

From the Pastor's Desk

Hating the Poor but Loving Jesus?

How a society treats its poor reveals its soul. Recently there has developed a mentality of animosity toward the poor, misconceptions about their predicament, and a desire to punish them by curtailing programs that offer assistance. Reasonable reforms to welfare programs are one thing, but massive cuts to programs that so deeply hurt the most vulnerable among us are another. Christianity has always advocated on behalf of the poor particularly when they are being exploited. I ran across an article that addresses this trend and how contradictory it is to the basic teachings of Christianity. It was written by Craig Watts and was posted on the "Red Letter Christians" blog, which contains the concerns of many younger Christians. You can find the link to the article at the end. ~ PB

A popular praise song – among my favorites – pleads, “Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord. I want to see you.” Do we really? Apparently the hearts of many Americans are darkened, making them unable to see. That appears to be the finding of a Princeton University study.

Well, the study actually didn't have to do with hearts and it wasn't expressly about seeing God. It had to do with the working of brains. The study revealed how the poor are seen...or not seen. More precisely, using neuroimaging researchers found that the very poor are viewed with such disdain that they were dehumanized in the eyes of the beholders. Brain activity suggested that the very poor were viewed more like repugnant piles of garbage than as people.

“Americans react to the poor with disgust,” said Susan Fiske, professor of psychology and public affairs at Princeton University and the originator of the neuroimaging tests. She has studied attitudes toward the poor for a dozen years. “It's the most negative prejudice people report, greater even than racism,” Fiske stated.

No doubt part of that response is aesthetic. Some of those who are very poor – especially those living on the streets – smell bad and are unkempt and shabbily dressed. But a deeper part of the response is moral. The poor are stripped of value in the eyes of many. They are seen as useless, and not just useless, but an actual drain on the more productive and affluent members of society. Not only do they fail to add anything positive to the world, they actually subtract value, like trash piled on a lawn.

How can we see God while despising the needy among us? Scripture declares that it is impossible. “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20). Spiritual blindness is the inevitable consequence of hating the poor.

As Zarah Teachey, a formerly homeless woman from Philadelphia who now counsels people in need, said about how most people seemed to view her when she was on the

streets, “You’re looked at like you’re trash. It’s like they think you want nothing out of life. Like you’re not still a person.” Once people are dehumanized, it is easier to ignore their misery and even oppose efforts to help them. Elsewhere scripture tells us that “the rich have many friends. Those who despise their poor neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor” (Proverbs 14:20-21). Yet many have been convinced by the despisers of the poor that kindness toward the less advantaged is counter-productive.

The haters of the poor look at poverty and claim that the moral character of the poor is so deficient that the very programs designed to help them further entrench them in poverty. According to a NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll taken in June of this year, the single most frequently given reason for the continuing problem of poverty was “too much welfare that prevents initiative” (24%). In contrast, only 4% answered that the “lack of government funding” for poverty programs was the major reason for poverty. Somewhat more recognized the “lack of job opportunities” was the culprit (18%). This poll implies that many think the best way to help the poor is by cutting off what is *by far* the major source of help for the poor.

This poll shows the effectiveness of an often repeated Big Lie: government poverty programs are just throwing money into a rat-hole. “We have more poor people now than before the so-called War on Poverty. It was a lost cause,” or so many have asserted. But in terms of percentage of the population it is not true. The U.S. poverty rate was at 21% when the War on Poverty was initiated in 1967. Ten years later it was near 11%. Forces have chipped away at the programs ever since that time. Nevertheless, poverty rates have never climbed back to pre-War on Poverty rates.

The poll also reflects another Big Lie: the poor don’t work hard and don’t want to work. The truth is that most of those who receive food stamps (SNAP) work if they are able. The most reliable source of information states, “Among SNAP households with at least one working-age, non-disabled adult, more than half work while receiving SNAP — and more than 80 percent work in the year prior to or the year after receiving SNAP. The rates are even higher for families with children. (Almost 70 percent of SNAP recipients are not expected to work, primarily because they are children, elderly, or disabled.)”

Not laziness but job loss or being stuck in low paying jobs and the inability to find work with a livable wage are the real problems, *not* the character flaws of the poor. Those who hate the poor refuse to recognize that America is no longer the “land of opportunity” it was at one time. Rather the nation has become both the most unequal among the developed nations and also the rich nation where climbing from poverty to prosperity is the least likely. The poor are generally stuck in poverty or near poverty, not because of a lack of effort, but because of a lack of opportunity.

Some haters of the poor claim that substance abuse is a major cause of poverty. In fact there is little evidence to support such a claim. After reviewing the evidence for widespread substance abuse of those receiving government aid, researchers came to

a conclusion that is not particularly damning: “On every measure we examine, SNAP recipients are only slightly more likely than non-recipients to display substance use disorders.” Yet there are politicians who insist that all who receive aid through SNAP should be tested for drug use, adding both costs and administrative burdens to the program. Claims that government programs that help the poor are plagued with fraud perpetrated by the recipients of aid are just another way to express hate of the poor. In fact there is very little cheating that is done by those benefitting from these programs.

Rather the main fraudsters are those administering or providing services, largely managers and executives, studies show. But those who want to inspire hate for the poor don't draw attention to where the problem actually resides, instead they point to the “welfare queens” and other recipients of help. Over all, the fraud level by whatever means is exceptionally low.

The viciousness of the hatred toward the poor can be seen in the desire of some leading politicians to cut off food aid for those who are unemployed. Billions of dollars a year would be reduced from the budget of SNAP. The most desperate people in America would be hurt the worst by such an action. Yet those who cannot find a job and who do not have children would be limited to three months of food stamps every three years and all waivers would be abolished by the barbarous policy proposal.

Some politicians who identify themselves as Christians claim the only way the poor should be helped is by voluntary contributions. To use tax dollars to help them is “theft” and “using other people's money,” they argue. Oddly, they don't seem to think that using tax dollars for crop subsidies, energy subsidies, surveillance apparatus or weapons systems constitute theft. The hypocrisy is clear.

Scripture asks, “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 John 2:17). Not just as individual Christians do many of us have “the world's goods.” As Christian citizens we “have the world's goods” as well. Withholding help for the poor suggests an absence of God's love, whether we withhold help as individual Christians or as Christian citizens. God is never glorified by withholding aid for those in need. Nor is God glorified only by helping as many of the poor as can be reached through private means and allowing the others to suffer for lack of help. A philosophy which supports such action is just another mask behind which haters of the poor hide.

Jesus was clear in his identification with the hungry, hurting and needy people of the world. How we treat them is how we treat him. Our Lord did not detail *how* the help should be done but simply that it *should be done*. Jesus said, “Just as you did – or did not do – to the least of these, you did – or failed to do – for me” (Matthew 25:31-46). And if we don't see him in the poor and needy and value them, we don't really see him at all.

Taken from: <http://www.redletterchristians.org/hating-poor-loving-jesus/>