# Poverty Sunday

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Preacher: Andy Lloyd

[0:00] Poverty Sunday. Poverty Sunday. And it's been an interesting time to prepare, a theme to prepare on. Because as a sociologist, I wanted to go into all sorts of interesting things around poverty, and I decided not to.

So that's probably a good thing for you. I'm going to read in a moment the passage from Matthew 25, The Sheep and the Ghost. But Matthew 25 is a really interesting chapter.
If you have a chance this week, maybe just have a look at Matthew 25. It has three sections to it. It starts off with the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids.
You may remember that story about the bridesmaids. Some had oil, and some didn't have oil. Some were prepared, and some weren't prepared.
And then when the bridegroom came, some got into the party, and others didn't. And then it goes on to talk about the parable of the bags of gold.
[1:08] The three servants who were given different amounts of gold, and they went away and had to make more money for their boss. And two did, and one didn't.

He just buried his bag of gold in the mud and got told off for it. And then we come to The Sheep and the Goats. And there's just a theme there and a sequence.
The first thing we need to do as we think about our response to poverty, or even just our lives as Christians, is be personally prepared.
Have the oil in our lamp. There's a song about that, isn't there? Have the oil in our lamp. We need to be personally prepared. And as we think about this theme, we need to be personally prepared to think about it.
We then need to move on and think, what has God given me that I can use for His service? What has God given me that I can use for His service?
[2:13] And then we go on to the act of service. So there's three things there, and I'm going to read from Matthew 25, beginning at verse 31.

They should come up on the screen. When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, He will sit on His glorious throne. Isn't that just a lovely verse? All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate people one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.
And He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on His left. Then the King will say to those on His right, Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.
For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me in. I needed clothes, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you looked after me.
I was in prison, and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer Him, Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you, and thirsty, and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger, and invite you in, or needing clothes, and clothe you?
[3:24] When did we see you sick, or in prison, and go to visit you? And the King will reply, Truly, I tell you, whatever you did for the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did for me.

Then He will say to those on His left, Depart from you, you who are cursed. Into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink.
I was a stranger, and you did not invite me in. I needed clothes, and you didn't clothe me. I was sick, and in prison, and you did not look after me. They will also answer, Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or needing clothes, or sick, or in prison, and didn't help you?

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He will reply, Truly, I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. Then they will go away into eternal punishment.
The right but the righteous. To eternal life. It's an astonishingly sobering passage. It's called the parable of the sheep and the goats, and we use the expression that will separate the sheep from the goats.
[4:43] We almost forget the depth and the seriousness of Matthew chapter 25.

The back end of it. So as we come to think about this theme, don't lose sight of the fact that we have a calling from God to be active in this area.
Next slide, please. Why Poverty Sunday? Why Poverty Sunday? Here's some... I will do a little bit of data, just because I can't not. 700 million people worldwide live on less than £1.60 a day.
£11 a week, £48 a month. 700 million people. Now you can say, yeah, well, the cost of living in lots of countries is low, and you can do all of that.
But just put very simply, that's a lot of people who live on less than a cup of coffee.
[5:56] 20% of people in the UK are living in absolute low-income poverty, according to the government statistics. One in five.

There's 100 people in this building, 20. That would be 20 people. Locally in Whitby, 30% of our population live in the top 20% most deprived areas in England.
That's a number that surprised me. But that's the truth of it. That's the truth of it. Now why am I telling you that? Because poverty is a live and real issue for our world and for our community.
And if I was doing some sort of different talk, I would then talk about relative poverty and absolute poverty, and we can have that conversation afterwards. I'd be very happy to. I'm a nerdy sociologist.
But for today, understand that poverty is a live and real issue for our community and for our church, for Whitby Christian Fellowship.
[7:12] So what do we mean by poverty? We're focusing on financial poverty today. But in Scripture, we can be poor in a number of different ways.

We can be poor in our relationship with God. Colossians 1. In our relationship, we continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.
We continually ask God to fill you with knowledge. We need to continually work to develop our relationship with God.
And Scripture is clear. We can be in poverty in our relationship with God. In our spiritual maturity. Paul's challenge in 1 Corinthians, I fed you with milk, not solid food, because you're not ready for it.
And even now, you're not yet ready. You're still having milk. Our spiritual maturity is important.
[8:24] And the challenge that we have is that we need to grow in spiritual maturity. We see children who, to start with, are drinking milk only.

If they were drinking milk only at 10, that would be a concern. And as I've been preparing, I've been wondering, where on that journey am I?
Are there days when I just want to have milk? I want to have the easy-peasy bits of Scripture. God is nice and He likes me. It's true, by the way.
It's true. But where's the wrestle? Where's the struggle? Where's the commitment to say to God, I want to go deeper and know you more and understand more?
Our behavior and attitudes. 1 Corinthians 14. Stop thinking like children. In regard to evil, be infants.
[9:31] But in your thinking, be adults. Goodness may. In regard to evil, be infants.

Know nothing of it. But in regard to God, grow up. Grow up, Andy.
You've got to do better than this. So, and that's the stuff that I'm not going to talk about. But I just thought I ought to put it in there.
Have I done something? No, you've not done anything at all. Somebody sent me a drink. Thank you. Always good to have a drink there.
What do we mean by poverty? We mean all that stuff. But let's talk about today because that's the theme. Financial poverty. Next slide, please. God's heart is for the poor.
[10:33] Truly, I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. When we meet the needs of others, we are meeting or we are serving God.

When we come to say, this is something that we are doing and we feel good about doing, well done, I'm pleased that you feel good about doing it, but actually you're serving God.

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Truly, I tell you, whatever you did, you did it for me. So when we consider our response to the poor and the needy, when we think and consider our response to the Pennycross Fund, when we think and consider the needs of others, we think and consider what God is asking us to do.
And when we serve Him, or when we serve others rather, we serve Him too. Throughout Scripture, we see examples of God honoring the poor and warning the rich to be careful about their attitude to money.
And just because it's important to say it, money is not evil. It's our attitude to money that is sometimes wrong.
[11:57] So we can't be simplistic. We can't do some sort of heavy end Marxist philosophy and say the rich are bad and the poor are good.

That's incompetent theology with great respect to Marx. Well, some respect to Marx. We can't do that. We have to, each of us, examine our hearts.
Because if we love money, Scripture tells us we're going down a difficult path. So it's not about rich and poor.
It's about our attitude to money. But God is on the side of the poor. Scripture's clear about that. Whoever mocks the poor shows contempt for their baker.
Well, that's fairly clear, isn't it? You can't misunderstand that particular verse from Proverbs. Next slide, please. If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them so they can continue to live among you.
[13:16] If somebody becomes poor, if somebody suddenly develops a need because of whatever, circumstance or mishap or just life, help them.

Why? So that they can continue to live among you. Why is that important? Because God's heart is for relationship. God's heart is for community.
We are community together at Whitby Christian Fellowship. And if you're visiting us, for this morning, you're community together with us. And if you have a home church, you're community together with your home church.
But God builds community. God created us to be together. It is not good for man to be alone. So if one of our community becomes poor and the subtext there is and therefore can't live and continue to live amongst us, help them.
Help them so they can. So they can be part of who we are, of our community together. Because, and scripture elsewhere is very clear, we can't do without any of you.
[14:45] Without any of you here this morning, our fellowship is lesser for it. One body, many parts. We need each other.

The funny thing is, you need me. Ha! Ha! Help them. Help them. Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.
Speak up and judge fairly. Defend the rights of the poor and needy. In a community, in a society where we see rich wealth, plenty, linked to power, we see, and these last three or four weeks, we've seen it with devastating clarity, how wealth and power is a terrible combination used badly.
Defend the rights of those who have no wealth and therefore no power. Defend the rights of the poor and the needy.
When you reap the harvest of the land, do not reap to the very edge of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor.
[16:17] It's a delightful little passage of that. Delightful couple of verses. And this is about a rural economy and this is, I mean, I'm not particularly skilled or knowledgeable about farming.

But I do know that what my scripture tells me is that if I'm gathering up stuff of mine, which is rightfully mine, and I can take every single last bit of it because it belongs to me.
What God is saying, leave a bit. Leave a bit for those who don't need it. Sorry, who do need it. Who don't have it. Leave a bit.
Leave a bit. And the idea of gleaning is a really interesting one. We have some friends for a number of years, Johnny and Gemma Forsyth, we support them.
They lived in Mexico City, they worked with a church called La Loma, and La Loma was on the edge of a rubbish heap. And each morning, hundreds of people would go and pick over the rubbish from Mexico City that had been dumped in that huge area.

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[17:32] And they'd find bits of tin or bits of whatever. And that's how they eked out their existence. Gleaning.

I don't quite know what gleaning means for you. I'm not entirely sure. I know what not gleaning, what leaving bits at the edge of the field means.
That's for you to work out and for me to work out. But it's about don't gather up absolutely everything that belongs to you and put it in a big barn.
Leave some of it available for other people. However that works out in your world. Next slide, please.
So what's our attitude to poverty meant to be? There's an argument that goes quite wild on the internet which is that Jesus says that the poor will always be with us and therefore we shouldn't address poverty because part of poverty is part of God's plan and if you're living in poverty then hard luck but that's how the cards have fell.
[19:00] I think that's incompetent theology. I think it's incompetent everything. But lots of people believe it. It's a very easy get out of jail card. The poor will always be with us so that we have no responsibility.

No, that's not what scripture says. Have as Philippians says and it's a challenging verse this as well in your relationships with one another have the same mindset as Christ Jesus in all sorts of areas.
But let's think about poverty. Compassion generosity and kindness are key. They're things which we need to develop as individuals and it needs to be a characteristic of Whitby Christian Fellowship.
Compassion generosity kindness kindness. They're words which each of them will take my lifetime to work out what it means.
But we simply cannot and must not pretend that those words don't exist. To pretend that somehow we have some sort of free pass on compassion and generosity and kindness.
[20:34] Offer help where we can do so. How? Do you know? But God does.

And I suppose here this is where our attitude to Christ Jesus needs to be needs to be really careful that we need to be talking to God all the time about how can I serve you?
How can I be the person that you want me to be? And that conversation with God goes deep really quickly in my experience.
Because asking God to make me the person that he wants me to be necessarily means me changing from what I have been.
Me accepting that I haven't got it all cracked. That despite privilege despite my life experiences and my work and my time in church and all of that sort of stuff there's more more more more more to learn.
[21:44] And there's more about me to change. Change from glory into glory till in heaven I take my place. the point there is until I'm in heaven I have to change.

How do we offer help? We can offer help simply by smiling at somebody. There's a story which may well not be true but might be a parable rather than a story.
It's about a lady who was buying a train ticket and it was one of those train ticket machines that speaks to you. And as the train ticket machine was speaking to this lady she answered back and somebody said there's no one there you know.
And she said yes I know but that's the only person I've spoken to today. How do we help? Maybe by saying hello to somebody.
Maybe by smiling at somebody. Smile at people it terrifies them. It's really good fun. Walk around town smiling at people they run away.
[22:59] Maybe say hello. Whatever. Speak up and defend the rights of the poor. Speak up and defend the rights of the poor.

And again that's for you to work out how you choose to do that. We have blessedly in this country a variety of different political views.
It's a great privilege and we must never lose that. And your politics and your upbringing and your views and all the rest of it will inform this conversation.
speaking up and defending the rights of the poor is a principle and an attitude that we need to learn from Jesus.
And then don't lean to the edge of the field. Leave some for other people. Again however that works for you. Next slide please. God needs to guide us in our response to poverty.

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[24:19] Giving is a spiritual discipline. We need to give but we need to be wise. And the reason we need to be wise is that actually tragically it's easy to be taken advantage of.

And I've put especially in the days of internet fraud but just it's easy to be taken advantage of. And so wisdom is important here. And what does wisdom mean?
It means praying. It means saying to God what do I do about that particular situation? What do I do about that particular individual who I can see is in need?
How do I meet their needs in a way which isn't going to damage them or mean that I'm being taken advantage of or tricked?
Now each of us again have to find their own balance in that. My take is quite often if it's a relatively small amount I'm not particularly bothered if I'm being taken advantage of.
[25:29] I'll just meet what I think might be a need. Others of you will take a different view and I'm absolutely relaxed about that. I don't think there's a single rule here.

But we do need to be wise and wisdom comes from God. How, when, and what you give is simply and only between you and God.
we need to be very clear that this is a transaction that you have with God, not with each other or with us as a church.
We need to learn how to be discerning in our response and our giving. And the tragedy is that I've seen people over my life who have got a bit of a zealous sort of bone in their body who have just got into a right pickle because they haven't been wise and discerning in their giving.
Maybe that's something that I need to learn too. But wisdom is about listening to God, not about listening to me, because I will have a view, but it might not coincide with God's view, and God is sovereign.
[27:04] can I have the next slide, please?

I'm going to, in fact, Josh, sorry, can you, no, I'll read this. 2 Corinthians 9, 1 to 12, there is no need for me to write to you about this service to the Lord's people, for I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year, you and Acacia were ready to give, and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.
But I'm sending the brother to you in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready as I said you would be.
If any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we, not to say anything about you, would be ashamed of having been so confident. That's Paul being really pointed.
He said, you've promised me you're going to be kind and nice to us, but I'm just writing you a letter to nudge you just in case you thought you might let it slip. Don't let it slip because it's going to be embarrassing.
[28:17] He goes on, so I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it would be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given.

And now we get into some really interesting stuff. Remember this, whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.
Each of you should give as you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. I'll come back to that.
And God is able to bless you abundantly so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will be bound in every good work. As it is written, they have freely scattered their gifts to the poor, their righteousness endures forever.
Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.
[29:23] And through your generosity, through us, your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people, but also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.

Next slide. That's a really, again, a passage that deserves its own talk, but I've not got time.
What's our response to poverty then? Eagerness to help. Part of our response has to be, I really want to be able to help.
I really want to do something. I don't want to be passive. I want to be eager. Have wisdom. Hear God.

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But have an attitude of, you know, I want to help where I can, what I can do. Enthusiasm which spurs one another on. I like that.
[30:24] I like that because if you get enthusiastic, it makes me look and think, well, perhaps I ought to get enthusiastic as well. Enthusiasm which spurs one another on.

But also be ready to give when needed. And that's a preparation of heart as well as of resources. We just need to be people who are ready. And that's how, that's a conversation with God about make my heart ready.
Make me ready to be able to give, to be willing to give, to have whatever I can do and meet that need. And this is really important.
Not sparingly, we'll leave that between you and God. But not grudgingly. Not grudgingly. Can I ask you something? If you come back here, if you're a regular here or if you come back here if you're a visitor, and the bag comes round and you think, oh, flipping heck, don't put anything in.
[31:42] Don't put anything in. God doesn't want our grudging gifts. He wants our free gifts. Our happy gifts.

Because God, when we give, blesses you. And then there's a bit of a dangerous one if we're not careful about how we read it. He will enrich you. That's not about you give something and God gives you lots more back.
That's not how it works. He will enrich you so you can be further generous. Give.
God will bless you. He'll enrich you so you can give further. And that's a wonderful, wonderful little relationship that we have in our time with God.
Next slide, please. God loves how do we give? Joyfully. God loves a joyful giver, a cheerful giver.
[32:52] One of the literal translations there can be hilarious. I think I've said it before. Giggle as you give. each of us should give what you have decided in your heart to give.

Just talk to God and come to a decision. Not reluctant to be or of compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. God wants us to be cheerful givers.
Secondly, before God alone, be wary, be wary of people who stand at the front of anywhere and say, I believe that God is telling everybody here to give this much money.
That's not how it works. That's not how it works. Talk to God. Agree before God and do it with great joy and great hilarity because you know that you're doing God's will.
in secret. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your giving may be in secret.
[34:12] Secret giving is hard because maybe human nature wants at least one person to know so they can say, oh, that was very generous.

that's not how it works. Secret giving. Decide before God and God alone what you will give and then give before God alone.
Now, we're a church and we have processes and we have to have processes of financial probity and we do like to claim tax back so it's hard sometimes. but just be assured on the processes they are strictly confidential but be assured more that that doesn't deny your ability to give secretly.
There are churches which on the monthly notice sheet publish the top ten givers for that month. We're doing that from March.
March. It's just not true by the way. Sorry. And then just a quick word about tithing because time has gone.
[35:33] I think tithing is really helpful as a concept. I think it's a very helpful starting point. I think it's a very helpful discipline. It's not a New Testament principle by the way, not a requirement, but I think that I find and I know that many many other people find.

It's a really good starting place to talk to God about it. But God will delight in what you can give. Agree before God what you will give and then just do it.
And I think this is the final slide now, yeah? So what do we do now? What do we do? I've embarrassed us all by talking about money in church is a bad thing. I think we do, we start by giving thanks to God.
I think any response to need has to start with our thanksgiving to God. Give thanks to God for all he has done for you and all he's given you.
Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. Start with gratitude in your heart. Start with thanksgiving. May thanksgiving and gratitude be part of who you are and how you work your life.

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[36:48] And then talk to God about it. Pray. God, what do you want me to do with this need? How can I help in this situation? How can I respond to this?

And let God speak to you, prompt you, show you, and then do it. Then do it. By the way, that's the hard pit.
Two little words, do it. That's the hard pit. But that's the bit that God has for us. Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream.
Amen. Amen.

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