About the Mentally Ill Homeless by Rev. Donald Tack, Servants Center Founder

According to the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, 40% of America’s chronically homeless people suffer from some type of serious mental disorder. The major mental illnesses we see among the street people are neurological brain disorders. These are real diseases. These disorders are not caused by bad parenting, drug abuse or satanic activity.

Fifty years ago, most mentally ill persons were housed in large state hospitals. During the second half of the twentieth century new psychiatric medications were discovered which helped to control the delusions and hallucinations of neurological brain disorders. With these new medications, doctors and politicians believed that mentally ill persons could be released from hospitals and return to their home communities.

A network of local government funded Community Mental Health agencies was established. Mentally ill people were to come to these centers as outpatients to receive medications and have case workers
check on their general well-being. These agencies were also to assist with appropriate housing placement.

For many of the mentally ill persons who had been institutionalized a couple of generations ago, the nationwide shift to community based treatment has been a wonderful blessing. But for hundreds of thousands of other mentally ill people, deinstitutionalization has been a tragic disaster. As the large state hospitals were being closed down, serious problems developed in America’s mental health system. Not enough appropriate community housing with adequate support was funded. And the housing and care facilities that were developed had a tendency to accept only cooperative clients. Mentally ill persons who exhibited bizarre behavior or were thought to put other residents at risk, were not accepted or were ordered to leave. Often, the only housing alternatives for these folks were the homeless shelters or literally living on the streets.

Persons suffering from untreated mental illnesses usually do not function well in homeless shelters. Most shelters require people to leave during the day. This is a serious problem in northern U.S. cities during the winter.

Shelters must have regulations. But the disorganized thinking of many mentally ill homeless persons often interferes with their ability to comprehend and comply with rules. For example, a man was told to
leave a Grand Rapids shelter because he kept getting in and out of the supper line. He wasn’t cutting in front of others as each time he left the line for a few moments, he would return to the same place in line. A shelter staff person, untrained in dealing with mentally ill persons, told the ragged man to leave. The homeless man protested. He tried to explain that he was getting in and out of line to place his ear against a certain brick in the wall. His schizophrenic delusions caused him to think the brick was a special telecommunication device through which he needed to send and receive important messages on behalf of US Armed Forces. The staff person simply laughed and put this pitiful man on the street.

Another case illustrates the lack of appropriate response to the mentally ill by the staff of most homeless shelters and missions. An elderly mentally impaired man who had stayed nightly at a rescue mission for many years was suddenly told to leave. Servants Center workers found him late that winter night, sitting in the lobby of the downtown Post Office. He had contracted scabies which can rapidly spread to others. Rather than get medical help for him, he was simply put out on the street in the dead of winter. He survived the Battle of the Bulge in WWII, but was in danger of freezing to death on the streets of Grand Rapids! He didn’t know that the Post Office lobby would be cleared out and locked at midnight. We filed a petition with the Probate Court and were appointed legal guardian for this man who was suffering from dementia. After a brief stay at our COIT HOUSE, we were able to help this man
get accepted into the Grand Rapids Home for Veterans where he lives safely today.

While the major mental institutions were closing down all across American, another trend was developing which would greatly contribute to the rising number of mentally ill homeless persons: the patients’ rights movement. While no thinking person wants to return to the bad old days when a person could be confined to an institution without legal representation, the pendulum has swung too far. Today most states have laws that allow a mentally ill person to refuse treatment, unless it can be proven in court that the person is a danger to self or others, or is likely to put him/herself at risk. Untreated persons suffering from major thought disorders, such as paranoid schizophrenia, are often unable to accept the fact that they have a treatable disease. These folks tend to have a high rate of declining treatment. They often are highly suspicious of social workers and physicians. Government funded mental health agencies justify their lack of services for the schizophrenic street people by stating that they are allowing these people to make choices about their treatment. Servants Center’s response is that the ability to make valid choices is broken because of the neurological brain disease from which the homeless person is suffering.

Servants Center has found that many mentally ill homeless persons will respond positively and accept psychiatric treatment if we slowly build up trust with them over a long period of time.
This trust building phase can involve a wide variety of approaches. Sometimes it is simply making regular contact with homeless people at the free meal places and shelters. There are 13 emergency and transitional homeless shelter programs in Grand Rapids. There are about 800 people in these shelters on any given night. To overcome the paranoia and suspicion of many street people, we distribute blankets to those living under bridges and freeway overpasses. We have helped mentally ill homeless people who have been victimized by crime, get the justice they deserve by going with them to file charges and work through the intimidating process of going to court. Sometimes a mentally ill street person will start to trust us because they have observed us helping other people get off the streets. Hospital emergency department staff call us and the response we bring helps to create trust with homeless patients. Often the police are involved with the same people we are trying to serve. Helping those who have contact with police get treatment instead of going to jail builds trust.
God's Heart for the Homeless

The Bible is clear in revealing God’s heart for the poor and oppressed:

II Corinthians 8:9 “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich.”

Proverbs 29:7 “The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.”

Proverbs 14:31 “Kindness shown to the poor is an act of worship.”

Psalm 41:1,2 “Happy are those who are concerned for the poor; the Lord will help them when they are in trouble.”

Isaiah 58:6, 7 “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen; to loose the chains of injustice . . . Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?”

Matthew 25:31-46 Response to the poor is a key indicator of our true recognition of the Christ of Scripture.
Acts 6:1-7  The office of deacon was understood by the early church to be an extension of the Levites, the social workers of Israel. Modern churches have often forgotten the historical setting of the creation of the office of deacon . . . to feed poor, elderly widows of the congregation.

Romans 12:16 “Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.”

James 2:14-26  James demands that faith show itself through emergency help for the poor and homeless.

I John 3:16  Not as well known as the same chapter and verse of John’s Gospel account, yet a powerful test of our true relationship with God
Biblical Foundations of Poverty Ministry by Rev. Donald Tack

In recent years there has been a great deal of discussion about the best way to respond to the poor in America. President Clinton, upon taking office in 1992, pledged to "end welfare as we know it." President Bush has promoted government funding for religious organizations that serve the poor.

Many political conservatives believe they have a window of opportunity to demonstrate community-based welfare strategies that empower small, local non-profit groups can do a better job serving the poor than large, bureaucratic government programs. If this is true, how are churches and local Christian charities fitting into U.S. welfare reform?

As the founder and director of a West Michigan ministry to the poor, I am concerned that many of our churches are missing the opportunity to offer significant alternatives to government poverty programs and do so in the name of Jesus Christ. Part of my fear is based in the observation that most of the members of evangelical churches have a knowledge gap when it comes to what the Bible teaches about God's heart for the poor.
and the believer's responsibility to serve the poor in Christ's Name. Many professing Christians in our conservative churches never think about the poor or ministry to the poor as a valid part of their Christian life. Many church boards never consider outreach ministry to the poor and homeless. Before churches will be able to be used by God to demonstrate to our nation what Christians can do to reach the poor, Christians must first have some idea what God says about response to the poor. This paper is a summary of several key Scripture passages which trace the theology of poverty in God's Word.

There is no clearer statement in the Bible about God's attitude toward poverty ministry than Proverbs 29:7, "The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern."

This is a powerful, uncompromising statement that leaves no doubt that concern for the poor is seen by God as the fruit of knowing Him. The latter phrase of the proverb serves as a warning to the church member who never thinks about the plight of the poor and oppressed. It is possible for a professing Christian to give cognitive assent to evangelical doctrine but still remain unregenerate.

History is filled with examples of religiously orthodox people who held a cavalier attitude toward the poor. In 1780, when Robert Raikes wanted to reach out with education to the poor, illiterate children of London, the official church would have nothing to do with such a venture. Raikes
found a few godly women who were compassionate toward the rowdy, dirty street children and these women opened their homes on Sunday afternoons to launch the first Sunday Schools.

In Proverbs 29:7 the phrase "justice for the poor" does not mean always giving poor people what they ask for. In fact, unqualified church charity often does more harm than good by being so meager it discourages the poor. At the other extreme, unqualified charity from church programs, not unlike government welfare, often enables and continues unhealthy patterns of dependency.

Determining a course of justice for the poor is more than used clothes and canned food. Doing justice for the poor demands a major investment of time and resources. Justice for the poor means assessing and investigating, on a person-by-person basis the causes of a person's poverty. Then comes the often slow process of designing and implementing an effective course of action that places appropriate responsibility with the person helped. Doing justice for the poor is about liberation—not furthering or fostering dependency.

Churches would be better off doing nothing to help the poor if their charity is only the impersonal one-size-fits-all dispensing of groceries and other give-aways. Often these charity programs are ill-conceived. The recipients often feel even worse off after they receive their box of groceries. Why? Because there is a total absence of a genuine caring
relationship. True justice for the poor involves associating with people of low position (Romans 12:16).

Homeless people on the streets of Grand Rapids tell me that the hardest part of their plight is having non-homeless persons treat them as if they were invisible. Mother Teresa, known for her work among the poor in developing countries, said that the poverty of America is a poverty of loneliness. When we take the time to really know a poverty stricken person, we may need to deal with an unscrupulous slum lord on behalf of a widow. We may need to testify in court on behalf of a mentally ill street person who was savagely beaten. We may need to appeal the firing of a worker who "blew the whistle" on illegal practices in the work place. We may need to line up job interviews for a fellow church member who has been "down-sized" out of a job. We may need to recruit a mechanic from our congregation to repair the brakes on the ancient car of a single mom who desperately needs that old clunker to get to her new job she just got after ten years on welfare!

Proverbs 29:7 provides a simple two part outline for approaching an expanded biblical treatise on the same issues:

1. Those who are truly God's people will demonstrate ministry to the poor.
2. Those religious people who ignore the poor, no matter that orthodox creedal statements pour from their lips, are not God's people.

An expansion on the concepts of Proverbs 29:7 is found in Matthew 25:31-46. Here Jesus describes, in the context of His return, the "righteous" of Proverbs 29:7 symbolically as "sheep" and the "wicked" as "goats."

Jesus measures response to the poor and oppressed, people without food, water, shelter, clothing, and people who are sick or imprisoned. Those who have responded by caring for the poor are pronounced as "righteous" and their destiny is assured with Christ in His eternal kingdom.

Is Jesus teaching that we can earn salvation and eternal life by being nice to poor people? NO. Jesus is teaching the principle "if you love Me you will keep My commandments" John 14:15. Throughout the Old Testament, the only Scriptures the Matthew 25 people had, the people of God are instructed to look out for the interests of the poor. The "sheep" of Matthew 25 have lived out their faith by obeying the Scriptures as evidenced by their practical assistance to the poor. Their good deeds have not earned their salvation—but are evidence of salvation.

In contrast, the goat people of Matthew 25 are identified with the "wicked" of Proverbs 29:7. They have not lifted a finger to help the
poor, revealing their total lack of obedience to God's Word. They do seem to hold to biblically correct theology in terms of Jesus' identity. They call Him Lord, but are nonetheless on their way to eternal punishment.

I am afraid that there may be many members sitting in our churches each Sunday who are actually on their way to hell and don't know it. They call Jesus Lord but never experience even the slightest stirring in their hearts to take action to assist the poor in the congregation or community. Part of the responsibility for this tragedy may be with Christian colleges and seminaries and pastors who have not educated their students or parishioners in the great theme of God's heart for the poor that runs through the Scriptures.

As God's people were in the process of entering into the new land which had been promised to Abraham, Moses warned them not to become proud and start thinking their new-found prosperity was of their own making. God, through Moses, in Deuteronomy 8 reminds the Hebrew people not to forget their roots in generations of poverty and oppression in Egypt. Instead, as God prospered His people, they were to model His compassion for the poor.

God designed a wise welfare system that provided an economic safety net while preserving the dignity of the poor. God's plan was based on
empowerment and liberation. It did not lead to dependence and pauperism.

Leviticus 19 outlines some of these statutes of economic justice for the poor. It is significant that, in an agricultural society, God ordered that farmers not harvest all of their grain or fruit. The "corners of the fields" are not measured in detail, but were to be determined at the discretion of the farmer. The grain in the corners of the fields was to be left for the poor to pick. Any grain that fell to the ground during harvest was also to be left for the poor "gleaners" to pick up. Fruit trees and vines were to be picked only once by their owners at the peak of production. A few days after the main picking, there is always a smaller second picking of fruit that has matured more slowly as it is shaded in the center of trees or vines. It's a little harder to get at—but it's just as sweet! This second picking was to be left for the poor willing to come into the vineyards and orchards and work for it.

In God's welfare program, unlike much church charity and many government programs today, the work ethic was preserved. In order to benefit from the fruit or grain left behind, one had to go out and work to pick it. This was not thought of as demeaning to the recipient. In fact, members of the royal family of King Jesus, Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi, at times were able to benefit from these gleaning laws.
Later, in Leviticus, chapter 25, God's heart for the poor is revealed in His statues on the use of the land. The foundation of these land-use principles is rooted in the fact that "the earth is the Lord's" Psalm 24:1. The land, the source of wealth in an agricultural society, was not to be sold permanently. Under Joshua, God's people were issued tracts of land with fixed boundaries, but they were to think of themselves as tenants or managers rather than owners. (Lev. 25:23). Several times in the chapter, warnings are issued to affluent farmers not to take advantage of their neighbors if one of them became poor (note vs. 25, 29, and 35). Any land that had been turned over to another to use as collateral for a debt was to be redeemed, that is the deed cleared of all debt every fifty years. By American economic traditions, this practice seems very odd and not very practical. What was God seeking to model by the practice of having all families get a fresh start every couple of generations?

God knew that due to the curse of sin in creation and men's hearts, unforeseen setbacks would happen that would bring poverty to some hard working farmers. A farmer might be stricken with illness and not be able to tend his land. Fire might destroy his grain fields. Disease could wipe out his flocks. Or nomadic bandits might steal from his storehouse. In order to survive, such a victim of poverty would be able to let a neighbor grow crops, flocks, and herds on his own land and actually hire himself out as a laborer or tenant farmer. Or a poor farmer might be able, using his land as security, to get a loan from a neighbor for seed, breeding stock or to rebuild destroyed buildings. But in the
year of Jubilee—no matter if the entire loan had not been repaid or worked off—all debts against the land were cleared from the books.

This was one of the ways God wanted to assure that, unlike the surrounding nations, there would not develop among His people a small wealthy elite and a large permanent under class of peasants. When travelers and traders came through the land of Israel, God wanted them to notice the conspicuous absence of beggars. When inquiring as to the economic system that made it possible for a nation to be without beggars, glory would come to the God of the Israelites for designing such a wise welfare system.

For those disabled and therefore not able to do gleaning or other work, the family was to be responsible. But what if there were no family members to care for a disabled person? In II Samuel 9, David serves as an example of care for the poor who are unable to care for themselves when he makes arrangements for the care of Mephibosheth, the crippled son of Jonathan.

The prophets warned that judgment would come to the people of God if they turned away from honoring the Lord and served the false gods of the surrounding nations. The prophets also warned that one of the ways God measures the sincerity of those who claim to serve Him is their treatment of the poor and oppressed.
In Isaiah 10:1-4 the people of God are warned that because they take advantage of widows and orphans, God will bring disaster from invading countries.

Isaiah 58:6-7 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice... Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?"

One of the great themes of Amos is that economic oppression of the poor will bring about disaster. For those who invoke God's name in orthodox worship, while cheating the poor in their businesses, judgment is sure to come (see Amos 2:6-8; 5:10 -15; 5:21 -24).

Malachi 3:5 warns that God will punish those who cheat employees and take advantage of widows, orphans and foreigners.

In contrast, Ezekiel defines a truly good man as one who models God's heart as he who feeds the hungry and gives clothing to the naked (Ezekiel 18:5-9).

In Psalm 9:9 God is portrayed as a "refuge for the oppressed." When his people have been close to Him, in true obedience not just lip-service, they have allowed Him to use them to provide protection to those oppressed by poverty and injustice.
The care of the poor has been understood throughout biblical history to be a reflection of true righteousness. Job cites his care of widows and orphans as evidence of his relationship with God (Job 31:16-25).

Serving the poor in Christ's Name is not drudgery. The most joyful Christians I know live out Psalm 41:1: "Blessed is he who has regard for the poor; the Lord delivers him in times of trouble."

Much arguing goes on in American churches over styles of worship in the Sunday services. But all Christians should agree that "kindness shown to the poor is an act of worship." Proverbs 14: 31.

The early Christians believed that care of the poor was a natural and logical continuation of their Old Testament roots. In Acts chapter six we find that there was already a social service program operating that cared for the needs of elderly women who had no family to assist them. Administrative problems developed when some of the ladies felt they were being neglected while others were being favored. The office of deacon was created to serve as the first social workers of the early church by dealing with the delivery of services to poor senior citizens. This was a continuation of the historic role of the Levites in administering the cities of refuge and temple stores to those in need. Later, Paul's pastoral epistles would give more specific guidelines for the care of widows. Lists of names were maintained with those older women who qualified for service (I Timothy 5:9-10).
The most extensive body of teaching in the Bible on the subject of giving is found in the Corinthian epistles (I Cor. 16:1-4: II Cor. Chapters 8-9). In American churches, sermons on these passages often ignore the historical occasion of these texts. Famine and persecution had left the Christians in Jerusalem in great poverty. Paul wrote to the relatively wealthy Corinthian church to instruct them to join a fund raising effort along with churches in other provinces. The money would be collected and taken to Jerusalem to be distributed directly to the poor Christians there (see Romans 15:25 -27). The Corinthians had started their weekly collections of funds, but had apparently lost interest as the year wore on. Paul writes a second letter as a reminder, with more detailed instructions on giving to aid the poor.

Jesus Christ is the model of Paul's instructions in giving to the poor. II Cor. 8:9 "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich."

Giving to the poor is to be proportionate to income, based on personal decisions and done joyfully, not out of a spirit of legalism or high pressure (II Cor 9:7-8). Giving to assist the poor not only meets practical needs for survival, but also is accepted by God as an act of worship (9:12 -13)

News of giving to the poor makes a good impression on those outside of Christ. Paul mentions that "men" (usually referring to the general community beyond the church) "will praise God for the obedience that
accompanies your confession of the Gospel of Christ and for your generosity in sharing with them and everyone else." II Cor. 9:13

Renewed teaching and modeling is needed in America's evangelical churches in order to restore emphasis on the poor in our budgeting and fund raising strategies. Today most Christians think of the offering plate as the way to maintain the institutional infrastructure of the church. Little emphasis is placed on the original context of the most extensive passages on giving in the Bible—care of the poor. In a frequency not unlike the Old Testament, the New Testament writers assume a continuity of demonstrating our faith by doing justice for the weak, the poor and the forgotten.

James' epistle contains some of the best known instruction for ministry to the poor. In James 1:27, care for widows and orphans is seen as the activity high on God's priority list. Later, in 2:14, James argues that the kind of faith that produces no practical help for those "without clothes and daily food" is not real faith at all. Here we're reminded of the "goat" people of Matthew 25-verbally identifying Christ as Lord—but showing they've not truly been born again, by their total lack of concern for the things God is concerned about.

John argues in I John 3:16-17 that a professing believer who doesn't share his resources with a brother in need does not possess salvation. John is not saying that giving practical help to the poor people will save
us—but he is saying that if we are truly saved, we will not be able to refuse help for the poor!

Many have speculated as to why, in Luke 10, the priest and Levite, who knew the Scriptures very well, did not stop to render aid to the wounded man dying at the side of the road. They may have simply been living out a common belief of their day: "people get what they deserve". Somehow, they may have reasoned that the injured man probably had done something to cause his crisis. Rape victims often experience this misguided philosophy: "somehow the victim did something to trigger what happened to them." Blaming the victim means they did something wrong. The selfish conclusion is "I'd never do that; therefore this can't happen to me."

The priest and Levite may have become fatalists, even to the extreme of thinking "all things that happen are God's will, therefore if you intervene and help the man you may actually be interfering with some lesson God is trying to teach." The priest and Levite may have said to themselves, "This man needs help, but that's a physical matter and my work is spiritual, therefore I'll go on my way. I'll pray for the man, as spiritual work is more important than his physical wound." Perhaps they were afraid that if they got to know the man through helping him, they would discover he was much like them. Then they would realize that this awful fate could happen to them someday and because that was too
painful to think about, they would choose not to know the man. It is easier to blame him for his condition if you don't really know him.

Could it be that some of us would just as soon avoid knowing the homeless people who roam our streets, for fear that if we really get to know them we'll discover that they once had lives like ours? And that possibility is too much for us to think about—it could happen to me—therefore I'll avoid the homeless people altogether.

Christ's compassion flows through those who truly know Him. Professing Christians, who can't stand the thought of ministering to poor people, may be experiencing a warning from God: they may be active church members—but with no actual relationship with the authentic Christ. Remember, Jesus referred to himself as a homeless man. (Matt 8:20)

Can a genuine Christian worship a homeless man on Sunday and ignore one on Monday?