

LIFE IN CHRIST



focus
fellowship of catholic
university students



Chapter VII

Works of Mercy

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

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WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The Works of Mercy

Ever since the beginning of Christianity, Christians were known for their care for those in need. In the Roman Empire, it was Christians who often cared for infants who had been left to die of exposure. In the 20th Century, saints, like Mother Teresa, cared for the poor and abandoned that no one else would touch. What is it that drives Christians to care for the poor? And how are we called to care for them as disciples today? Let's look at three parables that reveal Christianity's radical, counter-cultural approach toward those in need.

A Matter of Salvation

There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy upon

me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.’ (Lk 16:19-31)

Pope Benedict XVI stated, “This parable teaches us two lessons: the first is that God loves the poor and comforts their humiliation; the second is that our eternal destiny is conditioned by our attitude [toward them]”¹ Let’s consider each of these two main points.

First, God loves the poor. Think for a moment about what we *don’t* read about in this parable. We don’t hear of Lazarus’ good deeds. We don’t hear about his deep faith or how he suffered patiently and offered his sufferings up to God. All we really know about him is that he was poor and that he suffered. And yet, we read very clearly that because Lazarus suffered “evil things” he is now “comforted.” The point here is clear: God cares for the poor.

We read about God’s concern for the poor repeatedly in the Old Testament (Is 29:19, Prov 14:31, Ps 34:6). Not only this, but He also

¹ Benedict XVI, Angelus, Courtyard of the Papal Residence, Castel Gandolfo, Sunday, 26, September 2010. Accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20100926.html August 8, 2023.

consistently exhorts His people to care for those in need (Deut 15:7, Prov 19:17). This same loving care was exemplified in Jesus' public ministry (Mk 10:21, Lk 4:18). And the Church continues this same mercy as Christ's body in the world (Gal 2:10, Acts 4:34). The word "mercy" in Latin, *miser cordia*, literally means a heart (*cor*) that gives (*dia*) itself to one in misery (*miseri*). Just as a parent has compassion on a suffering child, so too is God's heart moved by the misery of His suffering children.

Here we find a key source for Christian charity: we are called to love what God loves. God is the Father of all and loves His children dearly. He also, in a special way, loves his children who are poor and suffering. Therefore, as Christians we are invited to share in God's unique love for the poor. We are called to love as He loves (see 1 Jn 3:16-17). In the words of the Catechism, "those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a *preferential love* on the part of the Church" (CCC 2448). This leads to the second main point of the parable: our eternal destiny. Think of the Rich Man in the parable. Does the parable say he blasphemed God? Does it say he was a jerk to those around him? Does it say he failed to say his prayers or make his offerings at the temple? We don't know any of that. All we know is that he didn't take the time to consider the suffering of poor Lazarus at his door. And because of that, he is eternally lost.

Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Lk 18:25). As Christians disciples today, especially those of us in developed countries, we ought to take Jesus' words very seriously. We have material wealth that previous generations could only dream of (i.e., central air conditioning, heated and sanitized water, electricity, cars, and the internet and everything that comes with it!). But alongside these riches, have we also developed a "love of money" that St. Paul

says is the “root of all evils” (1 Tim 6:10)? Because the poor have little, their hearts are often disposed to recognize their total dependence upon God and others. As Our Lord said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). Riches, however, can foster the opposite, to hearts that are proud, to an interior disposition that trusts only in oneself—I can provide for myself, I need not ask for anything from anyone. Such an attitude is spiritually perilous because it fails to recognize our utter dependence on God—Why turn to Him? I have everything I need. This parable challenges this attitude and exhorts us not to overlook the eternal ramifications of our use of wealth.

Finally, consider the rich man’s last plea. While in torment, He realizes the seriousness of his situation and desires to spare his brothers the same fate. But when he asks that someone be sent to them, he hears the reply, “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.” In other words, God has already told them, and they still haven’t listened. Even someone rising from the dead is unlikely to change their behavior.

As Christians, these words ought to move our hearts. We believe that Jesus Christ has indeed risen from the dead, but have we heeded His message? Has His resurrection transformed us so deeply that we love the poor and care for those who are suffering? This parable ought to challenge us today, perhaps even more than it did those who heard it 2,000 years ago. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Have we taken to heart His words?

You Did It to Me

Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:41-46)

The call to serve the poor takes on a new significance in the light of Christ. As we read in Jesus' parable above, Christ has taken the incredible step of identifying himself with the poor. This is an astounding development. Not only does Jesus call us to serve the poor for their own sake, He goes even further, teaching us that how we treat the poor is also how we treat Him.

This reality adds a deeper dimension to the Christian understanding of serving the poor. Beyond the mere alleviation of suffering, serving the poor is also an act of devotion. In the words of St. Mother Teresa, "I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself, this is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This one has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him. I serve because I love Jesus."² Because our Lord himself suffered in his earthly life, especially in his Passion and Death, He remains specially united to all those who suffer. In them,

² Miller, Justina. "Mother Teresa: each one of them is Jesus in disguise," Pureflix, accessed March 27, 2019 <https://insider.pureflix.com/news/mother-teresa-each-one-of-them-is-jesus-in-disguise>.

we find God. In the words Pope Francis, “our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation.”³ Indeed, when we encounter the poor, we encounter Christ.

Knowing that it is Christ whom we serve in the poor has enormous consequences for us as disciples. On the one hand, it isn’t enough to simply acknowledge that the poor need our assistance (though they do), as Christians, we actually *need* the poor. As Pope Francis tells us, “We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them.”⁴ Because our encounter with the poor is an encounter with Christ, serving them is transformative. We are changed when we serve the poor.

Not only this, seeing Christ in the poor also moves us to encounter the poor *personally*, to move beyond our own comfort and preferences to meet those in need. While it is certainly good to give money to charities and support just social structures in the economic and political realms, the Christian call to serve the poor requires that we become personally involved in their lives. It isn’t enough to simply wish them well from a distance. If we never meet the poor, if we never see them face to face, then we will never truly encounter Christ in them. Again, Pope Francis says, “We must learn how to be with the poor, to share with those who lack basic necessities, to touch the flesh of Christ! The Christian is not one who speaks about the poor, no! He is one who encounters them, who looks them in the eye, who touches them.”⁵ The poor are

³ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 179, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, June 9, 2023.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 198, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, June 9, 2023.

⁵ Pope Francis, Meeting with the Poor Assisted by Caritas, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/october/documents/papa-francesco_20131004_poveri-assisi.html, June 9, 2023.

not problems to be solved or tasks to be checked off our to-do lists, but brothers and sisters to be loved.

Furthermore, the Church also cautions us against reducing service to the poor to mere political and economic activism. Pope Benedict XVI stated it this way,

There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such. There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness.... The State which would provide everything, absorbing everything into itself, would ultimately become a mere bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing which the suffering person—every person—needs: namely, loving personal concern.⁶

This is not to say that we are not also called to influence the social structures that impact poverty today—we certainly are. The Church has a rich social doctrine, which continually calls us to work for justice for those in need.⁷ As Christians, we are called to both: to encountering the poor among us directly and to working to build a society that enables human flourishing.

An additional point is worth making clear: Christian discipleship *requires* serving the poor. Pope Benedict XVI wrote, “The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.”⁸ We might be tempted to think that

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, par. 28b, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html, June 9, 2023.

⁷ For more on the social doctrine of the Church, please see the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, par. 22, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html, June 9, 2023.

serving the poor is for *some* people, but not *everyone*. We might think that we are living a faithful Christian life so long as we are praying and going to Mass on Sundays. But serving the poor is not an optional add-on to the Christian life. If we neglect this essential task then our faith is, as St. James tells us, “dead” (Jas 2:17). The love of God is inseparable from the love of neighbor (1 Jn 4:20).

Who is My Neighbor?

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live.” But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed mercy on him.” And Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Lk 10:25-37)

A question that might come to our minds is “How am I supposed to serve the poor?” The parable of the Good Samaritan can help guide us in answering this question. Let’s consider a few elements of this incredible parable to discover how we are called to care for the poor. One of the first things that stands out about this parable is its context. Jesus tells a scholar of the law that to inherit eternal life, he must fulfill the two great commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. However, the Scriptures tell us that the lawyer desired to “justify himself” (v. 29). In other words, perhaps this man wanted “off-the-hook” so to speak, hoping that Jesus would narrowly define “neighbor” to exclude some people.

Jesus, however, does exactly the opposite. He tells a parable wherein a Samaritan, one of the enemies of the Jewish people, is the hero. This is not lost on the lawyer. After the parable, Jesus asks him who proved to be neighbor and he is unable even to say the words, “the Samaritan.” He opts instead for a description—“the one who showed mercy.” We ought not miss how scandalous Jesus’ message must have seemed to His Jewish audience: Who is my neighbor? Who am I called to love? Everyone, even the Samaritans. This is Jesus’ point: everyone is our neighbor, even our enemies (see Mt 5:43-48).

In fact, Jesus’ answer flips the lawyer’s original question on its head. Instead of telling the lawyer *who* his neighbor is, Jesus actually asks him which of the three “*proved neighbor*” (v. 36, emphasis added). He makes “being neighbor” something active. While everyone is our neighbor, more importantly we are called “to be neighbor,” to be people who have mercy on others, who give their hearts away to those in misery. While we should ask “Who is my neighbor?” We should also contemplate, “Who am I called to be neighbor to?”—who in my life, in my community, in my sphere of influence is poor, lonely, in need of

mercy? Even more important than identifying *who* is a neighbor is a heart that is ready to *be* a neighbor.

A second aspect of the parable that stands out is that the Good Samaritan notices the other man's suffering. Too often today, we can get absorbed in our own pursuits. Like the priest and the Levite, we can be inattentive to the needs of those around us. Pope Francis speaks firmly about this problem,

We need to acknowledge that we are constantly tempted to ignore others, especially the weak...We have become accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, ignoring situations until they affect us directly.... What is more, caught up as we are with our own needs, the sight of a person who is suffering disturbs us. It makes us uneasy, since we have no time to waste on other people's problems.⁹

As Jesus' disciples today, we must be attentive to the needs of the poor around us. We don't have to go all over the world, searching for the poor, either. Mother Teresa said,

Find your own Calcutta. Find the sick, the suffering, and the lonely, right where you are — in your own homes and in your own families, in homes and in your workplaces and in your schools. You can find Calcutta all over the world, if you have eyes to see. Everywhere, wherever you go, you find people who are unwanted, unloved, uncared for, just rejected by society — completely forgotten, completely left alone.¹⁰

⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, pars. 64-65, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html June 9, 2023.

¹⁰ Murdock, William. *Find Your Own Calcutta: Living a Life of Service and Meaning in a Selfish World*. Bloomington, IN: Westbow Press, 2017. 2.

Furthermore, as we can see, Mother Teresa certainly invites us to attend to people experiencing material poverty, but she also invites us to address spiritual poverty. Pope Francis even goes so far as to say that the “worst discrimination the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care.”¹¹ Thus, the Church has always invited Christians to be attentive to both the *corporal* and the *spiritual* works of mercy, to care for peoples’ bodies as well as their souls.¹² The people around us have so many needs, we simply need to open our eyes and our hearts to see their poverty. Again, Mother Teresa observed this clearly,

*The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty — it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There’s a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.*¹³

Cardinal Ratzinger observed something similar: “The deepest poverty is the inability of joy, the tediousness of a life considered absurd and contradictory. This poverty is widespread today, in very different forms in the materially rich as well as the poor countries”.¹⁴

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 200, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, June 9, 2023.

¹² “The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead” (CCC 2447).

¹³ Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path*, Compiled by Lucinda Vardey, Ballantine Books: New York, 1995.

¹⁴ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “The New Evangelization: Building the Civilization of Love,” Address to Catechists and Religion Teachers, Jubilee of Catechists (December 12, 2000).

Turning back to the parable of the Good Samaritan, we observe one final aspect of loving our neighbor: a willingness to make sacrifices. Consider the many sacrifices the Good Samaritan makes to care for this man in need: his time, his money, and his personal attention. Caring for the poor isn't necessarily easy. It often has a cost. The Good Samaritan was willing to make those sacrifices. The question is: Are we willing to do the same? Will we use our money, our time, our energy and effort to care for the poor around us? Or will we simply pass by on the other side of the road?

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: Luke 16:19-31, Matthew 25:41-46, Luke 10:25-37

Introduction

1. Launching Question: If there was one need of the world that you could meet, which would it be and why?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Last time we unpacked how the “Our Father” is the perfect prayer. Today, we’re going to continue our conversation about the essential habits of Christian disciples. Specifically, we’ll explore the works of mercy. Ever since the beginning of Christianity, Christians were known for their care for those in need. What is it that drives Christians to care for the poor? And how are we called to care for them as disciples today? Let’s look at three parables that reveal Christianity’s radical, counter-cultural approach toward serving those in need.

A Matter of Salvation

Read Luke 16:19-31

Please read aloud: Pope Benedict XVI stated, “This parable teaches us two lessons: the first is that God loves the poor and comforts their humiliation; the second is that our eternal destiny is conditioned by our attitude [toward them]”¹ Let’s consider each of these two main points.

2. What do we learn about why Lazarus is saved? What, if anything, seems to be missing? Do we hear of his virtues or religious practices?

Answer: We don’t hear of Lazarus’ good deeds. We don’t hear about his faith in God or how he suffered patiently and offered his sufferings up to God. All we really know about him is that he was poor and that he suffered. And yet, we read very clearly that because Lazarus suffered “evil things” he is now “comforted.”

3. God cares for those in need, he comforts the afflicted. How do we see God’s care for the poor shown in Scripture? And what does this mean for us as His followers?

Answer: We read about God’s concern for the poor repeatedly in the Old Testament, for example in his provident care of the Hebrews while they suffered enslavement under Pharaoh (see leader’s guide for additional Scriptural passages). This same love was exemplified in Jesus’ public ministry, for example his care for the sick and dying such as the Widow at Nain or the hemorrhaging woman (see leader’s guide for additional passages).

¹ Benedict XVI, Angelus, Courtyard of the Papal Residence, Castel Gandolfo, Sunday, 26, September 2010. Accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20100926.html August 8, 2023.

Here we find a key source for Christian charity: we are called to love what God loves. God is the Father of all and loves His children dearly. He also, in a special way, loves his children who are poor and suffering. Therefore, as Christians we are invited to share in God's unique love for the poor. We are called to love as He loves (see 1 Jn 3:16-17). In the words of the Catechism, "those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a preferential love on the part of the Church" (CCC 2448).

Please read aloud: God's care for those in need can be given another name: mercy. The word "mercy" in Latin, *misericordia*, literally means a heart (*cor*) that gives (*dia*) itself to one in misery (*miseri*). Just as a parent has compassion on a suffering child and happily serves to alleviate the suffering, so too does our heavenly Father look with great mercy upon the poor and needy.

4. What do you think of when you hear this definition of mercy, a heart which gives itself to one in misery? Have you ever experienced this kind of love? What was that like?

Allow the group to discuss.

5. Have you ever witnessed immense faith in someone who has had a very hard life or has suffered much? Why might the experience of poverty lead to faith in God? How does your experience of poverty influence the way you approach God?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: The experience of poverty can awaken a need for God and a reliance upon him. Those who take on that disposition and live from

a place of reliance on providence often have the richest, strongest faiths, even in the face of immense loss, suffering, or hardship.

Please read aloud: God cares for those in need and has mercy on them: he gives his heart to those in misery. This is the first point Pope Benedict was making: “God loves the poor and comforts them in their humiliation.” Let’s turn to his second point: “Our eternal destiny is conditioned by our attitude toward them.” In other words, our eternal life with God hinges on the disposition we have towards the poor. Let’s unpack this together.

6. Jesus warns elsewhere in Luke’s Gospel that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Lk 18:25). We see this to be true for the rich man in this parable. Why might riches be an obstacle to salvation? What disposition of heart might threaten the eternal destiny of those who possess riches?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: With riches comes the danger of cultivating of an interior belief that we can get by in life by being self-reliant – we have enough, we can provide for ourselves, we need not ask for help or seek to receive anything from anyone. St. Paul says, “The love of money is the root of all evils” (1 Tim 6:10). If we love money, we are easily tempted into believing that it alone will protect us, secure our future, and in a real way, save us from all harm. If we believe ourselves and our resources capable of providing for our own needs, we risk elevating ourselves (and our means) to a role that only God can truly claim: He alone is our protector, provider, and savior.

7. Now, looking back at the story, does the parable reveal any wicked deeds of the rich man? Why does it appear he was damned?
Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Does the parable say he blasphemed God? Does it say he was a jerk to those around him? Does it say he didn't say his prayers or make his offerings at the temple? We don't know any of that. All we know is that he didn't take the time to consider the suffering of poor Lazarus at his door. And because of that, he is eternally lost.

Please read aloud: As Christians disciples, we ought to take Jesus' words very seriously. In fact, this seems to be the key point of the parable. We are saved or lost based on our willingness to minister to the suffering of the poor around us.

8. How would you describe your current attitude toward those in need? How does this parable challenge your attitude?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Now, we've considered, one, that God loves the poor, including how poverty and riches can impact our attitude toward God, and, two, that serving the poor is a matter of salvation. But why, exactly, does service to the poor matter so much for our eternal destiny? Let's see what Jesus tells us about this in another parable.

You Did It to Me

Read Matthew 25:41-46

9. Jesus identifies himself with the poor. How does this shed light on the connection between serving the poor and our salvation?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Not only does Jesus call us to serve the poor for their own sake, He goes even further, teaching us that how we treat the poor is also how we treat Him. This reality adds a deeper dimension to the Christian understanding of serving the poor. Beyond the mere alleviation suffering, serving the poor also becomes an act of devotion to God.

In the words Pope Francis, “our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation.” When we encounter the poor, we encounter Christ. Because our Lord himself suffered in his earthly life, especially in his Passion and Death, his heart remains specially united to all those who suffer as well. In those who suffer, we find the heart of God. In serving the suffering and poor, we bring consolation to the heart of Jesus.

10. Do you serve the poor? Why must Christian disciples be interacting with, serving, and encountering the poor in a personal way?

Allow the group to discuss.

*Answer: While it is certainly good to give money to charities and support just social structures in the economic and political realms, the Christian call to serve the poor requires that we become **personally involved in their lives**. It isn't enough to simply wish them well from a distance. If we never meet the poor, if we never see them face to face, then we will never truly encounter Christ in them. The poor are*

not problems to be solved or tasks to be checked off our to-do lists, but brothers and sisters to be loved.

*An additional point is worth making clear: **Christian discipleship requires serving the poor.** We might be tempted to think that serving the poor is for some people, but not everyone. We might think that we are living a faithful Christian life so long as we are praying and going to Mass on Sundays. But serving the poor is not an optional add-on to the Christian life. If we neglect this essential task then our faith is, as St. James tells us, “dead” (Jm 2:17). The love of God is inseparable from the love of neighbor (1 Jn 4:20).*

Please read aloud: We have many good reasons to serve the poor. God loves the poor, it is a matter of our eternal destiny, Christ himself is in the poor! So how do we identify who it is we ought to serve and how are we supposed to serve them? Let’s dive into one last parable to answer these questions.

Who is My Neighbor?

Read Luke 10:25-37

11. This parable is well-known and puts on display a man of great generosity who cares abundantly for those around him, even at his own cost and inconvenience. Let’s begin our discussion with Jesus’ question at the end of the parable. Because He actually flips the original question on its head and asks who *proved to be neighbor* to the man in need. In this parable, Jesus is inviting us to “be neighbors” to others. What does it mean to “be neighbor”?

Answer: In his question, Jesus makes “being neighbor” something active. It is important to recognize that what it means “to be neighbor”

is to be one who has mercy on others, who gives their heart away to those in misery. While we should ask "Who is my neighbor?" we should also contemplate, "Who am I called to be neighbor to?" -- who in my life, in my community, in my sphere of influence is poor, in need of generosity, in need of mercy? What shall I do to serve them? How am I neighbor?

Please read aloud: We are called to take on the role of neighbor in an active way. But the context of this parable also unlocks another important fact. Jesus tells this scholar of the law that to inherit eternal life, he must fulfill the two great commandments: the love of God and the love of neighbor. However, the Scriptures tell us that the lawyer desired to "justify himself" when he asks "Who is my neighbor?" (v. 29). In other words, perhaps this man wanted "off-the-hook", so to speak, hoping that Jesus would narrowly define "neighbor" and exclude some groups of people he wouldn't have to serve.

12. We often hear in Scripture of the mutual animosity between Jews and Samaritans. The scholar questioning Jesus is a Jew and the hero of this story is a Samaritan. How does the scholar answer Jesus' question about who proved to be neighbor? What might his wording reveal about his disposition of his heart towards Samaritans?

Answer: After the parable, Jesus asks him who proved to be neighbor and he is unable even to say the words, "the Samaritan." He opts instead for a simple description — "the one who showed mercy." His hardness of heart towards the people he perceives as enemies becomes clear.

13. How does Jesus' answer, the parable of the Good Samaritan, challenge the hardness of heart of his listeners, especially the scholar questioning him?

Answer: We ought not miss how scandalous Jesus' message must have seemed to His Jewish audience: Who is my neighbor? Who am I called to love? Even our enemies, the Samaritans. This is Jesus' point: everyone is our neighbor—even those we most detest, even our enemies (see Mt 5:43-48).

14. Now let's turn to the Good Samaritan himself. What do you notice about his actions? In what ways does he serve the man in need? And what might his actions teach us?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: The Good Samaritan notices the other man's suffering. He was attentive to his needs. He also had compassion on him (see above on the meaning of compassion). Additionally, He went to great lengths to care for his needs, giving of his time, his money, and his personal attention. This teaches us that we need to be attentive to the needs of the poor, have hearts of compassion toward them, and make real sacrifices to meet their needs.

15. What can keep you today from noticing the needs of others and serving them? Who are neighbors you can begin serving in your immediate community? What kinds of needs can you begin attending to?

Allow the group to discuss.

16. (Optional) Our communities have a variety of needs, but we could say that their spiritual needs are the direst. Mother Teresa said,

The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty — it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There's a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.²

Similarly, Pope Francis writes that the “worst discrimination the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care.”³ Have you taken time to consider the spiritual poverty of your community? What would it take to begin serving the spiritually poor around you? What would that look like?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Thus, the Church has always invited Christians to be attentive to both the corporal and the spiritual works of mercy, to care for peoples' bodies as well as their souls.⁴ The people around us have so many needs, we simply need to open our eyes and our hearts to be attentive to their poverty.

² Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path*, Compiled by Lucinda Vardey, Ballatine Books: New York, 1995.

³ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 200, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazi-one-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, June 9, 2023.

⁴ “The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead” (CCC 2447).

