

THE ROLE OF THE RIGHTEOUS WEALTHY

an essay for members of short-term teams



by Alan Pieratt, PhD, MNM

Welcome!

If you are reading this, then you have joined one of Children's Relief International's (CRI) short-term mission teams. We are pleased that you have chosen to serve with us! I have written this essay to help you prepare for the trip and tell you a little more about us.

Our motto at CRI is: **We are passionate about serving Christ by helping his weakest children.** The words and phrases from this motto were carefully chosen to express who we are or, at least, who we aspire to be. In choosing to serve with us on a short-term team, you become, for a time, part of our organization. To that extent, these words apply to you as well. I am going to use them as the themes for each section of this essay. Let's start with the word We.

We

We aspire to be the righteous wealthy.

Some of you may recognize the phrase, "Rich Christians in a world of hunger." It comes from Ron Sider's 1970s bestselling book by the same name. Rich Christians? Yes. To the poor at our projects worldwide, we are amazingly wealthy. We live in multi-room houses and get around in comfortable cars. We have hot running water, dependable electricity, beds and mattresses, roofs that don't leak, medical care when we need it, and a retirement plan for when we grow old. We never go hungry. While in-country, at-work at our projects, we will be served by maids and protected by gates and guards. We are the wealthy, if not in our own eyes, certainly in theirs.

At the same time, the most important thing about us is not our wealth. It is that we are Christians. God has accepted us as followers of Jesus Christ. We are His! As bearers of His name, we represent Him in all that we do. We are both rich and Christian, doubly blessed by God. We at CRI believe that we can build upon this double blessing by taking on the role of the righteous wealthy.¹ How do we do that? We do it by being considerate. We do it by being humble, and we do it by being willing to share what we have.

The Bible provides us with examples of men and women who lived before us as the righteous wealthy. Abraham, for example, was very wealthy. Yet, once he arrived in Canaan at the behest of God's calling, he lived in tents for the rest of his life and used his wealth to help and protect those who came with him (Gen. 14). Late in life, King David put much of his personal wealth into building the first temple. He did so in a way that was characteristically wholehearted and joyful (1 Chron. 29:9). The farmer, Boaz, used his wealth to raise a kinswoman out of poverty at no small cost and risk to himself (Ruth 2-4). Job, a man whose name is synonymous with adversity, understood himself to be personally responsible for the poor who came within his view. In his lengthy defense of himself before his friends, he said this about his life before calamity struck:

"I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him. The man who was dying blessed me; I made the widow's heart sing...I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a

¹ Jonathan Bonk. *Missions and money. Affluence as a missionary problem...Revisited.* Rev. ed. Orbis. 2006.

father to the needy; I took up the case of the stranger. Have I not wept for the one whose life is hard? Was not my soul grieved for the needy?...If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary, if I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the fatherless - but from my youth I reared him as would a father, and from my birth I guided the widow" (Job 29:12-16, 30:25; 31:16-22).

I made the widow's heart sing. What a remarkable thing to be able to say! Would you like to be able to say that about yourself? The role of the righteous wealthy is yours for the taking.

Generous compassion is counterintuitive for most of us. It feels like we have worked hard for what we have. Therefore, our money and possessions should be ours to do with as we please. But that's not the biblical point of view. From the vantage point of the Bible, we are stewards, not owners. Jesus said, *"Freely you have received; freely give"* (Matt. 10:8). Paul echoed, *"For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either"* (1 Tim. 6:7). The wise man or woman will view their life from this perspective, holding onto her possessions lightly, sharing them freely where there is need.

Every once in a while, we have a short-term team member who returns home and begins an outpouring of goodwill and generosity. One, whom I've come to know well since his visit to our project, has touched the lives of literally hundreds of people there. You will soon have the opportunity to do the same. The AIDS epidemic is so vast at our African projects that you can meet more widows at one in a day than you will encounter for the rest of your life in the USA. We are rich Christians in a world of hunger. We are the righteous wealthy. At least, we aspire to so be.

Are Passionate About

Our sense of responsibility drives our passion for service.

Three different times in Luke's Gospel, crowds listening to John the Baptist ended by asking, *"What ought we to do?"* (Luke 3:10, 12, 14). Before hearing John speak, they had not known their souls were in danger. Suddenly, they realized the truth; they were responsible for all sorts of things about which they had been unaware. Now, they asked, what should they do? In every case, the answer from John or Jesus involved how they should spend their money or earn their living. We are like those crowds in that we, too, have been awakened to a sense of responsibility, and that awakening has brought a passion for service.

Zacchaeus, the wealthy tax collector, is another example. He spent a lifetime accumulating a fortune but, in one dramatic moment, gave most of it away. Luke records the decisive encounter that totally changed his perspective on possessions.

"And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house.' And he hurried and came down, and received Him gladly...And Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, 'Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.' And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham'" (Luke 19:1-9).

Half of his possessions to the poor?! Jesus once said it was easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy man to be saved. Zacchaeus was one of the fortunate rich who got through the needle's eye by suddenly unburdening himself of his wealth.

Is it possible that, in God's eyes, you and I are responsible for things concerning which we are unaware? I once received a ticket for an infraction. I did not know I had broken a law. That didn't prevent me having to pay the fine. Early in the Bible, God asks Cain about his missing brother. The brief dialogue goes like this. God: *"Where is your brother?"* Cain: *"I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"* (Gen 4:9). For what are we responsible? Our next-door neighbor? A remote villager in distant Africa? Jesus answered this question with the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). You know the story. A foreigner (the Samaritan) goes out of his way to help a total stranger. Jesus seems to say that our responsibility is limited only by our brother's need.

The Good Samaritan isn't the only place Jesus made this point. He returns to the same thought in His description of the Day of Judgment. There, a large group of people ("the goats") discover rather too late that they had responsibilities they had not fulfilled. Here is an excerpt from that passage.

"But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say...to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been 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; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.' Then they themselves also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?' Then He will answer them, saying, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life'" (Matt 25:31-46).

Every time I read this, it leaves me a little uneasy. Could I find myself among those who call out Lord, Lord, but hear in return, I never knew you? Maybe that's just the question Jesus intended us to ask when we hear this parable.

We may discover that we bear a responsibility for the poor and needy of our time that goes far beyond what we realized. You are going to see with your own eyes some of the poor at our projects. You will learn their names, meet their children, and perhaps be invited into the small huts they call home. Having seen their extreme need up close, what then ought we to do? This trip may ignite in you a sense of responsibility you did not have before and a passion to serve Christ by helping His weakest children.

Serving Christ

Christ comes first.

In our motto, serving Christ comes first and helping His weakest children comes afterward. This is not by accident. We respect efforts by any person or organization to help the poor. But our work at CRI originates in Christ's calling to service. In John, Jesus said to His disciples, *"Where I am, my servant also will be"* (John 12:26). By both word and deed, Jesus made it abundantly clear that He is among the poor. As servants who follow His calling, we, too, must find our work among the poor.

To have such a calling—to serve Christ by helping His weakest children—feels as if we have found the buried pearl spoken of in Matthew 13.

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it” (Matt 13:45-46).

The pearl, of course, is Christ Himself and finding Him in serving the poor is worth all that we have. Above, I quoted Christ’s description of the Day of Judgment and His dismissal of the goats. Let’s return to that passage now and look at His reception of the sheep.

“Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’ Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me’” (Matt. 25:34-45).

You did it to me! Somehow, service to the poorest and weakest of God’s children is service to Christ Himself. As we serve them, we serve Him. No one knows how this can be, but it is a wonderful promise of a mysterious encounter with Him in the person of the poor.

Putting Christ first in all that we do means that our work is deliberately holistic. As the African director of our Mozambican project once said, “In our community there is no boundary between the spiritual and the material. Ours is a holistic worldview. So let us bring Jesus into the whole of life.”

This has a more practical side to it than you might think because stubborn poverty is always tied up with false worldviews and harmful beliefs. Let me give just a couple examples of how what a person believes can bring poverty of spirit, mind, and body.²

- The poor believe that their poverty is permanent and unchangeable because it was ordained by God that they would live poor and needy.
- The poor believe that since it is their lot in life to be poor, the future is closed so there is no reason to risk anything, show initiative, or plan for change.
- The poor believe that good things are only for the rich. They believe that all that is good in life exists only in small quantities and there is no way within their power to increase the amount of good things so that they may share in them.
- The poor believe that the world is irrational because it is controlled by capricious gods and goddesses who demand obedience. They live in fear of this unseen spiritual world, full of evil eyes, curses, gods, demons, and ancestral spirits.

² Myers, Braynt. (2004). *Walking with the poor. Principles and practices of transformational development.* Monrovia, CA: World Vision

Our Christian beliefs counter these false views. The meaning of Christ's life and work is that we have so much value in God's eyes that it warranted the suffering and death of God's own son for our redemption. This means there is no divine predestination to poverty, nor do spirits and gods have control over them. The message of Christ is wonderfully liberating, and it gives the poor a new sense of direction and purpose. Aid that does not address this level of being human is unlikely to ever be effective.

We serve Christ by making Him the basis not just of our beliefs but of our work as well. The most effective aid, the only kind of aid that we offer, puts Christ first.

By Helping

We deliver aid with an attitude.

That attitude is one of humility, for we have nothing that was not first given to us. At first glance, it seems that anyone who claims to be humble must be filled with pride. But I am referring to a certain kind of humility, the kind that Moses commanded in his Law. He required that each year everyone bring an offering to the Temple. As it was given to the priest, they were to remind themselves in a formal confession that they would still be slaves if God had not freed them from Egypt (Deut 15:15). *"You should remember this,"* Moses said, *"and in remembering you shall humble your soul"* (Lev. 16:29).

Beginning with Moses, the Bible presents humility as an attitude that comes from the realization of our dependence on God. It makes us realize that there, but for the grace of God, go I. Statistically, it is much more likely that I would have been born into a poor and illiterate family than be the person I am, a middle class American. God has made me as I am and given me the wealth and opportunities that I have.

Humility then is based on realizing who we really are. In humility, self-understanding approaches the truth. Mother Teresa once wrote, "If you are humble, nothing will touch you...because you know what you are."³ That is the way Paul understood it. He returns to this point time and again in his writings.

"Put on a heart of humility" (Col. 3:12).

"Associate with the lowly" (Rom. 12:16).

"Walk with humility" (Eph. 4:1-2).

"Regard others as more important than ourselves" (Phil. 2:3).

I have seen extraordinary displays of humility from some of our short-term team members. I remember one woman who spent an afternoon at our AIDS hospice in Mozambique. Most of the patients there are close to death, and it is not an easy place to be. To Americans, the room looks dark, dank, and dreary. Nevertheless, this young mother knelt down on the cement floor by each bed—some of the patients were actually on the floor as there weren't enough beds—laid her hands on the person, and prayed for him or her. This act of humility left a tremendous impression on everyone in the room.

At CRI, the aspiration of humility is the basis of our partnership with native leaders. The most repeated criticism of international aid, whether it is Christian or secular, is that it is elitist. Most of the time, the poor

³ Conroy, Susan. *Praying in the presence of our Lord with Mother Teresa*. Self-published, 2005. p. 46.

are not included in the planning, execution, or evaluation of the help they receive. As one Senegalese commented after a massive World Bank project was completed, “They do not know that there are living people here.”⁴ The result is that the aid seldom makes a lasting difference in the community where it was given. At CRI, we choose to use indigenous leaders, people who are native to the communities, to lead our projects. You will get to meet our international partners: Jeronimo, Noemia, Edmundo, Helena, Manuel, Isaiah, Ananth, and others. We work with them, following their vision, their hopes, and their methods. We think you will find that they have produced some extraordinary results.

We use other strategies to help the poor as well. We work with children first, though not to the exclusion of other types of ministry. We begin with compassion and build sustainability on it. We place an emphasis on education because we believe it is the only way for an individual to become a sustainable adult. He or she must earn a livelihood and come to a point where they can choose Christ for themselves. You will see for yourself how far aid can go when it is delivered with an attitude of humility.

Weakest Children

We help the fragile, the flawed, and the oppressed poor.

We help God’s weakest children at our projects, the poorest of the poor. Only 15 to 20% of international aid goes to the poorest sector, those who make \$1 (USD) a day or less.⁵ In most places, that means widows and orphans. In South Asia, for example, we have a home for children who face discrimination because their family members once belonged to the untouchable caste. In Mozambique, our Project Life program assists widows with HIV, many of whom have passed on the disease to their children.

You have probably heard the statistic that something like a billion people go to bed hungry at night. You are going to meet some of them and see what their world is like. For them, much of what is good in life, including health, honor, land, respect, status, and safety, exist only in small quantities and short supply. More often than not, the very poor are women. Women perform two-thirds of the world’s work but earn only one-tenth of the world’s income and own less than one one-hundredth of the world’s property.⁶ On \$1 a day, the margin separating them from catastrophe is thin. It is as if they are standing in water up to their chin. One wave—a family illness, a poor crop, even the loss of a few chickens—could overcome them.⁷

What would it be like for you and I to live on \$1 a day? It would mean that we have 99% less money to spend. On that salary, a gallon of milk would cost the equivalent of \$350. Steaks for a family of four from a grocery store would cost the equivalent of \$2,000. Cable television would run about \$5,000 a month. At these prices, we would have to do without all of these. Our spending would drop down to almost nothing because our income would be hovering just above zero.

4 Hancock, Graham. (1989). *Lords of poverty. The power, prestige, and corruption of the international aid business*. London: Macmillan. p. 125.

5 Malhotra, Kamal. (2000). *NGOs without aid: behind the global soup kitchen*. Third World Quarterly, 21 (4), 655-668. Retrieved on February 24, 2006 from the EBSCO Host of Regis University Library. 662.

6 Myers, 2004, p. 65.

7 This example is from a brochure by the Christian Reformed Church.

A clever thought experiment written by an economist helps put us in the shoes of the deeply poor.⁸ Let's assume that you woke up tomorrow and had to live the rest of your life on an income of \$30 per month. What would your house and home look like?

You would begin by stripping your house of all furniture. Everything goes: beds, chairs, tables, TV, lamps, cupboards. You leave only a few old blankets and a wooden chair. You have no bed. You sleep on a reed mat on the ground. During a hard rain, you may have to stand all night long to avoid getting wet because of all the leaks in your roof. All the clothes go too, except for our oldest suit or dress, plus an extra shirt or blouse. Only one pair of shoes can stay, and that's for the head of the house, no shoes for the wife or kids. Next, you dismantle the bathroom, shut off the running water, strip out the electric wires. While you're at it, the house must go entirely. You move into the tool shed in the backyard.

No more papers, magazines, or books. They are not that missed since only one member of the family can read at all. We will allow a small radio to remain. Government services go next. No more postmen or firemen. The nearest medical center is 10 miles away and has only a midwife.

Your cars? They go too, and the only thing that's left behind is one bicycle for the whole family, and even that is a luxury. Now the food. The makeshift cupboard in your tool shed holds a small bag of grain of some kind, perhaps rice, some sugar and salt, a couple moldy potatoes, and a couple overripe mangoes. A small box of matches is there. But everything else is gone. Meat, vegetables, canned goods, crackers, candy, milk...

Finally, money. Your \$1 in income is spent as fast as it comes in. You have a cash savings of \$5 hidden under a mat.

I don't want to live like that. You don't want to live like that either. But many people do.

What does the Bible say about the poor? It sees them as real people and calls them by specific names: the orphan, widow, pauper, beggar, hungry, crushed, oppressed, exploited, and imprisoned. How did they come to be that way? The Bible has three answers to that question.

First, the Bible recognizes the fragile poor.⁹ These are people who have suffered a calamity, such as a woman who has lost her husband or an orphan who has lost her parents. It includes people who are constitutionally weak or dependent, such as the blind, deaf, lame, chronically sick, or mentally limited. It includes the foreigner and the immigrant who have to start over in life. Most of all, it includes children. The children of families who make only \$1 a day almost always suffer from hunger and its side effects—parasites, scabies, stunted mental development, and so on. Their swollen stomachs and spindly arms are a sure sign that things are not well with them.

⁸ Adapted from Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, W. Publishing Group, 1997. p. 1. Citing Robert Heilbroner, *The great ascent: the struggle for economic development in our time*. Harper & Row, 1963, p. 33.

⁹ See the discussions of the vocabulary of poverty in Hoppe, Leslie. (2004). *There shall be no poor among you. Poverty in the Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. And in Grigg, Viv. *Companion to the poor. Christ in the urban slums*. MARC, Rev. Ed., 1990

The fragile poor become that way by factors as diverse as poor geography, bad weather (drought, flooding, severe winters), poor soil, infectious diseases, and so forth. Some years ago, I encountered a young lady who was begging outside of a Mozambican hospital. She was only 20 years old but looked much older. She was dying of AIDS. Her skin was pockmarked and her knees so swollen she could not walk without a cane. Her family had already died of the disease, and she was looking for some place that would care for her in her last weeks. She was truly one of the fragile poor.

The Christian response to the fragile poor is compassionate aid that lifts them out of their immediate struggles. In the Bible, Job provides an example of someone who looked out for the fragile poor: *“I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy”* (Job 29:15-16).

We see plenty of the fragile poor at our projects. We have over 300 widows in our Project Life program in Mozambique alone. Most of them have AIDS. Many of them have young children with AIDS. It is difficult to imagine a more hopeless group of human beings. In South Asia, many of the orphans we have in our Mudpaths Rescue program would be living on the streets without our aid. In another part of South Asia, the children at our Rajah Children’s Home would have been fated to a life of hard labor because of their inherited social class. You will have the privilege of meeting some of these children, and, if you are willing, helping them in Christ’s name to overcome the intractable poverty into which they were born.

The Bible recognizes a second class of people that we can call the flawed poor. Their poverty is due to personal sins such as laziness, willful ignorance, drunkenness, immorality, and gambling. These and other evils have reduced them to being dependent on others. As one African writer noted, poverty is often due to “people’s laziness, negligence, ignorance, corruption, lack of work-ethics, greed, jealousy, selfishness, cheap politics, immorality, and a life where God’s laws are disregarded...”¹⁰ It is common, for example, when walking through an African village to come across a circle of men drinking locally-brewed alcohol out of discarded plastic bottles or cut-off coke cans. They are there from morning to night, choosing drunkenness as a way of life. Their poverty will be relieved only when they choose faith in God and their lifestyle is transformed.

The third kind of poor in the Bible is the oppressed. These people have poverty imposed upon them by some person or law that is unfair, unjust, or corrupt. As the author of Proverbs wrote, *“Abundant food is in the fallow ground of the poor, but it is swept away by injustice”* (Prov. 13:23). An example is our work in South Asia among families who spend their entire lives scratching out a living in a rock quarry. Why are they there? They were born into the untouchable caste and, therefore, cannot find any other work.

Both the Old and New Testaments in the Bible oppose poverty, regardless of its cause. At the inception of the new nation of Israel, Moses challenged his people by saying, *“There shall be no poor among you”* (Deut. 15:11).

He went on to establish a series of laws on labor, wages, land ownership, immigration, and slavery. If obeyed, these laws would have prevented an underclass from ever developing. Unfortunately, for the next eleven

¹⁰ Majawa, Clement. (1998). *The church’s prophetic role in the struggle against poverty in Africa*. AFER, 40(5/6), 258-270. p. 259.

centuries, the wealthy ignored these laws, and the prophets angrily denounced them. Amos, for example, charged the corrupt wealthy of his day with panting after the very dust on the head of the helpless (Amos 2:6). He called the wives of the greedy rich cows of Bashan, sleek cattle who were ever mooing after the last cents in the pockets of the poor they exploited (Amos 4:1).

Jesus knew about these ancient laws and complaints, of course. Every time He bumped into a beggar on a roadside with their hand out, it meant that the Law of Moses and the prophets' warnings were being ignored. This is why He was so severe in His condemnation of the Pharisees (*snakes! vipers! whitewashed tombs!*). They were experts in the Law and should have known better than to support the fraud of the ruling class by allowing them to manipulate the laws in their favor. Theirs was a self-serving understanding of the Law, and Christ hated it.

You will encounter all three types of poverty at our project sites. Most will be the fragile poor. They need and will welcome the help you bring. A few will be the flawed poor. To them, we owe only our patience and witness for Christ. Others will be the oppressed poor. Often they are the hardest to help because of the injustice that dominates their lives.

Conclusion

Gird your minds for action! (1 Peter 1:13)

Peter's powerful exhortation is a good way to end this essay. Gird your minds for action means to plan for what you are about to do. We close this essay by asking you to decide, in advance, to meet one of the great needs you will see at our projects. We ask that you do so by committing to sponsor, for at least one year after your return, one of our programs. Choices will range from \$25 to \$50 a month.

Your promise to do this shows that you realize you won't return home the same person. Having seen Christ's poorest, you will want to exercise your compassion. This predetermined commitment is a unique part of your short-term team experience with CRI.

Thank you for taking the time to read this essay. We hope that it has strengthened and encouraged you as you prepare for your trip!