

HOMELESSNESS

A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

A M25i Conversation White Paper



MATTHEW 25
INITIATIVE

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People all over the world regularly experience the lack of what is universally considered one of the basic human needs: shelter or, simply, a home. This epidemic has been, by many, accepted as part of life. Many of us care—even deeply care—but are so overwhelmed by the lack of clear solutions that we're more likely to throw up our hands in exasperation than roll up our sleeves to help. For all the economic and social issues that homelessness raises, it raises, first and foremost, theological issues.¹ Without a better understanding of the basic Scriptural and theological foundations of this problem, we're bound to go awry in our solutions. This brief reflection is meant to offer a closer look at the Scriptural and theological foundations for ministering to those experiencing homelessness.

I. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM: WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS?

In order to dignify any problem, we must begin with the basis: using our words carefully.² When we hear, “homeless person,” we probably conjure up similar images of someone permanently stuck, on the streets, without a home. In fact, homelessness is a temporary state for many people. While some do experience chronic homelessness, it's important to recognize that many do not. The simple switch to “person experiencing homelessness” instead of “homeless person” may help our diagnosis.

More importantly, the language “person experiencing homelessness” is preferable because it puts the emphasis in the right place. Those experiencing homelessness are *persons*. All persons have experiences in life but are not primarily defined by those experiences. Calling someone a “homeless person,” or even just “homeless” (or several slang words to describe this group), puts the emphasis on the wrong syllable. Homelessness is an experience for some people, but those people are, first and foremost, people.

The problem of homelessness, therefore, refers to an experience of lacking a home. “Home is where you make it,” says a popular slogan. But, in reality, home is more than just where your heart is. It implies a stable shelter that allows for baseline levels of human comfort, including running water, plumbing, food storage, and the like. While running water and plumbing are not strictly necessary, living in the modern world without these basic human utilities is very difficult. Homelessness, then, refers to the lack of such a shelter.³

¹ Of course, this is not at all to undermine the importance of the social or economic issues. The point is that those issues are inextricably related to the theological issues, which stand at the foundations. The social or economic realities may change—or even vary from situation to situation. The theological foundations will not.

² See Rev. Matt Dampier's *Companioning those Experiencing Homelessness*. He is right to begin with a section on “Terminology” and I follow his lead here. Whereas this paper is an introduction to critical theological issues, his paper is an excellent practical guide to entering into such ministry. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/114zzZpuY8nAjYwKF4gsZtCV5KnU1-IEQ/view?ths=true>

³ This definition is a little reductionistic. But it seeks to underscore the socio-economic realities of homelessness. For a more expansive vision of what constitutes a “home,” see: <https://settled.org>.

Many people incorrectly assume that homelessness is merely self-inflicted. In fact, the supreme reason people are homeless is a “catastrophic loss of family.”⁴ Another way to put it: people on the street have been “dis-familied.” While many people make serious mistakes with drugs or finances, those people who have solid family structures have someone to catch them. When someone experiences homelessness, it’s because they have no one to catch them. If we think a person experiences homelessness only because of something they’ve done, we’ve failed to recognize the forces outside that person’s control that likely contributed to their experience.

II. THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS: THE BEGINNING OF HUMANITY

To know the theological foundations, we must start, “In the beginning.”

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). The story is familiar. God unfolded creation one day after another until the sixth day when he made the crown of creation: man and woman, male and female, in his own image (Gen. 1:26-27). Each day, God beheld his creation and called it “good.” After the sixth day, God called his creation “very good.”

This seemingly minor detail is of major importance. God’s creative design for humanity is *very good*. And humans alone are created in God’s image. In the Genesis narrative, the image of God is the central fact about humanity. Like rivers down a mountain, everything about humanity flows from this peak. Without starting with what it means to be bearers of the divine image, we’re bound to confuse or distort basic facts about who we are or what our purpose is.

But what does it mean to be made in God’s image? What good is it, anyway? Theologians and Biblical scholars have emphasized three features of the divine image: the image is *representational*, *representative*, and *relational*. Let’s unpack each feature.

First, the image is representational because we share similarities to God. Our capacity to love, for example, reflects our creator. Second, the image is representative because we are given a responsibility to live as God has commanded us to live. In fact, the commands given to humanity on the basis of the image suggest that humans are commissioned by God to reign or rule creation as God himself would. To illustrate the difference between the two, consider how a daughter might image her mother *representationally* by looking or acting like her mother (like in her hair color or kindness) but *representatively* by acting on her mother’s behalf. Third, the image is *relational* because it implies a relationship with God and others.

While these three features may seem like splitting theological hairs, each is critical for relating to image-bearers. This is especially true for those experiencing homelessness, who are, regrettably, too often reduced to problems to be solved. To see another as an image-bearer is to see more than a visual impression or basic human needs. Because basic needs like food, water, or shelter are often scarce for those experiencing homelessness, meeting these basic needs is—and should be—a priority. But meeting basic needs can never be the extent of a ministry caring for those who carry the divine image. Even if meeting basic needs is, programmatically, all a ministry can do, the way those needs are met should be sensitive to these expressions of God’s image in humanity.

⁴ See Alan Graham and Lauren Hall’s book *Welcome Home*.

How can we be sensitive to each of these features of God's image?

When we are sensitive to the *representational* feature of the image, we will seek the good in others as an expression of God's own life shining through them. Every human being, in one way or another, reflects God's glory to the rest of his creation. Do we have eyes to see God's glory in those we seek to love and serve?

When sensitive to the *representative* feature of the image, we will affirm the creative aspects in each person. God's design is not only for us to subsist on food and water for survival, but to care, through creative activity driven by his own Spirit, for the world God made. How do we empower those experiencing homelessness to recognize their God-given ability to represent God?

Finally, when we are sensitive to the *relational* feature of the image, we will seek to encourage a proper relationship with God and others. We are relational creatures. A fracture in the relationships most dear to us can cause incredible harm, as many experiencing homelessness know too well. Supporting those relationships is essential. How do we encourage those experiencing homelessness to relate to God and others well?

Recognizing the divine image in each person is, in other words, to recognize the dignity of the human person.⁵

III. THE DIGNITY AND FLOURISHING OF THE PERSON

The image of God assumes human *dignity*. The "fall" into sin recorded in Genesis 3 does fracture humanity's relationship with God, thereby marring the image of God in persons. But it is clear that the image remains. Just a few chapters after Genesis records the fall, we see that God forbids murder, "for in his own image God made humankind" (Genesis 9:6). This implies that the divine image demands that each person be treated with decency and respect.⁶

But what do we mean by dignity?

The concept of "human dignity" has, in recent years, been co-opted in secular circles to provide a minimal standard that everyone—regardless of faith or creed—can agree on. But Christian ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre has recently argued that this is often a distortion. Dignity is not only a minimal standard to encourage respect of all persons, but is intimately tied with a robust vision of the end (*telos*) of human persons. It is concerned not only with a basic level of decency and respect, but with the flourishing of each person.⁷

Flourishing is a positive vision for persons that takes into account the end, or purpose, for which human beings were created. Flourishing, we might say, is sensitive to the representational, representative, and rela-

⁵ This is the first pillar of Catholic Social Teaching, a body of teaching that offers guidance for how to love one another well in modern society. For more, see Simon Cuff's excellent summary of Catholic Social Teaching, *Love in Action*. Cuff's book is focused on accessibility and is specifically for putting Catholic Social Teaching into practice. Catholic Social Teaching offers a helpful theological foundation for Christian social activism in any denomination.

⁶ For an excellent example of what dignity for people in chronic homelessness looks like, see Alan Graham and Lauren Hall's book *Welcome Home*.

⁷ For a succinct summary of MacIntyre's argument, and how he grounds this in a Thomistic view of justice, see Patrick Deneen's short article: <https://postliberalorder.substack.com/p/big-mac>

tional features of the divine image. It recognizes a created purpose for each person. As MacIntyre points out, dignity alone (on a secular understanding) is woefully inadequate: dignity can justify freeing slaves while leaving them in relative economic and social deprivation. Encouraging flourishing demands more.

The Christian vision of dignity—or a vision of the human person as a bearer of the divine image—includes aiming towards human flourishing. This means, when ministering to those experiencing homelessness, that the ends and purposes of all humans are kept in mind and central to the purposes and goals of our ministry.

However, it means no person can be viewed as merely a project. Too often, ministering to those experiencing homelessness goes awry when there is a we-them dynamic. *We* know what *they* need best. *They* are broken and *we* are not, so *we* must fix *them*. This mindset can manifest itself in a myriad of ways, and none of them are helpful. Recognizing the dignity of the person must include listening and being sensitive to what's important for them.

This does not mean, of course, that our ministry is responsible for the extent of human flourishing in each individual person. In fact, the extent of our capabilities may be meeting basic human necessities, like providing food and water. But we must keep in mind that such provision does not, by itself, fulfill human purpose and flourishing. Even if this does not change what we do when we minister, it must influence how we minister to those experiencing homelessness.

The specifics of care for those experiencing homelessness will in large part be determined by each unique context. Nonetheless, in the life, teachings, and ministry of Jesus, we can see important principles for loving those experiencing homelessness well.

IV. HOME

Conflicts in many countries throughout history have raged over land. The importance of land to a nation can hardly be understated. And yet we rarely give land and place much thought.

In the Old Testament, *a place to call home* is at the center of God's purposes and promises, from Adam and Eve's garden home to the Promised Land. In Genesis 12, God promises Abraham not only many offspring—"and many sons had Faaaather Abraham"—but the land in which they could thrive. Joshua records a conquest of the land, the land promised by God. From Genesis, to the history books, to the prophets, on through to Revelation, the land, and God's promises surrounding it, is central to the Bible's vision of human flourishing.

In a transient and nomadic culture like our own, the remarkable importance of a stable place probably seems, hundreds of years removed, both overstated and refreshing. On the one hand, we are tempted to react, "what's the big deal?" In the modern, Western world, we can move—even permanently so—across the country in the drop of a hat. Yet, on the other hand, we likely all feel a longing for stability. It is this stability that is the core of God's promises. In weaving land into his promises to his people, God is establishing the significance of *home*.

Today, we are too often isolated from the land, from the places we inhabit, but we still feel the importance of home. Wherever we call "home," the most important feature of that place is almost certainly not its

external features, but that it is an oasis for us from the outside world. Without this place, it is easy to feel tired or lost.

Homelessness is an insidious problem for many reasons. The lack of basic, stable shelter not only makes navigating the modern world difficult, it makes it dangerous. But it is perhaps most insidious for this feeling it elicits of being lost. Or, as the Israelites experienced it, wandering in the wilderness or, even, exile. We were designed for a more stable relationship with the spaces we inhabit, and a home is one of the most dignifying forces possible.

This does not mean, however, that material wealth, and all the trappings that proceed from it, equals “home” and material poverty equals “homeless.” Materially wealthy Christians have their own impoverishments.⁸ And the lack of permanent shelter, whatever challenges it may include, does not necessitate a lack of belonging. One can belong to a land and community without material wealth. And many with material wealth—indeed, a great many—lack a connection to place and community. Eden is the home we’ve all been exiled from. We are brought truly home only through the work of Jesus Christ.

V. THE COMMISSION OF CHRIST: CARING FOR THE LEAST OF THESE

Jesus Christ not only reveals the Father to us, but he also reveals the heart of the Father for the poor. In Luke 4, Luke records the inauguration of Jesus’s earthly ministry. After resisting the temptation of the devil in the wilderness, Jesus returns—“filled with the power of the Spirit”—to Galilee to begin proclaiming the gospel. He begins by standing before the Synagogue and reading: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

This allusion to Isaiah 61 is illuminating. Not only does it show us that Jesus intends for the poor to be central to his gospel message, but it shows that Jesus’ concern for the poor is not a New Testament anomaly. Jesus here echoes the concern for worldly justice smattered throughout God’s dealings with the Israelites in the Old Testament.

In Catholic Social Teaching, this special concern or focus on the poor is called the “preferential option for the poor.” This refers to a Christian duty to care for the poor—not only those struggling financially, but those facing all forms of marginalization and impoverishment. This principle is foundational because being with the poor cannot be divorced from the gospel. It was central to Jesus’ message, so should it be central to our own. Evangelization without a concern for the poor misses a key component of the gospel message.

The same concern shines through Jesus’ message about “the least of these.” In Matthew 25, Jesus places care for the least of these—the strangers, naked, hungry, thirsty, sick, and in prison—in an eschatological, or “end times,” frame. Those who fail to care for these “will go away into eternal punishment.” In Jesus’ telling, the reason is not, “this is God’s rule and we must follow the rules.” Rather, the reason this has eschatological implications is that *Jesus counts himself among the least of these*. When we care for the poor, it is as if we care for our Lord himself.

⁸ See Brian J. Walsh and Steven Bouma Prediger’s book *Beyond Homelessness* for more on this point.

The trajectory of the Incarnation, after all, is that God has humbled himself to even the lowest form. According to Paul in Philippians 2, Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” He “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” The lowering of God in Jesus—literally, God’s condescension—even to death on a cross means we cannot lower ourselves further than our Lord did for us.

To see the depths of what God does for us in Christ, consider a battalion of soldiers who have disobeyed their General and, because of it, is lost behind enemy lines. Now surrounded by their enemy and facing certain death, the General weighs rescue plans. One advisor recommends parachuting in supplies and weapons. The General has other ideas. He parachutes in himself to use his expertise to help them escape.

Like all analogies, this is imperfect. But it does highlight a critical feature of God’s rescue plan: he is not only for us, he is *with us*. Jesus is called *Immanuel*, meaning literally, “God with us.”

The God-with-us message means we, too, must be *with* and not only “for” others. This is a blueprint for serving those experiencing homelessness. This does not mean that we are responsible for “saving” people. Nor does it mean we must give up our homes and live on the streets. But neither should we only parachute in necessary supplies. There must be a radical with-ness expressed in our ministry if we are to love as Jesus loved. The Incarnation, as described by Paul in Philippians 2, is a guide for us.

VI. THE BODY OF CHRIST: CHRIST’S ACTIVITY THROUGH US

Before ascending, Jesus charged his followers to be his witness “to the ends of the earth.” The Apostle Paul articulated a similar message like so: those of us who are “in Christ” are the body of Christ and Christ is the head of the body. He operates in and through us. So, those in Christ are Christ’s body—an ongoing expression of Christ’s presence—in the world.

Being “in Christ” is perhaps the best way to articulate the fundamental purpose for which every human was made. We are bearers of the divine image, but we are, as Paul clarifies, images of the Image (Colossians 1:15). Our relationship to God is through Christ’s priestly ministry to us. Yet, as those in Christ—or as those who image the Image—we are tasked with continuing that ministry. Expressed another way: those in Christ act as Christ’s representatives to the world.

Our ministry to those experiencing homelessness must always happen within this context. Not every work or ministry will have an explicit ecclesial (or of the church) context. But as the Church—that is, as Christ’s body—our actions with those experiencing homelessness are an expression of Christ’s activity through us by the power of his Holy Spirit.

This grounds all of our actions in the Church. Our ministry to people experiencing homelessness is necessarily ecclesial, even if our ministry is not an explicit program of the church. This is a reminder, on the one hand, that we are but hands. Christ is the head to which we are faithful and we act, by his Spirit, in accordance with him. Yet, it is also a reminder that, because we are united to the head, so also are we united to the rest of the body. This brings both humility—we are but one member of a larger body—and freedom—we are not the only member—to our ministries.

As those “in Christ,” the Church—both as a gathered body and as individual believers—can therefore play

a role in uniting others to Christ. Being united to Christ is the purpose of all people, including those experiencing homelessness. Imperfect though she is, the Church is an expression of Christ's presence on earth. A primary way we are united to Christ, then, is through our participation in his Church, his body. Therefore, the Church is charged with expressing the radical "with-ness" that Christ displayed in the Incarnation.

Our "with-ness" to a broken world will in large part be judged by our "with-ness" to the least of these. The preferential option for the poor—on display in God's dealings with Israel and in Jesus' earthly ministry—must be our guide. In today's world, "the poor" are many. But there is perhaps no more pronounced and evident example of the poor than those experiencing homelessness.

The "with-ness" that is so critical to homeless ministry is demonstrated by the principle of *solidarity* in Catholic Social Teaching. Solidarity requires proximity. Without closeness, there can be no with-ness. We've already noted that the reason many experience homelessness is a catastrophic loss of family. The principle of solidarity is critical because it recognizes that *community*—that for which every image bearer is made—is often lacking for people on the streets. The purpose of our ministry is not to be a savior, but to be in community. That means knowing names and faces. It may mean doing someone's laundry. It may mean taking someone to an appointment. Solidarity can be difficult, for some, because it can be inconvenient. But it is the call of the Church. To be Christ to all. It is the Call of the Church, to be close to those on the margins. And Christ was with all—especially the least of these.

The Church's action, or inaction, towards these image-bearers will to a great extent determine our faithfulness to Christ's gospel message.

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Galatians 6:9 states: "let us not grow weary of doing good." Paul's encouragement to the Galatians surely extends to us today. Christ said that what we do to the least of these, it is as if we do it to him, but he did not promise that we would always clearly see Christ in the least of these. For practitioners daily caring for those experiencing homelessness, Paul's encouragement is an everyday thing. It's an encouragement to love those who may not be easy to love; to love those who God called *very good*.

It is love, after all, that is the foundation of our ministry to any person. If we have not love, asks Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, what good are our acts? The "greatest commandments," according to our Lord, are loving God and loving people (Matthew 22:36-40). This is why *love* must be the cornerstone of our ministry. A genuine, God-focused love with those experiencing homelessness may start with meeting material needs, but it does not end there. By recognizing the dignity of each person—each bearer of God's image—we pursue the goal of human flourishing. That includes, necessarily, introducing people to Jesus Christ (in our words and deeds) and inviting all into a deeper relationship with him.⁹

You may still be overwhelmed by the problems of homelessness. "What can I do?," you might wonder. We can all do something. It may be looking a person in the eye, asking their name, praying for them, and asking them to pray for you in return. Recognize the dignity of another person and affirm it. Affirm the goodness of God which is imaged through the panhandler on the corner. Spiritual formation, contemplation, even prayer and Scripture are ways we seek to "get closer to Jesus." In reality, there is perhaps no better way to be closer to Jesus than to be closer to the least of these. By recognizing the pride and fear

⁹ Once again, however, we must be careful of the dynamics at play when we introduce people to Jesus. If a person experiencing homelessness feels unloved or unwelcome because they don't recognize Jesus as Lord, then our ministry has failed them.

in ourselves when we interact with a person experiencing homelessness, we can be transformed by Jesus. That does not mean that people experiencing homelessness are instruments to our end of spiritual formation. But loving others with the love of Christ widens our capacity for love and to be transformed. Without this recognition, we neglect the care of not only another's soul, but our own.

This short Biblical and theological reflection on homelessness should not suggest to anyone that the issues of homelessness are simple. There are several complicated problems—with structures, systems, and with every human heart—that are related to this issue. This reflection has not addressed those issues explicitly. Rather, it has offered a foundation on which to stand when facing these issues. It invites us to reflect on these issues as deeply connected with our lives as Christians and as the body of Christ. But above all, these theological reflections remind us that—no matter how difficult the issues—*people experiencing homelessness are not an issue. They are images of a loving God.* That God, in his great mercy, has invited us to participate with him in healing his broken world. We are not saviors of anyone. But we are witnesses to the savior. And, in our own brokenness, we are invited to represent him to this world nonetheless.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.

⁶ *“Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?*

⁷ *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?*

⁸ *Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.*

⁹ *Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’*

*If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,*

¹⁰ *if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.*

¹¹ *And the Lord will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.*

¹² *And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in.*

ISAIAH 58:6-12



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