

The poor among you

March 30, 2012

They gather at dawn at day-labor centers or designated parking lots where contractors hire workers. Some stop on their way to pick up a cheap breakfast taco at a convenience store, buying their meal from an employee earning minimum wage. At the store, they wait in line with members of a crew purchasing gas for the mowers and trimmers they will use to cut the grass of other people's lawns.

Men line up early on a brisk morning at a North Texas day labor center, hoping to be hired for a work crew.
(PHOTO/Ken Camp)

They are the working poor—people who may work more hours a week than the average salaried employee, but they do it at a cobbled-together assortment of part-time jobs without benefits. Some find themselves trapped in the situation because they lack the education or technical skills to find a better job. Others lost salaried positions due to economic recession and are working part-time or temporary jobs to try to make ends meet.

Living in poverty

[Ron Sider](#), founder of Evangelicals for Social Action, sees that situation—coupled with the United States' deficit and a growing gap between the rich and poor—as a justice crisis.

"Minimum wage doesn't get a person even close to the poverty level. People ought to be able to work their way out of poverty," Sider, professor at Palmer Theological Seminary in Wynnewood, Pa., said in an interview.

But more Americans live in poverty today than at any time in more than 50 years, according to the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Bureau of Economic Research.

"The richest nation in human history now has the highest poverty level of any Western industrialized nation," Sider writes in his new book, [*Fixing the Moral Deficit: A Balanced Way to Balance the Budget*](#).

Difficult choices



Poverty forces some individuals and families into making tough decisions, said [Jeremy Everett](#), director of the Texas Hunger Initiative, a program of the Baylor University School of Social Work in partnership with the [Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission](#).

"Often, people find themselves having to choose between paying the rent, the light bill and the water bill or paying for groceries. For the elderly, it may be a choice between the mortgage and medication," Everett said.

Some even find themselves living on the streets, noted Jimmy Dorrell, founder and executive director of [Mission Waco/Mission World](#), a Central Texas-based ministry focused on community transformation.

"We have folks in our shelter who had never been in one and never imagined themselves there," Dorrell said. "Minimum-wage jobs, especially 29-hours-a-week jobs without benefits, can't come close to paying the bills.

The growing unskilled workforce has few living-wage job choices."

The poor among you

Underemployed or unemployed victims of recession, together with the ranks of the working poor who have been unable to rise above poverty, have forced growing numbers to rely on government welfare. Nearly 15 percent of all Americans—a record 45.7 million people—now participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps.

"Many people who never thought they would have to rely on federal safety net programs to help make ends meet do now—and without these programs, many more Americans would have fallen into poverty and hunger in this last recession," said [David Beckmann](#), president of Bread for the World, a Washington, D.C.-based Christian advocacy group.



"You also have to consider how low the federal poverty line is—\$23,000 per year is too low for most two-person households to live comfortably in

America, let alone a family of four."

Neither SNAP benefits nor refundable tax credits—like the Earned Income Tax Credit or Child Tax Credit—factor into poverty figures in the U.S. Census, he added.

"If they were, the data would show that these programs lifted 9.3 million people above the poverty line in 2010. These programs can mean the difference between getting by and going hungry for poor families—whether newly or generationally poor," Beckmann said.

What did Jesus say?

Some Christians fail to consider the plight of the poor because they don't recognize the emphasis Jesus placed on concern for one's neighbor and compassion for the vulnerable, Everett observed.

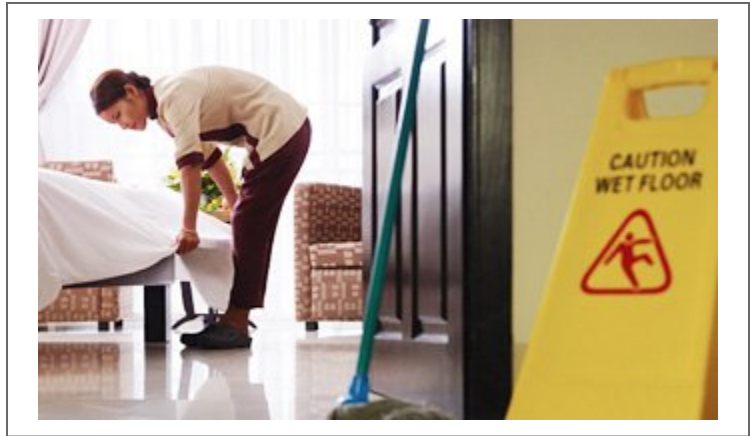
"Many Christians are not well-versed in what Jesus had to say about the poor," Everett said. "Caring for the poor is intrinsic to our calling as Christians. Every person is created in the image of God, and that means we are all interconnected."

Some reserve their compassion only for the few whom they consider worthy of assistance, he added.

"There's no such thing as the deserving poor and the undeserving poor. Jesus didn't say, 'Whatever you did for the least of these my brothers—when they deserved it—you did it to me,'" Everett said.

Rugged individualism

Others insist the poor simply should take more initiative and pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, Dorrell noted.



"Some continue to blame the poor for their own harsh realities and point to the rugged individualism of 'my grandpa, who brought himself up without any help,'" he said.

That attitude finds its most extreme expression in the libertarian views advanced by mid-20th century writer [Ayn Rand](#), who believed each person should pursue his or her own self-interests, not sacrifice for others, Sider noted in an interview.

"It's astonishing to me that any Christian would embrace a philosophy that says we have no responsibility for our neighbors," he said.

Charity not enough

Other Christians take seriously biblical teachings about compassion for the poor and vulnerable. They operate food pantries, volunteer at homeless shelters, support free or reduced-price medical clinics and work on Habitat for Humanity projects to build homes for low-income families.

But for all their efforts, they hardly make a dent in the problem of poverty. Charities nationwide provide only about 6 percent of the assistance that government programs for the poor provide, Bread for the World reports.

Five federal programs—SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Earned Income Tax Credit, Supplemental Security Income for the disabled and Medicaid—cost about \$485 billion in 2010.

"If the 325,000 religious congregations in the United States wished to take over these programs, each congregation would need to add about \$1.5 million to its annual budget," Sider writes in *Fixing the Moral Deficit*.

Christians should lead by example in meeting the needs of the poor, but they cannot do it by themselves, Everett noted.

"The church should lead the way, but the church cannot do it alone. Churches developed the hospital system to care for the sick. They led the way in creating hospitals. But if only churches ran hospitals today, we wouldn't have enough to care for everybody," Everett said.

"In terms of responding to poverty, the church should lead the way, but Christians should use their influence to get others involved—to bring government, the nonprofit sector and the private sector to the table."

From compassion to justice

Christians need to move from concern about the poor to hungering for biblical justice, Sider said. In Scripture, justice means more than procedural fairness in the courts; it also means fair access to society's productive resources so people can earn their own way, he said.

"Biblical justice rejects the Marxist idea of equal outcomes just as it rejects limiting justice to fair procedures. But it does demand equality of opportunity up to the point where everyone has access to productive capital so that, if they work responsibly, they can enjoy an adequate income and be dignified members of society," Sider writes.

Biblical justice also means protecting the interests of the vulnerable, he added. While Sider believes the current national deficit is "intergenerational injustice" and wants to see the government move toward a balanced budget, he warned against politicians who "want to balance the federal budget on the backs of the poor."

Beckmann agreed, noting that "cutting the amount of money dedicated to programs that help hungry and poor people make ends meet would not make as big a difference to the budget deficit as it would to low-income families."

Sider and Beckmann urged Christians to create a "circle of protection" around governmental programs that are vital to poor people and advocate for their interests.

"It is sometimes a challenge to understand the importance of advocacy when addressing these issues, but we need to change the politics of hunger if we want to create more widespread and lasting change," Beckmann said.

"With the stroke of a pen, decisions are made that affect millions of lives and redirect millions of dollars."