



# What are Christians to think about poverty and policy?

Our faith tradition guides us toward compassion, not suspicion.

BY LAURA E. ALEXANDER

**WHEN JESUS SAYS**, “The poor you will always have with you” (John 12:8), he is, among other things, quoting from Deuteronomy 15: “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I [God] therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’” (v. 11).

Christians know that God commands us to help those who are poor, and to both give and receive depending on our need (Acts 11:29; 2 Corinthians 8:1-6). Sometimes this command is straightforward. After hearing that an acquaintance is facing hardship, I might contribute some school supplies or donate to a GoFundMe. Or sometimes others can meet my needs. Friends dropped off meals when my children were newborns. But things get complicated when we’re talking about poverty and need within society as a whole—an issue the Israelite leaders faced in Deuteronomy, and one that we face today.

Questions about poverty, and

the role of government in providing basic needs for the least well-off, came up in light of the July 2025 budget bill that significantly cuts funding for Medicaid and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. The bill cuts \$1.1 trillion in federal healthcare spending over the next decade, which the Congressional Budget Office estimates will increase the number of Americans without health insurance by 7.8 million in 2034. It also cuts \$186 billion from SNAP. Estimates about the impact of those cuts are less certain because each state handles SNAP cuts differently. However, the Urban Institute and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities suggest that between 1.4 million to 2 million children may lose food benefits.

The impacts of these cuts won’t all be felt immediately, but polling shows that a majority of Americans think the bill will help the wealthy and harm low-income people. This may be one reason that Americans overall

don't support the bill's provisions; polling in June indicated that 49% of Americans opposed the bill while 29% favored it.

### **DOES CHRISTIAN THOUGHT HELP US?**

Christians in our society might wonder whether and how we should apply our religious values to policies like this. The Bible isn't a policy document, but it has a lot to say about wealth and poverty. Does Christian tradition give us any guidance when we consider government tax policies and programs like Medicaid and SNAP?

Some leaders seem to think so. House Speaker Mike Johnson requested prayers for the bill to pass when it was introduced in February. (Previously in 2023, Johnson told a gathering of supporters that God had prepared him to bring his party together by speaking to him in the middle of the night and guiding him to act like Aaron, then Moses, in his political career.) Meanwhile, House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries quoted the Bible during a eight-hour-plus speech arguing against the bill's passage, and several clergy were arrested after blocking a street outside the U.S. Capitol to pray while the Senate voted.

### **COMMUNAL CARE FOR THE POOR IN THE BIBLE**

Commands to care for the poor run throughout the Bible. Jesus blesses the poor and hungry, promising good things to come

(Luke 6:20-21). He states that those who feed the hungry feed Jesus himself (Matthew 25:34-40). He admonishes religious leaders for tithing herbs and spices while neglecting justice and mercy (Matthew 23:23).

In Matthew 23, Jesus seems to be following in the footsteps of Hebrew prophets like Jeremiah and Amos, who called their national community to task for exploiting the poor and critiqued the actions and policies of rulers. In Jeremiah 22, God tells Jeremiah to instruct the king: "Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word, and say: Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah...you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates ... Act with justice and righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place" (Jeremiah 22: 1-3).

Jeremiah further admonishes the king of Judah for mistreatment of workers: "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbors work for nothing and does not give them their wages" (Jeremiah 22:13). Biblical texts—both this text and passages in Leviticus and Deuteronomy—command landowners to pay fair wages and leave part of the harvest for the poor—not as charity,

but as a religious obligation not to appropriate goods that rightfully belong to those in need.

### **CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES, ADVOCACY FOR THE POOR**

At the very least, these texts—and Christian teachings through history—suggest Christians have a special responsibility not to look down on people who are poor. We are not to treat people in poverty as morally bad or less worthy than others. In the Beatitudes, Jesus literally says that the poor are blessed and preaches woe to those who are rich and well-fed, "for [they] have already received [their] comfort" (Luke 6:24-25). The book of James says that Christians cannot claim faith in Jesus if they show partiality to the rich (James 2:1-9). God has "chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom" (James 2:5).

For centuries, Christian theologians have reminded their audiences—both citizens and policy-makers—that their first attitude toward the poor should be one of respect and even honor. For instance, church tradition teaches that St. Lawrence was martyred in the third century because he defied political authorities on behalf of the poor. The prefect of Rome commanded Lawrence to hand over the church's treasures. In response, Lawrence brought indigent and disabled members of the populace before the prefect and stated that that these were the truest treasures of the church.

In the fourth century, St. Basil told a wealthy audience that, far from despising or pitying the poor, they should view themselves as thieves, since their extra food and clothing was actually stolen from people in need of help!

Martin Luther, never one to shy away from counseling and admonishing politicians, addressed social welfare in his letter *To the Christian Nobility*. Luther spoke against begging by religious pilgrims, advocating instead for local officials to organize consistent relief for locals in need. This was taken up by officials in Wittenberg, and in Leisnig, taxes were levied to maintain a “common chest” distributed by elected administrators from different social classes.

Jonathan Edwards, America’s best-known early theologian, brushed away the objection that Christians could withhold charity from someone who might have become poor through “idleness” or “prodigality.” Edwards instead argued that his congregation must not be too “scrupul[ous]” in charity. Christians, he said, must err on the side of giving, rather than risk sending away someone in dire need.

While these admonitions don’t translate directly into policy proposals, they do imply that Christians should approach questions of labor, charity and economic policy with compassion toward people who are poor, rather than suspicion. Whether it is usage of the term “welfare

queens” or accusations of free-loading on Medicaid or school lunches, Christians should be cautious about rhetoric that fires up people’s emotions against other people who receive assistance for their basic needs. This is especially true when rhetoric about possible fraud committed by the poor is accompanied by silence about wealthy people or corporations who do not pay workers fair or living wages, force workers into dire and unsafe working conditions, engage in human trafficking or commit fraud (for example) in reporting healthcare payments or receiving PPP loans. Furthermore, the history of Christian theology and charitable giving seems to demonstrate that Christians can properly support both individual giving and government provision for people in need.

#### **BIBLICAL COMPASSION AND RESPECT**

Biblical and Christian teachings will never tell us an exact number of people who should be on Medicaid, or whether SNAP is the best-designed program to get food to hungry people. However, when policy issues like the budget bill arise, what our faith tradition can do is demonstrate how Christians have engaged with charitable concerns at an individual, communal and policy level. And Christian teachings guide us to begin our analysis from a place of compassion and respect, especially for those in need. 🌿

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