

"Jesus did not come to help us escape the world; he came to help us transform this world. Read this manifesto of justice, and let the revolution begin inside of you. May your life be good news to the poor." —Shane Claiborne

A CALL TO ACT



BUILDING A POVERTY-BUSTING LIFESTYLE

**MARTIN CHARLESWORTH
& NATALIE WILLIAMS**

FOREWORD BY KRISH KANDIAH

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DAVID  COOK™

transforming lives together

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FOREWORD



Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the
prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' (Luke 4:14–21)

I wonder if this felt like a 'mic-drop' moment? A strong manifesto-setting speech has been delivered from this unlikely, uneducated northern newcomer. It is very clear what his vision and priorities are going to be and who is going to benefit. Today a new leader might make a point of dropping the microphone and folding their arms as a sign that no more needs to be said. Jesus rolls up the scroll of Isaiah and sits down. He has their attention. And for three very good reasons.

First of all, Jesus shows alignment with Scripture. Jesus the Son of God bases his manifesto for the future on what has been revealed in the Bible in the past. Elsewhere he states that he has not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. Jesus is constantly teaching the Old Testament and explaining his role and his vision using it. Nobody can question it: Scripture is pivotal to his work and his ministry.

Secondly, Jesus recognises his reliance on the Spirit. There is a beautiful mystery in the Bible about how the relationships between God the Holy Trinity work. Jesus here models to us his partnership with the Spirit when it comes to his mission. The work of the Spirit and the pursuit of justice have far too often been separated. Recognising only the first is futile, and only the second can be

self-serving. It is the Spirit who authorises and anoints us to meet the needs of those around us.

Thirdly, Jesus prioritises the poor. There is an unmistakable emphasis in Jesus' ministry on helping those in need. Not only is it here in his manifesto, but throughout his ministry the social outcasts are his role models (think of the widow's mite in Luke 21:1–4 and 'blessed are the poor' in Luke 6:20), his most eager followers (think of the lepers, the blind, and the crowds that have nothing to eat), and his preferred company (think of the early disciples and how 1 Corinthians 1:26 says that 'not many [of them] were influential'). This priority is also there in the rest of Scripture where we are reminded again and again to care for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow.

This clear prioritisation led me to found Home for Good, a charity focused on helping children in care to find loving families. It is what drives the work of Jubilee+ and what led Martin and Natalie to write *A Call to Act*. Throughout the book Martin and Natalie emphasise that biblical discipleship and a care for those most in need go together; that loving and serving Jesus means loving and serving those on the margins.

However, it also means more than just caring for those in poverty. It means changing the way we live, the choices we make, and the lifestyle we seek. *A Call to Act* will help churches and individual Christians discover practical ways that they can effect change in their own lives and in their churches, neighbourhoods, cities, and further afield.

It remains vital for the church's mission that we align ourselves clearly with the Scriptures, the Spirit, and the vulnerable. That is why

I love Martin and Natalie's work and why I am excited to commend not just this book but their unrelenting passion to help the church capture God's priorities. They are the real deal—open and honest and committed to finding ways for all of us to take seriously God's compassion for those trapped in poverty.

Dr Krish Kandiah
Founding Director, Home for Good
Author, Speaker, Social Entrepreneur
Lockdown in Oxfordshire 2020

INTRODUCTION



Visit www.calltoact.co.uk for more resources, including videos for your church, small group, or individual study.

On a wintry day in December, Martin and I met in London to go over the draft pages of this book together. As we were chatting, Martin mentioned the first family holiday he remembered: when he was four years old, his family travelled from Pakistan, where they were living at the time, to Sri Lanka. My instant response was, ‘Wow, how different our early years were!’

There are many, many ways in which my childhood and background differ from Martin’s. He lived in and experienced other parts of the world before hitting his teens. I got my first passport when I turned twenty. He went to public school and an elite university, while I had free school meals courtesy of the State and went to the roughest under-performing secondary school in my community. Whether we look at family stability, education, employment, or many other factors, my childhood and Martin’s do not have very much in common.

Martin grew up in relative privilege; I grew up in relative poverty.

However, there is one similarity that has made all the difference: we each encountered Jesus when we were fifteen years old. That turning point for each of us is why—despite our different early experiences of life—we both hold a deep and wholehearted conviction that concern about poverty and injustice is central to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's something we are firmly committed to, in our work together at the UK Christian charity Jubilee+, and in many other ways in our different local settings.

We believe that a vital element of Christian discipleship is coming to understand that caring for those affected by poverty in our communities is not an optional extra for followers of Jesus. Regardless of our backgrounds, experiences, upbringings—whether we've personally known door-opening privilege or opportunity-limiting poverty—every Christian is called to increasingly reflect God's heart for those who live in poverty or oppression.

But what does this look like, practically?

Martin's experience ...

Sometimes in life you need to take a step back and get everything into perspective. Most of us live at a fast pace. I certainly do. I get up early. I work hard. I have a lot of family responsibilities. I have leisure interests. I have a good many friends. Time passes quickly as a result. Life seems stressed. Life seems focused.

And then sometimes I take a day off and get away from town and go walking in the nearby hills. I live in a rural part of the UK where it is easy to get into the countryside. I turn my smartphone off. Suddenly everything seems to change. All the tough pressures of life seem to fade a little. I reconnect with nature and feel as

though I am in a different world; suddenly just being still seems more important than rushing around. I slow down. I reflect. Gone for a while is the pressure of work deadlines, gone is the pressure of advertising, gone is the ring of my phone. Gone is that feeling that I am trying to get somewhere without really knowing where that somewhere actually is!

Then comes the realisation: the things I really enjoy are mostly very simple. Things like a quiet evening in with my wife, playing with the grandchildren, meeting a friend for coffee in town, going for a bike ride, reading a good book, watching a good football match on TV. In many ways, the coronavirus pandemic in the first half of 2020 opened our eyes to how cluttered our lives have become. Due to lockdowns and social distancing, we were no longer able to fill our lives with things that previously felt so essential to us. Through the harsh realities of the pandemic, we learned afresh what really matters in life.

Many of us began to see that we need to rediscover a more straightforward lifestyle. And in order to do so we need to do some hard thinking about the power of consumerism and the materialist culture that threatens to engulf us by telling us that it has the answers to all our needs.

A poverty-busting lifestyle

Poverty usually starts out as a stark economic reality. However, it has a number of other dimensions which frequently go alongside economic need. Many suffer from ‘relational poverty’—the lack of stable and healthy family and social networks. This can often be closely connected to a sense of marginalisation and hopelessness which can be described as ‘aspirational poverty’. Finally there is ‘spiritual

poverty’—the lack of a coherent vision for life or set of values to aspire to live by. We have written about these different dimensions of poverty in our previous books¹ and we will be keeping them in mind throughout this book.

Our primary focus in this publication, however, is on developing a poverty-busting lifestyle. Each chapter will focus on a different aspect of the challenge. Chapter 1 was a late addition to this manuscript. Publication was delayed as the COVID-19 strain of the coronavirus spread across the world. Recognising the impact of the pandemic on those in poverty, in particular, Natalie and I submitted the extra chapter several months after the original manuscript. And that is now where we start.

Then in chapter two I offer an overview of current Western culture, particularly in the UK, before looking at some biblical teaching on how Jesus expects his people will live. In chapter three I focus on the need to reconsider our overall approach to living standards and advocate for a radical move towards ‘simplicity’. In the next chapter, Natalie considers the key issue of the culture of local churches—arguing for a much greater inclusivity of the socially and/or economically marginalised. In chapter five Natalie goes on to explore the great need and opportunity for churches to engage with decision makers in our local communities on behalf of those in poverty. Then in chapter six I take a close look at consumer purchasing habits and how these can be changed as part of our efforts to address poverty through our day-to-day lives. The final topic, in chapter seven, is the environment. I argue that this is another vital dimension in building a poverty-busting lifestyle

because of the social justice implications of the current urgent environmental challenges we face.

Our aim in this book is to think through practical ways in which today's church—by which we mean local churches and individual Christians—can truly reflect the prioritising of those in poverty that Jesus proclaims. We will be considering discipleship—a discipleship which combines active engagement with those in need, advocating for social justice and a willingness to think through and enact the practical implications of living out a poverty-busting lifestyle.

Let's start the journey!

CHAPTER TWO

OUR CONTEXT AND OUR CALLING



Looking back in time

Let's start by going back a couple of hundred years. In the UK, where I (Martin) live, things have changed a lot over that time, and that is putting it mildly.

In the 1800s most manual workers laboured over sixty hours per week whether they were men, women, or children. The nineteenth century was filled with legislative efforts to reduce working hours. As a result, the average working day gradually shortened. Today, the current overall average working week is about thirty-eight hours.¹ So we now have a lot more free time than most of our predecessors had—but we mostly don't realise it!

A hundred and fifty years ago most families, apart from a few of the rich, had only a tiny amount of their income available to spend

on anything above the necessities of life. Disposable income, as it is called, has shot up over the past century and has enabled most people to spend money on luxuries, hobbies, and holidays to an extent unimaginable to people back then. So we have a lot more money to spend on what we want.

A hundred and fifty years ago the average life expectancy was about forty-one years for men and forty-four years for women.² Now it is about seventy-nine years for men and eighty-two years for women.³ People live much longer. We can plan our futures with more confidence. We have longer retirements. There's more time to focus on things that we think will make us happier. Self-fulfilment is the name of the game.

A hundred years ago there was no universal healthcare system in the UK. Access to healthcare generally depended on having money or paying into an insurance scheme. Now we have a universal healthcare system mostly free at the point of delivery and available to all citizens equally. Healthcare has been transformed. We live healthier lives and have largely eliminated many dangerous killer diseases.

A hundred years ago shopping was hard work. Hardly anyone had cars. Public transport was very limited. Most people went to the local shops on foot to buy the necessities of life. Now we have cars, and a massive range of shops and goods shipped in from all over the world. We do not even have to move out of our homes to shop—we have the internet to help us and home delivery to supply us.

These contrasts are startling. It turns out that our Western societies have, in general, been getting richer and more comfortable. Westerners are now among the most affluent people who have ever lived on this planet.

All this begins to put my life into a more focused perspective. I should be overflowing with thankfulness for the privileges of my life—rather than burdened with stress about the things I would still like to add to it! Yet all around me I see discontented people—people striving to get richer and have more holidays and find that elusive ‘self-fulfilment’ we keep talking about.

The hard truth is that most Westerners are stressed. Many are under financial pressure. Personal debt levels are soaring. Mental health issues abound. Millions are dependent on anti-depressants. Family relationships are getting weaker. More people than ever are living alone. Social media is creating mass discontent and insecurity. These trends have only been accentuated by the impacts of the recent coronavirus crisis.

Something is wrong. It turns out that wealth alone does not bring real satisfaction and meaning to life. The poet W. H. Auden prophetically coined the phrase ‘the age of anxiety’ to describe the restless uncertainty of modern Western society.⁴

Looking more closely

Despite the general increase in wealth in our Western societies, there is a big and obvious paradox. Not everyone has been enjoying the benefits. Poverty is stubbornly present if only we have eyes to see it. It is a shocking story and a stark contrast to the burgeoning affluence around us. Yes, there are still a significant number of people who are genuinely poor in countries such as the UK. In particular, there are the long-term unemployed who have become a hidden underclass. Then there are those whose families have broken up. Even when this isn't because of poverty (financial pressure is a

leading cause of family breakdown), it can often lead to poverty. Family units are less stable than they used to be. There are those who are effectively excluded because they are unable to use the internet and digital technology. Some have seen their State welfare support reduced in real terms, while others are hugely in debt and cannot work their way out of it.

On top of this, the gap between average Western lifestyles and those in developing countries remains startlingly large. For example, the average annual income per person in the USA is \$65,112, compared to \$2,172 in India.⁵ It is a fact that in many parts of the world there are vast numbers of people in abject poverty—a type of poverty almost never seen in Western countries.⁶ Sadly, the worldwide coronavirus pandemic has led to significant further downward pressure on income levels in developing countries.

In the West many churches have been growing in their concern for and support of those in poverty and those who are marginalised. We give to international aid agencies and we have begun to focus more seriously on the poverty on our doorsteps. The rise of the ‘foodbank’ movement in the UK is a striking example of this.⁷ Committed Christians are volunteering in the thousands to help at church-based foodbanks, community cafés, youth-mentoring groups, debt advice services, activities for older people, night shelters, soup kitchens, and much more.

This is a story we have discussed extensively in our two earlier books.⁸ It is a positive story. It is an exciting story. However, in this book we are looking behind this to ask deeper, more challenging questions.

Here is a simple observation. While there has been a welcome increase in Christian engagement with those in poverty in recent years, this has not led to much significant reflection on our actual lifestyles.

Has this engagement led us to personally reconsider our own lifestyles and to begin to question our consumerist culture more seriously?

I was visiting a church-based foodbank recently. The car park outside the building was quite small. I found that the way to the entrance was largely blocked by cars—mostly expensive cars. This seemed surprising at first sight. I was later told that these were the cars of the volunteers. So this meant that anyone coming to that foodbank for help would have to run the gauntlet of stylish SUVs and four-by-fours. This is a symbol of a complex relationship between affluence and poverty. These volunteers were sincere, effective, and compassionate. I saw them at work. They were giving up their free time to help needy people. However, their cars symbolised a lifestyle vastly different from those they were seeking to help. Is this significant? Does it matter?

Can we as Christians truly serve those in poverty while still living unchanged consumerist lifestyles? This is a tough question. And it is a question that most of us don't really want to think about.

Looking beyond the media ...

In my childhood in the 1960s, TV was something of a novelty—and it was in black and white! Colour television was viewed as a great wonder when it was first introduced. New channels were added one by one—greeted with great excitement! Those days are long gone. I am absolutely amazed at the number of channels available to me on my TV at home. If we want to, we can have the television on in every room of the house, on large screens and small, throughout the day and night. Watching TV has become a prime leisure activity. This comes with a big price tag—and part of that price tag is

the prominence of commercial advertising. Advertising is a major feature of most TV channels. UK public service channels are allowed to show an average of seven minutes of adverts every hour across a day,⁹ and this advertising stimulates consumerism.¹⁰

One vital feature of the modern media world is the rise of the cult of celebrity. Famous, successful, and rich people have an enormous worldwide public audience. They may be millionaires or models, footballers or fanatics, personalities or politicians, actors or action stars—but they are all, in different ways, celebrities. They can attract previously unthinkable numbers of ‘followers’ through social media. And some are ambitious in self-promotion. The general effect of this phenomenon is to reinforce a cult of success and to promote the idol of materialism.

Our lives are also saturated by the news. Never before in history has so much information been available, easily accessed by so many people so quickly and in so much detail. What is the effect of knowing so much about so many other people and societies? It is helpful to know what is happening in the world—but there are significant problems too. We can easily become de-sensitised to news stories about war, famine, refugees, and outright poverty. It is not easy to take in and reflect on the multiple stories of human hardship. Our inclination is to switch off from them to save us the pain of identification and the guilt of feeling that we should do something. We become paralysed with information overload—leading to inaction.

Then there is the vast new world of social media. As I write, over 2.45 billion people regularly use Facebook¹¹—that is about 31 percent of people on the planet.¹² Social media can be a real positive. For example, it is great when seeking to keep in touch with family and friends at a distance. However, the messaging on social media

is complex to navigate. Many have found, to their cost, that virtual relationships are a poor substitute for face-to-face relationships. Many people feel more marginalised and undervalued as a result of social media.¹³ And it is all very time consuming. It is a serious issue, with studies now showing its impact on mental health, especially among young people, contributing to anxiety, depression, loneliness, aggression, low self-worth, and even suicidal feelings.¹⁴

It is evident there is a risk that the intense and ongoing world of the media in its many forms can have a huge influence in the way we think and act as Christians. Often we do not realise the extent to which we are being shaped by the media. One of the key ways the media shapes us is to make us passive. We watch the world go by from our armchairs. Meanwhile we begin to think purely in terms of consumption. Should we be considering what media we want to use and for what purpose?

In the same way that people tend to have a newspaper or TV channel of choice when it comes to news, so we tend to stick to our preferences online. In our earlier book *The Myth of the Undeserving Poor*, we explored in detail how the media influences our thinking around a number of issues relating to poverty. We concluded, sadly, that there is ‘a sobering challenge in terms of why we believe what we believe ... The influence of our news sources is a particular concern.’¹⁵

Christians cannot afford to let other people do our thinking for us. We are called upon to take a different approach, to be radical:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true

and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Rom. 12:1–2)

How do we 'renew our minds' and get free from the 'pattern of this world'? First and foremost by taking another, closer, look at the life and teaching of Jesus.

Looking to Jesus ...

The Gospels are filled with surprise encounters people had with Jesus. Here's one. Simon Peter was a fisherman. When he had first met Jesus, he had begun the journey of faith (John 1:40–42). Then one day, when Peter had come to the end of an unsuccessful night shift fishing on the Lake of Galilee, he was washing his nets and preparing for a quick sleep when Jesus happened to pass by. Jesus surprisingly asked Peter to get back into his boat and have another go at getting a decent catch. Peter and his fishing partners did this and found they had caught so many fish that the nets began to break! This is a well-known story. However, it is the outcome which is really interesting. As Peter was thinking about this extraordinary event, Jesus invited him to give up his livelihood, get on the road with him, and travel around as part of Jesus' inner circle of followers. Here's what happened: 'So [Peter, James and John] pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him' (Luke 5:11). That is a truly amazing event. What could possibly persuade Peter and his fishing partners to give up their security and income?

This was discipleship—the call to follow and obey Jesus. Discipleship is about lifestyle.

Christian discipleship is about following Jesus and letting him be our Lord in life. This is what Jesus invites us to do when he says: ‘Take my yoke upon you and learn from me’ (Matt. 11:29). It is a conscious decision to become an active, committed follower rather than just a casual church attender or a private believer. Many Christians have never thought of themselves as disciples in this specific sense. Arguably, the majority of church attenders in the Western world may not be true disciples of Jesus after all. They attend churches either hoping that some personal needs will be met, or out of cultural tradition or for some specific social benefit. In any culture, there’s a danger we can go along to meetings out of obligation, tradition, or duty, or the desire to have our own needs met, rather than because we are genuine disciples who have submitted our lives to the lordship of Christ.

Jesus calls us to a radical commitment.

Disciples follow the example of their leader. They try to live lives which reflect the values and teaching of their leader. To understand what this means, we need to immerse ourselves in the New Testament—but particularly in the four Gospels. Even a casual reading will tell us that following Jesus as a disciple involves deep commitment:

Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their

life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.' (Matt. 16:24–27)

Here we have some of the key themes of discipleship. Firstly, there is self-denial ('deny themselves'). Personal self-fulfilment in the modern sense is not on the agenda for disciples. Secondly, there is the willingness to face opposition ('take up their cross') as a result of public identification as a disciple of Jesus. No private, personal faith here. Faith is lived out in public as we witness for Christ. Thirdly, there is a decision to reject the materialist dream of acquiring extensive wealth ('to gain the whole world'). This discipleship lifestyle is only possible if we get the right perspective on our lives. Our present life is not the only one. Eternal life with Christ awaits us after we die. This certainty provides security and also the hope of a 'reward' for our faithfulness in this life—however hard that life may have been.

To get an understanding of what this might mean, we need to start by noticing what Jesus said at the beginning of his ministry. This sets the agenda for all that follows. His first recorded words of preaching are: 'The time has come ... The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!' (Mark 1:15). Jesus announced that God's 'kingdom' was arriving among mankind and that this would demand radical changes—changes of attitude, belief, and action.

But what exactly would this ‘kingdom’ bring to mankind? Jesus provided a direct and powerful answer to this question shortly after his opening proclamation. He returned for the first time to his hometown, Nazareth, after he had been baptised by John the Baptist, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and launched into his ministry by the words of the Father.¹⁶ His family, friends, and neighbours were extremely interested to know what was happening to Jesus. As he went into the local synagogue to worship on the Sabbath day as he had done for many years, they all pressed into the building to hear what he might say. Luke records the incident vividly for us:

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the
prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in

the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’ (Luke 4:16–21)

So it turns out that this ‘kingdom’ is going to have a radical impact on those in poverty, the sick, and the marginalised. They will be the primary recipients of God’s grace through his coming kingdom. When we read through the gospel accounts, we see many ways in which Jesus brought this into reality: physical healing, the forgiveness of sins, provision of material needs, giving hope and meaning in life, freedom from oppressive evil forces ...

It is not our task here to follow this amazing story in any detail. Our previous books looked more closely at the practicalities of how this worked out in Jesus’ life and in the early church.¹⁷ What we need to note are some of the more obvious implications for Christian discipleship. Two things are coming into focus already. Firstly, discipleship involves self-denial and a decision to let go of the pursuit of materialistic comfort and wealth. Secondly, discipleship involves enabling many poor and marginalised people to receive the kingdom of God and embrace the power of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus. This involves not just crisis support but a focus on changing societal structures when they cause oppression of those in poverty.

With this in mind let’s now turn to a key text for discipleship—the so-called Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5–7. Matthew’s gospel is constructed as a discipleship manual for the early church. Matthew makes a deliberate attempt to highlight Jesus’ teaching on discipleship.¹⁸ The Sermon on the Mount is vital in our

attempt to understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We are going to focus on Matthew 6, which addresses the lifestyle issues we are seeking to understand.

In the first half of the chapter, Jesus describes how his disciples should carry out three regular religious practices—giving to those in need, private prayer, and fasting from food (Matt. 6:1–19). It is interesting to note how these three practices are considered normal and commonplace by Jesus. Yet how many Christians discipline themselves to pray regularly in private? How many of us fast regularly? And how many of us give to those in poverty regularly? The focus in this passage is on doing these things as discreetly as possible—so no one notices, if possible. The motive is to please God the Father and to receive a reward from him.

So it appears from this teaching that disciples will regularly give to those in poverty. How will this be done? This is for us to work out in our contexts. It is the regularity and the motive that matters. Through our lifestyle of giving, the kingdom of God will come to those in need.

This sounds fine in principle—but very hard to live out in practice. Jesus knew this and his next teaching addresses the root issue. In Matthew 6:19–24, he identifies one of the primary issues of discipleship. It turns out that ‘treasure’—which could be money, property, or other possessions—functions like a huge psychological and spiritual power in our lives. It exploits our fears for the future in particular and offers the safety of a life full of materialistic treasures. Disciples are those who have turned their backs on the attractions of ‘treasure’ and are putting their trust in God as their Father as they take risks with their material security.

Jesus concludes this revolutionary teaching by focusing on our tendency to be anxious about our material provision (Matt. 6:25–34). ‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life’ (Matt. 6:25). He offers a radical alternative to the persistent anxiety about money that besets us all: ‘But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well’ (Matt. 6:33). We can’t just decide not to worry about money and about making ends meet. It doesn’t work like that! There is a more radical alternative. This is to focus our energies on advancing God’s ‘kingdom’ and his ‘righteousness’ which will naturally raise people out of poverty. How surprising to find that the antidote to worry about our money and possessions is actually to invest our lives into the kingdom that is good news for those facing poverty. God is always active in his mission to reach people and bring them to salvation. We are called, as disciples, to be partners and co-workers with him. As we work out what this means for us and orientate our lives to obey that calling, we are promised that God will meet our material needs.

Looking to the early church ...

So how did this process work out in the early church? We get a really good insight from the apostle Paul as he writes to his associate Timothy and advises him how to handle issues in the churches he is looking after.

First, Paul talks about getting the right attitude to money and wealth:

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can

take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. (1 Tim. 6:6–12)

The best way to live as a Christian, Paul says, is to cultivate an attitude of contentment with your lifestyle. Thankfulness for our basic physical needs being met is a great way to develop an attitude of ‘contentment’. However, if we are basically content with our standard of living, there will always be the temptation of ‘the love of money’. So what do we do if we find ourselves thinking obsessively about earning more, going up in the world, keeping up with richer friends or neighbours? Paul is clear—turn away decisively even from this thought pattern. Instead, actively pursue God’s kingdom—‘righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.’ Fighting for the advancement of God’s kingdom is good news for those in poverty, says Paul, then you won’t be tempted to think so much about enhancing your own lifestyle and personal comfort.

It is a radical message. But it echoes closely Jesus' teaching. This is discipleship.

Interestingly, Paul then goes on to tell Timothy how to teach and guide richer people in the church:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. (1 Tim. 6:17–19)

Here is some direct guidance for those Christians who seek to follow Christ but have a good standard of living and more money than they need to live on. Paul starts by warning them not to trust their wealth to meet all their needs or to make them feel self-important. Rich people, rather, should build up their active faith in God—in other words, they should make their spiritual lives really strong. Then, having done that, they need to do two practical things. Firstly, adopt a lifestyle that focuses on helping people in need in any way they can. Secondly, they need to specifically give some of their money away to help to those who are in poverty.

What might that look like in practice for us today?



Study Topics

1. Have you ever thought of yourself as a disciple? How might it change your daily life if you did?
2. What areas of your life has God been talking to you about as you read this chapter? What provoked an emotional response in you? Are there any areas where he might be prompting you to live more simply?
3. What holds you back from a lifestyle of generosity? How does Matthew 6 speak to your concerns?
4. How often do you thank God for your material possessions and for the richness he has given you in other areas of your life (health, family, friends, education, etc.)?