**Worship God by Serving the Poor**

By Steve Sjogren • February 23, 2015



Steve Sjogren: 12 ways to connect with those in need

The words in chapter 58 of the book of Isaiah have affected me for years. In that Scripture, God tells us the Father sees our relationship with the poor (or lack of it) as something serious. It is impossible to serve God with all our hearts and at the same time miss out on God’s call to care for the needy. The Scriptures say the way we care for the poor is tantamount to the way we see God. The prophet makes it clear that we must have a relationship with the poor if we hope to please God with our lives.

But in today’s church, most of us don’t know a single person who is needy. How can we obey God if we aren’t connecting with the poor on a regular basis? We can’t.

Something needs to change. We need to hear the call of God to those in need.

**The Problem**  
*“You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance, bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind. You dress in burlap and cover yourselves with ashes. Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the Lord?” (Isa. 58:5 NLT)*

We can get caught up in the mere motions of connecting with God. It is natural that we move from true intimacy with God into just outer motions of activity. Broken human nature will miss God. What sorts of traditions does your faith tribe connect with seeking God in worship? Raising hands? Closing your eyes? Standing up while singing? Nothing is wrong with such attempts, but we can miss Him as we do such things and even as we fast in an attempt to connect with the Father.

**The Call**  
*“No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help.” (Isa. 58:6-7)*  
God connects the practical with the spiritual. He tells us that we need to treat people differently if we hope to please Him. He calls us to the imprisoned, the oppressed, the hungry, the homeless and even relatives who need our help.

**The Result**  
*“Then your salvation will come like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your godliness will lead you forward, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind.*

“Then when you call, the Lord will answer. ‘Yes, I am here,’ He will quickly reply.” (Isa. 58:8-9)

Healing that is quick, new levels of godliness, guidance, salvation, the manifest glory of God—all those things happen as we rightly connect with God. What an amazing list of things that happen as we reform our approach to Him. When we connect with Him in these practical ways, we are plowing a path that will change everything.

What are you doing to connect with the poor? Here are a few practical actions to ponder:

**1.** **Give to the People Who Hold Signs**

You see them all the time. “Homeless. Hungry. Will Work for Food.” The homeless come to us in pretty predictable packages these days. Nearly always we just ignore them. We are going to get into a pattern of giving to these people.

It’s controversial, I know. You might think, “What if those guys take that money and buy liquor or drugs with it?” Or, “They have made decisions that got them to where they are—they deserve what they get in life.”

The poor are rightly understood as the “oppressed poor” in the Greek lexicon. The poor have been oppressed by the same essential dynamics for millennia. The Evil One is beating them up. He is oppressing them in a variety of ways. We aren’t excused from caring for the oppressed poor just because they made poor decisions—or just because they might spend the money we give them to get high.

It’s not our job to evaluate the motives of those who are hungry. The call of God is simply to relieve the suffering of others.

**2.** **Fast on Behalf of the Poor**  
  
If you want to see something big happen, start to approach God in a serious manner. Jesus said in Matthew 6, “*When* you fast,” not “*if* you fast.”

If you are new to the discipline of fasting, start with a missed meal. The benefits of fasting always come after you are through with it all. You will probably not feel all that inspired as you miss the meal(s). Ask God to stir up your spiritual temperature during this time.

**3.** **Pray Dangerous Prayers—“God, send the poor … ”**  
  
It is impossible to have any sort of relationship with the poor if you never connect with them. Pray a breakthrough prayer along these lines: “God, send the poor across my path.” God loves to answer that kind of prayer. He will do something soon as you utter that to Him.

**4. Sponsor a Child in a Feeding Program**  
  
It is great to connect with feeding programs like [**World Vision**](http://www.wvi.org/). Don’t let up in that regard. On the other hand, realize it is not enough to simply give to a distant need. God wants our more direct involvement.

**5. Feed People**  
  
Connect with a feeding program. [**The Salvation Army**](http://www.salvationarmyusa.org/usn/www_usn_2.nsf) is a good place to begin. You will be changed as you feed people at a soup kitchen.

**6. Deliver Groceries**  
  
Good news travels fast. It is possible that you will run into more and more people who need food. As people call in for help with food, put their address and phone number on a map. Set out bags of groceries near your front door. Encourage people to go in twos to deliver the food to the location listed. When you get there, offer a prayer for the specific needs of the people present.

**7. Start a Pantry. You Can Do It!**  
You might be surprised at how easy it is to launch a pantry connected with your church. The need of today is feeding opportunities. You don’t have to read very far in the daily newspapers to figure out that a lot of people are in great need of food.

You will need some real estate to house this. It could be as simple as a garage. It could be space at your church.

Connect with a larger area food bank. They are all about helping start food pantries.

I encourage you to stay pretty basic for a while with your pantry. You need to do what you are doing with enthusiasm and excellence. The temptation will be to try your hand at something additional other than feeding people. At a later point, that might be a good idea, but to begin with, stick to giving people bags of groceries.

Sit down and work on the central goals of your pantry. Who are you helping? How are you helping them? What DON’T you do in all of this? (This is a very important question. You will be tempted to do things for people that are not a part of your aim. Doing so will end up depleting your energy and could cause some to want to quit.)

Define yourselves as a pantry that feeds people for the days when they don’t have food provided for them by other feeding programs. People who receive governmental funds—or are on a limited budget—typically have enough food to last about 28 days. That’s a couple of days short of a month. If you could provide food for those days when they aren’t cared for, you will be doing something great.

**8. Learn to Pray 10-Second Prayers**  
  
As you begin to intersect with those in need, you will have opportunities to pray short prayers. Jesus prayed a lot of short but effective prayers. We need to learn how to connect with God—and others—through micro-bursts of prayers. God is interested in you intersecting with people in need.

**9. Sort Clothes**  
  
Right now, clothes in your closet are going to waste. You are not wearing them. The same holds true for shoes. You aren’t going to be wearing a lot of this stuff again. Do a quick sort and heave! Make sure you deliver these things personally to where they will go out.

**10. Reread the Four Gospels and Acts**  
  
Go back to the Gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus and the early church. If you have a difficult time reading, consider listening to Scripture on your iPod. You can cover any of the Gospels in about 90 to 120 minutes. You can get the audible version on iTunes.com. I highly recommend *The Bible Experience*. As you follow the story, pay attention to the frequent times the topic of the poor comes up. You will find there are more occurrences regarding the poor than you might have thought existed. Let God speak to you through His Word. Pay attention to the practical ways the believers ministered to those in need.

**11. Journal Your Discoveries**  
  
When life is done, you will want to give away your accrued riches to your children, grandchildren, etc. You may not have much in terms of material goods to give away. That doesn’t matter. You may give away a rich trove to your relatives if you give them some great thoughts—the summary of your life in the form of journal entries. Pay special attention to what God is showing you about those in need—along with what you are learning about your heart. As we get around people in need, we end up discovering lots of new things about ourselves.

**12. Just Begin**  
  
Nothing will replace simple obedience. Just step out to obey God in what He is showing you to do.

Don’t make a bigger issue out of this than need be. You aren’t moving to Calcutta. You are just taking some simple steps toward interacting with those in need. You don’t need to do something (or things, plural) that will be amazing. The simpler your plan for obedience, the better. If you allow your plan to become complex, you can get mired down. God calls us to care for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and those who are foreigners among us. It’s that simple. There is your calling in the pages of Scripture.

Connecting with the needy is a powerful step toward personal renewal. Want to stir up your spiritual life? Your spiritual temperature will go up as you step out to care for those in need. As you obey, you won’t be able to stay the same. If you want to draw closer to God, draw closer to those in need.