Poverty and Sin

At Equip 2011 [1] I was introduced to doing systematic theology Bible studies. Systematic theology is taking a single topic and then looking at what the Bible as a whole has to say about that topic. This is different from Biblical theology, which we had studied in previous [2] years [3], in that Biblical theology considers how a single passage forms part of God's greater plan.

Systematic theology obviously requires hard work, as you need to consider all that the Bible has to say *before* reaching a conclusion! One also needs to resist the temptation of using proof texts out of their individual immediate contexts. All that said, I found writing this study slightly less taxing than the previous two. Obviously we were limited by time and could not consider all the passages in the Bible which dealt with the topic (we were limited to six passages, but I went slightly over), but we still had to search the Bible for key passages which we wanted to use in our studies.

Our topic was **poverty**. My **main idea** was to show the link between poverty and sin, and what the response of a Christian to poverty should be.

This study was presented to the workshop on 25 April 2011.

The Bible Study

In 2005, film producer Morgan Spurlock and his fiancée Alexandra Jamieson had their bank accounts frozen and took minimum wage jobs for 30 days. They soon found themselves in trouble: unable to afford basic medical care, they were spiraling into debt. Their experiment highlighted serious flaws in the American social security system.

1. If you were to freeze your bank account for 30 days, what would you like to prove or demonstrate? What would you absolutely refuse to do to survive?
2. Think about some of the reasons for people to be poor. Who or what is responsible for poverty?
3. Read Genesis 2:8–9 and 15–17. Did Adam lack anything? Or do you think that he was provided for abundantly?
4. What do you think was the most valuable that Adam has in the garden of Eden?
5. Read Genesis 3:17–19. Think of some reasons why these curses can lead to poverty.
6. Read Deuteronomy 28:12–14 and 45–48. The former are some of the covenant blessings which God promised the nation of Israel if they were to remain faithful, while the latter are some of the covenant curses promised for unfaithfulness. In light of Deuteronomy 28, how do you think an ancient Israelite might view wealth and poverty?
7. Can you identify any similarities between Deuteronomy 28 and Genesis 2 and 3?
8. Read Deuteronomy 15:1–11. If the people of ancient Israel were being faithful to God, what should not be in the land? Does verse 4 agree with your answer? What about Deuteronomy 28:12–14?
9. If someone were to fall into poverty, how were the Israelites commanded to respond?
10. If poverty is a consequence of sin, why do you think the Israelites are commanded to act towards them as they were done?
11. Compare verses 4 and 11. Why do you think they are stated in that order?
12. Read Job 24:5–7. Job was a man "blameless and upright", but was allowed by God to be afflicted and become poor. Here he laments the fact that the poor are dependent on the wicked, who prosper. Do you think Job's observation is accurate?
13. Do you think that we can still hold to a view that poverty is only a form of punishment for sin?
14. Read the whole of Job 24. Does it seem like there is currently a correct order in the world regarding punishment and reward?
15. Read Matthew 9:9–13. Although not stated as being poor, the tax collectors and sinners recognise a need within themselves which only Jesus can fulfill. What other passages which

we have looked at deal with similar issues? What parallels can be drawn? What about the Pharisees?
16. Read 2 Corinthians 8:9. What was the richness that Jesus had? In what ways did He become poor? Where have we seen this before?
17. Read Matthew 25:31–46. How does Jesus want the faithful to respond to the needy?
18. Why do you think Jesus is so serious that we should care for the needy?
19. What are the implications of providing for the needy as Jesus commands?
20. Verse 34 speaks of the righteous inheriting a kingdom. Revelations 21 makes it clear that there will be no need or suffering in this kingdom; the new heaven and earth. Discuss the similarities between the new earth and Eden, and the differences with the old (current) earth.

We have seen that poverty will only ever exist in a period of human history whre we are living under the effects of sin. Poverty is not, however, now a universal punishment for sin.

21. What do you think the relationship between poverty and sin is?
22. Why should we as Christians be involved in helping the poor?
23. What aspects need to be addressed in a person who is stuck in poverty? [Answers: material needs, spiritual needs, helping to understand their afflictions as part of a fallen world]
24. How can we practically help to alleviate poverty in our community?

Critique

The Bible study was well received. I tried to thread the different passages together by connecting ideas of abundance with God and lacking without Him. Again this was but a first draft and could do with some refinement.

The main criticism was that it was much too long. I somehow got confused as to the length. But then this study could be presented as a short series of Bible studies.

Addendum

Other ideas which could have been explored:

- What does the whole of the Mosaic law say about poverty and attitudes towards the poor?
- Poverty as a result of injustice (see the Wisdom literature and the Prophets).
- Poverty amongst believers (Acts 4:34).
- The issue of accountability (e.g. Paul and the Macedonians in 2 Corinthians).

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