

Sermon outline: Children in poverty

Topic: A Christian response to children living in poverty in Australia

Main passages: Matthew 6:3-4, 10:42, 25:40

Other passages: Deuteronomy 15:11, James 1:27, Proverbs 14:31,
Acts 20:34-35

Introduction

Former Prime Minister Bob Hawke once famously declared: “By 1990, no Australian child will be living in poverty”. Simultaneously, I’m guessing there was a dull thud off stage as Bob’s poor speech writer had a heart attack! Bob admitted sometime later that he went off script, and was actually supposed to say that “by 1990, no Australian child need live in poverty”.¹

While his ad-libbing has gone down in history as little more than another empty promise, it’s worth reflecting on what Bob was actually meaning to say: that within three years there was no need for any Australian child to be living in poverty.

I guess, at a theoretical level, we can all imagine it. There’s certainly plenty of wealth in our country, and if all that money was distributed a little more evenly, I’m sure everyone could live in relative comfort.

And yet, as we gather here today, 761,000 Australian children are living in poverty. That’s more than one in six children. And it’s a number that’s continuing to rise steadily.²

Poverty affects almost every aspect of a child’s life. If your family can’t afford to give you breakfast, then you go to school hungry. If you’re hungry, you can’t concentrate. And if you can’t concentrate, you fall behind. If your family can’t afford a school uniform or new clothes or the right books, you get teased by the other kids, and you don’t want to go to school.

You get the idea.

Generally speaking, poverty negatively impacts a child’s health, development, education, and their long-term employment opportunities.

And it’s not hard to see how poverty can become deeply ingrained within families and communities when the next generation faces the same challenges as the last.

¹ <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/no-child-will-live-in-poverty-30-years-on-bob-hawkes-promise-remains-an-elusive-goal-20170621-gwvdya.html>

² *Poverty in Australia 2022: A snapshot* is published by the Australian Council of Social Service, in partnership with UNSW Sydney

So how should Christians respond to the issue of child poverty in Australia?

First, we need to acknowledge that God wants us to be involved with these issues. Obviously government has a role to play, but God also expects believers to personally help people who are poor and vulnerable.

God commands this of the Israelites in the book of Deuteronomy:

- **Deuteronomy 15:11** – There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

In the New Testament, the book of James says that this kind of generosity is regarded by God as a “pure and faultless” expression of our faith:

- **James 1:27** – Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

But where do we start? With 761,000 children living in poverty, it’s natural to feel overwhelmed by the size of the problem. With such a huge issue, what can my little bit do?

It’s a fair question, but it’s important we acknowledge that the size of a problem doesn’t negate our need for personal involvement and responsibility.

Thankfully, we can look to the Bible for encouragement in situations like these. Consider Paul, who personally undertook a fundraising campaign for poor Christians in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 9:1-5), or Jesus, who saw thousands who were hungry and was moved to feed them (Matthew 14:13-21).

Let’s take a look at a couple of examples of how Jesus commands us to care for the vulnerable in Matthew’s gospel:

- **Matthew 10:42** – “And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”
- **Matthew 25:40** – ‘The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”’

In both of these passages, the who (‘my disciple’ in the first verse and ‘brothers and sisters of mine’ in the second) is less important than the what. In both cases, the what is the call for us to care for and serve the little ones and the least. That is, those who are vulnerable in our society.

Much could be said about these two verses, but let’s just pull out a few points relevant to our topic today:

1. **Seeing with Jesus’ eyes:** In ancient times, children were considered the least important people in Roman society – in fact it was commonplace in Jesus’ day for people to leave unwanted babies to die of exposure. But Jesus sees things very

differently. He knows that every one of us, from the greatest to the least, is made in the image of God, and therefore deserving of the same care and respect.

2. **Give now, get later:** Jesus' examples of giving water to a thirsty child or food and clothing to those in need model the kind of selfless service we're called to. In these cases, the favours probably won't be returned; our generosity won't be reciprocated. But the motivation isn't being part of a balanced transaction. We need to be prepared to give without receiving anything in return. The true reward for our generosity of heart and spirit is yet to come.
3. **A little goes a long way:** Look also at the exchanges taking place. Jesus uses examples of people desperate for life's most basic necessities – things that many of us have in abundance and perhaps take for granted. Our generosity has the power to create huge change in the lives of people who have very little.
4. **Loving others = Loving God:** Finally, acts like this reveal not only our love for others, but also our love for God, who sees all our good deeds – whether performed in public or private – and rejoices in them. We see this in the Old Testament too:
 - **Proverbs 14:31** – Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God.

Another example from Matthew's gospel gives us three action points that we can apply:

- **Matthew 6:3-4** – “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be done in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”
1. **Look for opportunities:** Notice that Jesus says “*When* you give to the poor”, not *if*. His assumption is that his followers are looking for opportunities to give to the poor. For us today, we should pray for opportunities and then keep our eyes peeled for answers to that prayer.
 2. **Don't make it about you:** Dignity is important for everyone so don't make a show of your generosity. Perhaps you're able to donate to a cause or charity anonymously, or put a bag of groceries on a family's doorstep. Of course, anonymity isn't always possible, but humility is.
 3. **Being generous is not a one-time thing:** Make regular time to devise generous plans. It could be working out how to pay someone's overdue bill, making a meal for a family in need or even sending extra sandwiches to school for a child without lunch. It's important to provide for people's basic needs right now. And it's also important to consider how we can help people improve their situation over the long term, so that in time they will be able to bless others in need (Ephesians 4:28).

We can again look to Paul for inspiration here. By being proactive, he was able to provide generously for others:

- **Acts 20:34-35** – “You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

Paul was a tentmaker. He worked tirelessly at this profession “night and day” (1 Thessalonians 2:9) but he didn’t work to become wealthy. Rather, Paul used his trade to support himself and others who travelled with him on a mission of far greater significance – sharing the good news of Jesus.

(INSERT PERSONAL STORY OR USE CATHY’S STORY BELOW)

- Cathy, a case manager with Mission Australia, met a family of seven living in a caravan park. The mother, father and five children, aged between 5 and 12 years old, had lived in extremely cramped conditions for the past two years.
- The mother and father were both in poor health but weren’t receiving disability pensions. Their only source of income was when the father could pick up the odd cash-in-hand job when his health allowed it.
- Eventually the family was evicted from the caravan park for not reliably paying their rent. They didn’t have any family or community support, and although they were on the waiting list for government housing, there was no progress on that front.
- Thankfully, Cathy was able to step in just in time. Working with a local church, Cathy helped get the family into temporary accommodation. She also helped them apply for disability pensions and worked with them on improving their tenancy and budgeting skills.
- Meanwhile, she connected the children with a service focused on mental health early intervention and prevention. With added support and a stable home, the children all started attending school more regularly.
- After six months in the church house, the family was offered a social housing home.
- Cathy saw the family some time later and they’d just completed a big shop at the supermarket – something they never used to have the money to do. The mother and children appeared happy. Cathy says the family’s self-confidence and independence has improved dramatically, to the point they no longer rely on help from any support services.
- This family’s story is a great example of how a few generous acts can transform lives – in this case, seven of them!

Three ways you can be part of the answer to child poverty in Australia

1. **PRAY:** Pray for children and families struggling below the poverty line in Australia. Pray for organisations such as Mission Australia, which helps thousands of people

across the country through services that aim to end homelessness and ensure people and communities in need can thrive.

Sign up to receive Mission Australia's prayer diary at missionaustralia.com.au/prayer

- 2. VOLUNTEER:** There are almost endless opportunities to help children and families, both in our community and beyond. You could consider informal ways of helping, like reaching out to a neighbour, local school or library to offer your time, or your church could serve alongside a Christian service organisation like Mission Australia.

For ideas, go to missionaustralia.com.au/churches

- 3. GIVE:** Give of your finances to support the work of God in this area. As Jesus said in **Matthew 25:35** "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in."

This could be through your local church's ministries or you can donate to Mission Australia securely online at missionaustralia.com.au or by phoning 1800 88 88 68.

Know someone who needs help?

With more than one in six children living below the poverty line in Australia, there's a chance you may know a family who's struggling to get by. You yourself might be finding it hard to make ends meet. If you fit either of these descriptions, please come and talk to me after the service.

Mission Australia also encourages people to reach out to them and seek help. Mission Australia's services are available at missionaustralia.com.au/find-support.