



CITIZENS *for* PUBLIC JUSTICE

Living Justice and the Psalms

Week 5: Material Poverty

*[Have someone share the **definition of material poverty**]:*

“The likeliest images to be conjured up upon hearing the word “poverty” are of homelessness, physical want, illness, and material deprivation. It is a concept that suggests “lacking” - be it money, resources, health, housing or a livelihood. Material poverty forces unconscionable decisions between buying groceries or paying the rent. It manifests itself in shame and fear. It is an experience to which we are all susceptible.” (p. 7, *Living Justice*)

*[Invite members to be silent before saying this or another **opening prayer**]:*

Lord, You invite all who are burdened to come to you. Allow Your healing Hand to heal me. Touch my soul with Your compassion for others; touch my heart with Your courage and infinite Love for all; touch my mind with Your Wisdom, and may my mouth always proclaim Your praise. Teach me to reach out to You in all my needs, and help me to lead others to You by my example. Most loving Heart of Jesus, bring me health in body and spirit that I may serve You with all my strength. Touch gently this life which you have created, now and forever. **Amen.**

(“A Prayer for Healing” taken from www.catholic.org/prayers)

*[Ask a member to **read this passage of Scripture** aloud]:*

Psalms 119: 9-16 (NRSV)

⁹ How can young people keep their way pure?

By guarding it according to your word.

¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek you;

do not let me stray from your commandments.

¹¹ I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.

¹² Blessed are you, O Lord;
teach me your statutes.

¹³ With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.

¹⁴ I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.

¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.

¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.

*[Allow each person a few moments to **respond to this question**]:*

What stands out to you about this passage?

*[Allow for some silence and then ask a member to **read the discussion aloud**]:*

Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm in the Bible, composed of 178 verses. In its entirety, it is a poem based on all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, with each letter beginning a section of 8 verses. For those who follow the Revised Common Lectionary, this passage is used in the fifth week of Lent to highlight the ways of God.

The Psalmist expresses a desire to seek and know God by learning His ways and ordinances. But clearly the Psalmist has more in mind here; they express a clear intent to be a faithful, living *response* to God's word and will for the world. In other words, we are not to simply intellectually assent to God's commands; we are called to put them into practice in our own time and place.

Over 2000 verses in the Bible address poverty, almost more than any other single subject. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God calls his people to not only serve and care for the poor, but to redress the unjust social structures that lead to poverty in the first place. In the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, for example, God gave the Israelites specific instructions for re-distributing food to their less fortunate community members. When the time came to bring the crops in from the field the harvesters were to leave a portion of the harvest (the outside edges of the field and any other leftover areas) so that the poor would be able to collect it and have enough food for themselves (Leviticus 23:22. Also see Lev. 19:9-10 and Deuteronomy 24:19-20).

People often cite Jesus' familiar statement, "the poor will always be with you" (Matthew 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8) as indication that, despite our attempts, poverty cannot be solved. Yet Jesus' original audience would have understood the context of this statement differently than contemporary hearers. Jesus, steeped in the teachings of the Old Testament, was referring to Deuteronomy 15:11: "since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth" is immediately followed by a directive: "I therefore command you, open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land".

There are actions that we can take as individuals and entire communities to prevent poverty. Poverty will only persist because of our collective failure to heed God's call to justice. How have we been wandering from God's commandments and vision for the world in this regard?

*[Have someone **read aloud from Living Justice**: "The Crux of Justice" by Greg Paul p. 10-11]*



*[Break into group and choose one of the **suggested activities** on pages 12-13 of Living Justice]*

*[Spend a few moments allowing everyone to **respond to the following discussion questions**]:*

1. What is the face of poverty where you live?
2. What types or situations of material poverty have you experienced?
3. How do you (and your faith community) show your love “in truth and action”?
4. What actions can you do that are not just “the wealthy giving to the poor”? What causes this distinction?

*[Close with **another reading** of Psalm 119 and the **prayer** on p. 14 in Living Justice]*

