The Gospel and the Poor: Towards an Understanding of How Christians Relate to Poverty

By Benjamin Edwards
Director of Urban Ministry, Inter-City Baptist Church

Introduction

One of the greatest issues our world faces today is the issue of poverty. The facts concerning the many needy people around the world are sobering:

“Almost three billion people live on less than two dollars a day, adjusted for purchasing power. Eight hundred and forty million people in the world don’t have enough to eat. Ten million children die every year from easily preventable diseases. AIDS is killing three million people a year and is still spreading. One billion people in the world lack access to clean water; two billion lack access to sanitation. One billion adults are illiterate. About a quarter of the children in the poor countries do not finish primary school.”¹

Poverty is a reality that Christians cannot ignore, but myriads of questions arise around how Christians should respond to it. This workshop will explore Biblical teaching related to a proper perspective on poverty and wealth, biblical instruction related to ministering to the poor, and how the Gospel relates to ministry to the poor. The purpose of this survey is to lay a foundation on which to build a philosophy for ministry to and among the poor. Further issues for study will be mentioned, along with answers to common objections to ministry to the poor.

Biblical Perspective of Poverty and Wealth

Before looking more specifically at how Christians are to relate to the poor, it is necessary to gain an appreciation for the biblical perspective on poverty and wealth. Why do some people claim that the Bible teaches a gospel of health and wealth while others have viewed poverty as inherently more spiritual? Part of the reason is that the Scriptures provide a more complex view of wealth and poverty than is often admitted.

The Bible does present wealth as a good thing. In Psalm 1:3 and 112:3, wealth and prosperity are marks of those who fear God and delight in His law. Material prosperity is a blessing that comes from God (Gen 24:35; Dt 8:18). Often, the kingdom is portrayed as a time of wealth and plenty (e.g., Amos 9:13; Joel 3:18). In fact, God told the nation that if they fully obeyed God, they would have no poor people in the land (Dt 15:4–5). Of course, the reality was that the people

would not be able to fully obey God so they would always have poor people with them (Dt 15:11).

As wealth is a sign of God’s blessing, poverty is a negative thing that comes as a result of sin. Sometimes, a person’s poverty arises primarily from his own sins, including laziness, love of sleep, and wasted spending on pleasure (Prov 12:24; 14:23; 19:15; 20:13; 21:17; 24:30–34). Other times, a person’s poverty is a result of the sins of others, including the sins of injustice and exploitation (Prov 13:23; 22:22; Is 10:1–2; Jer 22:13; Ezek 22:29; Amos 2:6; 5:11, 12; 8:4–6; Mic 2:2). As well, some people are in poverty as a result of natural disasters that occur in a sin-cursed world (Gen 47).2

However, wealth is also frequently presented as a negative thing that draws people away from God (Dt 8:10–17). People are not to use their strength to pursue wealth (Prov 23:4). On multiple occasions the Gospels present wealthy people who are headed towards destruction (Mk 10:23; Luke 12:13–21; 16:19–31). Wealth is dangerous because the “deceitfulness of riches” can keep people from salvation (Mt 13:22).3

Not only are the wealthy often depicted as wicked, but the righteous are also pictured as poor. There are three Psalms that address the paradox of the prosperity of the wicked (Ps 37, 49, 73). In fact, there are times in which it almost seems that the poor person is equated with the righteous person who is on God’s side (Ps 9:18; 10:14; 12:5; 14:5–6; 34:6; 35:10; 74:19). Why does this happen? Those who are materially poor are often more likely to recognize their spiritual poverty and thus turn to God for help (James 2:5). This recognition of spiritual poverty is essential for salvation (Lk 6:20; cf. Matt 5:3).

As God is specially concerned about the poor, so the poor may be specially concerned about God, for two good reasons. If there is poverty in Israel, it is because those with power are misusing it; so the poor will claim God’s help first because it is his rule which is being flouted, and he must vindicate himself, and secondly, because in the circumstances there is no one else to turn to. In this way “poor” becomes almost a technical term. “The poor” are the humble, and the humble are the godly (Ps 9:18; 10:14; 12:5; 14:5–6; 34:6; 35:10; 74:19). Just as being rich can foster self-indulgence, self-confidence, pride, and the despising and oppression of one’s fellows, so being poor should encourage the opposite virtues.” 4

So, while the Bible teaches that wealth is a gift from God, it does not teach that all believers will be wealthy. Neither does it teach that poverty necessarily guarantees spirituality. In reality, “the

---

2Thus, all poverty can be traced to sin, but not necessarily to the sin of the individual poor person.

3All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *ESV*.

morality of riches depends entirely on personal attitudes.” The Christian should desire neither wealth nor poverty (Prov 30:8–9). He must not allow his heart to be set on earthly riches, but must instead seek heavenly treasure (1 Tim 6:10; 17; Matt 6:19–21).

How does this relate to the Christian’s ministry to the poor? 1) It helps us to realize that the answer to poverty is not merely increasing wealth, since a love for wealth brings horrible consequences. 2) It helps us to see how we should view our own material goods—not as things we have acquired but as gifts from God to be used to serve Him. 3) It helps us to recognize that poverty is the result of sin, but not necessarily the direct result of an individual’s sin.

The final point is an important issue to recognize, since the causes of poverty must be considered if a proper remedy is to be provided. Too often, conservatives tend to see the poor as having created their own problems and, thus, are the ones to share the bulk of the blame for their predicament. Liberals tend to emphasize societal causes, and, thus, view the poor as merely victims of circumstances outside of their control. Most often, poverty is caused by a combination of both individual and societal/structural/cultural causes. For example, a young man may grow up in a poor neighborhood and attend a school that does not provide a quality education. After graduating, he is still basically illiterate and as a result cannot find a job. Eventually, his frustration leads him to alcoholism and he becomes a homeless drunkard. Why is he poor—unfair systems, sinful choices, or both?

**Biblical Instruction Regarding the Poor**

The Bible contains multiple references to the treatment of the poor. God warns His people not to oppress them (Is 10:2; Jer 22:11–17; Amos 2:6). Instead, God’s people are to make sure that the poor are treated justly, rescuing them from the wicked (Ps 82:3–4; Prov 31:9). They are to take special care not to shame a poor person or take advantage of him (Dt 24:10–15). The poor were to be given a fair hearing in the judicial process (Prov 22:22). Every seventh year, the year of Jubilee, those who had sold themselves into slavery were to be released (Lev 25:39–41; Dt 15:12–18). The Israelites were to lend to those who were in need without exacting interest from them (Ex 22:25–26). They were to give generously and willingly to those who lacked material goods, forgiving their debts every seventh year (Dt 15:7–11). The law also made provision for the poor by commanding those who harvested to leave the gleanings for the poor to gather (Lev 19:9–10; 23:22; Dt 24:19–21; cf. Ruth 2).

The importance of these commands regarding the poor is also emphasized multiple times. Ministry to the poor is considered the nature of true religion (Is 58:1–12; Mic 6:8; Hos 6:6; Matt 23:23; James 1:27). In fact, God views ministry to the poor as ministry to Him (Prov 19:17; 21:26).

---


6 A failure to give generously because of a fear that the money would not be repaid (due to the proximity of the year of Jubilee) was a sign of covetousness and sin.

7 Some of these passages deal with those often associated with the poor (e.g., widows and orphans), while others emphasize mercy and justice. These concepts are linked to how God’s people were to relate to the poor, since

The Gospel and the Poor

One of the more startling aspects of the Bible’s instruction regarding ministry to the poor is the eternal significance that appears to be tied to it. In fact, Jesus seems to relate one’s eternal destiny to how he treated Jesus’ followers who were hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, and in prison. Those who helped are the righteous and enter eternal life, while those who ignored their needs are cursed and enter eternal punishment (Matt 25:31–46). The righteous person is the one who lends generously to those in need (Ps 37:21, 26; 112:5–9). Those who close their heart to a brother in need do not have God’s love in them (1 Jn 3:17–19). In James’ epistle, written in part to show what true saving faith is, he points several times to the reality that believers should help those in need (Js 1:27; 2:26; 5:1–6). In fact, when James gives an example of dead faith (i.e., one that does not save because it is not accompanied by works), he points to someone who does not give a brother or sister what they need for their bodies (James 2:14–17). That person’s faith will not save him!

Is the Bible teaching that ministry to the poor will earn a person eternal life? In order to answer that question, it may be helpful to consider a few more passages. In Galatians 6, Paul describes what a person who is keeping in step with the Spirit looks like. In a well-known section, Paul points out that sowing to one’s own flesh brings about eternal destruction, while sowing to the Spirit results in eternal life. The context shows that the concept of sowing is dealing in large part with how a person uses his material goods—does he merely use it for himself or does he employ it in what the Spirit wants? Paul has spent the previous chapters arguing vehemently for justification by faith apart from works, so it would seem out of place for him to then argue that a person’s salvation is dependent on his use of material possessions. In reality, these passages are teaching the oft-repeated phrase “salvation is by faith alone, but the faith that saves does not remain alone.” Saving faith will always produce works. What is often missed is that one of the most common examples of the work that faith produces is ministry to the poor.

Why is ministry to the poor so closely tied to the evidence of one’s salvation? As was pointed out earlier, God views how people treat the poor as how they treat Him. The reason seems to be that a person who genuinely understands the gospel will be generous to the poor:

This means that God on judgment day can tell what a person's heart attitude is to him by what the person's heart attitude is to the poor. If there is a hardness, indifference, or

mercy would include helping those in need and justice would include not using the poor for material gain (e.g., Micah 6:10–12).

8Though there is some dispute as to the exact referents in this passage (e.g., is Jesus referring to the treatment of just the Apostles and missionaries, of all His disciples, or of saved Jews during the Tribulation), the basic point remains—Jesus points to a connection between the eternal destiny of people and their treatment of certain poor people.
superiority, it betrays the self-righteousness of a heart that has not truly embraced the truth that he or she is a lost sinner saved only by free yet costly grace.⁹

That is why Paul tells the Corinthians that he will be able to know the sincerity of their love by how they give to help the poor in Jerusalem. The reason is that they “know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:8–9). As Jonathan Edwards commented on this passage: [Giving to the poor] is especially reasonable, considering our circumstances under such a dispensation of grace as that of the gospel. Consider how much God hath done for us, how greatly he hath loved us, what he hath given us, when we were so unworthy and when he could have no addition to his happiness by us. Consider that silver and gold, and earthly crowns, were in his esteem but mean things to give us, and he hath therefore given us his own Son. Christ loved and pitied us, when we were poor, and he laid out himself to help, and even did shed his own blood for us without grudging. He did not think much to deny himself, and to be at great cost for us vile wretches in order to make us rich, and to clothe us with kingly robes, when we were naked; to feast us at his own table with dainties infinitely costly, when we were starving; to advance us from the dunghill, and set us among princes, and make us to inherit the throne of his glory, and so to give us the enjoyment of the greatest wealth and plenty to all eternity…Considering all these things, what a poor business will it be, that those who hope to share these benefits, yet cannot give something for the relief of a poor neighbour without grudging! That it should grieve them to part with a small matter, to help a fellow-servant in calamity, when Christ did not grudge to shed his own blood for them! How unsuitable it is for us, who live only by kindness, to be unkind!¹⁰

When a person understands the gospel, he will realize that everything he has is because of God’s grace. He will realize that all people are made in God’s image, and all people are fallen in sin. He will see that he is no better than those who are poor and will realize that they, like him, stand in need of God’s mercy. He will recognize that earthly riches are temporal, and so will seek to lay up treasure in heaven by giving to those in need on earth (Lk 12:33–34). He will see that a failure to be generous to those in need shows that he loves his possessions more than God and does not understood what it means to lose his life for the sake of Christ (Lk 14:26–33; 18:18–29).

The gospel not only causes believers to be generous to the poor, but being generous to the poor reinforces the truths of the gospel to the believer:

Like nothing else could ever do, the gospel instills in me a heart for the downcast, the poverty-stricken, and those in need of physical mercies, especially when such persons are of the household of faith. When I see persons who are materially poor, I instantly feel a kinship with them, for they are physically what I was spiritually when my heart was closed to Christ. Perhaps some of them are in their condition because of sin, but so was I. Perhaps they are unkind when I try to help them; but I, too, have been spiteful to God when He has sought to

⁹Timothy Keller, “The Gospel and the Poor,” Themelios 33 (December 2008). This does not mean that these good works form the grounds of justification; they are evidence of the reality of justification grounded in the work of Christ.

help me. Perhaps they are thankless and even abuse the kindness I show them, but how many times have I been thankless and used what God has given me to serve selfish ends? Perhaps a poverty-stricken person will be blessed and changed as a result of some kindness I show them. If so, God be praised for His grace through me. But if the person walks away unchanged by my kindness, then I still rejoice over the opportunity to love as God loves. Perhaps the person will repent in time; but for now, my heart is chastened and made wiser by the tangible depiction of what I myself have done to God on numerous occasions. The gospel reminds me daily of the spiritual poverty into which I was born and also of the staggering generosity of Christ towards me. Such reminders instill in me both a felt connection to the poor and a desire to show them the same generosity that has been lavished on me. When ministering to the poor with these motivations, I not only preach the gospel to them through word and deed, but I reenact the gospel to my own benefit as well.11

**Issues Related to Ministry to the Poor**

The Bible is clear that Christians need to be involved in ministry to the poor. However, there are several issues that should be addressed in order to understand more clearly what that ministry should look like. Too often, these issues are used as excuses to try to justify ignoring the Scripture’s teaching on the matter of Christian charity. Instead, believers should seek to think through the matters carefully and biblically in order to know how they can obey God as they help those in need. Though I will not attempt full and complete answers to these issues, I will seek to provide some starting points for further evaluation.

*Indiscriminate Charity?*

One of the first questions that people have when discussing the nature of ministry to the poor is whether or not there are exceptions to these calls to charity. Are we supposed to give to any person who comes and asks for money? What about those people who have wasted their money or are not willing to get a job? Though Scripture rarely qualifies the injunctions concerning generosity to those in need, Paul does teach very clearly that believers should work to provide for themselves. Those who are unwilling to work should not be supported by other believers. Instead, they should be put out of fellowship to urge them to repent (1 Thess 4:11; 2 Thes 3:6–15; cf. Eph 4:28). Who falls under the category of able but unwilling and how this principle should be applied to those outside the church must be considered further.

*Should a New Testament Believer Obey These Old Testament Instructions?*

Though the New Testament is clearly not silent on this matter, the Old Testament contains several passages dealing with ministry to the poor. Should the year of jubilee be applied today, and, if so, how? Should Christians not charge interest to other Christians? In order to answer these questions, it is important to keep a few key points in mind. The church is not Israel and is not under the full regulations of the Mosaic Law (Mt 16:18; Acts 2; Rom 6:15; Gal 3:24–26). Israel was a nation that determined its own laws and institutions, while the church is separate.

---

from the state (Matt 22:15–22; Rom 13:1–7). However, the Old Testament is still authoritative and instructive for believers today (2 Tim 3:16). Thus, a New Testament believer may not be able to apply the Old Testament instruction in an exactly parallel way today, but that does not mean it can simply be dismissed as irrelevant.

Ministry to Believers or Unbelievers?

Are believers supposed to minister to all poor people, or only to poor Christians? Is there a priority of one over the other? Unfortunately, many overlook this issue when addressing the biblical teaching on ministry to the poor and do not point out that most of the passages in the New Testament are speaking of believers helping other believers (e.g., John 13:35; Acts 2:45; 11:27–30; Gal 6:1–2; James 2:14–16; 1 Jn 3:16–17). However, Scripture is clear that believers are also to minister to those who are unbelievers, including their enemies (Lk 6:32-36; Lk 10:25-37; Matt 5:45.) Galatians 6:10 helps us to see the relationship between the two: “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” How that “especially” is implemented must be addressed on an individual basis.

What About the Social Gospel?

One of the reasons that conservative churches do not address the repeated teaching of Scripture regarding ministry to the poor more often (if at all) is a fear that the biblical gospel will be replaced by the social gospel. However, ministry to the poor in reality has nothing to do with the social gospel. The social gospel was about societal salvation, while ministering to the poor is about obedience to biblical teaching and is only indirectly related to salvation.

Since ministry to the poor is not the social gospel, it seems unwise to ignore clear Scriptural teaching by claiming to protect the gospel. Surely it is possible to hold to the truths of the gospel while still ministering to those in need. The issue in part lies in the relationship of evangelism to deeds of mercy. Perhaps one way to maintain a proper balance is to keep the realities of eternal suffering constantly before us and those to whom we minister while we endeavor to relieve their temporal suffering. In other words, “Preach Hell.” If we truly believe in eternal life and eternal death, we will strive to do the greatest good for those in need by proclaiming the gospel to them and will not be satisfied with merely working to accomplish temporal good.

Is This the Job of the Church or Individual Christians?

It is at times stated that the mission of the Church is found in the Great Commission while the Great Commandment falls to individual believers. Thus, ministry to the poor is not the job of the church qua church but is only carried out by individual Christians. Though there is wisdom in that distinction, it may not provide the full picture. After all, the early church created officers in the church to deal with ministering to widows in need (Acts 6). As well, the Corinthian church was involved in the relief of the poor believers in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8–9), even though it was voluntary for individual members. Broadly speaking, it seems that the needs in the church are the responsibility of the church, while the responsibility to minister to the poor outside the church

lies more at the feet of individual Christians. But the exact relationship must be worked out further.

*Should This Be Carried Out by Local Churches or Para-Church Organizations?*

This issue is obviously related to the previous one, but considers more fully how these commands should be worked out. For example, if an individual believer wants to start a Christian organization to minister to the poor, should it be run through his local church or should he begin a para-church organization?\footnote{Even though the mission of the church does not necessitate an organization devoted to ministry to the poor that does not necessarily mean that a church could not start such an organization. For example, the church’s mission does not necessarily include a liberal arts education for children, but many churches choose to start a Christian school because they believe it can be a help in fulfilling the mission of the church. A similar argument could be used for starting a soup kitchen, rescue mission, pregnancy center, etc.} Does it depend upon what type of ministry it will be? Often local churches do not have the resources (either financially or administratively) to effectively run these types of agencies, so it may be better to work through para-church non-profits. However, the primacy of the local church means that these organizations should be used to serve local churches.

*Global or Local?*

Though related to the question of whether the poor includes poor unbelievers, this issue focuses more specifically on the locality of this ministry. Should the church be as concerned with poverty across the world as they are with the poverty in their own neighborhoods? Does the local church even have a responsibility to alleviate the needs of those living on the other side of the globe? The direction of Scriptural teaching seems to push towards a primarily local concern. After all, Israelites were not called to help the poor in Egypt but those in their own land. However, the churches in Antioch were concerned with the believers in Jerusalem who had been hit the hardest by the famine (Acts 11:27–30). It would seem appropriate for churches to provide relief for believers hit by natural disaster. Whether or not there is an obligation beyond that seems less clear.\footnote{It may be that the best way to deal with global poverty is through church planting, so that local churches can minister to the needs in their own community.}

*How Do We Help Without Creating Dependency?*

Once believers recognize their responsibility to minister to the poor, it is important to minister in a way that will not hurt those whom you are seeking to help. Too often those who give to the poor actually cause damage, perhaps most often by creating unnecessary dependency among those receiving the aid.\footnote{There are times when dependency may be legitimate, if the person is not capable of providing for himself and neither is his family. For example, I Tim 5 gives instruction for the church’s support of widows who must be dependent on the church because they have no family to meet their needs.} To try to avoid this issue, one must determine what category of assistance is needed—relief, rehabilitation, or development. 1) Relief is “the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-
made crisis.”16 2) Rehabilitation “seeks to restore people and their communities to the positive elements of their precrisis conditions.”17 3) Development is “the process of ongoing change that moves all people involved—both the ‘helpers’ and the ‘helped’—closer to being in a right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.”18 It is necessary to determine which type of help is required for a given situation.19 Providing relief when development is needed will do more harm than good. Also, as a rule of thumb, those who minister to the needy must avoid the trap of paternalism. In other words, “do not do things for people that they can do for themselves.”20 If our ministry to the poor is to be effective, we must think through how to evaluate the needs and work to accomplish actual benefit for those in need.21

Objections Against Ministry to the Poor

In his message, "Christian Charity: or, The Duty of Charity to the Poor, Explained and Enforced," Jonathan Edwards concludes with a powerful section answering common objections to obeying Scripture’s teaching to minister to the poor.22 I have included a summary of these objections and his answers to try to remove any lingering barriers to ministry to the poor. 

**Objection:** “I do not feel the proper spiritual motivation to help the poor.”

**Answer:** This excuse would keep you from doing any religious activity. You still pray, read the Bible, and go to church even when you lack proper motivation. Thus, you should do the same in regards to helping the poor.

**Objection:** “I would view my giving to the poor as a righteous act to get God’s favor.”

---

16Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), p. 104. Relief should be seldom, immediate, and temporary, pp. 109–110.

17Ibid.

18Ibid.

19Though the categories of rehabilitation and development may include societal/systemic concerns, they can also be focused on individuals, even those inside the church. For example, if a church is able to see a drug addict come to Christ through their ministry to the community, their discipleship of this individual will probably include rehabilitation and development by helping to overcome his dependence on drugs and moving him towards gainful employment so that he can supply his own needs and minister to others in need. Merely providing relief (food, money, clothes) may actually enable a person to fall back into their drug addiction.

20Ibid., p. 115.


Answer: The same could be said for any good thing that God commands. Your self-righteous pride is not more of an objection to helping those who are poor than it is an objection for doing any other good thing that God commands.

Objection: “When I helped in the past I did not experience the blessing that Scripture promises”
Answer: It may be that you were not giving willingly but with a grudging spirit, and, thus, disqualified yourself from the blessing. It may be that things would have been worse if you had not given to the poor. Or it may be that God is still planning on blessing you in a greater way than you have yet to experience.

Objection: “He may be needy, but he’s not destitute.”
Answer: Since we are commanded to love as brothers, would you wait until your brother is destitute before you helped? Since we are commanded to love others as we love ourselves, do we want help with our hardships even if we are not destitute?

Objection: “He doesn’t deserve my help; he’s ungrateful.” Or “He’s treated me poorly.”
Answer: We are commanded to love even our enemies, so we must do good to those who have mistreated us. Also, we are to love as Christ loved us. Since Christ was willing to suffer and even die for us when we were undeserving and unthankful, we must be willing to show the same kind of love to others.

Objection: “I don’t have anything to spare.”
Answer: There may be times when that is a legitimate excuse—you are not required to give if you are more needy than those to whom you are giving. However, anyone can make this objection as long as they are the ones interpreting what it means to have “extra.” Because of the gospel, there are times in which our giving will require sacrifice. After all, how else can we share the burdens of others if we do not feel part of the weight (Gal 6:2)? Also, there are times when those who are in need should give to those who are in greater need (2 Cor 8:1–2). The Scripture uses the picture of sowing seed to describe ministry to the poor. There are times in which, even though people could use the seed for food right now, they save some seed to sow for the next harvest because they believe it will bring a greater return in the end. So believers must at times give what they feel they need for the present and trust God to provide for them in the future.

Objection: “I don’t know enough about this person to know whether or not they are truly in need.”
Answer: This was the same objection for which Nabal was condemned (1 Sam 25:10–11). As well, the commands to be generous to strangers show that we do not need to know everything about a person to know whether or not they appear in need (Matt 25:35; Heb 13:2).

Objection: “I don’t have to give until someone asks me.”
Answer: Which is more kind: to force someone to ask for help or to give without making them ask? When we look for ways to be kind it matches better with a generous spirit. Would you wait until your brother asked for your help before you gave it, or would you want to help as soon as you saw a need? If we heard about someone who sought to find out what needs a group of people had and then helped them, we would think highly of that person. Then why shouldn’t we do the same thing?
Objection: “It’s his fault he’s in need.”
Answer: If it is because a person lacks the mental ability to make and manage money, then you should be thankful that God has given you that ability and seek to help the one who lacks it. If it is because of a person’s foolishness, then the gospel requires that we offer forgiveness to those who need it. If it is because of a person’s laziness, then if they have turned from their laziness we should seek to help them. Even if they continue in sin, we still may need to help them in order to help their families whose poverty was caused by their sinful father.²³

Objection: “If other people were doing their part, then I wouldn’t need to do as much.”
Answer: The fact that other people do not fulfill their obligation does not excuse you from yours.

Objection: “The government already has laws in place to help.”
Answer: The government does not necessarily help everyone who is in need, especially those who are not yet destitute. And, similar to the last objection, if the government is not doing its job that does not mean that you are free to neglect your responsibility.

²³Edwards’s instructions here border on neglecting 2 Thess 3:10. It may be that his point is that Christians may need to help the family of a man who is refusing to work, which could indirectly help the man himself.