

Pappas Patristic Institute
5th Annual Summer Patristic Studies Program
July 18-23, 2011

*On Poverty & Possessions
in the Early Church*

Instructor: Dr. Susan R. Holman

COURSE READER

Course Description

This course will focus on extended reading and discussion of primary sources about faith-based responses to issues of poverty, hunger, and social injustice in early Christian texts. Classroom introductory narratives and supplemental readings will provide the tools to help students understand and reflect on social and religious context and its relevance to how we read these texts today.

Course Objectives

1. To enable direct and thoughtful engagement with early Christian ideas about possessions, poverty, detachment, justice, human rights, and gift exchange, as they intersect in crafting a religious response to material human need.
2. To provide dedicated time to read and listen to the text
3. To foster dialogue respectful of different views about these texts and their messages
4. To provide students with tools for further application of these topics to church life, academic study, and/or personal spiritual choices.

Course Readings

All readings are provided in one of two required texts:

1. Course reader (available during registration or by the first class)
2. Basil of Caesarea, *On Social Justice*, translated by C. Paul Schroeder (SVS Press, 2009)

All readings are in English or English translation. Some selections may contain texts or excerpts in the original languages (Greek, Latin, or Syriac); knowledge of these languages is not required for the course.

Class discussion will focus on the primary text readings. Please read as much as possible of the secondary readings before each class to help you discuss background and context. Optional readings are provided in case you want to read more (now or later).

All readings (except Basil's sermons in the Schroeder book) will also be available in PDF format online at www.povertystudies.org during the week of the course (click on "Syllabi" and look for "Pappas Summer Institute 2011")

Bible readings that accompany each day's discussion that are in the Reader are from the *New Revised Standard Version*. Students are encouraged to bring to class a Bible and/or their preferred translations [or original text] of the selected passages if they wish.

Course Credit

Please tell the instructor on the first day if you are taking this course for credit and arrange a time to discuss assessment and grading expectations and how you plan to meet this goal. It is your responsibility to complete requirements for desired course credit within the appropriate time frame.

Syllabus and Readings

DAY 1 (Tuesday 19 July): Possessions

Bible: Mark 10:17-31

Primary texts:

- Clement of Alexandria “The Rich Man’s Salvation” (selections) [**PDF#1** in course reader]
- Basil of Caesarea, “To the Rich” (homily 7) (selections) [Schroeder, pp. 41-58]

Secondary:

- Holman, “Patristic Christian views on poverty and hunger,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 10/6 (2010) [course reader, also available online]

Optional:

- Shepherd of Hermas, parable of the vine and the elm [course reader]
- J.A. McGuckin, “The vine and the elm tree: The patristic interpretation of Jesus’ teachings on wealth” in: W.J. Sheils & Diana Wood (eds.), *The Church and Wealth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) [online during the course]

DAY 2 (Wednesday 20 July): The Experience of Bodily Poverty

Bible: 1 Kings 17:1-24

Primary texts:

- Gregory of Nazianzus, “Funeral oration on Basil of Caesarea,” chapters 34-36 [course reader]
- Basil of Caesarea, “In time of famine and drought” (homily 8) (selections) [Schroeder, pp. 73-88]
- Gregory of Nyssa, “On the love of the poor” (selections) [**PDF#2** in course reader]

Secondary:

- Schroeder, “Introduction” (pp. 15-39)

Optional:

- Holman, “Leitourgia and the poor in the early Christian world,” Chapter 1 of *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 31-63. [online during the course]

DAY 3 (Thursday 21 July): Philanthropy of the Gift

Bible: Luke 21:1-4; Acts 9:36-41

Primary texts:

- Syriac Man of God [**PDF#3** in course reader]
- Basil of Caesarea, “Against those who lend at interest” [Schroeder, pp. 89-99]

Secondary:

- Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “The holy and the poor: Models from early Syriac Christianity,” in Emily Albu Hanawalt and Carter Lindberg (eds.), *Through the Eye of a Needle: Judeo-Christian Roots of Social Welfare* (Kirksville, MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1994), pp. 43-66 [**PDF#4** in course reader]

Optional:

- Brenda Llewelyn Ihssen, “Basil and Gregory’s Sermons on Usury,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16/3 (2008): 403-430. [online during the course]
- Ambrose of Milan, “On Naboth” (selections) [course reader]
- Bronwen Neil, “Models of Gift-Giving in the Preaching of Leo the Great,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18/2 (2010): 225-259. [online during course]

DAY 4 (Friday 22 July): Social justice

Bible: Luke 16:19-31; James 2:1-9 and 5:1-6

Primary readings:

- John Chrysostom, 2nd sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man [**PDF#5** in course reader]
- “On Mercy and Justice” [Schroeder, pp. 101-108]

Secondary:

- Holman, “Healing the world with righteousness? The language of social justice in early Christian homilies” from Miriam Frenkel and Yaacov Lev (eds.), *Charity and Giving in Monotheistic Religions* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 89-110. [**PDF#6** in course reader]

Optional:

- Basil of Caesarea, “I will tear down my barns” (homily 6) [Schroeder, pp. 59-71]
- Matz, “The principle of detachment from private property in Basil of Caesarea’s *Homily* 6 and its context” from Johan Leemans, Brian J. Matz, and Johan Verstraeten (eds.), *Reading Patristic Texts on Social Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), pp. 161-184 [online during course]
- Holman, “The Entitled Poor: Human Rights Language in the Cappadocians.” *Pro Ecclesia* 9 (2000): 476-489 [online during course]

DAY 5 (Saturday 23 July): Poverty and Liturgy

NT: Matthew 25:31-46

Primary:

- Jacob of Sarug, “On the love of the poor” [course reader]

Secondary:

- Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “To whom did Jacob preach? from: George Anton Kiraz (ed.), *Jacob of Serugh and his times: Studies in Sixth-Century Syriac Christianity* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), pp. 115-131 [**PDF#7** in course reader]

Optional:

- Holman, “On the ground: Realizing an ‘altared’ *philoptochia*” from Matthew Pereira (ed.), *Philanthropy and Social Compassion in Eastern Orthodox Tradition*. Papers of the Sophia Institute Annual Academic Conference Dec. 2009 (NY: Theotokos Press, 2010), pp. 31-49 [online during course]

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Mark 10:17-31

[17] As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” [18] Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. [19] You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” [20] He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” [21] Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” [22] When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

[23] Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” [24] And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! [25] It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” [26] They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” [27] Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

[28] Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” [29] Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, [30] who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers, sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. [31] But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

1 Kings 17:1-24

[1] Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” [2] The word of the Lord came to him, saying, [3] ‘Go from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. [4] You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.’ [5] So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. [6] The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi. But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

[8] Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, [9] ‘Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.’ [10] So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.’ [11] As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.’ [12] But she said, ‘As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.’ [13] Elijah said to her, ‘Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. [14] For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.’ [15] She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. [16] The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

[17] After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. [18] She then said to Elijah, 'What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!' [19] But he said to her, 'Give me your son.' He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. [20] He cried out to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?' [21] Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again.' [22] The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. [23] Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, 'See, your son is alive.' [24] So the woman said to Elijah, 'Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is true.'

Luke 21:1-4

[1] He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; [2] he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. [3] He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'

Acts 9:36-41

[36] Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. [37] At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. [38] Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, 'Please come to us without delay.' [39] So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. [40] Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, 'Tabitha, get up.' Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. [41] He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.'

Luke 16:19-31

[19] There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. [20] And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, [21] who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. [22] The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. [23] In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. [24] He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' [25] But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. [26] Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' [27] He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' [29] Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' [30] He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' [31] He

said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'

James 2:1-9 and 5:1-6

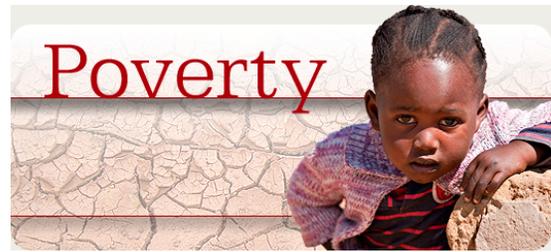
[2:1] My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? [2] For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, [3] and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or 'Sit at my feet,' [4] have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? [5] Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? [6] But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? [7] Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

[8] You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' [9] But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

...[5:1] Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. [2] Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. [3] Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. [4] Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. [5] You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. [6] You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.

Matthew 25:31-46

[31] When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. [32] All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, [33] and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. [34] Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; [35] for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, [36] I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' [37] Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? [38] And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? [39] And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' [40] And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' [41] Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; [42] for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, [43] I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' [44] Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?' [45] Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' [46] And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.



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Patristic Christian Views on Poverty and Hunger

[Susan R Holman](#)

[1] The poor are "living images of God," wrote Martin Luther in 1522, an opinion shared by Ulrich Zwingli, who argued that God "turned all visible cults from himself to the poor."¹ Both reformers knew Johannes Oecolampadius (a co-signatory at Marburg in 1529), whose treatises on poor relief began with his 1519 translation of Gregory of Nazianzus's fourth-century sermon (*Oration 14*), "On the love of the poor."² John Calvin similarly drew on early Christian writers, particularly John Chrysostom, the late fourth-century bishop of Antioch and Constantinople, for his views on social welfare.³ These reformers profoundly shaped Thomas Cranmer, who influenced the development of Elizabethan poor laws. What was it about the early church that spoke so powerfully to Christians seeking to change social systems? What do early Christian responses to poverty and hunger offer to us in the twenty-first century? This article provides a brief overview of examples from the "patristic" period, that is, early Christian writings between the second and the sixth centuries.



Detail from *Belisarius Begging for Alms* by Jacques-Louis David

[2] Care for the poor and hungry was part of Christian "liturgy" (meaning both worship and service) from the beginning. According to Justin Martyr (*Apology* 1.67), Sunday services in second-century Rome included a collection for the poor, funds used to care for orphans, widows, the sick, prisoners, strangers, and "all in need." The *Didache* (13.4–5) also mentions regular food collections for both the clergy and the poor as part of worship. 1 Clement (55.2) famously claims that some sold themselves into slavery in order to feed others.⁴

[3] Assistance was not limited to fellow believers. Even before Christianity became legal in the early fourth century, Christians were recognized for their open-handed generosity beyond religious boundaries. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (martyred in 258) practiced a "liberality of overflowing works to all, not to those only who are of the household of faith."⁵ Pachomius, a pagan teenage soldier imprisoned as a conscript around 300, was so impressed by the Christians who brought food to the prisoners that he converted, founding the earliest model of "coenobitic" or community monasticism. Christian responses to a famine in Cappadocia (central Turkey) in the 360s, discussed further below, emphasized similar ecumenism. And by the year 400, John Chrysostom told his congregation, "If you see anyone in affliction, do not be curious to enquire further... [the needy person] is God's, whether he is a heathen or a Jew; since even if he is an unbeliever, still he needs help." (*Homily on Hebrews* 10.4).⁶ Even the emperor, Julian "the Apostate," in his letter to Arsacius, high priest of Galatia, regarded Christian generosity as a model. A few writers do seem to limit alms to fellow Christians; two examples are Clement of Alexandria and Leo, the fifth-century bishop of Rome. But even they focus more on generosity than on imposing limits.

[4] The more common distinction was between "worthy" and "undeserving" beggars. In third-century Syria, widows and orphans were "worthy" of church support and were expected to pray for their benefactors. Donors, too, needed to be "worthy"; the *Didascalia Apostolorum* condemned donations that had been earned by immoral means lest they taint the praying widow when God failed to honor her prayers but instead avenged the donor for his (or her) sinfulness.⁷ Yet even gifts from sinners were accepted. Sometimes this was because their intent and desired relationship with God represented proper repentance. In other cases, Christians eager to channel riches into relief activities were not above tricking unrighteous misers into anticipating "profit" from an investment without quite making it clear that only in heaven would they see their gains.⁸ Early Christian texts consistently tried to literally "scare the hell out of" people by citing the threat of Matthew 25:31–46, the parable of the sheep and the goats, that God will justly reward (or condemn) those who do (or do not) give to Christ in the bodies of the poor here and now. The Reformers' understanding of this "Christ-poor," quoted above, reflects a similar literalism unrelated to any positions on the doctrine of salvation by faith. Regardless of one's grounds for salvation, that is, Christ was to be recognized — and touched — in the bodies of those in need.

[5] Early Christians were divided on many details about divestment. Some, like St. Anthony, took literally the Gospel teaching to give everything away and choose voluntary poverty. Others, like Clement of Alexandria, taught that what mattered most was detachment: there was nothing wrong with retaining the wealth and social status that allowed one to maintain one's own household and dependents as long as one's focus and true attachments were centered in Christ and the hope of gaining "true" spiritual wealth.⁹ By the fifth century, even monastics usually worked at various tasks to support themselves, often sharing sacrificially with others, including wandering non-monastic beggars. Basil, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, described below, advanced what was for many a "moderate" patristic advice: that ordinary Christians ought to keep their personal possessions to a bare minimum, always ready to share, but they might also retain power over property and goods in a manner that treated equally the needs of the body and the needs of the soul.

[6] During famine and drought in the 360s, Basil was eager to take advantage of the church's newly acquired political power to show that church-supported care for strangers was good for the city. He established the best-known early Christian poorhouse/hospital (Greek: *ptochotropheion*), spending his wealth to buy up local grain from rich landowners and distribute it to the starving poor.¹⁰ He built an institutional complex at the edge of town that offered medical care, housing, job training, and transportation to the sick and destitute crowding into the region. The poorhouse was so successful that Gregory of Nazianzus called it the "new city." Basil's entire family took part in relief efforts. His siblings Macrina and Peter also distributed grain, and Macrina sought out homeless women to share her ascetic

household. Another brother lived in the woods, providing food for some elderly persons. Basil's sermons and letters from this period call for economic justice, fair distribution of goods, and condemn the luxurious greed of the rich. While Basil focused on those we would call the "working poor," Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus offer vivid descriptions of sick and homeless street people, ostracized "lepers" who subsisted in dehumanizing conditions at the edge of civic boundaries.

[7] Most social welfare, by the Cappadocians and others, was in the form of charitable gifts rather than educational opportunity or capacity-building empowerment. Graeco-Roman culture was static, lacking a concept of democratic equity beyond one's fixed social class. Patronage ruled all relationships, including charitable exchange with the poor and hungry. In a world without refrigeration, electricity, antibiotics, or vitamins, food security depended on wealth, position, and relationships, and illness was a constant risk for all. Maternal and child mortality rates were high, and women had to depend on family and patronage structures (including the patronage of bishops, monks, and magistrates) to protect their possessions and their interests. Gift exchange that generated perpetual interdependencies was a logical means of social welfare in such a world. "In addition, Christian alms (Greek *eleemosyne*) was also understood by many as part of mercy (Greek *eleos*)."¹¹ Fueled by emotive "pity" and "charity," such mercy, then as now, likely often perpetuated patronage at the expense of human dignity for the poor. While early Christian texts often place the poor and needy much closer to God than their rich and snooty philanthropists, the "Christ-poor" still had little power to change their lot in this life beyond practicing what generosity they could with their own limited resources.

[8] Despite the emphasis on patronage, language about justice, equity, and human rights was central to many fourth and fifth-century Christian social welfare texts. This strong focus on fairness rather than feelings is important for the modern reader who wishes to learn from such texts today. The Cappadocians, for example, emphasized the common humanity and equal "rights" (or entitlements) of both poor and rich. Gregory of Nazianzus (*Oration* 14.24–26) exhorts his audience to imitate God in treating all persons with equity, or equality of rights (*isonomia*). The poor are identified as having equal worth, due the same honor as everyone else. Basil called sharply for debt-forgiveness and an end to the cancer-like growth of usury.

[9] This focus on justice is explicit in early Christian texts in Syriac, where the word for alms is identical to the word for justice. Syriac writers like Aphrahat (fourth century), Rabbula, bishop of Edessa (fifth century), and Jacob of Sarug (sixth century) all appeal to justice (Syriac *zedqto*) as the basis for relieving poverty. This root word has the same parallel meaning in Hebrew and Arabic; in modern Jewish philanthropy, *tzedakah* means both charity/alms and righteousness; and in Arabic *sedaga*, usually translated almsgiving, is one of the five pillars of Islam. Jacob of Sarug and the Cappadocians went so far as to argue that failure to "do justice" to the poor had global and even environmental consequences that could destroy the earth itself.¹²

[10] Then as now, individual lives were helped one person at a time, but the larger problem of poverty was perpetual. By the sixth century, much social welfare was institutionalized by Christian emperors in addition to individual examples mentioned in passing in monastic and hagiographic texts. We hear, for example, about state- or monastery-sponsored institutions that housed specific types of poor persons: abandoned infants, orphans, the sick, "lepers," monks who had gone insane, and the destitute elderly. Many of these institutions (particularly orphanages) continued in the Greek east up to the Crusaders. Social structures were less stable in those regions affected by the Gothic, Persian, and Islamic invasions of the fifth through seventh centuries, and initiatives often depended on particular bishops or the presence of monastic foundations and private donors. Hospitals continued to be run by monks and bishops and focused medical care on those too poor for private doctors at home.¹³ Not all of these models inspire: We

know from Gregory the Great's *Epistle* 9.24, for example, that this bishop purchased pagan slaves in 599 for the church at Rome so they could do the dirty work of caring for the church-supported poor.

[11] Early Christian texts on poverty and hunger are well worth reading today, and many are available in English. They offer us voices of our spiritual "kin" from a different time and place who faced many of the same problems that we do. Their responses may be useful as we pray, contemplate need, share with the poor, and "do" the liturgy of service, especially if we draw on such texts with due caution in order to avoid perpetuating their mistakes. We must recognize, for example, the limitations of their framework (patronage, slavery), their failure to empower social change, and their all-male blindness to the effects of poverty as it was (and is) suffered disproportionately by women. We must also avoid treating such sources as if they are a canonical "fix-all" ideal. Like us, their authors argued among themselves, struggled with limited resources, and differed about who was "worthy," how much to give, and what responses worked best. Indeed the variety of their voices can encourage us in our own contemporary efforts at global inter-faith dialogue as it relates to treating the bodies of the poor and needy as global and sacred space.¹⁴

Endnotes

1. Lee Palmer Wandel, *Always among us: Images of the poor in Zwingli's Zurich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 40 (n.17) [Luther] and 62 [Zwingli].
2. Oecolampadius, *Always among us*, p. 41. For an English translation of Gregory's *Oration* 14, see Brian E. Daley, SJ, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (NY: Routledge, 2006) 76–97.
3. Elsie Anne McKee, *John Calvin on the diaconate and liturgical almsgiving* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1984).
4. All examples are discussed in more detail in Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), and idem, *God Knows There's Need: Christian Responses to Poverty* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2009).
5. Pontius, "The life and passion of Cyprian, bishop and martyr," trans. Ernest Wallis, *AnteNicene Fathers* series, volume 5, 270–271.
6. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Hebrews* 10.4 (PG 53.88), trans. Rudolf Brändle, "This sweetest passage: Matthew 25:31–46 and assistance to the poor in the homilies of John Chrysostom," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2008) 130.
7. Didascalia Apostolorum: The Syriac Version Translated and Accompanied by the Verona Latin Fragments, trans. R. Hugh Connolly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929) esp.130–141.
8. For example, in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*, the apostle Thomas, ministering in India, promises to build a king a magnificent "mansion" but in fact spends the king's money on perpetual donations to the needy. Enraged when he discovers Thomas's duplicity, the king is prepared to kill him until the king's brother has a near-death experience in which he sees the heavenly mansion for himself.
9. Clement of Alexandria, "The Rich Man's Salvation," trans. G. W. Butterworth (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919); see also Annewies van den Hoek, "Widening

the eye of the needle: Wealth and poverty in the works of Clement of Alexandria," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, pp. 67–75.

[10.](#) The most complete primary source for the story of Basil's *ptochotropheion* is Gregory of Nazianzus's *Oration 43*, his funeral oration on Basil, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 7, 395–422, and in Leo P. McCauley, trans., *Funeral Orations by St. Gregory Nazianzen and St. Ambrose* (Fathers of the Church 22; NY: Fathers of the Church, 1953) 27–99.

[11.](#) For an excellent study on the early Christian language of compassion, see Paul M. Blowers, "Pity, empathy, and the tragic spectacle of human suffering: Exploring the emotional culture of compassion in late antique Christianity" [2009 NAPS Presidential Address], *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18/1 (2010) 1–27.

[12.](#) The linguistic focus on justice is discussed briefly in *God Knows There's Need* (see esp. 87–90) and more extensively in Susan R. Holman, "Healing the world with righteousness? The language of social justice in early Christian homilies," in *Charity and Giving in Monotheistic Religions*, ed. Miriam Frenkel and Yaacov Lev (Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients 22; Berlin and NY: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 89–110.

[13.](#) See esp. Robert Doran, trans., *Stewards of the poor: The Man of God, Rabbula, and Hiba in Fifth-Century Edessa* (Cistercian Studies Series; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Studies, 2006).

[14.](#) For more on this, see Susan R. Holman, "God and the poor in early Christian thought," in *God in Early Christian Thought: Essays in Memory of Lloyd G. Patterson*, ed. Andrew B. McGowan, Brian E. Daley, SJ, and Timothy J. Gaden (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 297–321.

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The *Shepherd of Hermas* on the elm and the vine

(early-to-mid second century Rome)

Parable 51(also known as “Similitude” 2)

[1]While I was walking in the field and considered an elm tree and a vine, reflecting on them and their fruits, the shepherd appeared to me and said, “Why are you asking yourself about the elm tree and the vine?”

“I am thinking, Lord,” I replied, “that they are extremely well suited for one another.”

[2] “These two trees,” he replied, “symbolize the slaves of God.”

“I would like to know,” I said, “what these two trees you are speaking about symbolize.”

“You see,” he said, “the elm and the vine?”

“I see them, Lord,” I replied.

[3] “This vine,” he said, “bears fruit; but the elm is a tree that does not. Yet if this vine did not grow up onto the elm, it could not bear much fruit, since it would be lying on the ground, and the fruit it bore would be rotten, since it would not be clinging to the elm. And so, when the vine attaches to the elm, it bears fruit both of itself and because of the elm. [4] And so you see that the elm also gives much fruit—no less than the vine, but rather more.”

“How does it bear more, Lord,” I asked.

“Because,” he said, “it is by clinging to the elm that the vine gives an abundance of good fruit; but when it is lying on the ground it bears just a little rotten fruit. And so this parable applies to the slaves of God, the poor and the rich.”

[5] “How so, Lord?” I asked. “Explain it to me.”

“Listen,” he said, “The rich person has money, but is poor towards the Lord, since he is distracted by his wealth. The prayer and confession he makes to the Lord are very small—weak, small, and of no real effect. And so, when the rich person depends upon the one who is poor and supplies him with what he needs, he believes that by helping the one who is poor he will find his recompense before God. For the poor person is rich in his petition and confession, and his petition has a great effect before God. And so the rich person supplies everything to the one who is poor, without hesitation. [6] And then the poor person, having his needs supplied by the one who is rich, prays to God and thanks him for the one who has given him what he needs. And that one becomes even more eager to help out the poor person, so that he may lack nothing in his life. For he knows that the petition of the poor person is acceptable and rich before the Lord. [7] And so both accomplish their work. The poor person works at his prayer in which he is rich and which he received from the Lord; and he gives it back to the Lord who supplied it to him in the first place. So too the rich person does not hesitate to supply his wealth to the poor person, since he received it from the Lord. And this is a great and acceptable thing to do before God, because the rich person has gained understanding by his wealth and has worked for the poor person out of the gifts provided by the Lord, and he has accomplished his ministry well. [8] And so, people may think that the elm tree bears no fruit; but they neither know nor understand that when a drought comes, the elm nourished the vine by holding water; and the vine, since it has an undiminished supply of water, produces fruit for two, both for itself and for the elm. Thus also those who are poor who pray to the Lord on behalf of the rich bring their own wealth to completion; and again those who are rich and supply the poor with what they need bring their souls to completion. [9] Both then share in an upright work. And so the one who does these things will not be abandoned by God, but will be recorded in the books of the living. [10] Happy are those who have possessions and understand that their riches have come from the Lord; for the one who understands this will also be able to perform a good ministry.”

Source: *Shepherd of Hermas*, in: Bart D. Ehrman (ed. & trans.), *The Apostolic Fathers* (Loeb Classical Library 25; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), vol. 2, pp. 309-315.

Gregory of Nazianzus on Basil's Divestment for the Hungry and Sick Poor

[34] Of Basil's care and protection of the Church there are many other examples.... But there was one example of special importance and fame.

There was a famine, the most severe within the memory of man. The city was in distress, but there was no help forthcoming from any quarter, nor any remedy for the calamity. The maritime cities support without difficulty occasions of want like these, since they can dispose of their own products and receive in exchange those which come to them by sea. But we in the inland can make no profit on our superfluous products, nor procure what we need, having no means of disposing of what we have or importing what we lack. In situations like this, nothing is so distressing as the cruelty and avarice of those who enjoy plenty. They watch for occasions of trafficking in want and they reap a harvest from misfortune. They do not heed: 'He that hath mercy on the poor, lends to the Lord' (Prov. 19:17) and 'He that hides up corn, shall be cursed among the people,' (Prov. 11:26) or any other of the promises made to the merciful or the threats against the inhuman. Their insatiate desire runs beyond bounds in their false wisdom. While they close their bowels of mercy to others, they close those of God to themselves, not perceiving that they are in greater need of Him than others of them. Such are these buyers and sellers of gain, having no regard for their fellow men or thanks to God, by whose benefit they enjoy plenty when others are in distress.

[35] But Basil could not rain down bread from heaven (cf. Exod. 16:15; Ps. 77:24) by prayer to feed a fugitive people in the desert, nor cause food to well up without cost from the depth of vessels (cf. 3 Kings 17:14) which are filled by emptying—a paradox, indeed, that she who fed the Prophet might be fed in turn for her hospitality. Nor could he feed many thousands of men with five loaves, (cf. Matt. 14:19; Luke 9:16) of which even the fragments sufficed for many tables. For these were the works of Moses and Elias and of my God who gave them this power, fitting also, perhaps, for those times and the conditions prevailing then, since signs are for unbelievers, not for believers (cf. 1 Cor. 14:22). But what was in accord with these works and tending to the same result, he devised and executed with the same faith. By his word and exhortations he opened up the storehouses of the rich and brought to realization the words of Scripture: he dealt bread to the hungry (cf. Isa. 58:7) and he satisfied the poor with bread, (cf. Ps. 131:15) and he fed them in famine (cf. Ps. 32:19) and 'he has filled the hungry with good things.' (Luke 1:53) And in what manner? For this contributed in no small way to his assistance. He assembled in one place those afflicted by the famine, including some who had recovered a little from it, men and women, children, old men, the distressed of every age. He collected through contributions all kinds of food helpful for relieving famine. He set before them caldrons of pea soup and our salted meats, the sustenance of the poor. Then, imitating the ministry of Christ, who, girded with a towel, did not disdain to wash the feet of His disciples, and employing his own servants or, rather, his fellow slaves and co-workers in this labor, he ministered to the bodies and the souls of the needy, combining marks of respect with the necessary refreshment, thus affording them relief in two ways.

[36] Such was our new provider of grain and second Joseph, save that on him we have something more to say. For Joseph trafficked in famine and gained Egypt by his humanity, (cf. Gen. 41:1ff) making use of the time of abundance with a view to the time of want, appointed for this purpose through the dreams of others, but Basil rendered service freely, relieving the dearth of food without drawing any profit therefore. He had in view only one object: to win mercy by being merciful, and to acquire heavenly blessings by his distribution of grain here below. He furnished also the nourishment of the Word, that more perfect charity and distribution of goods, truly celestial and sublime, since the Word is the bread of angels, (cf. Ps. 77:25) the food and drink of souls who are hungry for God and seek for food that does not pass away or fail, but abides forever. This was the bread that he furnished and in great abundance, that poorest and most needy man that I have known. And it was not to relieve a hunger for bread or a thirst for water, but a longing for the Word which is truly vivifying and nourishing and which leads to progress in the spiritual life whoever is well nourished thereon. ...

... [63] What more? A noble thing is philanthropy and the support of the poor and the assistance of human weakness. Go forth a little from this city and behold the new city, the storehouse of piety, the common treasury of the wealthy, where superfluous riches, sometimes even necessities, thanks to the exhortations of Basil, are laid up, unexposed to the moths and no source of joy to the thief, escaping the assaults of envy and the corruption of time. There, sickness is endured with equanimity, calamity is a blessing, and sympathy is put to the test. ... This to me is the most wonderful achievement of all, the short road to salvation and the easiest ascent to heaven. We no longer have before our eyes the terrible and pitiable spectacle of men who are living corpses, dead in most of their limbs, driven away from their cities and homes, public places, fountains, even from their dearest ones, and more easily recognized by their names than by their bodily features. They no longer appear at our public assemblies or social gatherings as objects, not of pity for their disease, but of loathing, expert in singing piteous songs, if any voice is still left in them.

...He did not disdain to honor disease with his lips, that noble man of noble family and dazzling renown, but he greeted the sick like brothers...by his own Christian spirit of approaching them and caring for their bodies, a mute but eloquent exhortation. Nor was the situation different in the city from that in the country and beyond. On the contrary, he proposed, as a common object of emulation for all leaders of the people, charity and generosity toward the sick. Others had their cooks and rich tables and enchanting refinements of cuisine, and elegant carriages, and soft flowing garments. Basil had his sick, and the dressing of their wounds, and the imitation of Christ cleansing leprosy not by word but in deed.

Source: Gregory Nazianzen, Funeral Oration “On St. Basil the Great,” trans. Roy J. Deferrari, in *Funeral Orations by Saint Gregory Nazianzen and Saint Ambrose* (NY: Fathers of the Church, 1953), pp. 56-59, 80-81.

Macrina and Peter (Basil’s older sister and younger brother) and their role in famine relief:

...[under Macrina’s tutelage Peter] was no less esteemed than the great Basil for the excellent qualities of his later life. But then, he was above all a co-worker with his sister and mother in every phase of their angelic existence. Once, when there was a terrible famine and many people came pouring in to our region because of the fame of its prosperity, [Peter] furnished so much nourishment through his foresight that the large numbers going to and fro made the hermitage seem like a city. ...

I do not think it is wise to add to my story all the other details we heard from those who lived with her and knew her life accurately.... Therefore I pass over that incredible farming phenomenon at the time of the famine when, as the grain was given out in proportion to the need, the amount did not seem to grow smaller, but remained the same as it was before it was given to those asking for it.”

Source: Gregory of Nyssa, “The Life of Saint Macrina,” trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, in: *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works* (Fathers of the Church; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), pp. 171-172, 190-191.

Ambrose of Milan
“On Naboth” (1 Kings 21)
(traditionally dated ca. 394)

(selections)

1. The story of Naboth is old in time but daily in practice. For who of the rich does not daily covet the goods of others? Who of the wealthy does not strive to drive off the poor man from his little acre and turn out the needy from the boundaries of his ancestral fields? Who is content with his own? ... Not one poor man, Naboth, was killed: daily is Naboth struck down, daily is a poor man put to death. Alarmed by this fear, the human race is now departing from its lands; the poor man, carrying his latest born, wanders forth with his little ones; his wife follows in tears, as if accompanying her husband to his tomb... [although the widow mourns less because] she does not groan at the hunger of her tender brood, which is worse than death....

5. Achab was king in Israel and Naboth was a poor man. The former was wealthy in the opulence of his kingdom, the latter possessed a few clods. The poor man coveted nothing of the rich man's possessions, but the king seemed to himself be in want because the poor man, his neighbor, had a vineyard. Which then seems poor to you: he who is content with his own or he who covets another's? ...

19. How pious would be your fasting if you set aside the expense of your banquet for the poor!... [The table of] that rich man from whose table the beggar Lazarus was collectin what fell, desiring to be filled... also was made from the blood of many poor and his cups dripped with the blood of many whom he had driven to the halter. 20. How many are killed, so that what delights you may be secured! Deadly is your hunger; deadly, your luxury. One fell from a rooftop when he was building spacious storehouses for your grain. Another fell from the highest branches of a lofty tree while he was searching for the kinds of grapes to bring down, from which wines worthy of your table might be pressed. Another was drowned in the sea because he feared that a fish or an oyster might be wanting to your table. Another was frozen stiff by the cold of winter while he was intent on tracking hares and catching birds in cribs. Another, if perchance he has done anything displeasing, is scourged to death before your eyes and sprinkles the very banquet itself with his flowing blood...

40. But perchance you may say—what you are commonly wont to say—“We ought not to give to him whom God so cursed that he wished him to be in need.” But the poor are not cursed, since it is written, “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Not of the poor man but of the rich does Scripture say, “He that seeks after prices for grain will be cursed.” Furthermore do not look to what each deserves. Mercy is not wont to pass judgment on merit, but to render help in necessity; to assist the poor, not to weigh justice; for it is written, “Blessed is he that understands concerning the needy and the poor.” Who is he that understands? He who feels pity for the poor man, who sees that he is his consort in nature, who recognizes that the Lord has made both the rich and the poor, and who knows that he sanctifies his fruits if he takes from them some portion for the poor. ...

52. And rich men, you serve indeed a miserable servitude, who serve error, who serve covetousness, who serve avarice which cannot be filled. Any insatiable whirlpool is more rapid when it is swallowing what has been thrown into it, and in the manner of a well when it overflows, it is polluted by mud and eats away at the ground with no profit to itself. Even by this example is it fitting that you be warned. For a well, if you draw nothing from it, easily becomes foul through undisturbed rest and base neglect; but if kept in use, it is sparkling in appearance and sweet to drink. So also a heap of riches, besmudged with dirt when piled up, is resplendent in use; but when left undisturbed, it is considered worthless. Draw something from this well. “Water will quench a flaming fire and alms will resist sins,” but stagnant water quickly produces worms. Let not your treasure rest, let not your fire abide; for it will abide in you unless you avert it by the works of your mercy. Reflect, O rich man, in what fires you are. Your voice is that of the one crying, “Father Abraham, say to Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water to cool my tongue.”...

67. And so in conclusion...pray for your sins, return gifts for the benefits which you have...It is faith that reconciles gifts, it is humility that commends offerings...Whence is it that the poor man's sacrifice pleases more than that of the rich? It is because the poor man is richer in faith, more wealthy in sobriety. And since he is poor, he is of those of whom it is said, "Kings shall offer presents to thee." For not in those who bring presents clad in purple does the Lord Jesus delight, but in those who govern their passions and by the power of their minds have dominion over the lust of the body. ...[R]eturn gifts to the Lord your God. Return them in the poor man, render them in the needy, lend them in the destitute...

Source: Martin R. P. McGuire, *S. Ambrosii: De Nabuthae: A Commentary, with an introduction and translation: A Dissertation* (Patristic Studies 15; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1927).

Ambrose of Milan "On Tobit"

[ca. 376-380; sections (not included here) are borrowed from Basil of Caesarea's 2nd Homily on Ps. 14, against usury; we know Ambrose and Basil corresponded (eg. Basil, *Ep.* 197)

(selections)

...9. Many through fear of loss do not lend, since they fear fraud, and this is what they are accustomed to say to those who ask of them. To everyone of these it is said, "Lose thy money for thy brother's sake and for thy friend, and hide it not beneath a stone to be lost. Place the treasure in the precepts of the most high and it shall avail thee more than gold." But the ears of men have been deaf to such salutary precepts, and especially the rich have their ears closed by that brazen din of their money. While they are counting their money they do not hear the words of Scripture. As soon as someone oppressed by necessity or solicitous for the redemption of his relatives, whom the barbarian is selling as captives, begins to ask, the rich man turns his face away...You are not freed by your perjury, but bound. 10. But when mention has been made of usury or of a security, then, with arrogance thrown aside, the money-lender smiles and receives with a kiss the very one whom before he said he did not know, as though recollecting a paternal friendship...11. Such, O rich men, are your kindnesses! You give less and you exact more. Such is your humanity that you despoil even while you are helping.... He pays usury who lacks food. Is there anything more terrible? He asks for medicine, you offer him poison; he begs for bread, you offer him a sword; he begs for liberty, you impose slavery; he prays for freedom, you tighten the knot of the hideous snare....

36. How often have I seen the dead held as a pledge by usurers and denied burial while the interest is being demanded! To them I have gladly given assent that they keep their debtor...[since] there is no difference between interment [*Lat. funus*] and interest [*Lat. faenus*]....

38. Of no less bitterness [,] these men watch the booths of the gamblers and esteem as their own advantage the distress of the loser...A dice-game also has its own rules which the laws of the forum may not render void...And their power is more feared than that of lions. Among these wild animals you live, O usurer, and move; you snatch your food from these beasts, you are considered more hideous than they: more cruel than they, you are more feared....

41. The usurer's money is a kind of viper which brings forth so many evils! The viper, however, carrying vitals fruitful for anguish, is burst by her young, and by a mother's death shows the offspring not to be inferior in nature to the mother. Therefore as soon as they begin to be serpents they render her with their bites. There where poison is born it is first tried. But the money of the usurer contains all its own ills; it brings forth, nourishes, and itself grows more in its own offspring, more numerous through its melancholy progeny, not less twisting than a serpent, and gathering itself completely into a circle, that it may protect its head, it scourges with the rest of its body. This alone it exposes to wounds; with its huge coils it binds those whom it has caught, with its head alone it kills them. If the head is safe, even if the rest of it has been destroyed, it revives....money at interest, from the day on which the contract has been

entered into, creeps along with increasing usury. It knows nothing of giving birth because it itself rather transfers the pains to others....

55. I will teach you how you can be good usurers, how you may seek usury. Solomon says, "He lends to the Lord that hath mercy on the poor, and according to his gift He will repay him." Behold good interest is made from bad...Do not then consider me any longer as grudging you your profits. Do you think that I am taking away from you your debtor? I offer God, I substitute Christ, I point out Him who cannot deceive you. Lend your money therefore to the Lord in the hand of the poor man. ...The Lord of Heaven and the Creator of this world is as a poor man for you, and do you still deliberate? ...56. ...Do not then yourselves fear poverty, in order that you may be rich. Give your idle money and you will receive fruitful grace, and you will assist the necessities of the poor and the care of keeping guard will be lessened for you; what the poor man has received will not perish, and what you have given to the needy will be preserved for you without a guard...

91. Tobias also knew that a reward must be paid to the hired servant...and instead of a worthy hired servant he found an angel! ...For we ought not to doubt that there can be an angel in the hired servant, since Christ can be, who is accustomed to be in the least. 92. Give the hired servant his reward therefore and do not defraud him of the price of his labor, because you too are a hired servant of Christ, and He has sent you to His vineyard, and a heavenly reward is laid up for you. Do not therefore injure the servant working in truth nor the hired servant giving his life, do not despise the needy man who spends his life at his labor and maintains it by his hire. For this is to kill a man, to deny him the succor required for his life. You too are a hired servant on this earth; give his reward to the hired servant, that you too may be able to say to the Lord when you pray, "Give a reward to them that uphold thee." ...In these things, therefore, is everlasting gain and perpetual usury.

Source: Lois Miles Zucker, *S. Ambrosii: On Tobias* [dissertation] (Patristic Studies 35; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1933.

Jacob of Sarug

Homily on the love of the poor (extract)
translated by Sebastian Brock

That Provisioner who provisions (both) worlds with what they need
became with us so that He might be like us.

He bore our sufferings and was smitten with our sicknesses,
just as Isaiah wrote concerning Him [Is. 53:4].

For your sake He was made a beggar in the streets,
in hunger and need along with the poor in this world.

Look how the poor are (like) a vast (piece of) land (for the purposes) of justice:

The needy are the 'good soil' [Mt. 13:8,23] of justice;
from them the soul will gather in produce that is full of Life.

The soul does not have anywhere to sow justice
(829) if the poor are not serving as the soil (on which) to sow.

The buffeted, the hungry and the afflicted are like fields:
do not be slow in casting your seed on (this) good soil.

These pieces of bread that you give to a person in need
will gather in sheaves of Life in the Land above.

Your gift may be extremely small when it is given
yet it will prepare for you a table of blessings along with Abraham [cf. Lk. 16:23].

(The land) is sown down below, but above it gathers in a storehouse of Life
- an excellent store that the soul will have need of there.

You sow here on the land of poverty
and your seed is placed in the hands of the Lord, according to His promise.

(In the case of) the person who seeks to give to the poor when he asks,
it is to God himself that this person lends, as is written [Sir. 35:11-12].

The Creator, to whom the entire creation belongs,
has abased Himself so as to borrow from you in (the person of) the poor.

'Do not lend it to a person who will repay you', is what He taught and instructed [Lk 6:34];

'Give to the needy, and I will be as a debtor to you:

'I am the one who borrows from you in (the person of) the poor,

'for on their behalf I will give you great wealth.

'I accept this—to become as a debtor

'on behalf of the poor, for it is poverty that I love.

(830) 'So, do you give, and become a creditor to borrowers,

'and I will become a debtor to you on behalf of those who receive.

'I will act as surety, and I will repay on behalf of those in debt:

'once you have been repaid, you will be able to acknowledge that you have not been defrauded.

'On behalf of the poor person who has not got the means to repay what he has received

'everything I have shall be yours when I repay.

'I am the one who borrows, and I will repay you with the Kingdom itself.

'Let not the person who gives to the needy have any doubt:

'take the Kingdom and great wealth in return for the left-overs
from your table that you give to him who is in need.'

Be astonished and amazed, discerning (readers), at the Lord's compassion:

although He is God, He has equated Himself with the poor;

He who is rich [2 Cor 8:9] has lowered himself to become a debtor,

seeing that He seeks to scatter His riches in all sorts of ways.

He is hidden and exalted high above all the ranks of heavenly beings,

but when a poor person stands at your door, you see Him!

He at whose fierce heat (even) the seraphs of fire cover (their faces)
 is here going around, in the person of the poor, begging bread from you.
 He before whom the cherubim of fire tremble in His exalted sphere
 is here going around with the beggars from house to house.
 He to whom all places belong, yet they are too small for Him,
 is wanting, with the strangers, to come and stay with you.
 (831) He who has constructed the house of (both) worlds for the races to live in
 in the person of the destitute He has no house to take shelter in.
 He with whom the Creation is full, and cannot contain Him,
 is knocking to enter your house in the person of the despised and the insignificant.
 The One who entered and sat (at table) in Abraham's house because of his love [Gen. 18:8]
 —invite Him in from the street to sit down at your table.
 He by whom the sea was confined by means of the sand [Ps 78:27], and (the sand) does not release it,
 —He is confined in prison: go and visit Him along with the prisoners [Mt. 25:36]
 He whom the cherubim convey on their backs with trembling
 lies smitten on the bed of sickness, along with the sick.
 Wherever you want to see Him, you will find Him
 by means of the luminous eye of faith that does not doubt:
 with the sick, with those in distress, with those who mourn,
 with the needy, with the hungered, the buffeted and afflicted.
 His radiance burns up the heavenly beings if they gaze upon Him,
 yet with the beggars He is clothed in rags so that you might be set in the right by Him:
 'Whoever, believing in me, receives one of these small ones
 is receiving me,' according to His teaching, full of Life [Mt. 10:40-42].

In the case of these fruits of justice which you give to Him
 He asks of you to receive Him with gladness;
 if you give Him a piece of bread and a cup of water,
 (832) then let your mind too be glad and let it cherish Him.
 Brought low, wretched, buffeted and afflicted, He has come to you;
 sit Him down at ease, while you get up and serve Him, rejoicing as you do so.
 Greatly worn down by poverty, and carrying (a load of) sicknesses [Is. 53:3],
 —show Him great love, lest He be grieved [cf. Eph. 4:30].
 For the poor person who has stood at your door is God Himself
 who has come to you: with cheerfulness open, so that He may enter.
 Had He come to stay with you in the person of someone of wealth
 you would have been put to shame because you had not got the means to entertain Him.
 In a lowly and despised guise He has come to visit you,
 so that when you fill His belly, you will find the Bread of Life.
 Give from what is yours—not that you're really giving from what belongs to you,
 for you have nothing of your own to offer Him;
 it is He who provides for you, and in the person of the poor He is making a request of you
 so that, by all sorts of means, He may cause you to acquire the Kingdom.
 He has given you His own Body—stretch out (your hand) and give him bread, for He is hungry.
 You drink His Blood—take up and give Him to drink, for He is parched.
 He gave you radiance and splendour to put on from the (baptismal) water;
 do not fob Him off with miserable worn out clothing!
 (In return for) all that you give to Him in the persons of the poor who ask of you
 He will repay you with raiment of light in the New Age.

For our sakes He humbled Himself voluntarily,
 (833) He came to the extremity of poverty, to the extent that He said
 'Foxes have lairs, and birds have cover,

but for the Son of Man there is nowhere to lay His head' [Mt. 8:20].
 To such an extent did He show love for poverty
 that a person who loves Him does not seek to acquire anything:
 the person who does not desire to acquire in (this) world anything at all
 —this person knows Him and loves Him with all his heart.
 The soul which feels disgust at the world's luxury and its lusts
 is a home and a dwelling in which He will reside.
 That widow who had in her house (just) two small coins [Lk, 21:2]
 —until she produced them and gave them away, He did not reside with her.
 Simon, head of the disciples, only had a small net:
 the moment he cast it away, he then followed the Son of God.
 The Apostles did not possess anything by fishnets on earth
 —they left them behind, and now they are rich and possess the Kingdom!
 Zacchaeus the tax-collector had a house filled with wealth,
 (but) when Christ entered to be entertained there, he straightway divided it up:
 there was nothing in his house that Zacchaeus did not distribute [Lk 19:8]
 since he saw that his Lord was a lover of poverty.
 A house where He sees gold, He does not enter,
 since it has grabbed and taken His place, and He is not wanted.
 (834) Gold has got up and become master, wherever it is,
 and if some other master enters, he despises and insults him.
 You cannot serve with all your strength two masters,
 God and mammon together' [Mt. 6:24, Lk, 16:13],
 one will be honoured, the other despised, because you are not capable
 of repaying both equally with a single honour.
 He bade you love the Lord, your Lord, with all your heart,
 but if you acquire gold for yourself, you will not love Him along with it:
 gold will take away your heart and make it its own,
 while God will be left behind, without your having loved Him with all your heart.

[Syriac text is at: Paul Bedjan, ed., *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, vol. 2 (Paris: Lipsiae, Otto Harrassowitz, 1906), pp. 816-836.

[see PDFs #1-7 for further course readings]