this next week.

But you want to be careful about that and not just think, I'm going to give money. And why don't they change? Surely we can just send them to rehab and then they're sorted. Three weeks in rehab, 16 weeks in rehab.

And they say, what's the problem? What's the problem? Well, that's like telling an eight-year-old child to learn how to drive themselves to school. They can't do it.

[12:42] They need help to grow to a place where they can understand what they need to do to make their lives better themselves. But we also know this about us.

This is also kind of true about ourselves. Somewhere along the line of our journey of change, there have been people thinking to themselves, but doesn't this guy get it?

Why don't you just change? And aren't you glad that God gave people to you that have patience, that helped you along the way, learning how to be more mature, how to be grown up, how to be responsible, and how to be a useful Christian?

So we're not too different from the homeless in that regard. We also have had people that... We also need help. We also take a long time to change. And I know this, because I've been working here at St Marks for a while.

And so we can't have a short-term, and they must change quickly. It will be great. But we all think about that for ourselves.

[13:48] But it takes time. It takes many conversations. Now, the whole time I've been talking about kind of us and them, as if we are the ones with the solutions, and they, whoever they are, are the ones with the problems.

But in truth, there's not one of us here that doesn't suffer from some form of poverty. And so, when you look at us as sinners, saints, and sufferers.

Sinners, saints, and sufferers. Now, sadly, when it comes to helping the poor, Christians can sometimes be the most judgmental. I think part of the problem is that we see people either as saints or as sinners.

So, if I look at you, and you're struggling with something in your life, well, you must have done something wrong to deserve it. But thinking like that forgets that we are not living in a vacuum.

We're living in a fallen, broken, sin-cursed world. People are sinners. Christians are saints. But they are also sufferers.

[14:58] We are also sufferers. In fact, we all suffer from the effects of living in a world that doesn't work properly. Example. One of the ladies we helped at U-turn back in the day was homeless because her mother, who was a drug addict, paid bail to the boyfriend who was abusing the girl so the mom could get drugs.

It was literally safer on the streets than living at home. But when you see someone begging at the robots, you don't see that. You just see a grown person who has done something with their life that hasn't worked out for them.

But we don't see how they get there. What has affected them to be in a place like that. They don't want to be there. No one wants to be there.

But now they're there. And something has gone wrong. Yes, it's a combination of their own choices. But there's a lot of things that have been imposed on them that they didn't want and they didn't know how to cope with.

So you see them at the robots, you don't see that. But most people on the streets are suffering from something that has gone very badly wrong in their life.

[16:14] So I think it helps to remember that they themselves are suffering from bad decisions that others have made. We don't like to think of ourselves as sufferers because we want to take charge of our lives.

Being a sufferer means someone else has got something, a hold over me, a power over me that I don't like and I don't want. And we're very good at making sure those things don't impact us as best as we can.

But the truth is we all suffer from some form of poverty. Poverty is the lack of something that diminishes our ability to live life to the full.

Poverty is the lack of something that diminishes our ability to live life to the full. But you're saying to yourself, I'm not poor. I don't have inputs of poverty into my life.

I've got a house, I've got a car, I've got lots of food, I go on holidays. How am I suffering from poverty? Poverty, how am I a poor person? Well, let's do a quick audit on our lives.

[17:19] If you're very brave, you put up your hand. Does anyone here have absolutely zero family relational problems? Is every relationship in your immediate and extended family going well all the time?

Or are there relationships a little bit broken that you're struggling with and that could be better? Are there some relationships that you need to fix or that need to be fixed but you're not quite sure how? You don't know how. Okay, so it looks like most of us have got some sort of family problems. Next question. Does everyone have absolutely happy, a happy mindset and happy feelings all the time and a great night's sleep every night with no worries and concerns at all, ever?

No? Okay. Sounds like some of us are struggling with some things. Here's the bravest one if you want to put up your hand.

Does anyone use some form of chemical substance to help with how you're feeling? Well, you say, oh, I don't use drugs. Yes, you do. Coffee.

[18:40] Alcohol. Even if you're not addicted to it, it helps. Take the edge off. Cigarettes. Maybe you take illegal drugs.

I know for sure you take legal drugs. We all need something to help cope with life. We all have been impoverished in some way, shape or form.

None of us is living our life to the absolute fullest. We've all got things in our life that is sapping our energy, sapping our ability to enjoy life and to help others.

And so, there's not a lot of difference between us in this regard and the guy who doesn't have a roof over the head.

And that's why, when Jesus came preaching the gospel of salvation, it's coached in terms of good news to the poor. It turns out we're the poor that need help.

[19:50] So, let me read that passage from Luke chapter 4. It might come up on the screen. Jesus went to Nazareth, we had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went in the synagogue, as was his custom.

He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found a place where it is written, The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me.

Jesus is now taking that prophecy and saying, Yep, he's the guy. What has the Spirit of the Lord anointed Jesus to do?

To proclaim good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

And he rolls up the scroll, and he says, Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Jesus is the one who's saying, I've come to fix all of these problems.

[20 : 58] The poor, the blind, those in prison, people who are oppressed, who is it talking about? Well, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61. It's prophesying to the Jewish generation that was held captive as slaves in Babylon, due to their rebellion and sin.

But whom God, because he loves them, promises to release. But that was 600 years before Jesus quotes this text, and says, Yeah, you guys are still in the same situation.

They are in some sense still in slavery, still in the dark, still under oppression, and still in need of release. And I think this is where it touches us. Because the Bible uses this imagery of slavery, and lost in darkness, in confusion, not knowing how to handle life well, being caught in things that hold us captive, almost against our own will, our own thoughts, our own desires, and our own fears that we can't control.

Jesus is saying that, we who live in relative luxury in suburbia, are as in much need of saving as the person living under the bush, by the railway line. So no matter who you are, or how much money you have, or don't have, Jesus wants you to know, that without him you will remain poor.

You will remain impoverished. You'll remain disempowered. But the promise, of the gospel, the promise, is that Jesus will fill all of the areas of your life, that are broken, that require freedom, that require release, that require some sort of outside intervention, some sort of power, that you've never been able to fix yourself.

[22 : 44] Jesus says, no, I'll do that for you. Jesus will free you from the areas of your life, that is holding you hostage, that is making your life poorer.

And you begin to fill you with blessing, and goodness, and life, if you open up your life to him, and ask him for rescue, and for help. But how does this help us help the poor better?

I think understanding the gospel helps us be more understanding of those in need. The reason we help the poor is the same reason God helped us.

God sees that we're poor. We're in need. It's just that our poverty looks different. We're very good at hiding how badly it's affecting us. At least the homeless guys know that they're just like, yeah, I'm in such trouble here.

Okay, yes, they come up with all the stories on the planet, but... You can at least see how badly their lives are going. We're very good at hiding the things that hold us back and make us poor.

[23 : 50] It's the same deep-rooted problem of sin that impoverishes us and makes us needy for God's help and in need of his salvation. So, the next time you get that ring at the doorbell, okay, this guy's poor.

I'm also poor. But I've received help from God. In what way can I help this guy? Take the time to help the person with what they're asking for. So that you can take time to speak to them about what they really need.

Now, next week we'll go into when you must give and what you must give and what you mustn't give. But often, just giving a sandwich, giving a five rand, giving a ten rand. Just helps you have a little bit more of a conversation with the person.

Sometimes you're too busy to help them then and there. I'm not opposed to saying, Hey man, I'm busy right now. I want to help you, but I can't. Then it's a very easy solution. Come to church on Sunday. Come to St. Mark's on Sunday.

You've got the same problem I have. Try to tell that to the poor guy. Listen, I've got the same problem you've got. Well, do you also drink? You say, yeah, you can be honest. You do drink. Most of you drink.

[25 : 01] You say, come to church and you can hear about someone who can help you with your problems. It's a start. It's not going to solve your problem overnight. It's going to start changing your problem. They can come to our soup kitchen.

We'll sit and chat with them. That's our open. That's our first door. That's the way we open most of our services here. And you can get help and prayer and begin that journey of change. But don't send them away thinking it's not your problem.

No one else is going to solve the issue. The city spends 700 million rand a year. And they're not solving it. And then just think, what would have happened to your Christian walk if others hadn't

taken the time to talk to you about your problems?

And how Jesus is the one who can help you. And I think the last thing that this passage does is it shows us God's heart for the poor.

Now, throughout the Bible, God has consistently shown his love and mercy to those in need. Right from creation, from the fall, Adam and Eve messed up.

[26 : 13] And God said, you know what? I need to help them. And they were naked. And they realized they were naked. And now the elements, the world that God had made to support their life, is now actually going to cause a problem for them.

So God makes them a coat. He sacrifices an animal. Gives them an animal coat so that they're protected from the elements and protected from their shame. Later on, in the great act of salvation in Exodus, he frees his people from slavery.

Later on, in the time of Isaiah, he frees his people from exile. But all the way through the Bible, none of these brought about the permanent change that God wanted. So he finally sends Jesus to earth to fix the problem of people being caught up.

In the consequences of their sins. I think what that means for us is something what the theologians call incarnational ministry.

What that really means is realizing that someone is in need and then going to where that need is. And entering into some sort of relationship, even if it's just talking or helping.

[27 : 27] Because they're not... A person in need can't change themselves. We tend to think that people can change themselves. None of us have gotten to where we are without any help whatsoever.

None of us have been able to do this by ourselves. Incarnational ministry, we can think of it as relational ministry. It's just relationships is probably one of the best ways we have of helping those in need.

It means welcoming and befriending those in need, literally to our church when they come here. So, one of the things that I often do when a person who looks like they're homeless comes and asks for help, I tend to just sit back a little bit.

I want to see now who's going to go speak to that guy. Go and speak to them. They're a human.

They've got the same problems you've got. They've got bigger problems.

But you've also got problems. You can relate to them. Hey man, what's up? Yeah, they're going to have a long story. You can't spend five minutes, ten minutes at tea time talking to someone.

[28 : 37] Relational ministry. Open our churches, open our homes. Go for a coffee. Be careful about opening your home. Just come back next week to see how you can do that carefully.

I think it means finding, yeah, just finding the space to relate to people. And it takes more long term. It's more long term. It's not immediate, it's more long term.

But just to say that relational ministry works wonders. We've seen this with the Barnes's. And we've seen it with the Claims. And I've got a feeling that God is testing us now that Nolan and Tracy are going overseas.

And they are going to leave a gap. Who's going to fill it? God will fill it. But he's going to fill it with someone here. Relational ministry.

Hospitality. Friendliness. Going for a coffee. Having a chat. We can all do that. That's one of the superpowers that God has given us to help the poor. Just to befriend them. And see what's going on. And be in a space where they can receive advice from someone who can give good advice.

[29 : 56] These guys, they come from such broken families. They don't have friends like we've got friends. They've got friends that help them with drugs. They don't have friends that help them not with drugs. You might be the only person in their life that says, that's a bad idea.

Are you enjoying it? No. Well, let me tell you about something that's going to be better for you. Of course they're not going to change on the spot. It takes a long time. So be prepared for that.

You're going to say the same thing a lot of times. By the way, so relational ministry needs support from everyone else. The Barnsers couldn't do it by themselves. Tracy and Nolan can't do it by themselves.

You guys, there's others. Many of us are doing many things. Those are the ones that stick out in my mind. The poor often don't need immediate solutions.

They need people in their life they've never had before. Good people, loving people, patient people, non-threatening people. People who can be a bit objective, a bit wise, but above all welcoming and

friendly and loving.

[31 : 03] And so let's pick up where Nolan and Tracy are going to leave off. And make sure that we are doing this thing that God did for us. Going to where the hurt is.

Sending Jesus down to earth where we're all suffering. I've come to help the poor. You've realized that you're poor. Now, if you've received help from God, then go and help others in the same way. You cannot imagine the good that God will do through the families of this church, just by being friendly to people. But there is more to it than that.

That's just the start. And so there are some do's and don'ts. Better ways of helping and less better ways of helping. So we're going to we're going to look at that next week. Can I pray for us?

Heavenly Father, we are so thankful for your word, Lord, that this gospel that is couched in terms of you coming to help the poor.

Coming to help those who are in need, who are captive by something in their lives, who are struggling around in the dark, you've who are oppressed and you've come to release them and free them and give them sight and give them purpose.

[32 : 17] You've done this all through Jesus Christ. Lord, help. We are so thankful that you've done that for us. Help us, Lord, to do that for others together as a church.

In Jesus name. Amen.