

Ethics: What motivates Christians to help people who live in poverty?

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If I were to answer this question simply, I'd say God. But perhaps this is also quite complicated. When asked this sort of question, I find it helps to first examine what we mean by motivation, and particularly in reference to the Christian tradition.

Motivation is to do with our reasoning, our intentions, our inspiration, and our purpose. A Christian life is one which is modelled on the life of Jesus Christ, the one in whom the mystery of what God is like is revealed: 'For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells' (Colossians 2:9).

More than just being convinced by Jesus' personality and teaching, Christians believe that the spirit of God empowers us to be like Jesus. The Spirit inspires us to exercise 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control' (Galatians 5:22-23). Jesus typified these virtues and tells us to 'go and do likewise' (Luke 10:37).

A means of exercising these fruits of the Spirit is by loving our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:39). Acts of generosity, charity and compassion are a work of love for 'love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth' (1 Corinthians 13). Offering help is for the sake of others and is a response to human need. Christians ought not to be concerned with personal gain, reward or boasting: 'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.' (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The Church is intended to be the community, the body, which enacts and makes known this way of life. The Church is supposed to example a society – the Kingdom of God – in which love and dignity are offered to all, irrespective of any condition or status: 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' (John 13:34-35).

Jesus in the Scriptures offers us teaching about what this society – what this Kingdom – is supposed to represent and value. One of the most challenging ways he does this is in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46). In this parable, Jesus outlines six works of mercy i.e. feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and visiting the prisoner. Jesus says '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' (Matthew 25:40). Such is his care and affiliation with those who are impoverished that he suggests that in looking after them we directly serve him.