

How to Keep Poor People Poor

by David Servant

The key to helping the poor is to teach them to fish, rather than giving them a fish, and to require them to work for their own improvement.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 24:19

Topics: "Poverty Relief", "Christian Stewardship"

Description

David Servant shares a powerful message on the importance of not enabling dependency but encouraging self-sufficiency, drawing from personal experiences in Romania and biblical principles. He emphasizes the need for noble motivations in work and charity, highlighting the detrimental effects of handouts without requiring effort. The sermon delves into the biblical commandment that those who are able to work should do so to earn their keep, echoing the apostle Paul's example of working diligently to set a good model. David Servant also explores the balance between providing immediate relief and fostering long-term development for the poor, advocating for wise and sustainable solutions.

Transcript

Back in the late '80s, I had an opportunity to travel inside the Eastern European nation of Romania, which at that time was in its fifth decade of communism. It was a country that was crumbling. I witnessed empty store shelves, food lines, and the dreary faces of people in survival mode. Meanwhile, their megalomaniac ruler, Nicolae Ceaușescu, pampered himself in mansions scattered about the country that were filled with marble, art, antiques and gold-fixtured bathrooms.

About the only happy person I met in Romania was an elderly Seventh Day Adventist pastor who lived in a weathered little house in a small Romanian village. He was, in fact, bubbling with joy, and he told me that the reason he was so blessed was because he loved God with all his heart, mind, soul and strength. Visiting with him was a delight.

Pastors were considered societal parasites in Eastern Europe during those years, and so he, like all pastors, was required to work at a daily job that was thought to be of some economic value. He had been assigned to work with a crew of loggers. He told me that each day his crew would hike out into the forest, cut down trees for three hours, and then lie down and sleep on the forest floor for the remainder of their shift.

I asked him the reason for such an extended daily work break. He explained that if his crew cut down more than their required quota of trees on any given day, their daily quota would be increased. And they would not receive any increase in pay since the government set all wages, and everyone in Romania was supposedly equal. So that joyful, blessed pastor who loved God with all his heart spent his afternoons sleeping in the woods!

His story illustrates a universal human trait: Unless we are motivated by some noble cause, we will always choose the easiest option. That Romanian pastor did not consider lining the pockets of communist leaders to be a noble cause. If he, however, would have had a guarantee of earning more money in exchange for more work, he would have worked harder, as he would have been motivated by love for his wife and children to be a better provider. He may have also been motivated by love for the poor with whom he could share a portion of his earnings. Communism utterly kills people's motivation to work harder, because the harder-working laborer receives no benefit. Socialism has the same effect, just to a lesser degree. Why should I work harder if most of my increase is taken by the government and given to someone else who is unwilling to work?

What would you have done had you been that Romanian pastor? Imagine for a moment that you were looking for a job and were offered two identical opportunities, but one job paid more than the other. Which would you choose? You would, of course, choose the higher-paying opportunity simply because it offers you more money for the same amount of work. That Romanian pastor was similarly motivated, except there was a ceiling set on his earnings. So he chose the "higher paying job"---the one that required less work for the same amount of earnings. If you or I had been that Romanian pastor, we would have been sleeping in the woods every afternoon, too.

Let me take this one step further. What if you were offered two opportunities to gain \$1,000, one that required one week's labor, and one that required no labor? I suspect you'd take the second offer, the gift of \$1,000. Again, unless we're motivated by some noble cause, we naturally choose the easiest option.

Understanding this helps us realize what we don't want to do for the poor if we truly want to help them, and that is, give them something for nothing. A flow of well-intentioned charity can ensure perpetual poverty. We should not wonder why the poor have no motivation to work when we feed, clothe and house them without requiring any work from them. They will choose the easiest option. Like the former communist government of Romania, we've effectively killed any motivation they may have had before we arrived with all our good intentions.

Government charity is of course no different than private charity. If by working, people are not able to make significantly more money than they can gain from collecting welfare checks, they will have absolutely no motivation to get "off the dole" (as they say in Britain).

When it comes to dealing with the truly poor in less-developed nations---those whose poverty is appalling by comparison to what is labeled as poverty in the more-developed world---we have a natural tendency to compassionately empty our wallets to instantly meet the glaring needs. But the recipient has been taught a lesson that he will not soon forget: The easiest means to money is to be friends with rich people from other countries. That is the breeding ground for all sorts of evil that aid-organizations, western missionaries, and practically any Christian with an email address frequently find themselves facing, evils such as deception, flattery, and bad reports about other "less-worthy" beneficiaries. Beyond that, expectations and dependencies are slowly created, and as benefactors slowly grow weary of feeding the ever-increasing

appetites of the monsters they've created, they ultimately stop their flow of charity. In the bitter end, benefactors find themselves accused of "betrayal" and "cold-heartedness" by their former beneficiaries---who have already begun their search for the next benefactor.

Before I go any further, let me quickly affirm that needy people who are unable to earn a living for themselves, such as orphaned children, elderly widows, those who are significantly handicapped or oppressed, and those with no earning opportunities, are in a different category. They need a flow of charity, at least temporarily. Those who suddenly find themselves in desperate situations, such as victims of natural disasters or war refugees, need immediate hand-outs in the form of food and shelter; but even in those cases, relief needs to transition to development as soon as possible. And although I hoped to avoid using in this article the worn-out cliché about the comparative benefits of giving a man a fish versus teaching him to fish, there is no better illustration of what I'm talking about. Development is better than relief.

It is not always quite so simple in the real world, however, because chances are the man already knows how to fish, he is already fishing, but he is only catching enough fish to barely feed himself and his family. What he needs is a boat and a net so he can catch more fish, and he needs a nearby market where people would be willing to buy his fish.

So how do we get that man the boat and net he needs? We have two good options. We can either give or lend him money to purchase the tools a fisherman needs. If we give him money, from the outset the profits from his new venture don't have to be split between meeting his own needs and making loan payments. He may not, however, be as careful to take care of the tools that cost him nothing, and he may not work as hard to ensure his success. What costs nothing is often valued accordingly. If he fails, he hasn't lost anything, and is only back to where he was before he started. He may assume that if he fails his benefactor will be there to bail him out again.

If, however, we lend him money at interest to purchase a boat and net---and even require some collateral---he is then motivated to carefully consider his business plan, weigh his risk of loss, and work very hard to succeed. He is personally invested from the start. Moreover, if he repays his loan, we can help another needy fisherman to buy a boat and net, and then another, and another and another. If he refuses to take a loan (at a reasonable interest rate), it might be a good indication that he doesn't believe he can succeed in a proposed business. The willingness of people to take loans and put up collateral can be an excellent litmus test of their chances of success.

Learning these things from our experiences and the experiences of others, Heaven's Family is focusing more and more on establishing micro-banks. These banks not only provide start-up capital via loans for enterprising believers, but they also provide income for micro-bankers via the interest that their little banks earn.

So this is the first principle of helping the poor: We should never do for the poor what they can do for themselves. Years ago I can remember traveling with my church's youth group to Appalachia to repair run-down houses of the poorest people I had ever met up until that point in my life. I can remember that the people spoke English, but we were barely able to understand them because of their thick mountain accents. And I can remember how we marveled that the residents would just sit and watch us repair their leaky roofs and sagging porches. We never required them to join us in our work, and they were happy to drink our lemonade and not get in our way.

If I had to do it all over again, I would start by asking homeowners if they had any roof leaks. If they said "yes," I'd hand them a few shingles, some roofing nails and a can of tar, and tell them, "Go fix a leak on your neighbor's roof. I'll be back in an hour. If I see you've used what I've given you to fix a neighbor's leak, I'll pay you with a few shingles, some nails and a little tar that you can use to fix one of the leaks on your own roof."

Scripture says, "If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either" (2 Thes. 3:10). That is plain and simple, and it is just as much a biblical commandment as are all the commandments to give to the poor. The apostle Paul believed in that commandment so much that he worked just to set a good example, even when he had the right to be sustained by the offerings:

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either (2 Thes. 3:7-10).

Under the old covenant, field-owners were forbidden to gather the gleanings from their fields during the harvest, but to leave what remained for the poor (see Deut. 24:19-21; Lev. 19:9-10). Notice, however, that if the poor were to benefit, they had to work to gather the gleanings. Field-owners didn't deliver gleanings to their doorsteps. God set the example Himself in that regard, freely pouring manna from heaven six days a week for the needy people of Israel as they journeyed to the Promised Land, but He required that they gather it. Those who didn't work didn't eat. There was no such thing as a free lunch from God.

We read in Acts 6 of the early church's efforts to take care of widows by means of a daily feeding. It didn't take long before the apostles were plagued by the universal dilemma that always stalks the generous: More needy people start showing up for their handouts. Those widows in Jerusalem who were being overlooked started complaining, and their representatives accused the apostles of ethnic favoritism. That is no doubt why the apostles, as they decided to delegate their responsibilities to others, required men who were "full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3, emphasis added). Effective benevolence demands great wisdom, lest more harm than good be done.

Paul later wisely laid out very detailed instructions to Timothy regarding which widows should and should not be supported by the church (see 1 Tim. 5:3-16). Only a limited number would qualify, and those who did would hardly be receiving something for nothing, as they were required to work full-time in serving others, doing good works, and praying.

We have found that in some cases, impoverished Christians in other countries have been so conditioned by the thoughtless charity of Western Christians that they seem to have no concept of working to earn money, but expect to be sustained by hand-outs. If offered a loan to start a business, they refuse it, as it requires work to succeed and repay the loan. Those folks should be left alone until their stomachs educate their heads:

A worker's appetite works for him, for his hunger urges him on (Prov. 16:26).

I once heard about a pastor who, during the Great Depression, frequently had beggars come to his church office to ask him for money. He would first ask them if they had looked for a job. They would respond that

they had, but explained that they had simply not been able to find one. He then asked them if they would work if they could find a job. They always replied in the affirmative. Finally, he would say to them, "Good! I have a pile of wood in back of the church that needs split. There's an axe beside the woodshed. Go out and split as many of those logs as you can, and then come back and I'll pay you."

The majority of the time, those freeloaders politely thanked him, walked out his door, and he never saw them again. And that pastor kept a clear conscience in the process.

Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise, which, having no chief, officer or ruler, prepares her food in the summer and gathers her provision in the harvest. How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest"--Your poverty will come in like a vagabond and your need like an armed man (Prov. 6:6-11).

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