

What Does God Command?

Through His Word, God calls us to join Him in caring for the poor through concrete, practical actions. In groups, discuss the following verses that have been loosely grouped by topic, using the response questions to guide your discussion. Share your findings with the larger group when finished.

Fight oppression and provide rescue:

Exodus 22:21-27; Deuteronomy 24:10-15; Zechariah 7:8-10; James 1:27

Maintain rights and advocate for justice:

Exodus 23:6; Psalm 82:3-4; Proverbs 22:22-23; Proverbs 31:8-9a; Isaiah 1:15-17

Work hard and avoid avarice:

Ezekiel 16:49; Matthew 6:19-24; Ephesians 4:28; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-13; 1 Timothy 6:6-10

Give generously and minister joyfully:

Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Luke 3:11; Luke 14:12-14; Acts 2:44-47; 2 Corinthians 9:6-11

What does the Bible command concerning your topic? Be specific.

What is your initial response to these commands?

What are some practical ways that you can turn this knowledge into action as you apply these commands to your life today?

Distinguishing Relief from Development

As we seek to follow God's instructions, we may at times find ourselves discouraged to realize that good intentions don't always equal good actions; even the most well-meaning interventions can end up causing harm. In *The Poor Will Be Glad*, Peter Greer, president of HOPE International, tells of a well-meaning relief effort with some unintended consequences for a Rwandan man named Jean. Jean perceived a need in his community for fresh eggs and began a modest business raising chickens and selling eggs. His business grew increasingly successful, and for the first time the community enjoyed access to an ample supply of reasonably priced, nutrient-rich eggs.

Unbeknownst to Jean, a Western church took note of the same need. Although it took some months for all the details to be arranged, the church was elated when they were able to begin distributing eggs – free of charge! – to members of this community blighted by protein deficiency. For one year, eggs flowed freely, until the church, pleased with a job well done, decided to reallocate their mission dollars elsewhere for the coming year. Unbeknownst to the church, its free eggs had driven Jean out of business. Where eggs had once been available for a fair price, the community now had to import eggs from a nearby town at a higher cost. The good intentions of the church ended up hurting both Jean and his community.

What went wrong here? How could a well-intentioned effort do more harm than good? Unfortunately, stories like Jean's are all too common as we struggle to not only respond but respond *well* to the needs of the poor. In this case, the church provided emergency assistance (relief) to a population prepared for development.

Before we go further, take time to discuss the difference, if any, between relief and development as you have heard the terms used in the past.

We often use the terms relief and development interchangeably, but there are important differences between them. Both are necessary, but either approach used out of its appropriate context runs the risk of doing more harm than good. Relief seeks to meet an immediate need and generally centers on bringing outside goods or services into a community. The world's response to the Asian Tsunami of 2004 is an example of appropriate relief: People needed emergency shelter, food and water, and medical services. Offering small business training – an example of development – would be inappropriate in this situation, even if many in the region struggled to earn an income.

Development seeks to equip individuals and communities to effect long-lasting change. While relief offers an immediate return, it may take months, years, or even generations to see the full results of development. Development utilizes local people and resources, thus fostering personal relationships, inspiring cooperation, and encouraging sustainability. Just as there are times when development is inappropriate, there are times when relief is inappropriate, even harmful – as in the story of Jean.

Authors Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett outline four criteria for determining when relief is the most appropriate response:

- *Is there really a crisis at hand?*
- *To what degree was the individual personally responsible for the crisis?*
- *Can the person help himself?*
- *To what extent has this person already been receiving relief from you or others in the past?*

“Only a small percentage of the poor in your community or around the world require relief,” they claim. Most others fall into the category of people who may derive more long-term harm than good from our relief efforts. When men and women can do for themselves, having something done for them undermines their God-given dignity. Read the story of the Good Samaritan in **Luke 10:25-37**.

According to Fikkert and Corbett's criteria, why was the wounded man a good candidate for relief?

Under what circumstances might development have been a better choice?

How might providing ongoing relief contribute to feelings of inferiority and shame among the materially poor?

Stepping Forward in Faith

Faced with the enormity of the charge to not only respond but respond well to these complex and systemic issues, it can be easy to wonder if one person can make any significant inroads. Fortunately, we are not called to perfection but to faithful obedience. We are blessed to serve a God of grace, who understands our human limitations and knows better than we do that sometimes our efforts to help will end up hurting. Read **Hebrews 11**. This “hall of faith” is full of ordinary people who struggled with their calling and even failed at times – often repeatedly. But on this one point, they were commended: They believed God sufficiently to act on what He asked of them.

When we are obedient, God in turn is faithful to use us despite our shortcomings.

Take, for example, the story of Calvary Monument Bible Church (CMBC) in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Church members knew the Bible’s commands concerning poverty and were eager to follow them. After visiting a church in Zaporozhye, Ukraine, they responded to the immediate needs they saw, sending food, clothes, and medical supplies, even helping buy land for church expansion. However, after three years, the pastor in Ukraine became concerned that his church was relying too much on outside generosity. Eager to continue to obey God’s commands, CMBC looked for ways to help the church without creating dependence. After a great deal of research, they bought a \$2,000 machine that would enable the church to make money by processing oil from sunflower seeds.

When church members visited a year later, excited to see the lives changed as a result of their development project, they instead found that the machine had never been used. The problem: None of the church leaders in Ukraine believed that there was a market for sunflower oil, and they didn’t want to waste time on a project that wouldn’t make money. In the face of repeated failure, the two churches refused to give up on their partnership. Instead, they turned to microfinance, providing small loans to local entrepreneurs to fund their own initiatives, and HOPE International was born.

As Christ’s body here on earth, we are called to be His hands and feet, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, tend the sick, and defend the weak. As we have seen, it’s an epic challenge, but rather than overwhelm or paralyze us, this should encourage us to proceed with caution and to take joy in the words of James 1:5: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” We have not been left alone to flounder in our mission. As Jesus prepared to leave His disciples for the last time, He promised to send them a Counselor who would always be with them and remain in them. The presence of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-18; John 16:13) helps us discern how to apply the Bible’s commands to our lives today in ways that help rather than hurt. May we listen well.

