

Compassion Sunday 2002 Sermon  
Pastor Pete Briscoe  
Bent Tree Bible Fellowship  
Carrollton, Texas

*Prior to the sermon, the video: Releasing children from poverty in Jesus' name was shown and then Pastor Pete opened in prayer:*

Heavenly Father, I give myself to You as I open Your Word, as we grapple with something that we don't think about very often. Unveil our eyes. If we are blind, rip the scales away. Help us to see them the way You see them. Open our hearts. Speak through me by Your Spirit. We give You this time. In Jesus' name, amen.

Will you turn in your Bibles, please, to Psalm 113 and then 1 Timothy 6 as well.

As I was looking at those images of those children we saw in the video, I was taken back to a trip that I took about a decade ago now to the Philippines. I was on a mission trip with a basketball team. We went to a little town where the Lord really grabbed hold of my heart and really called me into ministry.

It was the ministry of a young pastor there. He had five people after serving in this town for five years. He was really struggling. But he was a godly guy and really touched my heart.

And there was a little leper boy in town who had been ravaged by leprosy. He was terribly disfigured, and everywhere he would walk in town, everyone would run away from him. No one would go anywhere near him—except the pastor.

I saw the pastor on a number of occasions walking down the middle of the dusty street, holding what was left of this little boy's hand in his hand. As they swung their arms back and forth, it was the only time I saw the boy smile. I remember observing that, and here's what I thought, to my shame: *I'm glad he does that so I don't have to.*

That's the way most of us on the team felt, even though we never verbalized it. Except for one guy on my team whose name was Randy. He had a real heart for people. Randy saw the pastor, not as a substitute, but as a model. And by the end of the three days in that town, I remember seeing Randy sitting under a tree with this little boy ravaged with leprosy sitting in his lap. And I saw the little smile once again on the boy's face.

I'd love to tell you that that changed me forever and I came home and I just opened my heart to the plight of hurting and poor people. But that's not true. No, I've been negligent here, personally. So preparing for this sermon this week was a real challenge for me. And I want you to know that I'm preaching to me as I'm preaching to you, as the Holy Spirit challenges all of us through His Word.



This week I read portions of a book by John Stott entitled *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*. And in that great work he had a whole section speaking to the responsibility of the Western Church for the poor of the world—very powerful reading. He says we really think of the poor in three different ways (or at least we should).

We should, first of all, think rationally. We should look at the statistics and we should try to comprehend them. We should realize that a full one-fifth of the world's population does not have the bare necessities of life—food, clothing, and shelter. One-fifth—over 1.5 billion people—don't have those things. We should be aware of the fact that one-fifth of the world's population hoards four-fifths of the world's wealth, most of them living in the West, many of them living in the United States.

We know there are rational statistics that we should believe as Christians, but we shouldn't just look at it rationally, because that can be kind of cold and hard. We should also look at it emotionally. When we see the pictures of the children, when we hear the stories, we should allow them to touch our hearts.

Now, most of us don't let it go there. We're afraid of emotionalism. But it is not emotionalism to hurt when you see someone is hurting. That's called being human. In fact, there's something quite divine about it. Mark 8 says that Jesus saw the multitudes and they were hungry, and He had compassion. He hurt with them.

Now, if all that's involved is our emotions, that's emotionalism. We don't want that. We want to look at it rationally; we want to look at it with our emotions; and of course we want to look at it biblically.

I'm convinced there should be a subtitle under the words "Holy Bible" on the outside of your Bible. The subtitle should be "God reaches out to the poor." We start looking through the pages of Scripture, and every three or four pages, the poor just keep popping up. It's all the way through. From the Pentateuch to the Apocalypse, God's heart and passion for impoverished people is obvious.

We see it described beautifully in Psalm 113. Verse 1 says this: "Praise the Lord." This is a great psalm of praise. He goes on: "Praise Him for this. Praise Him! Praise Him! Praise Him! Praise Him!"

Look at verse 5. We see the specific reason for this praise: "Who is like the LORD our God?" Who is like Yahweh? It's a rhetorical question. He's saying there's no one like this guy. There's no one like this God. There's something distinct and unique about Him. But what is it? He is, the text says, "the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and on the earth[.] He raises the poor from the dust."

Most gods in ancient literature weren't worried about the poor. This one is concerned. And He lifts the needy from the ash heap. Here's what really sets Him apart: "He seats them with princes, with the princes of their people." For example, verse 9: "He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children. Praise the LORD."

You see, it's God's character to champion the poor, to rescue them from their misery. But not just to put a Band-Aid on their problems; to raise them and to make them princes.

God is in the business of taking poor people and making them princes, turning paupers into princes.

If we're going to understand what the Bible has to say about the poor, we need to understand who the poor are. So let's talk first of all this morning about two kinds of poverty that we need to be aware of.

Poverty and treating the poor is a theme—a thread—throughout the whole Old Testament and the New Testament as well. But in the Old Testament there are six Hebrew words that all mean “poor” or “needy” or “in need.” They occur over 200 times, and when you look at all the instances of them and start categorizing them, you find there are two general categories of poor people in the Bible.

The first one is material poverty—people who are poor physically. We're going to put these into two groups as well.

The first is the distressed. The distressed are people who are deprived of the basic necessities of life. They lack food, they lack shelter, or they lack clothing—or they lack all three. There are at least 1.5 billion of them in our world today.

Now, they may be poor because of their own sin. If you read through the book of Proverbs, you'll see tremendous warnings that sins like laziness and gluttony and extravagance can actually lead to someone becoming poor. But those are the exceptions. Generally the Old Testament sees poverty as an involuntary evil that needs to be abolished.

As a result, God laid it on the hearts of the Jewish people to have a real heart for the poor. A good portion of their tithes went toward supplying the poor. The farmers were told, “Hey, make sure you don't glean all the way to the edges of your field. Round them off. And let the poor people come and get the corners for themselves.” “If you are harvesting grapes and you drop some on the ground,” they were instructed, “leave those on the ground, and the poor people will come and pick them up.” Every third year, a full 10 percent of all agricultural produce was given directly to the poor. Every seventh year, the fields were not harvested by the people who owned the fields, and the poor were allowed to come in and harvest all of it for themselves.

Lots of different things in the Old Testament lead us to believe that God really had a heart for these people who simply didn't have enough to survive. Proverbs 19:17 says, “He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD.” God really empathizes with these people. And He will reward him for what he has done. And conversely, Proverbs 21:13 says, “If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.” That's a strong warning. It should give us pause.

The distressed are one category of poor; the second is the oppressed. These are powerless victims of human injustice.

We see this happening even today, don't we? We see terrible film clips on the news of poverty and drought in places like Somalia and Ethiopia. And so our hearts are warmed and we send lots of food over there. Then about three months later we see people are still starving to death, and we say, “What happened to all the food?” The answer is that some

corrupt people in the government caught the food, kept it from getting to the people, sold it on the black market, and made a tidy fortune, and so their people continue to die. It's been happening for centuries. It was happening in biblical times as well. The oppressed.

In Proverbs 31 the writer says this: "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 the needy."

John Stott says, "The perspective of Scripture is not the survival of the fittest, but the protection of the weakest." Can I say that again? "The perspective of Scripture is not the survival of the fittest, but the protection of the weakest." That's God's heart. He wants us to share it with Him.

There's a second large category of poor people in Scripture, and that is the spiritually poor. Spiritual poverty. These are people who are helpless spiritually, and they look to God alone for salvation.

Now, many times it's kind of hard to tell the difference between the physically poor and the spiritually poor in Scripture. The book of Psalms has been called by some people the hymnbook of the helpless. Listen to some examples.

Psalm 25:16-18 says this: "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish. Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins." Here's someone who is probably physically poor and struggling terribly as a result, but this person recognizes his or her spiritual need in the midst of material poverty. This person has nowhere else to turn.

Psalm 22:26 says, "The poor will eat and be satisfied." He's talking here about physical food. Keep reading. "They who seek the LORD will praise him—may your hearts live forever!" He's talking about people who are spiritually impoverished. They seek after the Lord and as a result they are satisfied in their soul.

Psalm 34:6 says, "This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all of his troubles." Verses 17 and 18 say, "The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

The whole idea is that "poor" doesn't necessarily mean you are deprived physically; it means that you are deprived spiritually as well.

Jesus picked up on this theme in Matthew 5 at the beginning of His Sermon on the Mount. His beatitudes start out this way: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The "poor" here are those who hunger after God and after His heart.

So there are two kinds of poverty. The first kind—material poverty—is a social evil that God opposes. The second kind—spiritual poverty—is a spiritual virtue of which He approves. These are two very different kinds of poverty.

One day John the Baptist was having second thoughts about Jesus, wondering if He was really the Messiah or not. John was in prison at the time, so he sent a messenger and asked Jesus, “Are You really the Chosen One?”

Jesus in Matthew 11:4-5 responds this way: “Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight [this is His proof that He’s the Messiah], the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”

Now, what did He mean when He said, “The good news is preached to the poor”? Is He speaking there just about the materially poor people? Well, it can’t be just that, because we know that salvation is offered to everyone; it doesn’t matter what your bank account says. It can’t also just be the spiritual poor, because the whole concept is about people who are needy and are in tremendous physical need. The point is that Jesus always poured his heart out to both—the physically poor *and* the spiritually poor. Jesus was driven to alleviate the suffering of both, and He expects His followers to live life the same way.

John Stott says it this way: “The Church should bear witness to the biblical paradox of poverty, by opposing one kind and encouraging the other. We should set ourselves both to eradicate the evil of material poverty and to cultivate the good of spiritual poverty. We should hate injustice and love humility. It is in these two ways that the Gospel can be said to be ‘good news to the poor.’ ” See, there are two different kinds of poverty.

What Christians tend to do is polarize. Balance is hard for Christians. So what’s happened over the years of history is that there have emerged two different kinds of churches. Let me briefly outline what those are for you. Okay?

The first is the kind that is driven by social needs. These churches are usually labeled liberal churches by people who are theologically conservative. Their focus is not necessarily on preaching the Bible. Their focus is not necessarily on telling people the good news of salvation that they can find in Jesus Christ. Their focus is on the materially poor, on people who just don’t have enough to make it. And as a result, they preach the “social gospel,” as it’s called. They invest enormous amounts of energy ministering to the physical needs of impoverished people. That’s one type of church.

The other type of church is driven by spiritual needs. These will generally be evangelical churches, churches like Bent Tree that are aware of the fact that the Bible teaches categorically that unless you trust Jesus and Jesus alone for salvation, you’ll be separated from God forever. So we invest an enormous amount of time and energy communicating that very important message to people—sometimes at the expense of caring for their physical needs.

Two different kinds of churches on two ends of the spectrum. I’m convinced there needs to be a third kind. And I’m convinced Bent Tree needs to fit into the third category. And that is the church that, like Jesus, poured Himself into both.

Chuck Swindoll agrees with me. He doesn’t know he agrees with me; he hasn’t heard me say that. I read something he wrote that is in agreement with me, and I want to read it to you. He was talking to a guy one day, and he was sharing his heart about poor people, and

the guy looked at him incredulously (he wasn't a believer), and he said, "You're an evangelical and you've got compassion?" He was stunned.

Swindoll said this, "You've even got some compassion, as though it's not supposed to be there? Like if you're committed to the truth of Scripture, you should get that concerned about people stuff? Heartaches, illness, hunger, fractured lives, struggles with insecurities, failures, grief. Because those are only temporal problems, mere horizontal hassles.

"Leave that to the liberals! Our main job is to give 'em the Gospel—get 'em saved. Don't get sidetracked by their pain and their problems! It's conversion we're really interested in, not compassion! Once they're born again and into the Word, all those things will solve themselves!"

Be honest now, isn't that the way it usually is? Isn't it a fact that the more conservative theologically one becomes, the less compassionate? I know there are some exceptions, but we're talking about the general rule, okay?

I want to know why. Why either/or? Why not both-and?

I'd also like to know when. Not just why we can't be theologically conservative and personally compassionate, but *when*? When did we depart from the biblical model? When did we begin to ignore Christ's care for the needy? When did we stop thinking of how valuable it is to be healing agents, wound wrappers, à la the Good Samaritan? When did we opt for placing more emphasis on being proclaimers and defenders and less on becoming repairers and restorers? When did we decide to strengthen our focus on public announcements and weaken our involvement in private assistance? Maybe when we realized that one is much easier than the other.

See, there are two kinds of churches: those that focus on social needs and those that focus on spiritual needs. The problem is that we, as the Church, follow a Savior who focused on both. As a result, we, as his disciples, need to focus on both as well.

But there's a legitimate question, isn't there? A legitimate question that most Western Christians should be asking at this point is "Okay, so what can I do? I mean, the need is so enormous! I mean, I couldn't even begin to put a dent in it. Where are we even supposed to start?"

Well, let me talk about the fact that there are two kinds of Christians. There are two kinds of poverty; there are two kinds of churches; and now third, there are two kinds of Christians. Two different ways to deal with this problem of poverty. Two different ways that those of us in the West grapple with it.

First of all, we have those who sell. These are those who just sell everything they have, give it all away, and that way take care of the problem—they become poor themselves.

Now, some of them will argue biblically for this. They would say, "Look at the disciples. Jesus said, 'Follow me. Leave everything.' And they did! They left everything. They left their business; they left their families; they left everything. They became materially poor to follow Christ."

And they would say, “Look what Jesus said to the rich young ruler. ‘Go away and give away all you have, and then come back and follow me, or else you can’t enter the kingdom.’ ” And they would look at us and say, “See? He expects us to do the same thing.”

I’m not absolutely convinced that He does. Certainly Jesus tells us to store up treasure in heaven. He tells us to beware of coveting. He tells us it’s impossible to serve both God and money at the same time. But I don’t believe He tells all of His followers to give away everything.

Here are a couple of examples. Joseph of Arimathea in one sentence was described as both a disciple of Jesus and a rich man. Obviously not mutually contradictory terms, right? Remember Zaccheus when he became a believer? He was so excited that he decided to give away all his money, right? No. How much did he give away? Half. Meaning he kept half for himself. But Jesus was fine with that.

When Jesus tells us to hate our parents and renounce our wealth, He’s using very powerful language to make a simple point: not that we’re supposed to hate our parents and renounce our wealth, but that we’re supposed to always put Him first before anything else in our life. So I’m not convinced that all of us are supposed to give away everything we have.

Now, God may call some of you to do it. And if He does, God’s blessing on you. My feeling is that not many of you have received that call. Just knowing most of you, I don’t think most of us have received that call.

Which leads us to the second kind of Christian, the one that fills evangelical churches a lot. And that is those who sleep. This isn’t a person who sells it all; this a person who sleeps through it all. Such persons close their eyes to the need, and they just pretend it’s not there.

Now, they’re not doing this because they’re malicious at heart. They’re doing it because it overwhelms them and they don’t know where to start. They put affluent blinders on. These are the blinders that you flip into place when you come up to the stoplight and the homeless person comes over toward your car and starts knocking on the window. Those blinders.

I’m not condemning you; I’m telling you I’m with you putting the blinders on. I struggle with this too.

Listen to what John Stott says. “We cannot maintain a good life of extravagance and a good conscience simultaneously. One or the other has to be sacrificed. Either we keep our good conscience and reduce our affluence, or we keep our affluence and smother our conscience. We have to choose between God and man.” It’s a powerful statement. He’s not telling us that we’re supposed to sell everything, but he’s also saying that it’s not appropriate to sleep through it. What he’s saying is that there has to be a third kind of Christian, and I would agree with him.

A third kind of Christian is someone who simplifies—someone who simplifies life so that he or she can make a difference in the lives of those who are impoverished.

Turn to 1 Timothy 6; I'll spend the rest of our time there.

In 1 Timothy 6:6 the apostle Paul, in instructing his young protégé who is pastoring a church at the time, said, "Here are the things that you need to teach your people." Apparently materialism, commerce, moneymaking were issues that Timothy's church had to deal with. Maybe it was an affluent area—who knows? So, these are some of the things that Paul addresses.

The first thing he says is, "Timothy, teach them to cultivate contentment." It says in verse 6 that "godliness with contentment is great gain." One plus one equals great gain. One: godliness. Two: contentment—the lost word.

To explain, Paul goes on to say, "For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it." One person once said, "Life is a journey from one moment of nakedness to another, so we should travel light and live simply." You take nothing with you; you bring nothing in. We're traveling from one moment of nakedness to the other. It says we travel light and live simply.

Verse 8: "If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." Can that be said of you? Honestly, can you say, "Hey, if I've got food in my stomach and I've got clothes—if I'm covered up—I will be content in the Lord"? Most of us don't live in that statement.

The word "content." It's a word that's just missing out of our vocabulary. We don't think about it.

You've probably heard about the fisherman in the village down in Mexico, sitting on the beach. Just sitting there. It was mid-afternoon. A tourist came up to him and said, "What are you doing just sitting there?"

He said, "Well, I've caught enough fish for the day, so I thought I take the rest of the day off and look at the water."

"What do you mean, you'll take the rest of the day off? You've got another four or five hours of fishing! You should be out there catching more fish!"

He said, "Why?"

"Well, because then you could make more money."

"Well, then what would I do with the money?"

"You could buy a bigger boat!"

"What would I do with a bigger boat?"

"You could go to deeper water."

"What would happen there?"

"You'd get bigger and more fish!"

“Wow! And then what?”

“You make more money!”

“Wooo! Then what happens?”

“Well, then you can set up little fishing businesses up and down the coastline.”

“Well, that would be exciting. And then what happens?”

“Then you make tons of money!”

“Then what happens?”

“Well, then you make enough so that you can retire.”

“And then what happens when I retire?”

“Well, you can go down to Mexico and ... sit on the beach.”

He says, “Which is exactly what I’ve chosen to do with the rest of my day. I don’t need to go through all that to get here.”

Is that the way Americans think? What do you mean, you have *enough* fish? You could get *more!* Since when did “more” become God?

Can we introduce the word “enough” into our bad vocabulary? Can we reintroduce it into our lives? Can we honestly look at our lives and say, “This is *enough*”? If we can do that, and live that, we will find contentment creeping into our hearts, and we won’t even know where it came from. It’s like the guy sitting on the beach, enjoying an afternoon off.

Look what the text says: “People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.” Wow! It’s talking about coveting here—coveting what you don’t have. Coveting and contentment are polar opposites.

Schopenhauer said this: “Gold is like seawater. The more one drinks of it, the thirstier one becomes.”

So, verse 10: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” Please note, as you’ve heard before, *money* isn’t evil, *money* isn’t the root of evil; it’s the *love* of money that is the root of all kinds of evil.

Materialism is not possessing material goods; materialism is an unhealthy obsession with material goods. You could be materialistic and make \$2,000 a year if you’re obsessed with getting more. You could make a million dollars a year and not be remotely materialistic if you’re satisfied with what you’ve got.

“Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” You know some of these folks in North Dallas, don’t you? He says, “Hey, if you want to escape that fate, cultivate contentment. Pray through it. Simplify your life.”

The second thing that he tells Timothy to cultivate in his people is generosity. Now move ahead to verse 17, where it says, “Command [there’s a strong word!] those who are rich in this present world [that would apply to most of us here; it would apply to all of us here by worldwide standards] not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.”

Please note, he doesn’t say, “Tell them to sell everything.” He didn’t say that, did he? He says, “Hey, I’ve provided these things for their enjoyment.” He’s saying, “Hey, if I’ve blessed you materially and financially, enjoy that! Don’t begrudge it. Don’t beat yourself up. Say, “Thank You, Lord! I’m going to enjoy this.” But while you’re enjoying it, realize that it is *not* appropriate to sleep concerning the cause of the impoverished.

He goes on to say this in verse 18: “Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.” Will you underline that whole statement? “Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasures for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”

You want to live the abundant life? You want to take hold of the life that is truly life? You want to experience contentment and joy in this life? Right there is the secret: be rich in good deeds, be generous, and be willing to share.

Bishop John V. Taylor said, “Our enemy is not possessions, but excess. Our battle cry is not nothing, but enough.”

So, how do we achieve contentment and generosity? I think there’s one specific decision we can make that leads to both. That is the decision to simplify our lifestyles. What does that mean? That means that I make a conscious decision to live below the standard of living I can afford so that I might be generous to those who don’t get to make that decision.

Can I say that again? I make a conscious decision to live below the standard of living I can afford so that I might be generous to those who don’t get to make that decision because they have nothing to live on.

This is something that I think Jesus expects us to do. Let me give you the spirit of the text. I’m going to assume that Paul is sending this letter to me, as your pastor, as he did to Timothy, the pastor of that church. And I am going to command you. I’m going to *command* you to be rich in good deeds, to be generous, and to be willing to share. God commands this. Strong words.

There are a thousand different ways you could apply a message like this. I wanted to make sure that you had at least one before you left today. So we’re going to spend the rest of our time, and I’m going to give you a specific application. I’m going to describe it for you

in three different ways, and then I'll give a brief description, and then you'll be off with it. Okay?

I'm going to show you a drama; I'm going to show you a video; and I'm going to share a testimony. In the next 15 minutes you're going to have a feel for a specific application. I call it an "entry-level application." It's a way to get the poor into your life as a first step. And I challenge you to be praying, as you're observing these things, what God would have you do. Let's watch together.

*At this point in the service, a drama was performed that depicted the importance of the sponsorship relationship on both the sponsor and the child. This was followed by a short video from the Compassion Sunday presentation video, and then a church member gave a testimony of what it has meant to her and her family to sponsor a child.*

*People were invited to select a child for sponsorship, as they left the service, at the sign-up tables located in the hallways.*