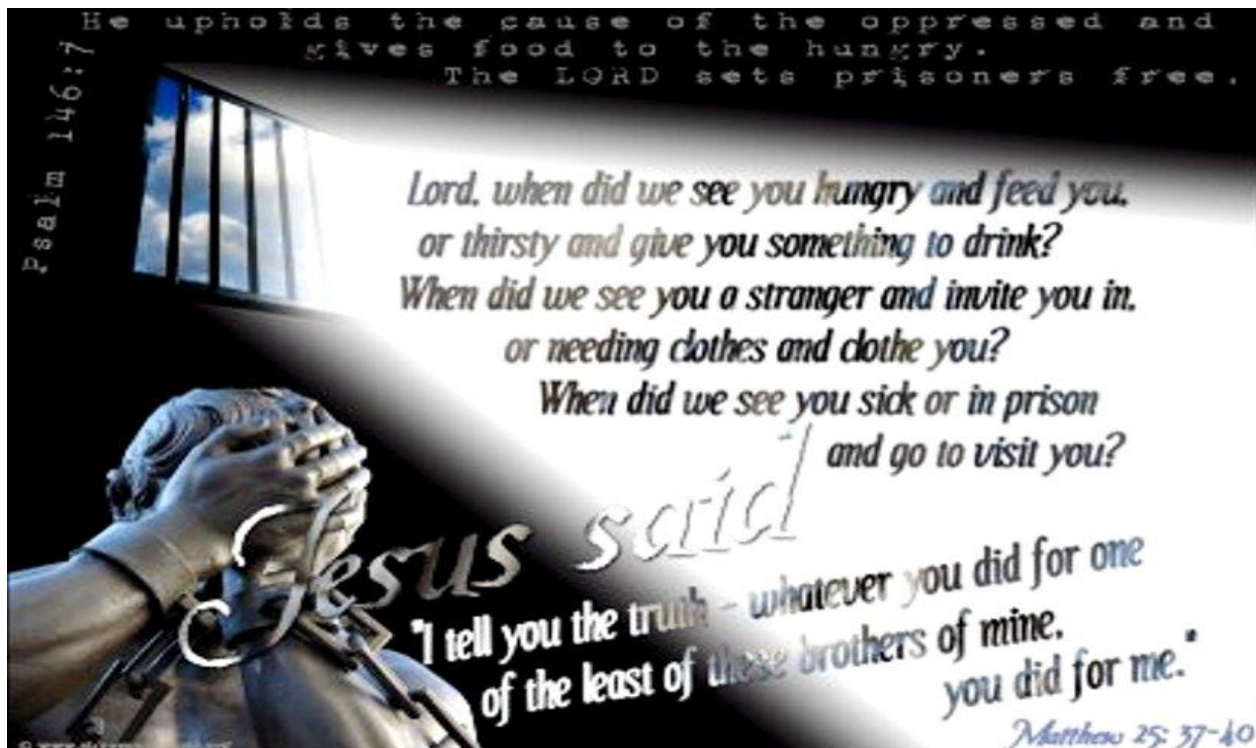


"The Least of These" @Matthew 25:40

By David Lee Burris



Matthew 25:40 -- "the least of these"



The Modern Poverty Standard



“Throughout the millennia of human history, malnourishment has been the scourge of mankind. Today, obesity disproportionately plagues lower-income Americans.”

As noted by the Heritage Foundation report:

“Relatively few of the 35 million individuals labeled as ‘poor’ by the Census Bureau would actually be considered impoverished by the typical American. As Rector and Sheffield point out, the average poor family in America is well-housed, adequately fed, and has enough money to pay for essential needs, including medical care. According to the government’s own survey data, in 2005, the average household defined as poor by the government had air conditioning, cable TV, and a family car. For entertainment, the household had two color televisions, a DVD player, and a VCR. If there were children in the home (especially boys), the family had a game system, such as an Xbox or PlayStation. In the kitchen, the household had a microwave, refrigerator, and an oven and stove. Other household conveniences included a clothes washer, clothes dryer, ceiling fans, a cordless phone, and a coffee maker.”

Census: Americans in ‘Poverty’ Typically Have Cell Phones, Computers, TVs, DVDs, AC, Washers, Dryers and Microwaves

(CNSNews.com) - Americans who live in households whose income is below the federal “poverty” level typically have cell phones (as well as landline phones), computers, televisions, video recorders, air conditioning, refrigerators, gas or electric stoves, and washers and dryers and microwaves, according to a [newly released report](#) from the Census Bureau.

In fact, 80.9 percent of households below the poverty level have cell phones, and a healthy majority—58.2 percent—have computers.

Fully 96.1 percent of American households in “poverty” have a television to watch, and 83.2 percent of them have a video-recording device in case they cannot get home in time to watch the football game or their favorite television show and they want to record it for watching later.

Refrigerators (97.8 percent), gas or electric stoves (96.6 percent) and microwaves (93.2 percent) are standard equipment in the homes of Americans in “poverty.”

More than 83 percent have air-conditioning.

Interestingly, the appliances surveyed by the Census Bureau that households in poverty are least likely to own are dish washers (44.9 percent) and food freezers (26.2 percent).

However, most Americans in “poverty” do not need to go to a laundromat. According to the Census Bureau, 68.7 percent of

households in poverty have a clothes washer and 65.3 percent have a clothes dryer.

The estimates on the percentage of households in poverty that have these appliances were derived by the Census Bureau from its Survey of Income and Program Participation. The latest report on this survey, released this month, published data collected in 2011.

Here are the percentages of households below the poverty level that the Census Bureau estimates had the following appliances:

Clothes washer: 68.7%

Clothes dryer: 65.3%

Dish washer: 44.9%

Refrigerator: 97.8%

Food freezer: 26.2%

Stove: 96.6%

Microwave: 93.2%

Air conditioner: 83.4%

Television: 96.1%

Video recorder/DVD: 83.2%

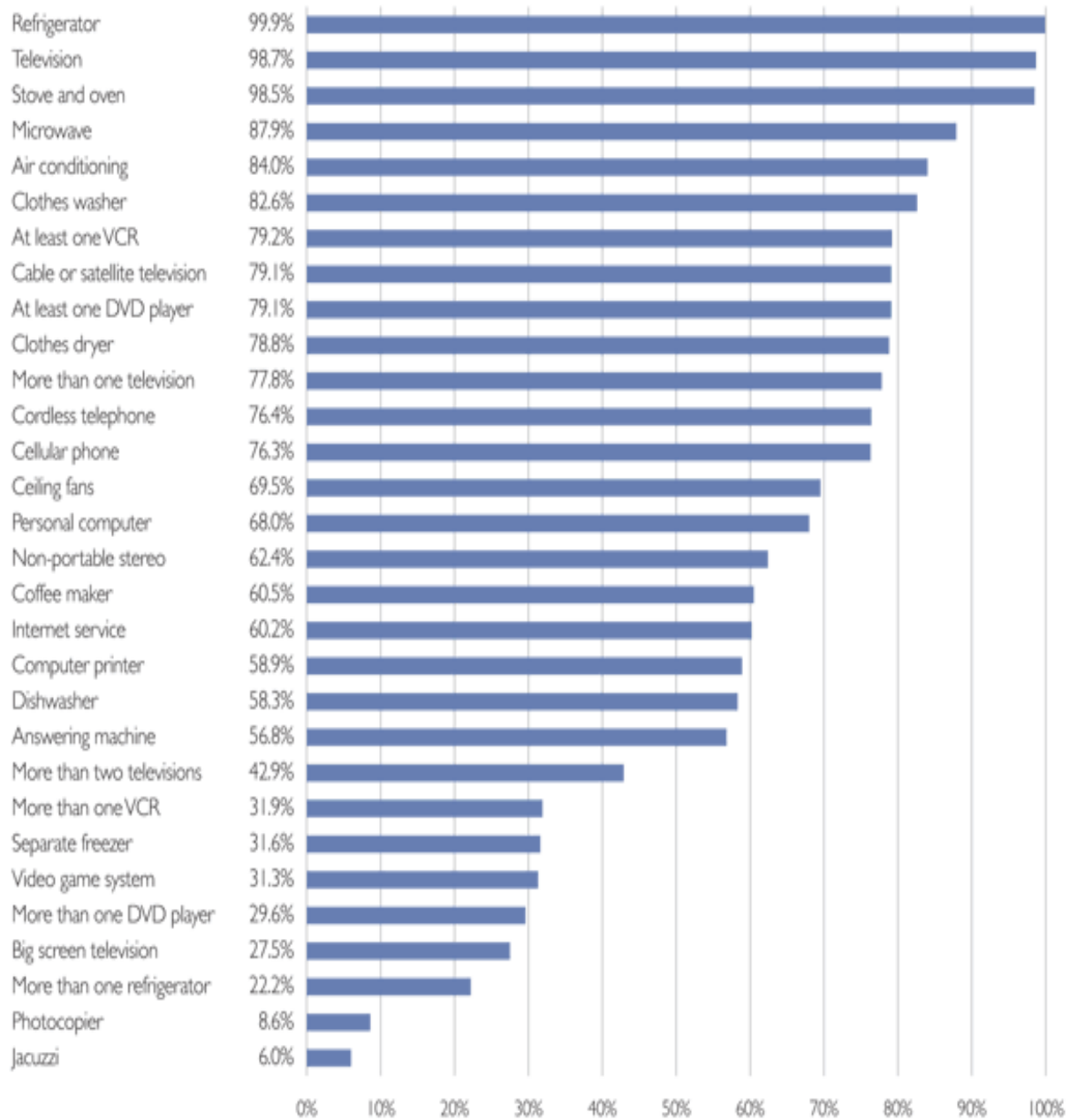
Computer: 58.2%

Telephone (landline): 54.9%

Cell phone: 80.9%

Percentage of All U.S. Households Which Have Various Amenities

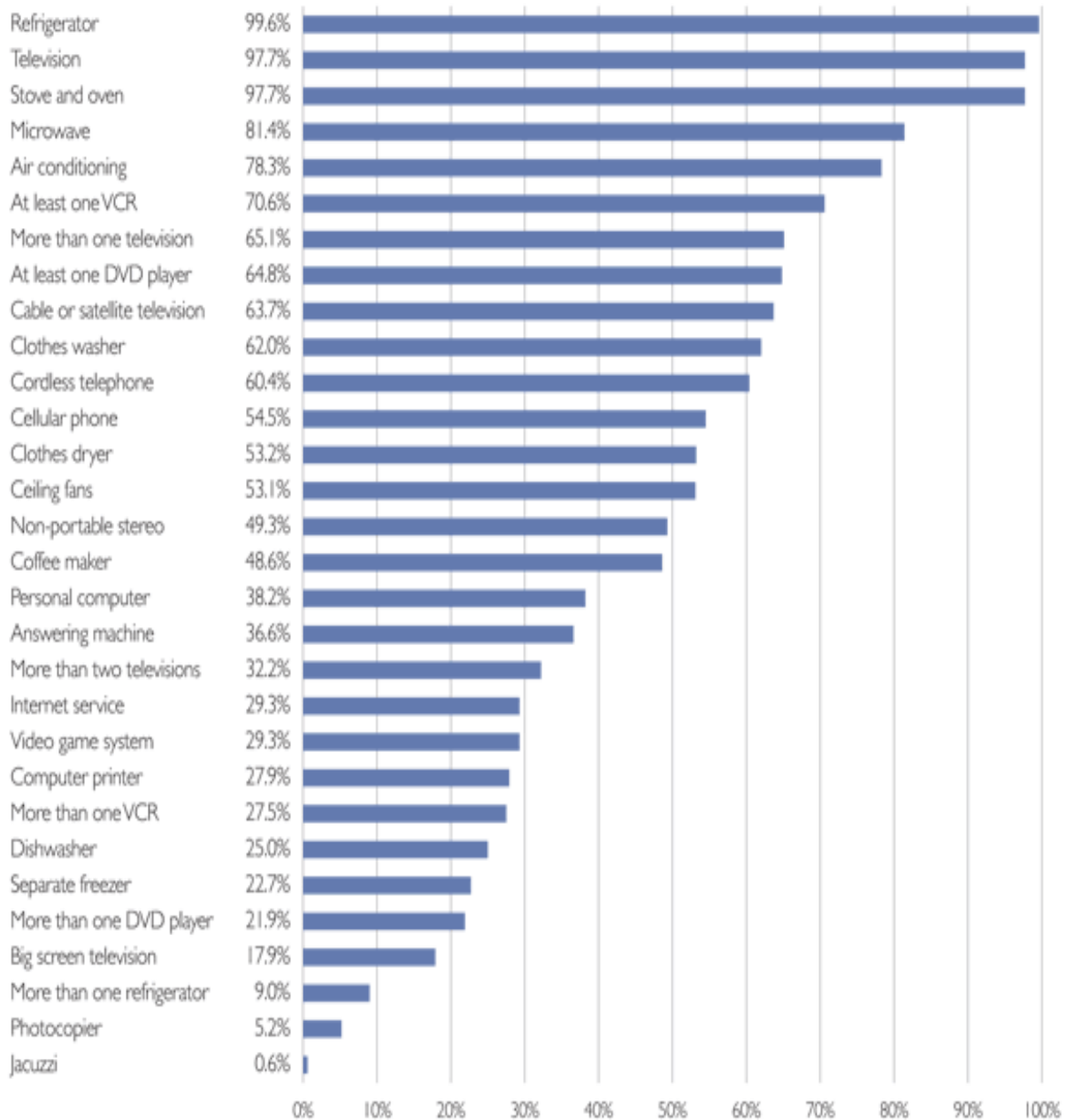
Figures Are for 2005



Source: U.S. Department of Energy, Residential Energy Consumption Survey, 2005.

Percentage of Poor U.S. Households Which Have Various Amenities

Figures Are for 2005



Source: U.S. Department of Energy, Residential Energy Consumption Survey, 2005.

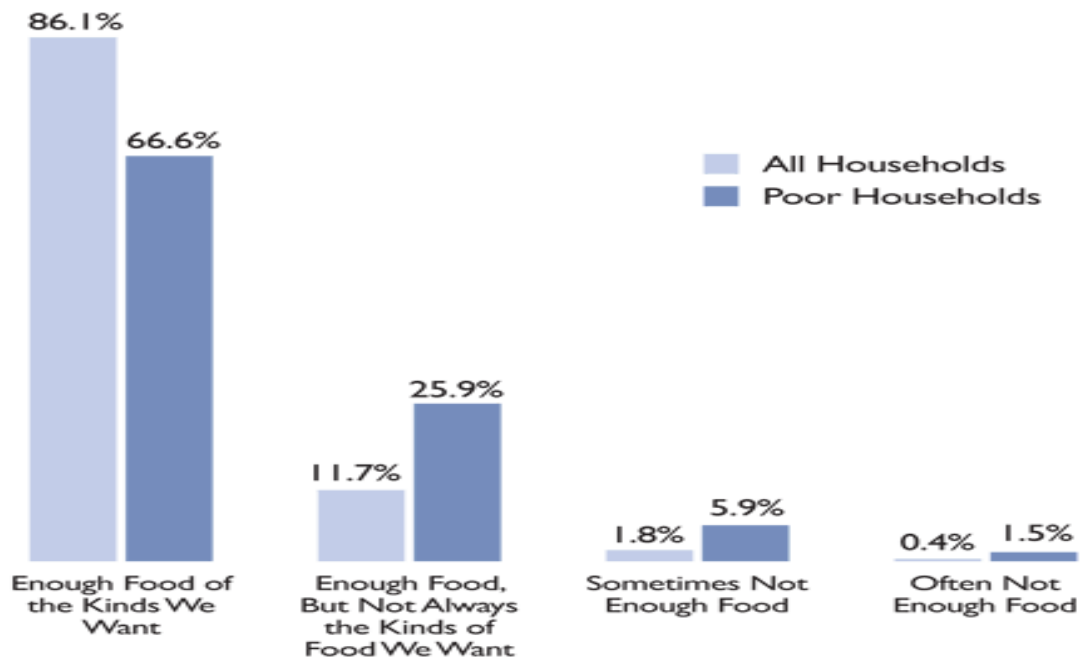
Amenities in Typical Households

Household	Most Common Amenities
Median U.S. Household, Whole Population (Amenity Score = 19)	Air conditioning, personal computer, Internet access, computer printer, two color televisions, cable or satellite TV, DVD player, VCR, refrigerator, oven and stove, dishwasher, microwave, washing machine, dryer, ceiling fans, cell phone, cordless phone, and coffee maker
Median Poor Household (Amenity Score = 14)	Air conditioning, two color televisions, cable or satellite TV, DVD player, VCR, refrigerator, oven and stove, microwave, coffee maker, clothes washer, dryer, ceiling fans, and cordless phone
Median Poor Family with Children (Amenity Score = 16)	Air conditioning, personal computer, cable or satellite TV, three color televisions, DVD player, VCR, video game system, refrigerator, stove and oven, microwave, coffee maker, cell phone, cordless phone, and clothes washer

Source: U.S. Department of Energy, Residential Energy Consumption Survey, 2005.

Table 1 • B 2575  heritage.org

Enough Food to Eat over the Past Four Months



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation, 2001 Panel, Wave 8 Topical Module, 2003.

Chart 7 • B 2575  heritage.org

Odds of Being Homeless on a Single Night in 2009

	Number of Persons	Odds of Being Homeless on a Single Night Within Whole U.S. Population	Odds of Being Homeless on a Single Night Within U.S. Poverty Population
Persons in shelters and transitional housing	403,308	1 in 753	1 in 108
Persons on the street/without shelter	239,759	1 in 1,266	1 in 182
All homeless persons	643,067	1 in 472	1 in 68

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *2009 Annual Homeless Assessment Report*, p. 8.

Table 2 • B 2575  heritage.org

Odds of Residing in a Homeless Shelter or Transitional Housing for at Least One Night During Full Year: 2009

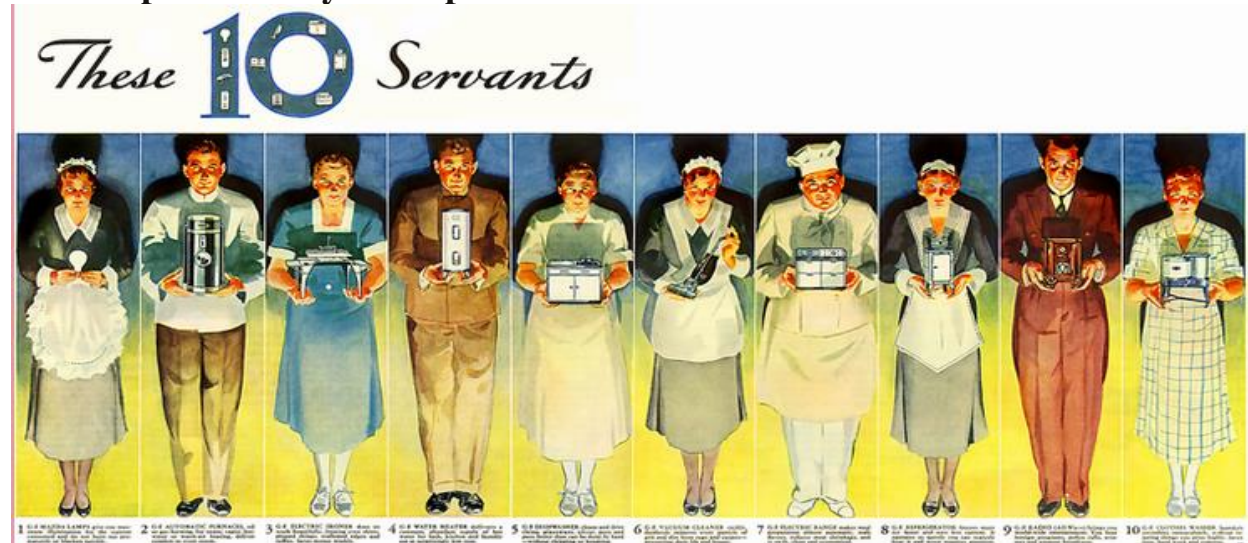
	Number of Persons	Odds of Using a Homeless Shelter in 2009 Within Whole U.S. Population	Odds of Using a Homeless Shelter in 2009 Within U.S. Poverty Population
Children	330,000	1 in 214	1 in 38
Adults	1,216,800	1 in 190	1 in 21
All persons	1.56 million	1 in 195	1 in 25

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *2009 Annual Homeless Assessment Report*, p. 8.

Table 3 • B 2575  heritage.org

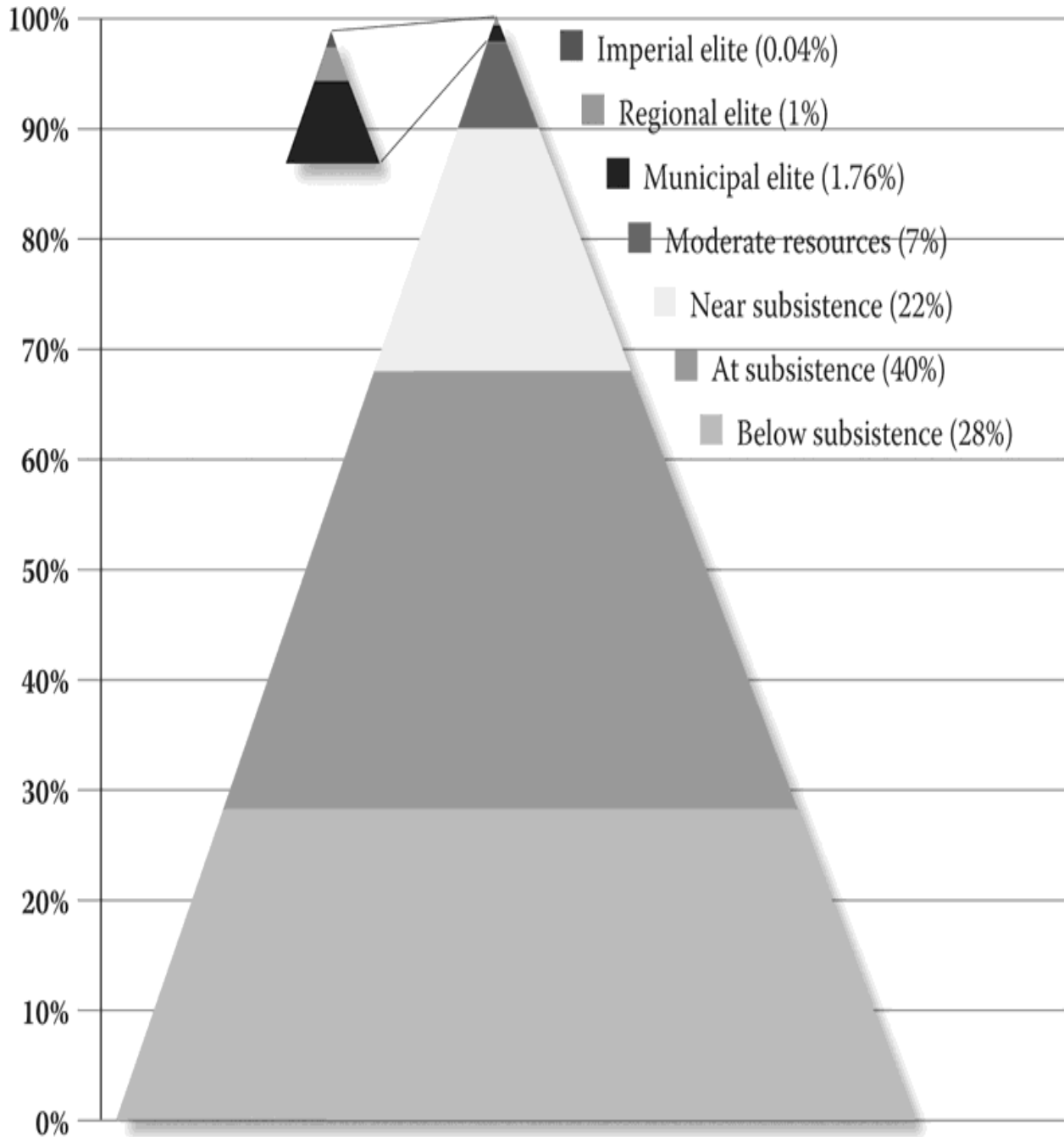
HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCES EQUATE TO SERVANTS OF ANCIENT ARISTOCRACY

The story of appliances starts in the second half of the nineteenth century, which came to be known as the “Electric Age” due to the proliferation of electrical inventions it spawned. In this period, commentators argued that slavery would eventually be replaced by the technologies electricity made possible. These ideas continued to hold sway long after the abolition of slavery. The first domestic appliances in the early twentieth century were originally marketed to upper-middle-class households as both liberators of women’s time and energy—and —and as replacements for human labor. A study of electricity consumption in the 1920s thus described electricity as the “willing slave” of any “household operation.” Compliant electrical power could replace unruly labor power.



Appliance ads in the first three decades of the twentieth century are rife with references to modernity and efficiency on the one hand and the so-called “servant problem” on the other—that is, the shortage of domestic workers. The “electrical servants” promoted in appliance ads in this period effectively promised to do away with these issues. The slogan for [a typical advertisement was] “You shall NOT enslave our WOMEN! Free them! With the 10 BEST HOME SERVANTS.” The ad copy then proclaims that the last frontier for human rights is that of housewives’ rights. It invokes the end of slavery, and—this is interesting—the passing of laws limiting the number of hours that women can work. And it explicitly positions the brand as a vehicle of emancipation. – *Electricity Is the Modern Lincoln*

The Ancient Poverty Standard



Friesen, S. J. (2008). [Injustice or God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty](#). In S. R. Holman (Ed.), *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (pp. 17–36). Grand Rapids, MI; Brookline, MA: Baker Academic; Holy Cross Orthodox Press.

Table 1.1. Poverty Scale for a Large City in the Roman Empire

Percent of Population	Poverty Scale Categories
0.04%	PS 1. Imperial elites: imperial dynasty, Roman senatorial families, a few retainers, local royalty, a few freedpersons.
1%	PS 2. Regional or provincial elites: equestrian families, provincial officials, some retainers, some decurial families, some freedpersons, some retired military officers.
1.76%	PS 3. Municipal elites: most decurial families, wealthy men and women who do not hold office, some freedpersons, some retainers, some veterans, some merchants.
7% (estimated)	PS 4. Moderate surplus resources: some merchants, some traders, some freedpersons, some artisans (especially those who employ others), and military veterans.
22% (estimated)	PS 5. Stable near subsistence level (with reasonable hope of remaining above the minimum level to sustain life): many merchants and traders, regular wage earners, artisans, large shop owners, freedpersons, some farm families.
40%	PS 6. At subsistence level and often below minimum level to sustain life: small farm families, laborers (skilled and unskilled), artisans (especially those employed by others), wage earners, most merchants and traders, small shop/tavern owners.
28%	PS 7. Below subsistence level: some farm families, unattached widows, orphans, beggars, disabled, unskilled day laborers, prisoners.

Economic Inequality in the Early Roman Empire. In their analysis of Roman imperial society, *Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller* employ the poignant phrase, “the Roman system of inequality.” With this phrase Garnsey and Saller call our attention to the fact that the Roman Empire maintained its domination of the Mediterranean world through judicial institutions, legislative systems, property ownership, control of labor, and brute force. Like all societies, the empire developed mechanisms for maintaining multifaceted inequality, and **like all so-called civilized societies the empire promoted justifications that made the inequity seem normal, or at least inevitable.**

There are three fundamental ideas to keep in mind. First, as economic historians point out, the Roman imperial economy was preindustrial. The vast majority of people lived in rural areas or in small towns, with only about 10 to 15 percent of the population in big cities of ten thousand people or more. This means that most of the population worked in agriculture (80 to 90 percent) and that large-scale commercial or manufacturing activity was rare.

Second, **there was no middle class in the Roman Empire.** Because the economy was primarily agricultural, wealth was based on the ownership of land. Most land was controlled by a small number of wealthy, elite families. These families earned rent and produce from the subsistence farmers or slaves who actually worked the land. **With their wealth and status, these families were able to control local and regional governance, which allowed them to profit also from taxation and from governmental policies. These same families also controlled public religion.**

Third, poverty was widespread both in rural and urban areas. Interpreters of early Christian literature tend to underestimate the overwhelming poverty that characterized the Roman Empire. And when we do mention the problem of poverty, we tend to use the undefined binary categories of “rich” and “poor” in our descriptions.

Greco-Roman Understandings of Wealth and Poverty—Image and Reality

We are now ready to focus our attention on Greco-Roman perception of and teachings on poverty/the poor and wealth/the wealthy. Greco-Roman authors, who themselves were wealthy and privileged, approached wealth and, for that matter, poverty in a moralizing and ambiguous way.

Traditionally Greeks used the term “the poor” to describe the working poor (*penētes*) as opposed to the rich (*plōusioi*), but distinguished them from the destitute beggars (*ptōchoi*). According to Aristophanes’s play *Ploutos*, “it is the beggar’s life to live possessed of nothing, but the poor man’s life to live frugally and by applying himself to work, with nothing to spare indeed, but not really in want.” The key to understanding the poor is to see that they *had to* work for their living, and work represented subservience and dependence and was therefore contemptible. Again, they “were all those people who needed to work in shops or in the fields and were consequently *without the leisure*” and self-sufficiency, “characteristic of the rich gentry, who were free to give their time to politics, education, and war.” The poor man’s lot was measured in a relative, ever-sliding scale depending on his occupation, income, property, family situation, etc., whereas a wandering beggar was the one on the margins of a society, “who makes [one’s] livelihood by endless entreaties,” having “lost many or all of one’s family and social ties.”¹⁰³

Defining and understanding poverty in this way, the elite both normalized it as part of the natural order of things and perpetuated the binary category of the rich and the poor by collapsing the various grades of socioeconomic structure into just two. This blurred a vast social hierarchy and inequality and concealed substantial social distance not only between the rich and the poor but also between the relatively prosperous (“the middling group”), the less poor, the poorer mass, and the extreme poor. The elite’s conceptual tie between social status and poverty, which was a product of the old aristocratic contempt for manual labor and trade, naturally led them to ascribe negative and servile characteristics to “the poor,” befitting their social status, such as “*leves, inquinati, improbi, scelerati*, etc. terms implying dishonesty.” It was particularly “the urban poor and the conditions of urban living that always attract[ed] the attention of writers and the fears of the rich,”¹¹⁰ as Cicero’s notorious description of them as *sordem urbis et faecem* (“the poverty-stricken scum of the city”) illustrates. Roman authors typically presented the urban poor as the idle mob whose grievances and moral defect (such as laziness) led them to crimes, riots, and sedition. They were seen as a threat to social harmony and stability, and could only be controlled by satisfying their insatiable cravings for “bread and circuses.”¹¹² These characterizations of the poor were certainly behind the reasons why the rich elite had no expressed concern, sympathy, or aid for the needs of the poor per se, as opposed to those of the *populus*.

While the Roman elite pathologized urban poverty with vices, violence, and disease in their political discourses, they idealized the rural poverty of a peasant farmer as that of “the virtuous hard-working citizen, who had no time for anything except earning his living on his farm and doing his civic duty.” It was a kind of poverty characterized by an idyllic simple life and “unwealth,” but not deprivation or destitution.¹¹⁵ This poverty was praised as the paradigm of good and honest living with the virtues of frugality and self-sufficiency, far removed from the corruption, vulgarity, and ills of urban poverty, on the one hand, and opposed to avarice and abuse of wealth, on the other. Thus, poverty in the elite writings often features as a heuristic device in the context of proper use of wealth, having nothing to do with the actual experiences of the actual poor.¹¹⁷ Construction of this kind of romantic image served to alleviate the elite’s disgust and fear about the (urban) poor and helped them to separate the good (deserving) from the bad (undeserving) poor in their civic benefaction and euergetism, such as food distributions.

There was no question that poverty was widespread and ubiquitous in the Roman Empire and that the social reality of the poor, whether in cities or countryside, was harsh without any public safety net. The rural poor suffered not only by frequent crop failures and debt but also by the influx of slave labor purchased by the landed rich; many poor farmers became day laborers and tenant farmers.¹¹⁹

Since the elite did not generally associate moral excellence or virtue (*dignitas*) with poverty or the poor, and since patronal benefaction was a means of enhancing social control and submission among those who could reciprocate service, they carefully separated the deserving and worthy (i.e., respectable citizens) from the undeserving and unworthy poor in their euergetism. **Aristotle had emphasized “giving rightly,” that is, a generous person “will give to the right people” (i.e., men of virtue); this spirit was captured by Cato’s maxim of *bono benefacito* (“do good to the good”). Cicero urged giving to those who are “worthy” (*idonei*). One should give to the “most deserving” (*dignissimi*), to “the good” or those “capable of being made good,” writes Seneca. If anyone deserved the pity (*eleēmosynē*; *miser cordia*) of the rich elite, it was to be “appropriately given on an exchange basis to men of like character, and not to those who are not going to show pity in return.” In this sense, “to give to a beggar is to do him an ill service.”¹²⁵ Indeed, “the true object of pity,” taught Plato, “is not the man who is hungry or in some similar needy case, but the man who has sobriety of soul or some other virtue, or share in such virtue, and misfortune to boot.” Hence, it was the “fallen” rich who experienced a sudden “reversal of fortune” and loss of status that deserved the pity and “good deeds” (euergetism) of their peers, not the poor, whether the working poor or the destitute. The interests of the rich “lay not in general poverty, which they regarded with indifference, but in marginalizing extreme poverty as a form of moral degeneration.”¹²⁸**

While the Greco-Roman rich and moralists disregarded the poor and poverty in general, they were concerned with wealth and the ethics of wealth. Both Plato and Aristotle conceived of a good man (a sage) as an aristocratic man who had wealth but also took wealth as a functional means—that is, not as an end in itself but as having a value and significance relative to achieving virtue. The value of wealth depends upon one’s attitude toward it and its proper use toward achieving virtue. Wealth liberates one’s life from manual labor, should lead to the pursuit of justice, and makes possible a life dedicated to virtue, not to further accumulation of wealth. However, wealth comes with its attendant “faults” and “temptations,” such as avarice, miserliness, prodigality, and ambition.¹³⁰

The Cynics radicalized this received thought by positing wealth not as a vehicle but as an impediment to virtue, which is necessary to the life of self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) and freedom in all things; wealth and virtue are mutually exclusive. Hence, they despised wealth and luxury along with other social conventions (e.g., marriage) and extolled poverty by urging the complete renunciation of material possessions and *voluntary* adoption of the lifestyle of a beggar (*ptōchos*). This is exemplified by Diogenes of Sinope. According to Pseudo-Crates, true wealth is to be found only in poverty, which is necessary to virtue as such (*Ps.-Crates* 7). Nonetheless, we should remember that the “anti-wealth and pro-poverty” stance of Cynics was an *affordable choice* purely for their philosophical pursuit; it was certainly unconventional and “antisocial” but did not entail any special concern or care for the plight of the involuntary poor.

While sharing the Cynic view of self-sufficiency and independence from externals, the Stoics placed wealth in the realm of *adiaphora*, “things morally indifferent,” along with health, honor, fame, etc., but did not regard or avoid wealth as an obstruction to virtue. No external things, neither poverty nor wealth as such, determine human essence, moral worth, and destiny, and therefore none should affect the rational person’s goal of life, passionlessness (*apatheia*). **Virtue depends on what one makes of external (material) things such as wealth or poverty (their lack thereof) but can accommodate enjoyment of the very things the Stoics regarded as indifferent to virtue.**¹³⁵ **As long as wealth does not interfere with reason and thus virtue, the sage could opt for wealth over poverty and health over illness.** Therefore, Stoics could have two sides to living out their understanding of and attitude to wealth.

According to Aristotle, generosity (*eleutheriotēs*; *liberalitas*, a Latin equivalent) is a virtue worthy of and necessary to the good man and should be motivated not by a selfish cause but by the “nobility of giving.” **The donor is to give “cheerfully” and “gladly” without pain,**¹⁴⁰ and “the motive of the magnificent man in such giving will be the nobility of action.” **Stoics also emphasized “cheerful giving”; Seneca exhorted the donors to “give willingly, promptly, and without any hesitation” only for the recipients’ enrichment.**¹⁴⁴ Common to Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca are emphases on **right motive** in giving—apparent absence of self-interest.

If generosity was the quintessential virtue of a good man, **love of wealth (*philargyria*, *philoploutia*; *avaritia*, a Latin equivalent) was the classic vice of Greco-Roman moral philosophy** across the spectrum. Not surprisingly, the Cynic **Diogenes condemned it as a primary source of all evils.**¹⁵⁰ In *On Love of Wealth (De cupiditate divitiarum)* the Middle Platonist with Cynic-Stoic influence Plutarch distinguishes natural (necessary) wealth and nonnatural (superfluous and useless) wealth and focuses on the irrational desire to possess great (nonnatural) wealth (*philargyria*, *philoploutia*, *pleonexia*). Building on the very classical theme of the inherent danger and limit of wealth, Plutarch sees the love of wealth as “mental poverty.”¹

¹ Rhee, H. (2012). [*Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation*](#) (pp. 1–49). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

○ EARLY CHRISTIANITY WAS PRIMARILY AN URBAN FAITH, ESTABLISHING ITSELF IN THE CITY CENTERS OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE. MOST OF THE PEOPLE LIVED CLOSE TOGETHER IN CROWDED TENEMENTS. THERE WERE FEW SECRETS IN SUCH A SETTING. THE FAITH SPREAD AS NEIGHBORS SAW THE LIVES OF THE BELIEVERS CLOSE-UP, ON A DAILY BASIS. THEY ESPECIALLY NOTED THEIR EXTRAORDINARY FORBEARANCE WHEN CHEATED, AND THEIR HONESTY IN BUSINESS DEALINGS.

- *Researcher David Barrett chronicles that by the year 300, or nine generations after Christ, the world was only 10.4% Christian with 66.4% of these believers Non-whites. The scriptures had been translated into ten languages. More than 410,000 individuals, representative of one in every 200 believers from the time of Christ, had given their all dying as martyrs for the faith.*

Considering these details as to the socio-economic stratification and wealth distribution of the Bible World of the Roman Era we can "flesh out" the probable composition of Jesus' audiences when he addressed the subject of poverty along with the poor of which He spoke...

Jesus' audience was primarily of the 62% living at the subsistence level and the "least of these" among the 28% of population living below the subsistence level.

Early Church Perspective @ Poverty:

Early Church Congregational Socio-Economic Composition

For the most part early Christians in this period continued to meet in localized households of varying sizes whose relatively wealthy hosts or hostesses acted as patrons of the particular groups, although it seems that in the early third century and on, Christians in some cities also began meeting in “church buildings,” initially modified from the private house structures (see chap. 1 and chap. 5). In Asia Minor, Ignatius’s letters presuppose the household as the general setting of the meetings and internal divisions (*Smyrn.* 7.1; cf. *Magn.* 4.1; *Eph.* 5.2–3). Also reflecting this historical reality are descriptions of **early forms of worship services in private homes of the wealthy elite converts. The wealthy and prominent householders provide hospitality to the ascetic, itinerant apostle, function as patrons and leaders of the church in the care of widows and nurture of new converts of the community (19, 25–26, 30, 34–36, 46, 62, 86, 106–11).**

In Rome, smaller localized communities in the mid-second century are illustrated by Justin Martyr’s statement that Christians meet (for worship) not in a single house but in multiple homes throughout the city depending on “one’s preference and opportunity” (*Acts Just.* 3.1–3), and one of those places included his own place “above the baths of Myrtinus.”

By the third century the Roman community became even more diversified and organized. The church order the *Apostolic Tradition* (attributed to Hippolytus) mentions various **occupations impermissible and inappropriate** for catechumens, which indicates the possible presence of those in the community with the professions mentioned. Most of them are admittedly socially inferior or questionable ones such as gladiators, and astrologers; however, also mentioned are high-ranking military and civil officers (those with “the power of the sword” or “civil magistrate[s] wearing the purple,” 16.9) and “public official[s] engaged in gladiatorial business” (16.6). The size and financial and organizational strength of the church is illustrated by bishop Cornelius’s famous statement about the church **supporting more than fifteen hundred widows and people in need as well as more than one hundred forty clergy** (Eusebius, *HE* 6.43.2).

The Carthaginian Christian communities in the third century were equally impressive in size, socioeconomic diversity, and organizational strength. Tertullian addresses his treatises to Christians of “birth and wealth,” particularly women (e.g., *Idol.* 18.3, 9; *Cultu fem.* 2.9.4–6; *Ux.* 2.3–4, 8), on their conduct; refers to the Christian “women and men of highest rank” (*Scap.* 3.4; 4.5–6; 5.2; cf. *Apol.* 37.4) and slave owners (*Pat.* 10.5; *Paen.* 4.4; *De resurrectione carnis* 57.12; *Marc.* 1.23.7); and favors Christian marriage between social unequals (*Ux.* 2.8). The number of Christians would have been significant by the mid-third century since Cyprian disapprovingly reports that thousands of certificates of forgiveness were dispensed to the *lapsi* every day by the confessors during the Decian persecution (*Ep.* 20.2.2). Presence of the indigent, the working poor, and the wealthy in varying degrees is mentioned in the sources, but private homes as their assembly places are hardly indicated. **On the one hand, the Christian apologists never apologized for the (working) poor (*pauperes*) and the illiterate in the assemblies and took their presence in Christian congregations for granted and as a factor that made Christianity unique and divine (e.g., Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 36.3; cf. *penētes* in Tatian, *Oratio* 32.1). Most of the membership would have come from the *humiliores* (just like the churches of other regions) to whom these working poor belonged as craftsmen and laborers; and during the Decian persecution Cyprian provided grants for those tradesmen who escaped detection but left behind their tools of trade (e.g., Cyprian, *Ep.* 41.1.2). On the other hand, conspicuous in the church, though in all likelihood a small minority, were the *honestiores* (probably provincial elites, such as Cyprian himself, cf. *Vita* 14; *Ep.* 8.1) and/or wealthy virgins who had their own financial resources (*Hab. virg.*) and the wealthy *lapsi* who had substantial patrimonies and estates to worry about during the Decian persecution (*Laps.* 6).**

In Alexandria Clement’s and Origen’s works attest to a considerable presence of cultured and educated Christians of high society and the internal tensions felt between the rich and the poor, as they chastise both the arrogant rich who wallow in their luxurious life without any concern for the needy and the flattering and servile poor who envy and want favors from the rich and yet pass judgment on their spiritual state (e.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Quis div.* 1; Origen, *Prayer* 29.5–6).²

² Rhee, H. (2012). [Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation](#) (pp. 103–106). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Christian Identity—Denunciation of Avarice and Luxury

In light of the generally negative tone of early Christian texts about business and commercial activities (perceived to be) motivated by unnatural greed, one can easily imagine that they would strongly denounce avarice and luxury (cf. chap. 2). This was not at all unique in a Christian circle. As mentioned in chapter 1, Greco-Roman and Jewish moralists characteristically condemned the twin vices of love of money and luxury. Nonetheless, Christian authors characterized the problem of avarice (love of money: *pleonexia*, *philarguria*, *avaritia*, *cupiditas*) essentially as idolatry (i.e., a theological problem even more than a moral problem, though they are usually intertwined; cf. Col. 3:5; Tertullian, *Idol.* 11.1) and thus as something intrinsically antithetical to Christian identity. The earliest extant sermon warns that “when we desire to acquire these [worldly] things, we fall away from the way of righteousness” (2 *Clem.* 5.7); and with dominical sayings on the impossibility of serving both God and money (cf. Luke 16:13; Matt. 6:24), it goes on to put them in an opposing relationship (6.1–5). Polycarp also admonishes the Philippians that unless they avoid avarice, they will be “polluted by idolatry, and will be judged as one of the Gentiles, who are ignorant of the Lord’s judgment” (*Phil.* 11.2), and Origen likewise repeats this close link between avarice and idolatry (*Hom. in Judices* 2.3; *Hom. in Exodum* 8.4).

In the context of addressing Christian patience in the face of many ills in life, including the **loss of property**, Tertullian frames his argument after the dominical example of indifference toward money (*Pat.* 7.2). The Lord “has set disdain for wealth ahead of the endurance of losses, pointing out through His rejection of riches that one should make no account of the loss of them” (*Pat.* 7.3). Tertullian interprets a familiar maxim of “the desire [*cupiditas*] of money [as] the root of all evils” (cf. 1 Tim. 6:10), to mean that desire of money here refers to “the desire for that which belongs to another” (*concupiscentia alieni*) and “even that which seems to be our own belongs to another” since God is the owner of all things (*Pat.* 7.5). Thus, if Christians fret and are impatient for their material loss, they “will be found to possess a desire for money, since [they] grieve over the loss of that which is not [their] own” (*Pat.* 7.6). When Christians are unable to bear their material loss, they sin against God Himself and behave like pagans by confusing the priority of heavenly goods over earthly ones (*Pat.* 7.7, 11). Just consider to what extent the pagans would go in order to pursue wealth: “they engage in lucrative but dangerous commerce on the sea; ... they unhesitatingly engage in transactions also in the forum, even though there be reason to fear loss; they do it, in fine, when they hire themselves out for the games and military service or when, in desolate regions, they commit robbery regardless of the wild beasts” (*Pat.* 7.12). In contrast, in view of Christian identity, **it befits Christians “to give up not our life for money but money for our life, either by voluntary charity or by the patient endurance of loss”** (*Pat.* 7.13).

As (pagan) impatience over material loss reveals one’s inordinate desire for and attachment to wealth, which was inspired by none other than Satan (*Pat.* 5.3–4), this idolatrous desire is closely associated with the two Latin words, *ambitio* and *gloria*, with which Tertullian further probes the fundamental problem of human avarice. Reflecting the current use of these terms in wider literature, for Tertullian, ***ambitio* is “desire without proper limits,”** which manifests itself in the immoderate desire for or the unrestrained use of wealth.

Tertullian defines *ambitio* as a vicious cycle of an unending movement with boundless desire: from scarcity (of goods/material, not its origin or use) is born the “desire to possess” (*concupiscentiam ... habendi*); from this desire to possess comes *ambitio*, that is, immoderate desire (*immoderate habendi*) (*Cultu fem.* 1.9.1–2). Then from this unlimited *ambitio* is born “a desire of glory” (*gloria*), a “grand desire” for magnificence and self-exaltation, which in turn does not come from nature or truth but from “a vicious passion [*concupiscentia*] of the mind” (*Cultu fem.* 1.9.2; 2.9.5). Then, the insatiable desire for wealth (*ambitio* and *cupiditas*) and the unrestricted desire for self-aggrandizement (*gloria*) feed upon each other and, along with the “want of sufficiency” (*insufficiencia*), result in the “worldly concupiscence” (*concupiscentia saeculi*) of striving for visible honors, dignity, and power of this passing world under God’s wrath (*Ux.* 1.4.6; cf. *Cultu fem.* 2.3.2; *Idol.* 18).

Gloria and *ambitio* drive and characterize Roman social, political, religious, and intellectual life with pursuit of public ostentation, praise, vanity, and “conspicuous consumption” (e.g., *Cultu fem.* 2.9.5; 2.10.1; 2.11.1; *Marc.* 4.34.17; *Apol.* 38.3; *Pal.* 4.6; *De anima* 52.3; *Spec.* 25.3).

If avarice, the acquisitive spirit for earthly goods, confuses and undoes Christian identity for lay people, how much more for the leaders, who were apparently so vulnerable to this temptation? Even in the Pastoral Letters, one of the repeated qualifications for the leaders was that they be “not a lover of money” (1 Tim. 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7; cf. 2 Tim. 3:2). Polycarp, dealing with the problem of an avaricious presbyter, Valens, in his letter (*Phil.* 11.1–4) reiterates this same qualification for deacons and presbyters as well as others, including widows (4.3; 5.2; 6.1). As the *Didache* commands the faithful to shun a prophet who demands money (11.12), the *Ascension of Isaiah* decries many elders (presbyters) and shepherds (bishops) who “exchange the glory of the robes of the saints for the robes of those who love money” in the “last days” (i.e., the current days of the Christian redactor, ca. 100 CE) (24–26).

The pre-Constantine protoorthodox church accused sectarian and heterodox leaders of greed as a way to distinguish them from the “authentic,” “orthodox” Christians (Eusebius, *HE* 5.18–19; 7.30–31). For example, Eusebius reports that according to Apollonius, confessors of the New Prophecy are impostors (not unlike Peregrinus in Lucian’s account) who, driven by their covetousness, “exchanged prison for wealth” and would fail “the test of fruits of prophets” by engaging in such activities as **lending money, loving ornaments, and gambling** (*HE* 5.18.5–9).

Avarice, the idolatrous and irrational lust of money or wealth, goes hand in hand with luxury (*tryphē*), an idolatrous and irrational display of one’s wealth. Clement of Alexandria, addressing his cultured audience, indulges in describing a “disease” of avarice and outrageous and even comical displays of luxury among the refined elites, from clothing, food, vessels, crowns, shoes, to jewelries and ornaments (e.g., *Paed.* 2.3, 8, 11–13). Christians who are serious about salvation must understand and settle the first principle in their minds “that all that we possess is given to us for use, and use for sufficiency, which one may attain to by a few things” (*Paed.* 2.3.39), whereas those with love of money, “the stronghold of evil,” from that greed “take delight in what they have hoarded up” (*Paed.* 2.3.39). The latter will “never reach the kingdom of heaven, sick for the things of the world, and living proudly through luxury” (*Paed.* 2.3.38).

Clement highlights the unnatural and thus degenerate nature of avarice and luxury: “Love of wealth displaces a man from the right mode of life, and induces him to cease from feeling shame at what is shameful” (*Paed.* 3.7.37). Luxury deranges all things and disgraces a person; “a luxurious niceness seeks everything, attempts everything, forces everything, coerces nature” (*Paed.* 3.3.21). **A Christian who lives in luxury (which itself is an oxymoron) commits not only a “sin of commission” (avarice, vanity, self-love, and attachment to the world) (cf. *Paed.* 3.6.34–36), but also a “sin of omission” by neglecting the commandment of loving one’s neighbor (*Paed.* 2.13.120). “It is monstrous for one to live in luxury, while many are in want. How much more glorious is it to do good to many [i.e., giving alms], than to live sumptuously!” says Clement (*Paed.* 2.13.120). The very existence of the needy and the poor (yes, there are many who are in want) testifies to the outrage of luxury, especially in its social ramification. **God created all things for all people; for the rich to hoard and appropriate an undue share of goods and wealth beyond what is necessary and useful, is to oppose God’s very creative purpose and intent (*Paed.* 2.13.120). Thus avarice and luxury result in eternally damning consequences in both vertical relationship with God and horizontal relationship with humanity.****

Note further how Clement’s argument for common use of property as a principle against avarice and luxury is **informed by his doctrine of creation**:

God created our race for sharing [*koinōnia*] beginning by giving out what belonged to God, God’s own Word [*logos*], making it common [*koinos*] to all humans, and creating all things for all. Therefore all things are common [*koina*].... To say therefore, “I have more than I need, why not enjoy?” is neither human nor proper to sharing [*koinōnikon*].... For I know quite well that God has given us the power to use; but only to the limit of that which is necessary; and that God also willed that the use be in common. (*Paed.* 2.13.120, PG [trans. Gonzalez])

The purpose of God’s creation of humanity is for sharing, which is demonstrated first by God’s sharing of the divine *logos*. **What makes us human is our sharing** in this *logos*; hence, for anyone not to share with others what is meant to be shared, i.e., “all things” created, rebels against the very *koinonia* that is a foundation and principle of our creation. **Although we are created for a higher order than mere material things of the world that are transient, God has made them for our use, and all humans are given access to these material things as means of necessary sustenance (*Strom.* 4.13). Thus, our “right” of property is limited by the legitimate use made of it—i.e., meeting our needs *and* the needs of fellow humans—“avoiding all excess and inordinate affection” (*Strom.* 4.13; cf. *Quis div.* 14, 26).³**

³ Rhee, H. (2012). [*Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation*](#) (pp. 167–171). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

○ **Justin Martyr, An Early Church Leader Wrote To Emperor Pius:**

“We formerly rejoiced in uncleanness of life, but now love only chastity, before we used magic arts, but now dedicate ourselves to the true and unbegotten God; before we loved money and possessions more than anything, but now we share what we have and to everyone who is in need; before we hated one another and killed one another and would not eat with those of another race, but now we have come to a common life and pray for our enemies and try to win over those who hate us without just cause.”

Acts 4:32 - They Shared Everything?

The description of selling one's goods in Acts 2:45 is expanded in Acts 4:34. In both cases the verb tense indicates an ongoing process. Whenever a need came to light, those having goods sold them and brought the money to provide for the need. As if these descriptions were not clear enough, in Acts 5:3–4 the author makes it plain that such generosity was not a legal requirement; it was the lie, not the failure to give, for which Ananias and Sapphira are condemned.

What was happening in the Jerusalem church, then, was simply that “they shared everything they had” (Acts 4:32). What had been an ideal to some of the Greek philosophers has been realized by the power of the Spirit in the church. Because they were “one in heart and mind” all thought of possessiveness vanished. They shared freely with one another. This sharing resulted in powerful evangelism and an experience of grace, perhaps indicated by the signs and wonders (Acts 4:33). **Consequently, they realized the goal of Deuteronomy 15:4 (“There should be no poor among you”): “There were no needy persons among them” (Acts 4:34).** Why was that? To hear of a need was to search one's heart to see if one could meet the need. As soon as a need was announced those with possessions would instinctively want to share (since the Spirit had removed personal possessiveness). They shared by bringing the money to the apostles, probably because (1) the apostles would know if the need had been met already and (2) the apostles would guard the anonymity of the donor. Ananias and Sapphira appear as negative examples, trying to fake the impulse of the Spirit and by deceit get the apostles to think of them as more Spirit-filled than they are. But, as someone observed, “in the church in which the lame walk liars die.” The same Spirit that is present for signs and wonders is also present for judgment.

To add to its problems Jerusalem experienced more than one severe famine during the 40s. We can read reports of Queen Helena of Adiabene sending relief to Judea, as well as rabbinic references to famine and poverty in Jerusalem. All of these would conspire to make it difficult to maintain the church in Jerusalem. But for early Christians it was important that a large Christian presence remain in that city. It is no wonder that Paul took up a collection to support this church (Romans 15:26; 1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Corinthians 8–9).

Acts, of course, is giving us historical precedents, not a pattern to be slavishly imitated. It shows what happened when the Spirit was present in power, *not necessarily how the church must live today*. [However] Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3:10–15 – i.e. “If anyone will not work, neither let him eat” - deals with an abuse of church charity that assumes some system of sharing was in place. He tells the abusers they are to “shape up or ship out,” but, far from changing the system, he instead turns to the church & says, “Never tire of doing what is right” (2 Thessalonians 3:13). If this were not enough, we discover the same Spirit is poured out on Macedonian churches (2 Corinthians 8). They lived in “extreme poverty,” but had given themselves so freely to God that they begged to be allowed to share with the poor in Jerusalem. The principle, Paul argues, true even across continental boundaries, is “that there might be *economic* equality” (2 Corinthians 8:13). This equality due to Spirit-directed sharing is precisely the situation we observed in practice in Jerusalem in Acts.⁴

⁴ Kaiser, W. C., Jr., Davids, P. H., Bruce, F. F., & Brauch, M. T. (1996). [*Hard sayings of the Bible*](#) (pp. 517–519). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

- “JULIAN ASCENDED THE THRONE AS CAESAR IN 360. HE WAS THE NEPHEW OF CONSTANTINE THE GREAT WHO ‘CHRISTIANIZED’ THE ROMAN WORLD. JULIAN SOUGHT TO RE-ESTABLISH PAGAN WORSHIP IN THE EMPIRE AND WAS THEREAFTER KNOWN AS ‘THE APOSTATE.’ JULIAN OPENLY BEGAN TO PERSECUTE CHRISTIANS AND HE WITHDREW THE LEGAL PROTECTION GRANTED THEM BY CONSTANTINE. HE SIMILARLY ACCUSED CHRISTIANS OF SEEKING TO OBTAIN FOLLOWERS BY BRIBING THE SICK. ‘THESE IMPIOUS GALILEANS,’ HE WROTE, ‘GIVE THEMSELVES TO THIS KIND OF HUMANITY [THOSE SICK] AS MEN ALLURE CHILDREN WITH CANDY, SO THEY BRING CONVERTS TO THEIR IMPIETY. NOW WE CAN SEE WHAT IT IS THAT MAKES CHRISTIANS SUCH POWERFUL ENEMIES OF OUR GODS. IT IS BROTHERLY LOVE WHICH THEY MANIFEST TOWARDS STRANGERS AND TOWARDS THE SICK AND THE POOR.’”

- ***Julian Continued*** –
“[Christianity] has been especially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers and through their care of the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar and that they care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help we should render them.”

- **“Julian had been educated in Athens alongside a committed Christian by the name of Agaton. Although as Emperor he persecuted Christians, he invited his friend Agaton to serve in his court. Julian frequently teased his Christian friend. One day, in front of a large group of wealthy Romans, Julian asked, ‘Agaton, how is your carpenter of Nazareth? Is he finding work these days?’ Agaton smiled and answered, ‘He is perhaps taking time away from building mansions for the faithful to build a coffin for your Empire.’ Less than two years later, on June 26, 363, Julian lay dying with a Persian arrow in his chest. He had led his troops in an attempt to take the ancient Persian Empire. Julian grasped a handful of dirt, red with his own blood. Flinging the dirt Heavenward he uttered his last words, ‘Vicisti Galilae.’ That is to say, ‘You have conquered, Galilean.’”**

Charitable Distinctions @ Worthiness:

Classical Perspective. Since the elite did not generally associate moral excellence or virtue (*dignitas*) with poverty or the poor, and since patronal benefaction was a means of enhancing social control and submission among those who could reciprocate service, they carefully separated the deserving and worthy (respectable citizens) from the undeserving and unworthy poor in their charity.

Aristotle had emphasized “giving rightly,” that is, a generous person “will give to the right people” (men of virtue); this spirit was captured by Cato’s maxim of *bono benefacito* (“do good to the good”). Cicero urged giving to those who are “worthy” (*idonei*). One should give to the “most deserving” (*dignissimi*), to “the good” or those “capable of being made good,” writes Seneca. If anyone deserved the pity (*eleēmosynē; misericordia*) of the rich elite, it was to be “appropriately given on an exchange basis to men of like character, and not to those who are not going to show pity in return.” In this sense, “to give to a beggar is to do him an ill service.” – *Loving The Poor, Saving The Rich*

1st Corinthians 11: 27-29 KJV Misinterpreted

The Question of Worthiness. The term *Eucharistia*, which means thanksgiving, had been replaced with *Missa*, which means the ‘dismissal of the unworthy.’ *Worthiness itself had metamorphized from personal & introspective to collective & hierarch determination.*

Proper grammatical reading of these verses is difficult from the older versions and translations. The term “unworthily” occurs twice – each time as an adverb modifying an action verb – eat and drink or eateth and drinketh. Contextually, in this sense, the term “unworthily” relates to manner of partaking – not of the people partaking @ Verses 27 & 29.

Neglecting to so somberly discern the symbolic nature of communion elements is to share guilt in the cruel death of His Son – we crucify Christ afresh and consume eternal death rather than eternal life.

None are “worthy” and this is where our thoughts should be per our Verse 28 – so that we can partake in a “worthy manner.”

Eschatological Dualism and Dualism of Earthly and Heavenly Riches

The final way that eschatology shaped social and ethical thought on wealth and poverty has to do with the eschatological dualism between heavenly and earthly riches. The parable of the two cities (*Sim.* 1.1–11) in *Hermas* reflects *Hermas*'s concern with the tension between this world and the world to come, a dualism that is both temporal and spatial. These conceptual contrasts—between this world and the next, between heavenly and earthly riches—underline the dangers of wealth and possessions as well as the purpose of wealth. Certainly, in the New Testament, the message of “laying up one’s treasure in heaven” stands in tension with “laying up one’s treasure on earth” (Matt. 6:19–20), with the former promising eternal security and protection.

The parable of the rich fool in Luke 12 highlights the imprudence of placing one’s security in an abundance of earthly riches as opposed to being “rich toward God” (12:21). *Hermas*'s parable of the two cities, “the author’s clearest articulation of his view of the Christian’s place in society” according to Osiek, portrays Christian existence as dual residence, one in a foreign country and one in the city of eschatological destiny, each governed by a law incompatible with the other.⁴⁵ Accumulation of earthly riches in this temporary foreign city through amassing fields, buildings, and other properties, is a sure sign of foolishness and double-mindedness, for the lord of the foreign city will inevitably expel Christians who are subject to the law of their own city (*Sim.* 1.1–4). Since Christians cannot keep the law of their own city by retaining their worldly possessions, **it is in their best interest that they be self-sufficient (*autarkeia*) and be free and prepared to leave the land at any time**, and “joyfully conform to the law” of their own city (*Sim.* 1.5–6). Once again, these divine commandments articulate the classic (Jewish and) Christian **acts of charity as a way of converting earthly temporal riches into heavenly spiritual riches—since it is God’s intention and purpose for earthly wealth**. God makes one rich for this reason, i.e., for performing “ministries” or “services” (*diakoniai*), and therefore “it is much better to purchase fields and possessions and houses of this kind” (*Sim.* 1.9). Whereas earthly wealth brings grief and fear, heavenly spiritual wealth brings joy; earthly extravagance is unprofitable to the believer, but heavenly extravagance is salvific (*Sim.* 1.10–11). **This eschatological motif does not renounce material wealth but affirms it as God’s gift, relativizes its earthly significance, and channels it to its proper use of amassing spiritual wealth through acts of charity/ministry.**

Symbiotic Relationship Between Wealthy Christians & Worthy Poor. The famous parable of the elm and the vine is to be seen in relation to this dualism of earthly and heavenly riches. **The elm and the vine, representing the rich and the poor, bear much fruit only when they are attached to each other and function together, not on their own.** The shepherd, *Hermas's* revelatory guide, takes for granted the traditional notion that the rich are deficient in the things of the Lord due to their wealth and its attendant problem of distraction, while the poor are rich in intercession and praise with effectual power (*Sim.* 2.5; cf. *Mand.* 10.3.2). Therefore, **the rich (should) “unhesitatingly” provide for the needs of the poor and the poor intercede for the rich; in this way they “complete” their work, which is “great and acceptable to God”** (*Sim.* 2.6). As Osiek notes, this “is a spiritualization of the institution of patronage: the *obsequium* and *operae* owed by the client to a patron takes the form of intercessory prayer.” This mutual partnership between the rich and the poor is spiritualized in view toward the end that both “will be enrolled in the books of the living” (*Sim.* 2.9). The thrust of this parable is that “the rich man understands about his wealth and works for the poor man by using the gifts of the Lord and correctly fulfills his ministry [*diakonia*]” (*Sim.* 2.7). Those rich who fulfill their God-given ministry/service here and now, and thus secure their heavenly riches, are the ones who overcome double-mindedness and therefore survive the great tribulation (cf. *Mand.* 9.2, 4, 6; *Sim.* 2.7; 8.10.3; 9.24.2; 9.29.2).

The rich members should “make Christ a partner with [them] in [their] earthly possessions, that He also may make [them] a fellow-heir with Him in His heavenly kingdom” (13). If they are “lending to God” by giving alms to the poor, “there is no ground for any one preferring earthly things to heavenly, nor for considering human things before divine” (16). The dualism of heavenly and earthly wealth also corresponds to the dualism of soul and body; whereas soul benefits by avoiding earthly wealth, body is fed by greed and lust, which pursues temporal riches and pleasures (7.5.23). As long as people are bound by corporeal and earthly goods, they live their earthly life “incapable of aiming at immortality” (7.5.24). No one should put faith in earthly wealth since it makes no one immortal (7.27.15). Instead, people should “use their virtue to trample down the corruptions of the earth” (7.27.14) and to pursue eternal and celestial goods by giving to the blind, the sick, the lame, and the destitute (cf. 6.11.18, 28; 7.27.2), which guarantees heavenly reward.⁵

⁵ Rhee, H. (2012). [*Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation*](#) (pp. 64–70). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

The Deserving versus Undeserving Poor: How Do We Deem Who's Worthy?

Causes of Poverty Either Agency or Structure. Believe it or not Poor can be placed into two different categories: The Deserving Poor, and The Undeserving Poor. The deserving are those who are in need and are unable to work because they are too old, disabled, or too sick. The undeserving poor are those who don't want to work, and often it is assumed that all able-bodied unemployed people fit into this category. In essence, the deserving poor can be thought of as those who cannot be blamed for their poverty; their poverty is not due to individual behavior or character flaws, but rather from structural or macro forces well outside of an individual's control. Whereas conversely the undeserving poor can be thought of as poor people who have bad moral character, and do not deserve to be helped. Since the idea of the deserving and undeserving poor can be linked to our understanding of the causes of poverty, such as if it was the result of agency or structure, shouldn't all affected by the forces in society that may have led to an individual's poverty all receive some sort of financial benefit? For example, if your poverty is due to no fault of your own – structure – then you are often seen as deserving of help. – *Internet Search*

WHAT DOES GOD'S WORD SAY?



LET US NOT BE WEARY IN DOING GOOD,
FOR WE WILL REAP
IN DUE SEASON,
IF WE DON'T GIVE UP.
SO THEN, AS WE HAVE
OPPORTUNITY,
LET'S DO WHAT IS GOOD
TOWARD ALL MEN,
AND ESPECIALLY TOWARD THOSE WHO ARE OF
THE HOUSEHOLD OF THE FAITH.
GALATIANS 6:9-10

**Although, that Brotherhood immersed
in symbiotic relationship is prioritized
- second tier - as we encounter the need -
we are to perform charitable service to
the involuntary poor of general society.**

Deuteronomy 15: 4 & Matthew 26: 11 – The Forever Poor?

At first glance there certainly does seem to be an outright conflict here. First, we are told that the Lord will so richly bless Israel that there will be no poor people in the land. Then provisions are made for the eventuality that there should be some poor in the land. Finally, we are advised that the poor will always be with us. Which statement is true? Or if they are all true, how do we reconcile the discrepancies?

If Deuteronomy 15:4 is taken in isolation, it certainly does look like a flat contradiction of Deuteronomy 15:11. But verse 4 begins with a “however.” This introduces a correction or a limitation on what has preceded it in Deuteronomy 15:1–3 about the cancellation of debts due to loans that have now been paid off. That is, it should not be necessary to cancel any debts if the people are fully experiencing the blessing of the Lord as he promised in verse four. There was a stated condition, however, for the nonexistence of the poor in the land mentioned in Deuteronomy 15:5: Israel must “fully obey” and be “careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.”

But if Israel was to refuse to fully obey (which they did), then the eventuality of Deuteronomy 15:7 is provided for, and the general assessment of Deuteronomy 15:11 is that “there will always be poor people in the land.”

The situation in these verses is very much like that in 1 John 2:1, “I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin ... ” Thus, the ideal is set forth while an alternative is also graciously provided in the way that poor people must be dealt with in an open, generous and magnanimous way.⁶

⁶ Kaiser, W. C., Jr., Davids, P. H., Bruce, F. F., & Brauch, M. T. (1996). [*Hard sayings of the Bible*](#) (p. 173). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

Give What Is Inside the Dish to the Poor?

This is a hard saying in the sense that it is not easily understood. Other sayings about giving to the poor are hard in the sense that, while their meaning is all too plain, it goes against the grain to put them into action. “Sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Lk 12:33) is one of these; not even the assurance that this is a way of laying up treasure in heaven makes it altogether easy to comply with it. But what are the things “inside the dish” that are to be given?

This saying comes in a context where Jesus rebukes some religious people for insisting on the external forms of religious practice while overlooking the inward and essential realities. No amount of ritual washing of the hands or other parts of the body will be of any avail if the heart is not pure. Only a foolish person would be careful to wash the outside of a cup or dish after use and pay no attention to the inside; the inside generally requires more careful washing than the outside. It is even more foolish to pay meticulous heed to external observances when inwardly one is “full of greed and wickedness.” What, then, is the point of the immediately following exhortation, “But give what is inside the dish to the poor”? How will that make “everything ... clean for you”?

If one looks at the Greek text, the first clause of Luke 11:41 could be translated differently: “But give to the poor those things that are within your control (or at your disposal).” Could this go well with the next clause: “and everything will be clean for you”? It might: this would not be the only text in the Bible to imply that giving to the poor is a means of ethical purification.

But could the rendering “give to the poor those things that are within your control” go well with what precedes? It might be argued that since Jesus had just mentioned greed as one of the things which pollute a person’s inner life, giving, which is the opposite of greed, would have a cleansing instead of a polluting effect. Even so, the flow of thought is not smooth.

Luke’s form of the saying, however, cannot be considered in isolation from the parallel text in Matthew 23:25. There too the words come in the course of criticism of those Pharisees who, as Jesus says, “clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside ... are full of greed and self-indulgence.” Then comes his direction: “first clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.” First things first, in other words. But the difficulty raised by Luke’s form of the saying has disappeared: “first clean the inside” is much more intelligible than “give what is inside the dish to the poor.”

Has Matthew eased a difficult construction which Luke left unchanged, as he found it? That is possible. But another possibility is pointed out by some scholars. Whereas Matthew and Luke seem at times to use the same Greek translation, there are other times when they use different translations of one Aramaic original. Here “clean” and “give to the poor” could be translations of two quite similar Aramaic verbs; **they could even be alternative translations of one and the same Aramaic verb, in two different senses.** This could be the explanation of the difference.⁷

⁷ Kaiser, W. C., Jr., Davids, P. H., Bruce, F. F., & Brauch, M. T. (1996). [*Hard sayings of the Bible*](#) (p. 470). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.



Early Church Perspective @ Prisoners:

He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets prisoners free.

Psalm 146:7

Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you,
or thirsty and give you something to drink?
When did we see you a stranger and invite you in,
or needing clothes and clothe you?
When did we see you sick or in prison
and go to visit you?

Jesus said

"I tell you the truth - whatever you did for one
of the least of these brothers of mine,
you did for me."

Matthew 25: 37-40

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From the birth of modern civilization in 3rd millennia BC, almost every major ancient civilization used concept of prisons as a mean to detain and remove personal freedoms of incarcerated people. **In those early periods of history, prisons were most often used as a temporary stopgap before sentencing to death or life of slavery.**

The earliest records of prisons come from the 1st millennia BC, located on the areas of mighty ancient civilizations of **Mesopotamia** and **Egypt**. During those times, prisons were almost always stationed in the underground dungeons where guilty or suspected criminals spent their life either awaiting death sentence, or a command to become slaves (often working as galley slaves). Exception from that rule comes from the home of modern democracy - **Greece**. There, prisoners were held in the poorly isolated buildings where they could often be visited by their friends and family. Primary source of their detention were not dungeons, high walls or bars, but simple wooden blocks that were attached to their feet. Ancient **Roman Empire** however continued to use harsher methods. Their prisons were built almost exclusively underground, with tight and claustrophobic passageways and cells. Prisoners themselves were held either in simple cells or chained to the walls, for life or for time. As slavery was accepted norm in those days, majority of prisoners that were not sentenced to death were sold as slaves or used by the Roman government as workforce. One of the most famous uses for the slaves in Roman Empire was as "**gladiators**". In addition to fighting in the arena, many slaves were tasked as a support workforce that enabled smoother run of the popular gladiator business. The most famous Gladiator battleground, the mighty Colosseum Arena in Rome had a slave army of 224 slaves that worked daily as a power source of the complicated network of 24 elevators that transported gladiators and their wild animal opponents from the underground dungeons to the arena floor. – *prisonhistory.net*

THE HISTORY OF IMPRISONMENT

The original purpose of confining a person within a prison was not to punish them, but was a means of keeping the perpetrator of a crime detained until the actual punishment could be carried out. This was usually in the form of corporal punishment that was intended to cause the guilty person pain, such as being beaten with a whip, or capital punishment which used a variety of methods to claim the lives of condemned individuals.

London is known as the birthplace of modern imprisonment. A Philosopher named [Jeremy Bentham](#) was against the [death penalty](#) and thus created a concept for a prison that would be used to hold prisoners as a form of punishment. Bentham drew up plans for a facility in which prisoners would remain for extended periods of time. His design was intended to ensure that the people who were locked up would never know if they were being watched by guards or not, which he felt would allow the prison to save some money. Since the inmates could not be certain how many guards were present, Bentham reasoned, fewer officers would need to be hired to maintain the peace. In the end, this prison was never built, but the concept of using prisons themselves as a form of long-term punishment did catch on.

By the 19th century, prisons were being built for the sole purpose of housing inmates. They were intended to deter people from committing crimes. People who were found guilty of various crimes would be sent to these **penitentiaries** and stripped of their personal freedoms. Inmates were often forced to do hard labor while they were incarcerated and to live in very harsh conditions. Before long, one of the goals of a prison sentence became rehabilitation of inmates. Many people felt that the fear of being locked up would be enough to deter an inmate from ever committing another crime, but other theories held that policies should be introduced to help reform prisoners before they were set free. An opposing viewpoint to the rehabilitative effects of imprisonment claims that being incarcerated will actually cause people to become more involved with a life of crime, because they become so enveloped in a criminal society while living with other inmates. Regardless of these conflicting opinions on rehabilitation of criminals, imprisonment continues to be one of the most common forms of punishment around the world. – *Crime Museum*

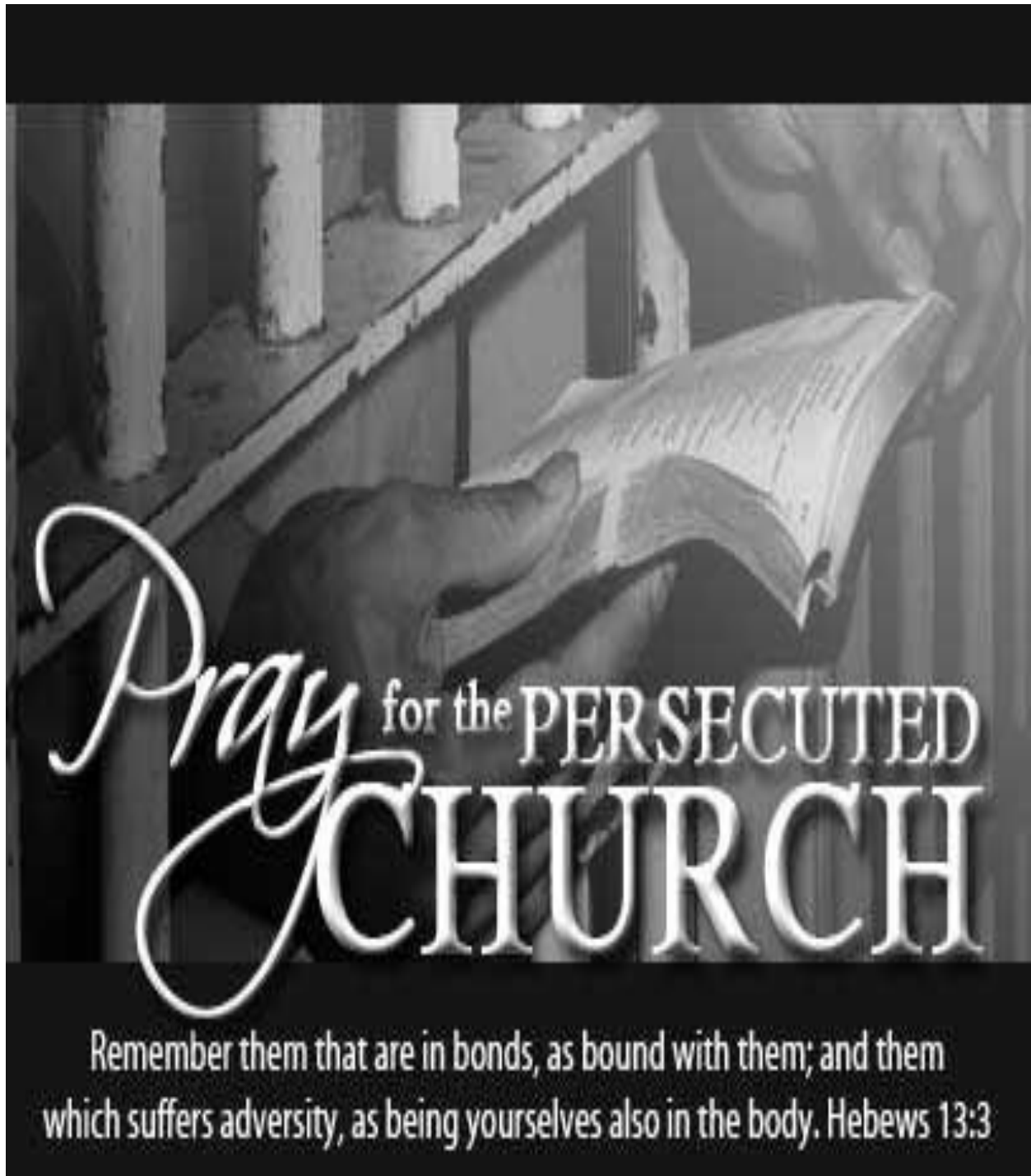
ENCOURAGERS *for* CHRIST



Remember those
in Prison as if you
were their

FELLOW PRISONERS...

Hebrews 13:3



Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffers adversity, as being yourselves also in the body. Hebrews 13:3

Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible

Remember them that are in bonds,.... Not for criminal actions, or for debt, though such should be remembered, and pity showed them, especially the latter; but such as are in bonds for the sake of Christ, and the Gospel. This has been often the lot of God's people, who should be remembered, by praying for them, sending comfortable letters to them, personally visiting them, and relieving them under their distresses:

as bound with them; as if it were so, as if in the same condition, and circumstances; by sympathizing with them; by considering themselves liable to the same bonds; by dealing with them as it would be desirable to be dealt with in the same case: and

them which suffer adversity; outward afflictions of body, distress for want of temporal mercies, food and raiment, and persecution by enemies; or spiritual adversity, as the prevailings of corruptions, and particularly unbelief, the hidings of God's face, and the temptations of Satan.

As being yourselves also in the body; as if in their bodies, enduring the same things; or as being afflicted in the body with diseases, necessities, and persecutions; or as being in the body, the church, of which these afflicted ones are a part, and therefore should have a fellow feeling with them; or rather as being in this world, in the flesh, or in a body and state subject to the like adversities, temporal and spiritual.

Expositor's Greek Testament

[Hebrews 13:3](#). μιμνήσκεσθε ([Hebrews 2:6](#)) τῶν δεσμίων ([Hebrews 10:34](#)), “Be mindful of those in bonds” ([Matthew 25:36](#)). This also they had already done ([Hebrews 10:34](#)). The motive now urged is contained in the words ὡς συνδεδεμένοι, “as having been bound with them,” as fellow-prisoners. The ὡς ἐν σώματι of the next clause might invite the interpretation, “for we also are bound as well as they,” and colour might be given to this by the Epistle to Diognetus, chap. 6. χριστιανοὶ κατέχονται μὲν ὡς ἐν φρουρᾷ τῷ κόσμῳ; but more likely the expression is merely a strong way of saying that all the members of Christ’s body suffer with each, [1 Corinthians 12:26](#). τῶν κακουχουμένων, “the maltreated,”

cf. [Hebrews 11:37](#); you must be mindful of these “as being yourselves also in the body,” *i.e.*, not emancipated spirits, and therefore liable to similar ill-usage and capable of sympathy. [A striking illustration of the manner in which the early Christians obeyed these admonitions may be found in the *Apology* of Aristides: ξένον ἐὰν ἴδωσιν, ὑπὸ στέγην εἰσάγουσι καὶ χαίρουσιν ἐπ’ αὐτῷ ὡς ἐπὶ ἀδελφῷ ἀληθινῷ· οὐ γὰρ κατὰ σάρκα ἀδελφοὺς ἑαυτοὺς καλοῦσιν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ ψυχήν. The Syriac Apology adds “If they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs”. Accordingly in the *Martyrdom* of Perpetua we read that two deacons were appointed to visit her and relieve the severity of her imprisonment.] It is interesting to find that Philo claims for Moses a φιλαδελφία towards strangers, enjoining sympathy, ὡς ἐν διαίρετοῖς μέρεσιν ἐν ζῶον, as being all one living creature though in diverse parts; and in *De Spec. Legg.* 30 he has ὡς ἐν τοῖς ἑτέρων σώμασιν αὐτοὶ κακούμενοι. Westcott gives from early Christian documents a collection of interesting prayers for those suffering imprisonment.

CONTEXTUALLY

AN ADMONITION OF
SPECIAL PRE-TRIAL &
FOLLOW-UP FINANCIAL
& EMOTIONAL SUPPORT
EXCLUSIVE TO THE
CHRISTIAN BROTHERHOOD
& TARGETING THOSE
CHRISTIANS SUFFERING
UNDESERVED PERSECUTION

**INDISCRIMINATE PRISONER PRIORITIES
IS WRONGFUL BEHAVIOR @MATTHEW 7:6**



**DO NOT CAST
YOUR PEARLS
BEFORE SWINE**

"The Least of These" @Matthew 25:40

CHAPTER CONTEXT: "LEAST OF THESE"

Verse 35

For I was hungry, and ye gave me to eat; I was thirsty and ye gave me to drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in; naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me; I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

This makes one's relationship to Christ the all-important consideration; and as he pointed out a moment later, that relationship turns altogether upon the treatment of his disciples. Just as in the case of Saul of Tarsus his persecution of the church amounted to his persecution of Christ ([Acts 22:7](#)), so, in all ages, treatment of the Lord's followers shall be the basis of determining one's relationship to their Head, which is Christ. What is done to Christ's followers is done to him. What is done to his church is done to him. **Those who think they find in these words of Jesus an excuse for making Christianity a mere matter of social charity, should look again. It is not the treatment of all the wretched and unfortunate of earth that shall make up the burden of the Christian's duty, but the treatment of "these my brethren," as Christ expressed it, that determines destiny (see [Matthew 25:40](#)).**

Verse 37

Then shall the righteous answer him saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungry and fed thee? or athirst, and gave thee drink? And when saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? And when saw we thee sick or in prison, and came unto thee?

The surprise of the righteous is itself surprising. The element of surprise applies to both the saved and the unsaved, but the principle is stated with crystal clarity. "What we do to his, we do to him!" What an awful warning this contains for those who set at naught the Lord's followers, who deny, or neglect them! **The Lord is in the least of his followers. Their needs, their rights, and their requirements are the Lord's. To deny them is to deny him.** In view of this, the principal part of every congregation's budget should be on command for the alleviation, not of the wicked world's abounding woes, but for the legitimate needs and requirements of God's people.

Verse 40

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, even these least, ye did it unto me.

No thoughtful person can conclude that Jesus equated salvation with benevolence in the usual sense. It is not mere charity, but help of Christ's followers that is highlighted here. In the final essence, what men do to his church, they do to him. To neglect, flout, or dishonor the church is to do the same to Christ who is the head of the church. On the other hand, those who support and provide for the church and extend their concern and constant aid **upon behalf of her poor and needy**, do the same for Christ whose body is the church.

JESUS IS SPEAKING TO THOSE ON HIS RIGHT!!

The “least of these” is a phrase that originates from [Matthew 25:31–46](#), where Jesus speaks of those in need. Verses 35–40 read,

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was 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 welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the **least of these** my brothers, you did it to me.’”

The “least of these” refers to those in a variety of needy situations. They include the hungry, thirsty, impoverished, sick, and imprisoned. **In this context, Jesus is speaking to those on His right, that is, the righteous. The needy are called Christ’s “brothers”; thus, the reference is to the righteous helping fellow disciples.** Jesus said that those who cared for such individuals were not merely serving other people. They were serving Him.

In the same passage, the opposite is also noted. The narrative concludes with Jesus condemning those who saw believers in need and yet did not help. He says,

“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, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’”

Jesus connected service to the needy with eternal rewards and punishments. Those whose lives are marked by apathy toward the needy show they have not been transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ.

God has always shown a special concern for the poor and needy ([Psalm 35:10](#)). It should come as no surprise that He expects His followers to do the same, especially toward those of the family of God ([Galatians 6:10](#)). What is surprising about the “least of these” is that our service is ultimately not to the poor, but to Christ Himself.

BOOK CONTEXT: “LEAST OF THESE”

WE MUST EXCEED THE PHARISEES!


There is linkage between putting aside the least of commands and putting aside the least of brethren.

Therefore, anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven ...” (Matthew 5:19)

What are the “least of these commands?” Jesus rounds out this context with a call to have a righteousness that “surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law” (Matthew 5:20); so whatever He was saying about setting aside the “least of these commands” probably had something to do with the skewed way that the Pharisees and teachers of the law read and applied Scripture. Their practice and Jesus’ condemnation of it serve as a warning for all of us who want to read and apply Scripture correctly.

In Matthew 23:23-24, Jesus speaks directly to the kinds of commands and principles that the Pharisees set aside. In that passage, He said, you give a tenth of all the spices that you have, but “you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness.” So, the kinds of commands that the Pharisees set aside were not the “least” of the commands at all, rather they set aside the “more important matters of the law.” This makes me think that Jesus’ comment about the “least of these commands” was directed more toward the Pharisees assessment of the commands they were setting aside rather than to the reality of the relative importance of those commands.

To be concerned about justice for those who can’t find it on their own, to be quick to show mercy because we know we need such mercy ourselves, and to be faithful even when it is costly ... these are weighty matters. May we never major in rituals while minoring in these weighty matters of love. – *Reaching Beyond Ourselves*



**YOUR LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER WILL PROVE
TO THE WORLD THAT YOU ARE MY
DISCIPLES.”
JOHN 13:35 NLT**

IN CONCLUSION,
OUR TAKING A DEEP DIVE
INTO MATTHEW 25:40 BY
BOOK-CHAPTER-VERSE
CONTEXTUAL & CULTURAL
-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS -
FACILITATES 21ST CENTURY
BIBLE STUDENTS TO BETTER
COMPREHEND HOW THE
FIRST CENTURY AUDIENCE
WOULD NOT HAVE
UNIVERSALIZED THE PHRASE
“THE LEAST OF THESE” AS IN
GENERAL REFERENCE TO THE
HUMAN RACE BUT WOULD
HAVE INSTEAD UNDERSTOOD
IT IN APPLICATION TO THE
BROTHERHOOD EXCLUSIVELY.

