

WELS MINISTRY TO THE HOMELESS

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

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MEQUON, WI

MARCH 9, 2020

## ABSTRACT

When traveling through large cities in the United States, it is not hard to find a group of homeless people congregated together. A question that can arise in a pastor's mind might be: "Is it possible to have a ministry plan to help them?" The Bible does not give a specific instruction for the church to care for the homeless, yet it also does not condemn any church that has a ministry to support the homeless. This thesis seeks to help a pastor find programs that are appropriate for any situation. The thesis will look at the historical perspective that the church had on compassion ministry for the homeless. It will then evaluate different Bible passages that describe how to care for the needy. This thesis will describe the work that different pastors are doing in the field of compassion ministry. Finally, this thesis will provide a sample compassion ministry plan.

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## INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is an issue that has consistently plagued the United States since the 1870s. It was a regular issue during the Great Depression of the 1930s. In the 1960s the government deinstitutionalized the mentally ill, and homelessness rose once again.<sup>1</sup> However, from 2007–2017 homelessness saw its sharpest decrease of any 10-year period. During that time homelessness decreased 14.4% nationally. The downward trend did not last long, as the numbers for homelessness rose again in 2017. Statistics from the 2018 Department of Housing and Urban Development study show that about 22 in every 10,000 people in the United States are homeless on any given night.<sup>2</sup> This number is slightly higher than the data from 2017, when 17 in every 10,000 people experienced homelessness on a given night.<sup>3</sup> However, “over the last decade, a shift has occurred in homeless assistance, placing a greater emphasis on permanent housing solutions to homelessness—such as permanent supportive housing and rapid re-housing—over transitional housing programs.”<sup>4</sup> But even with this great shift towards a greater awareness of

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1. Committee on an Evaluation of Permanent Supportive Housing Programs for Homeless Individuals, “Permanent Supportive Housing: Evaluating the Evidence for Improving Health Outcomes Among People Experiencing Chronic Homelessness” (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, July, 2018), Appendix B. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK519584/>.

2. “The 2018 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress,” <http://www.hudexchange.info/resource/5783/2018-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of-homelessness-in-the-us/>. To truly understand the depth of homelessness in America and the impact it has on the youth effected by homelessness, these reports are invaluable. These statistics break down multiple demographics and even track “large city” vs. “rural area” homelessness. Individual state statics are included, along with the cities and counties which experience the largest percentage of homelessness. The report includes the difference between homeless who are unsheltered vs. homeless who are in programs. I encourage anyone who is reading this paper to familiarize themselves with the last three AHARs. This will provide a base of understanding for the differing programs and goals that the government enacts and continues to modify to help four major demographics: veterans, families with children, unaccompanied youth, and chronically homeless individuals. Links will be provided in bibliography.

3. “The 2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress,” <http://www.hudexchange.info/resource/5639/2017-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of-homelessness-in-the-us/>.

4. “The State of Homelessness in America,” <http://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-report-legacy/>.

homelessness in our nation, it remains an issue that plagues even the richest areas of America. Our churches are not immune to these issues either. Throughout the paper I plan to prove that our churches should be prepared to help those who drop by and have no real way to help themselves.

Here is a situation that a WELS pastor has a good chance of experiencing. The pastor (I will refer to him as P) is sitting at his desk and working on his next Bible class or sermon. P hears a knock on the office door. P answers the door, and outside he sees a poorly clothed, smelly man. This smelly man (I will refer to him as S) wants a couple of dollars to help pay for his gas and a quick bite to eat. Without much thought, P pulls out his wallet as asks what the S's name is. As S tells P his story, P's heart goes out to him and P hands S a twenty-dollar bill. S thanks P and P goes back to his desk to continue his work. A couple hours later P's mind drifts back to the interaction he had with S. P replays the situation in his head. He wants to make sure the next time he encounters a needy person he doesn't forget the most important part, the gospel. Now, hours after his interaction, a guilty feeling comes over P. Did the \$20 really end up going to food and gas? Could P have gone with S to buy S gas and food? Does S know about what Christ has done for him? As P attempts to show love and have compassion on the needy, he can't help but wonder if his actions only enabled a nasty addiction.

The situation is not uncommon. Many a pastor has faced this situation, and many more will face it in the future. Pastors should be prepared for this type of interaction. In the book *Toxic Charity*, author Robert Lupton shares a conversation with one of his close friends, John. John is someone who is good with money. He is diligent in knowing exactly where every penny goes, and many people know that he is well-off. He wants to be sure his cheerful giving to the church and to various charities is done diligently. While going out for their monthly breakfast, John, who is usually upbeat, is weighed down and asks Robert the question, "There's something I'd

like your opinion on. What am I supposed to do with all these people who want something from me?”<sup>5</sup>

Because John is diligent when he donates his money, he wants to make sure that the money he gives to church or the needy is used for the benefit of the ministry of the church or the betterment of the lives of the needy, respectively. John continually had Jesus’ command from Matthew 25:10 stuck in his head: “Whatever you did for the one of the least of these ... you did for me.” How can John give and be sure that he is not aiding an addiction? John truly wants to help. The grace he has been shown by Christ’s redemptive work has moved him to be gracious with the earthly gifts he has. He wants to help the needy, but he doesn’t want the guilt that comes along with the unknown. “But where there are no records facilitating due diligence, is there any way of knowing that giving isn’t enabling an addicted person to continue a destructive, irresponsible lifestyle?”<sup>6</sup> This is what I will call the grace/guilt complex. This feeling is one of the reasons I was prompted to research the topic of this paper. I propose that one response to this problem is for a church to have a compassion ministry for the homeless.

## PART I: THE HISTORICAL CASE FOR COMPASSION MINISTRY

### **Grace/Guilt Complex**

Grace and guilt. How can a Christian do the charitable work that the Spirit has moved him to do, without feeling the guilt that the unknown can bring? Lupton tells this personal anecdote:

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5. Robert Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 43.

6. Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 44.

A lifetime of serving in the [inner]city should have fine-tuned my compassion skills, but as I confessed to John, I get as furious as he does when I find out that the young woman at the gas station has used that \$27.15 story to con suckers at gas stations all over the city. Could our reluctance to give a stranger on the street be more than a conditioned reaction reinforced by other cons we have fallen prey to? Could it be a righteous response in our spirits cautioning us to avoid irresponsible giving that harms both recipient and giver?<sup>7</sup>

His experience of helping multiple people has at times come back to bite him. His charity has been exploited. But was it Lupton's fault? To John's concern, would it be his fault if his well-intended gift of charity is then twisted to support a sinful lifestyle? How should John go about his loving and charitable actions? Should he always be on guard, or should he give freely as a way of showing true Christ-like love?

Lupton says that when we truly meet a human need, like giving a cup of soup or \$20 to help a family get gas to see their family at Thanksgiving, we feel a "deep sense of satisfaction."<sup>8</sup> So then, why would John feel so guilty when he looks away from a beggar holding a sign that says, "Homeless. Need Help. God Bless." when there is no way to determine that a gift *could* be beneficial for that beggar? In order to relieve the guilt complex from charitable giving, research shows that the most helpful way to discern the right response to a beggar is through meaningful relationships.<sup>9</sup>

Building a relationship with the less-fortunate is not the easiest thing to do for everyone, but it is an indispensable way for the Christian to show Christ-like love to the world. If we choose to build a relationship, we are choosing to treat the less fortunate as equals in society. We are not putting our own lives ahead of their own; we are not treating our lives as better and stooping low to be in contact with them. Building relationships with these people helps us realize

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7. Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 44.

8. Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 47.

9. Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 48.



that compassion ministry is worthwhile. We aren't trying to puff up our chest with our good works, but rather we are simply doing what God has compelled us to do. We are showing Christ-like love to all.

There are plenty of other ways to show Christian love to the world. For example, a Christian can say kind words to a stranger. A Christian can show love to the world by the way he or she displays sportsmanship after a tough loss. A Christian can show love to the world by his or her work ethic. Christ tells us that the world will know that we are his disciples by how we show our love for our fellow brother or sister (John 13:35 NIV). When a Christian shows love, it shows that his or her faith is active and not dead (James 2:17). I want to make the point that one of the most expressive ways to show Christian love is by caring for the homeless. There is no need for the grace/guilt complex to cloud our judgment when showing this form of Christian love. There is no need to look back and hope that our help has not been exploited. We do the work Christ has called us to do and pray that the Lord blesses our humble efforts.

### **Historical Background for Compassion Ministry**

In the early years of the Christian church, compassion for the needy was considered countercultural. Plato said that a poor man (often a slave) who was no longer able to work because of his sickness should be left to die. Plato went on to praise Aesculapius, a famous Greek physician, for withholding medicine from those who were stricken with lingering illness (*Republic*, 3.406d–410a).<sup>10</sup>

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10. Alvin J. Schmidt, "Christian Charity and Compassion," in *The Mercy of God in the Cross of Christ: Essays on Mercy in Honor of Glenn Merritt*, ed. Ross Edward Johnson and John T. Pless (St. Louis: Concordia, 2016), 159–60.

This was the philosophical culture into which Christianity was born. Christianity made its philanthropic mark during the plague in Athens and Rome during the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

Sick and dying Athenians were deserted by their fellow residents, who feared they too would die of the plague. Similarly, the pagan Romans panicked and fled from the contagious plague in Alexandria during the fourth century A.D., leaving behind their friends and next of kin. Such behavior prompted Emperor Julian the Apostate (ruled from A.D. 361-363) to lament that Christians, whom he ironically despised, showed love and compassion, whereas his pagan countrymen did not. Said he, “The impious Galileans [his word for the Christians] relieve both their own poor and ours.” And he continued, “It is shameful that ours [the pagans] should be so destitute of our assistance” (*Epistle of Julian* 49).<sup>11</sup>

It was into this selfish and heartless Roman culture that the Christians showed their compassion for the weak, sick, downtrodden and dying, usually at the expense of their own lives and well-being.<sup>12</sup> That was an expression of true Christian love. As Jesus says, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). These 4<sup>th</sup> century Christians were laying down their lives, not for those whom they knew but for complete strangers.

Early Christians built relationships not just with other Christians but with whole communities. They worked so vigorously in the city that when others saw their work they couldn’t help but see their faith. So, the question today may be asked, how can we let our society see how we love not just our own members but also the communities we are in? I propose one way is for a congregation in a large city to have a compassion ministry for the needy.

Specifically, a congregation can have this ministry for the homeless.

### **Mindset Shift**

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11. Schmidt, “Christian Charity and Compassion,” 160.

12. Schmidt, “Christian Charity and Compassion,” 160.

We need to clarify and pin down who a homeless person truly is. John Belcher proposes that there are three stages of homelessness. Stage I homelessness finds a person experiencing homelessness living with family and friends after losing their home. Stage II homelessness is when a person experiencing homelessness is living in shelters. Stage III homelessness is when they are living on the streets or in abandoned buildings.<sup>13</sup> My understanding before I started my research was that Stage III homelessness is what most people think of when someone says, “homeless person.”

Therefore, it is important to have a subtle shift in our attitudes while thinking about compassion ministry in connection with the homeless. Homeless people don’t want to be known as homeless, no more than we would want to be known by our visible sins.<sup>14</sup> I want to be clear; I am not saying that homelessness is a sin. Rather, in order to help break the stigma that goes along with being homeless and to elevate our view of these people, we should say, “someone who is *experiencing* homelessness.” The academic community would say that an autistic child should be called “a child *with* autism.” This shift helps teachers and administrators see children as children first rather than whatever issue they might bring to school. Those who are experiencing homelessness want to have a place to call home. A poor person “may be insulted and feel degraded by the use of the term ‘poor.’”<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, let us categorize these people in a way that views them as more than just a statistic or as someone we think of as a beggar on the streets. The research from *Toxic Charity*, interviews with professional social workers Anna Reinemann and Megan Samelson, and an

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13. John R. Belcher, “Helping the Homeless: What about the Spirit of God?,” *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (January 2003), 182.

14. A thought prompted by an interview with social worker Anna Reinemann.

15. Kevin Wattles, “A History of the WELS’ Mission to the Poor in the United States” (WLS Essay File, 1996), 6.

interview with Pastor Lucas Bitter reinforce this mindset shift. If we want to make an impact that lasts longer than a meal or a trip to the grocery store, we need to build relationships and treat these people experiencing homelessness the same as the member who is being counseled.

Another thought that goes along with the change of terminology is this simple thought: If every person were categorized by their most glaring weakness or sin, what would you be known as? Would you want to be known as the binge-spending, lethargic, overbearing, lying, depressed, narcissistic, cancerous, etc. person? This subtle shift, seeing someone as a soul, as a human being for whom Christ has paid for every sin, allows for a more optimistic perspective for those who work in the regularly pessimistic field of social work.

With these qualifications and for brevity, I will regularly switch between both “homeless person” and “person experiencing homelessness” throughout this paper. As Pastor Wattles said in his paper, “Realizing the tediousness of choosing a name for this kind of ministry and considering all the interviewees’ viewpoints in their terminology for ‘the poor,’ I am going to choose what I consider to be a ‘neutral’ term for this paper. That is, I am going to refer to the economically poor as just that, the poor.”<sup>16</sup> There is no easy way to describe those who are homeless without bluntly stating they are without a home. My goal is to be as generous as possible throughout the paper to those whom I am writing this paper about.

And what should we call this type of mission work? I will frequently use the terms “compassion ministry” or “ministry for the needy” to describe this work. But what if a church wanted to coin a phrase? What if a group of churches want to work together to form a ministry? Since 1985 the WELS has commonly used three different terms to describe this type of ministry. The names have been “The WELS Outreach to the Poor,” “Mission to the Economically

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16. Wattles, “WELS’ Mission to the Poor,” 10.

Deprived,” or “Evangelization of the Economically Disadvantaged.”<sup>17</sup> The reason for the change of names also has to deal with change in the political correctness of the media and minority groups in America. Pastor Harold Hagedorn, former WELS Administrator of the Board for Home Missions, in his interview with Pastor Kevin Wattles, stated that the change of names can be confusing and frustrating. Yet, Hagedorn “encouraged Christians, especially pastors, to show Christian love and consideration for the poor when referring to them in speaking public.”<sup>18</sup> In an interview with Pastor James Behringer, current Director of Special Ministries, Behringer called it a “compassion ministry.” I agree with Pastor Behringer. In an attempt to show that love, care, and consideration, I believe the term “compassion ministry for the homeless” is evangelical.

### **History of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and Compassion Ministry**

So now the question is raised: How does a Lutheran church include a ministry that is geared toward serving the homeless in the community? At the infancy of the WELS, compassion work was visible. During the cholera epidemic in Milwaukee in 1854–1855, J. P. Koehler wrote the following concerning the first president of the Wisconsin Synod, John Muehlhaeuser:

At the 1855 Synod meeting in Grace church, Milwaukee, the assembly, first of all, offered thanks and praise to the Lord for his protection in the cholera epidemic that had swept Milwaukee and vicinity during the year. In this trying period Muehlhaeuser, Synod’s founder, had nobly acquitted himself in not, like many, fleeing the city but fearlessly and with untiring devotion taking care of the sick and dying and ministering to their bodily as well as spiritual needs. The whole city at that time tendered him its grateful recognition and long after kept his memory green.<sup>19</sup>

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17. Wattles, “WELS’ Mission to the Poor,” 4–5.

18. Wattles, “WELS’ Mission to the Poor,” 5.

19. J.P. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (Sauk Rapids, MN: Sentinel, 1981), 48–49.

The historical accounts of the Wisconsin Synod's ability to perform compassion ministry show that from its humble beginnings, our synod has been concerned with the well-being of our immediate neighbors. Muehlhaeuser's compassion also prompted his members to join in his compassion work.

Muehlhaeuser's personal example, however, engendered a spirit of mutual helpfulness that is great to behold and warms the heart. Especially in the Gnaden-Gemeinde at Milwaukee and later also St. Johannis, when it joined Synod under Streissguth, individual parishioners made a practice of charity beyond the boundaries of the congregations, that naturally had the pastors and their families as its first object but then served to promote the welfare of the entire body. Muehlhaeuser's parsonage in Milwaukee was a regular hospice for the newcomers from Europe and the east, naturally so in those pioneer times and in view of the man's personal make-up. Whenever there was an overflow, that overtaxed the accommodations of the parsonage and his wife's unflagging efforts, he did not hesitate to quarter the extra guests with his parishioners of means. Thus a relationship sprang up between many of the pastors and individual Milwaukee families, especially thru the women that became the vehicle of much help that flowed from the two Milwaukee congregations out into the country without any publicity.... Such attention to the needs of others was practiced in all the congregations.<sup>20</sup>

WELS mission work for the poor was at the forefront in its infancy. Is it the case today? Is our church body still concerned and going out of its way to show compassion to the economically disadvantaged?

There are many different options available to show compassion: food pantry or bank, clothing drives, making or distributing resource kits to hand out to those on the street, supporting a non-profit with time, talent, or treasure, offering a place for medical professionals to do free exams, teaching job training courses, etc. There are many ways the church can get involved in a compassion ministry. However, the purpose of the church is not to feed mouths, but to feed

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20. Koehler, *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 66–67.

souls. Professor Armin Schuetze says that the church’s mission is what Jesus commanded his disciples to do in his great commission: preach the good news.<sup>21</sup>

The good news, in a narrow sense, is simply preaching justification through Christ alone. In the context of preaching sanctification, the good news is shown by living out the commission to love one another as Christ has loved us. This is where Professor John Brug believes American Lutherans have had a problem with teaching the doctrine of church and ministry.<sup>22</sup> This is because from the most liberal to most conservative Lutheran church, there is little agreement on what the mission of the church is. The New Testament never gives explicit commands that the mission of the church is to “preach the gospel, *and not make the world a better place.*”<sup>23</sup>

Yet, Professor Thomas Nass goes on to make the point that in all of the passages that describe the work of the church in the New Testament, there is a striking silence in one area. “The commission passages and the passages that describe the work of the first public ministers of the church do not talk at all about making the world a better place.”<sup>24</sup> Compassion ministry, however, is not aimed at making the world a better place. Compassion ministry is understanding the gift that the gospel gives and letting the peace of the forgiveness of sins naturally produce merciful living.<sup>25</sup> Jesus came to earth not to create a heaven here but to have compassion on the

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21. Armin W. Schuetze, *Church-Mission-Ministry: The Family of God*, People’s Bible Teachings (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1995), 48.

22. John F. Brug, *The Ministry of the Word* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2009), xii.

23. Thomas P. Nass, “The Church and Its Ministry” (WLS Essay File, 2008), 5–6.

24. Nass, “Church and Ministry,” 6.

25. Matthew C. Harrison, “Theology for Mercy” in *Mercy in Action: Essays on Mercy, Human Care and Disaster Response*, edited by Ross Edward Johnson (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), 28. Here it is important to make the distinction between the LCMS and WELS ministries. LCMS calls this form of ministry “mercy ministry.” In an interview with WELS director of Special Ministries, Pastor Jim Behringer, he called this form of ministry “compassion ministry.” While there is not much difference in the terminology or practice of this ministry, as stated above, I will stick with Pastor Behringer’s name for this ministry throughout the paper.

poorest of souls. He did not show favoritism towards the rich or upper class. Rather, he purposefully went to find those who were poor in spirit. “Jesus did not come to preach God’s gracious good news of the forgiveness of sins through faith in him only to the rich, physically healthy, or people of high social and/or political regard. Jesus came to preach the message of salvation to all people! Jesus Christ is the Savior of all the spiritually poor!”<sup>26</sup>

The WELS is not interested in creating a heaven on earth, but rather in “providing a means for congregations and their members to extend the reach of their God-given mission of proclaiming the gospel in Word and sacrament.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, the WELS is concerned with preparing souls for eternal service. Part of that service can be found through serving the homeless with a compassion ministry.

As stated above, I propose that churches in the WELS should assess their ability to perform and sustain a compassion ministry for the homeless in their area. There is Scriptural backing for this statement. There is practical backing for this statement. However, there are also times that a church *should not* have a compassion ministry for the homeless. This will be addressed as well. A Lutheran church will preach Christ crucified, just as Paul did in his first letter to the Corinthians. A Lutheran church will promote good works, just as James did in his epistle. One of the ways for the church to show its love to its immediate community is through good works of compassion for the needy.

## PART II: BIBLICAL BASIS FOR COMPASSION MINISTRY TOWARD THE HOMELESS

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26. Wattles, “WELS’ Mission to the Poor,” 3.

27. WELS Mission Statement from <https://wels.net/about-wels/>.



Pastor James Hein makes a point in his eight-part sermon series “Renewed Church/Renewed City” that the church should care about the city it is in. If the church cares about the city it is in, then the city will be blessed by the work of the church. He doesn’t come to this conclusion through his own personal convictions. He comes to this conclusion through his study of Scripture. Even more than that, he comes to the conclusion because the Old Testament and New Testament believers had this understanding of corporate compassion.<sup>28</sup>

The Lord cares about those who are broken; he cares for those who cannot care for themselves. In other words, God cares for sinners. He has shown that care for sinners by how he provided his Son to take away the sin of the world. One of the most striking accounts of God caring for those who cannot care for themselves comes from the ordinance he gave to his people in Zechariah 7:9–10. While the Lord pleaded with his people to no longer give pseudo-fasts but actually do what he has commanded them to do, he reminded them in verse nine, “Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another.” And then he qualified his statement by adding a specific group of people for the Israelites to care for. “Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other” (Zech 7:10). The Lord wants his believers to care for those who cannot provide for themselves. This list is not exhaustive of people to care for, and this command is not just an Old Testament motif.

The New Testament church also takes this practice seriously. James (1:27) and Paul (1 Tim 5:3) both bring out the idea of caring for widows and orphans. Jesus talked about caring for the needy (Matt 6) and backed up his teachings by showing compassion for the broken in society through his various miracles.

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28. <http://liveitmke.libsyn.com/webpage/2017/06>, <http://liveitmke.libsyn.com/webpage/2017/07>, and <http://liveitmke.libsyn.com/webpage/2017/08>.

### *Sedes Doctrinae* for Compassion Ministry

As clear as it is that the Christian church should have compassion for the needy, there is no direct Scripture passage that states an individual Christian or church should have a compassion ministry directed for the homeless. Jesus gives us a glimpse of how he views outward works of the church and of the Christians in his end time discourse in Matthew 25:31–46. The NIV labels this section as “The Sheep and the Goats.” A simple Biblegateway.com search for this section will show that there are more, possibly better suited headings for this section. This section should be referred to by what Jesus actually teaches. “Jesus Will Judge the World” (EHV), “The Son of Man Will Judge the Nations” (NKJV), or “The Final Judgment” (ESV) give a clearer picture of what Jesus is telling his disciples about the end time.

However, the distinction between the sheep and the goats gives the basis for how Jesus will judge the nations. Jesus says he will separate the sheep from the goats when he comes in his glory. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. And he will acknowledge his sheep for the works that they did during their life on earth.

Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me’ (Matt 25:34–36 NIV).

Jesus tells his disciples what the visible works of his judgment will be. These visible works, six items in all, are what Jesus sees when he judges the works of his people. Jesus intends to make the point that these six items are vital to Christian living. He repeats them four times in his discourse, as a way to emphasize these items.

Thankfully, Jesus does not judge the works of the church based on supernatural or spectacular works of the believer. Pastor G. Jerome Albrecht quotes John Chrysostom’s

application for this portion of Scripture. “The Judge does not say, ‘I was sick and *you* healed me,’ or ‘I was in prison and *you* set me free.’ These are not big miracles but little acts of mercy and kindness. Virtually every Christian is capable of these.”<sup>29</sup> If every Christian is capable of these little acts of mercy and kindness, why would a church withhold the opportunity for its members to do them? Matthew 25:31–46, and more specially verses 34–36, provide a Christian with examples on how to show Christian love to their neighbor.

Historically there have been different ways that this larger section of Matthew 25 has been interpreted. Sherman W. Gray in his doctrinal dissertation studied the multiple historical interpretations of Matthew 25:31–46. He says there are many different legitimate views. However, two come to the forefront. On the one hand there is a group of exegetes who find a basis for charity without bounds. These exegetes believe that this section should be interpreted as a command from Christ. They say that Christians and non-Christians alike should care for every needy human. This command to show compassion is written on the heart. On the other hand, the other major group of exegetes believe this section is primarily an end times discourse with examples of how Christians live their lives in the end times. They believe there is no direct command for compassionate, Christian living.<sup>30</sup>

#### Luther’s Interpretation of Matthew 25:31–46

Gray’s research was mostly concerned with how the church historically interpreted the phrase “least of my brothers” in verse 40. In his research, Gray categorizes many historical viewpoints

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29. G. Jerome Albrecht, *Matthew*, People’s Bible (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1996), 368. Italics added for emphasis.

30. Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31–46 A History of Interpretation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 8.

based on various periods of Christianity. In his Reformation section, he points out what Martin Luther taught concerning this portion of Scripture. Luther viewed “the least of my brothers” as pastors and preachers who were forced to take secular jobs so they wouldn’t have to be supported by the church. Working a second job would mean the pastors wouldn’t be putting such a burden on their church members to support the clergy. Luther, as a result of this verse, urged congregations to support their called workers to relieve the stress of extra work, especially during the time of Reformation.<sup>31</sup>

Luther also used the broader section of Matthew 25 as part of his 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment teaching. He taught that a Christian is to do no bodily harm to anyone; any form of intentional bodily harm could be considered a murder. He also taught that a Christian should not disregard caring for humanity. Christians don’t follow this directive out of fear that they won’t be counted as a sheep at the final judgment; rather they follow it because they wish to follow Christ’s example.<sup>32</sup>

As Luther taught on the 7<sup>th</sup> Commandment:

If your enemy needs you and you do not help him when you can it is the same as if you had stolen what belonged to him, *for you owe him your help*. St. Ambrose says, “Feed the hungry: if you do not feed him, then *as far as you are concerned, you have killed him.*” And in this commandment are included the works of mercy which Christ will require at the last day [Matt. 25:35–46].<sup>33</sup>

Luther wanted to make clear that this portion of Scripture should be applied to *all* people, not just to those within the church. In his treatment of the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment Luther says, “Therefore

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31. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, 204.

32. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, 205.

33. Martin Luther, *Christian in Society I*, vol. 44 of *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 109. Italics added for emphasis.

God rightly calls all persons murderers who do not offer counsel or assistance to those in need and peril of body and life.”<sup>34</sup> Luther is clear that we should help the poor if we have the ability.

If we don’t consider ourselves to be actual murderers, Luther uses the following analogy for how the world would view us if we were to withhold aid to the needy. “It is just as if I saw someone who was struggling in deep water or someone who had fallen into a fire and I could stretch out my hand to pull him out and save him, and yet I did not do so. How would I appear before all the world except as a murderer and a scoundrel?”<sup>35</sup> Luther applies the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment in such a way that there is no excuse for a Christian to withhold compassion from even the worst of our enemies. “Therefore it is God’s real intention that we should allow no one to suffer harm but show every kindness and love. And this kindness, as I said, is directed especially toward our enemies.”<sup>36</sup>

As Luther wrote in his Galatians commentary about Galatians 2:10, he also thought of the application of Matthew 25:35. Galatians 2:10 says, “All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.” Luther, in a comment directed specifically for the clergy, wanted to make sure that next to the proclamation of the gospel, the pastor’s concern should be for the poor. Luther says:

For wherever the church, there must be poor people. Most of the time they are the only true disciples of the Gospel, as Christ says (Matt 11:5): “The poor have the Gospel preached to them.” For both human beings and the devil persecute the church and bring poverty upon many, who are then forsaken and to whom no one wants to give anything. In addition, no one provides for the preservation of the Gospel, and no one now will take any care for the support of ministers and the construction of schools.... In other words, everywhere true religion is in need, and Christ complains that he is hungry, thirsty,

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34. Luther’s Large Catechism in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 412.

35. Large Catechism in Kolb and Wengert, 412.

36. Large Catechism in Kolb and Wengert, 412.

without shelter, naked, and sick (Matt 25:35)... Therefore a true bishop must be concerned also about the poor, and Paul here admits that he was.<sup>37</sup>

There is no doubt that Luther was concerned about the poor. He viewed the church as a respite for those who had been trampled on by society and the Roman Catholic Church. If the pastor made it a priority to show compassion to the needy inside the church, he believed the congregation would follow the pastor's example and also perform acts of Christian mercy for the poor and needy everywhere.

Luther interpreted this larger section of Matthew 25 in a way that promoted Christian acts of compassion, while also taking a narrow view of verse 40. He believed that Christian pastors and lay preachers who were poor should be taken care of by their members. This aligns with what the historical teaching of the church was. David L. Turner devotes a portion of his Matthew commentary about the historical interpretation of "the least of these" as well. He concludes that Luther, rightly, interpreted this phrase as the historical church did.<sup>38</sup>

#### Modern Application of Matthew 25:31–46

However, Turner does admit that interpretations of the Bible change over time. The message of the content remains the same, but the applications can change according to the norms of society. The modern view of Matthew 25:31–46 takes "the least of these" as anyone in need.<sup>39</sup> Pastor Jeffery Gibbs comments that the social-ministry interpretation of Matthew 25:31–46 is concerned about a broader range of people than works done to Christian pastors. He makes the

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37. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535: Chapters 1–4*, vol. 26 of *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 105–06.

38. David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 604.

39. Turner, *Matthew*, 605.

argument for this interpretation that Jesus didn't only care for those in need in Israel but for those in need, period. He went out of his way to go through Samaria. He set out resolutely to save not just Israel but the whole world from sin so that our poverty of soul could be set right (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:9).<sup>40</sup> As a result of Jesus's mission for Israel first, caring for the needs of our fellow Christians should also have high importance in our own ministries.

Modern interpretations do not all agree with the social-ministry interpretation. Grant Osborne notes,

It is common to make this the key to the entire section and to read Jesus's challenge as directed to all humanity or to the disciples in terms of social action; that is, Jesus will judge everyone on the basis of helping the poor and the needy. Yet this is not the best understanding, for "the least of these brothers and sisters of mine" (v. 40) must refer to believers, not to all humanity.<sup>41</sup>

Osborne takes the historical interpretation of this section yet fully endorses a view that teaches the ethical implication of faith salvation. This is because faith cannot exist without works. They are a necessary response to and a proof of faith.<sup>42</sup>

No matter the interpretation of this section of Scripture, the point is clear. Jesus will judge the church on the basis of their outward works. However, Jesus will not judge these works as the cause of salvation or damnation. The works done in this group are evidence for or against the working of God's grace in our lives.<sup>43</sup> There is an ethical responsibility for the church to

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40. Jeffery A. Gibbs, *Matthew*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2018), 1344. Though Pastor Gibbs makes the argument for a social-ministry interpretation, he does not personally endorse this viewpoint.

41. Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 935–36.

42. Osborne, *Matthew*, 939–40.

43. Leon Morris, *Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 634.

show mercy to the oppressed.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, these six works should be taken seriously and deserve due diligence within the mission of the church.

If a church is looking for a ministry to help those in their community, Matthew 25:31–46 offers a great list of ministries to start looking into. The WELS has ministries that serve some of these needs. In an interview with WELS Director of Special Ministries, James M. Behringer, he lists differing special ministries the WELS already has. In connection with Matthew 25 there are ministries for Health and Wellness, Prison Ministry, and Parish Nursing. Jesus talks specifically about visiting him in prison. Jesus talks about caring for the needy. Symptoms like being hungry, thirsty, naked, or sick fall in line with the side effects of being homeless. A compassion ministry tailored for the homeless could fit the void that the WELS has. The forms of ministry we create often reflect the cities and areas we are in. If the ability is there for a WELS church to use their gifts in service of those in their community, compassion ministry for the homeless is a sensible idea. The gospel creates new forms of ministry. Who knows what forms might be needed in 30 years? But at the moment in the large city, and even the “small” cities like Watertown, WI, a compassion ministry for the homeless is in need of exploration.

### **Old Testament Proof for Compassion Ministry**

From the time of the Mosaic Law until the time of Jesus, the nation of Israel was instructed to care for those who could not care for themselves. The first recording of God’s decree to serve a fellow neighbor comes from God’s laws for the Israelites recorded at Mount Sinai. God instructs the Israelites to be socially responsible. Part of being socially responsible was to treat the needy with a greater deal of generosity. “If you lend money to one of my people among you who is

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44. Osborne, *Matthew*, 937.



needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest” (Exod 22:25). While this verse does not explicitly state to treat the less-fortunate better, God put in a provision to keep the wealthy from taking advantage of the poor.

God goes on to give those who are farmers provisions on how to help provide for the poor and foreigner residing among the Israelites. In God’s commands for the Festival of Weeks, God built in a provision for the less fortunate. “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God” (Lev 23:22). God truly wanted his people to provide for and respect those who have a hard time providing for themselves. God put his covenant name on this particular instruction, to show this instruction is done out of love.

Unfortunately, the Israelites needed reminder after reminder to remain upright and just with the way they handled their money. God again instructed his people to help the poor and needy.

If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you. Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they many continue to live among you. You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God. If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to you, do not make them work as slaves. They are to be treated as hired workers or temporary residents among you; they are to work for you until the Year of Jubilee.... Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God (Lev 25:35–40, 43).

God put provision after provision in place so that his people who were poor and needy would be taken care of by a caring and gracious nation. The rich of Israel would take care of the poor because the Lord was gracious to all of Israel by bringing them out of Egypt. Notice again how he uses his covenant name in the midst of his instructions (Lev 25:38). He made a covenant with

Israel to bring them out of Egypt and to take them to Canaan. With that same name, he charges his people to show that same kind of gracious compassion to those within the Israelite community who were struggling.

While these few passages from Leviticus show that God wanted Israel to care for the poor and needy, I think there are better passages that speak more directly to how Christians, or in Israel's case Old Testament-believers, should show compassion to their neighbor. This section will explore various Old Testament passages that give Scriptural evidence for a compassion ministry geared toward the homeless.

#### Scriptural Proof from the Torah

As Moses was delivering his farewell sermon to the people of Israel, he recounted for them what the Lord had done. The Lord had given them a land full of milk and honey. The Lord had given them passage through the Red Sea. The Lord had given them freedom from oppression in Egypt. The Lord had generously provided for his people in the past, and he would generously continue to provide for them in the Promised Land.<sup>45</sup> As a result of his generous provision, the Lord's people were to be generous to one another as well.

If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land (Deut 15:7–11).

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45. *The Lutheran Study Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 302.

This portion of Deuteronomy is prompted by the categorizing of needy people back in Deut 14:27–29.<sup>46</sup> There, God tells his people to bring their tithes together every three years so that the Levites, foreigners, fatherless and widows might be able to eat and be satisfied. In chapter 15 there is a requirement yet again for generosity to be shown to the poor. In this section God tells those who are rich in land or money to be generous with how they lend to the poor. God wants not just generous action, but true heartfelt generosity.

Craigie’s commentary on Deuteronomy 15 bolsters the point for compassion ministry.

The humanitarian spirit of the address comes clearly to the forefront in these verses, for the requirement of generosity extends beyond the letter of the law and points to a proper attitude which was to characterize the people’s dealings with the poor. Note, however, that it is not charity, in the sense of almsgiving, that is advocated here; it is a charitable attitude to be expressed by lending the poor man *whatever he needs for himself*, while he pledged to repay the loan in due course.<sup>47</sup>

An application to take from verse 7 is that a rich man already has experienced God’s blessing in this life. He knows that the Lord will also bless him in the life to come. Even if the poor man was not able to repay in due course, the rich man would not hold it against the poor man. The Lutheran Study Bible makes the application that the Israelites “were forbidden from willfully refusing to help the poor.”<sup>48</sup>

God put the burden on the rich in the community to help support the needy. Yet even as helping the poor may be seen as a burden, the Lord programs a blessing into his command. “Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to” (Deut 15:10). God knows that it isn’t human nature to share the wealth we have been blessed with. As positive

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46. Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 236.

47. Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 237.

48. *The Lutheran Study Bible*, 301.

motivation, he programmed a blessing into his command so that sharing wouldn't be seen as a burden but as an opportunity to serve the God who gives all good gifts. And with this opportunity, God never fails to respond by blessing the happy and generous giver.<sup>49</sup>

God proposes an ideal that there should be no poor people in the Israelite community (Deut 15:4). However, on account of sin, this reality could never be achieved.<sup>50</sup> Because Israel was continually disobedient to God's will, the poor would continue to be in the land.<sup>51</sup> Part of that poverty would manifest itself in a family losing their home. Homelessness was an issue the eight-century prophets also battled with. It is an issue that is still unsolved in society today. Raymond Brown remarks that homelessness is an acute social problem that committed Christians cannot ignore on the basis of these verses.<sup>52</sup> In our fallen world where there will always be poor, and there will always be a need for a genuine Christian spirit of generosity.<sup>53</sup>

### Scriptural Proof from the Prophets

#### *Ezekiel*

Ezekiel's message in chapter eighteen deals with individual accountability before God. This portion of Ezekiel challenges the reader to look inward about sin rather than to previous generations. Through this passage, Ezekiel "exudes a sense of genuine concern by the strong for

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49. J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 188.

50. Mark E. Braun, *Deuteronomy*, People's Bible (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1993), 138.

51. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 188–89.

52. Raymond Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 168.

53. Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 245.

the weak.”<sup>54</sup> The overtones of Deuteronomy 15’s message for the rich to care for the poor of Israel permeates into Ezekiel’s message for the righteous. How is an Old Testament believer judged? The answer according to Ezekiel’s examples is very similar to how a New Testament believer is judged, on the basis of faith and how that faith manifests itself in action. The section for consideration is the first of three case studies that Ezekiel uses to make his point about God’s righteous judgment. Here, Ezekiel’s example is of a righteous man and his works.

He does not oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked. He does not lend to them at interest or take a profit from them. He withholds his hand from doing wrong and judges fairly between two parties. He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws. That man is righteous; he will surely live, declares the Sovereign Lord (Ezek 18:7–9).

Ezekiel uses negative statements to show what the righteous man refrains from doing.

The righteous man refrains from oppressing anyone. He is not prone to be violent or use force to get what he wants. On the contrary, he is gentle and compassionate to the poor and needy around him. He refrains from dealing dishonestly with anyone and is especially considerate to the poor. In fact, the righteous man refrains from these wicked acts because they are not compatible with God’s idea of righteousness and justice.<sup>55</sup> The righteous man exudes the fundamental convictions of the Lord who loves righteousness and justice (Ps 33:5).<sup>56</sup>

If you were to sum up the righteous man’s actions in this passage, you could say that the righteous man simply loves his neighbors as himself (Lev 19:18). His outward actions towards others were visible to all, and the respect he showed for God’s law proved that he was right with

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54. Horace D. Hummel, *Ezekiel 1–20*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), 524.

55. Hummel, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 540.

56. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 192.

God.<sup>57</sup> “Fundamentally, the one who does justice and righteousness is the one who, out of faithful loyalty to Yahweh as redeemer and covenant Lord, seeks to live in obedience to his laws and in conformity to the whole ethos and guidance of his word.”<sup>58</sup> The righteous man allows the “law of love,” as St. Paul mentions in Galatians 5:22–23, to govern his heart. Within this law, the righteous man does not have to worry about sinning against his neighbor. It has been attributed to St. Augustine that he said, “Love God, and do whatever you please.” This righteous man that Ezekiel describes loves God and lets his actions show his faith. His righteous deeds are simply reflections of God’s good gifts given to him in creation,<sup>59</sup> and he uses these good gifts to benefit the poor and broken in society.

Therefore, in a world where justice and righteousness can be administered by helping the homeless, the Christian can show his or her love for God by using his or her good gifts to benefit the homeless in the church’s reach. From this Ezekiel passage, we can definitively say that a Christian does not oppress a homeless person. Rather than just pass by the homeless, one can show compassion by sharing a meal together, giving clothes to keep the homeless properly clothed, or something so simple as striking up a conversation to get to know him or her. Ezekiel 18 sets an example that we should be loving to the needy through the earthly means God has blessed us with.

### ***Amos***

God wanted the prophet Amos to tell his people to conduct their lives in a worthy manner for the calling he had given them. If they were to be God’s people, they would uphold his idea of

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57. Keith B. Kuschel, *Ezekiel*, People’s Bible (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1986), 98.

58. Wright, *Ezekiel*, 192.

59. Hummel, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 541.

justice. However, Amos paints a powerfully negative picture of what the Israelites were actually doing.

There are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground. There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in court and detest the one who tells the truth. You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. Therefore the prudent keep quiet in such times, for the times are evil. Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph (Amos 5:7, 10–15).

Instead of promoting justice, they were repeatedly perverting it.

This justice that Israel was to administer is “what is right and proper ... the God-given norm to ensure a well-ordered society.”<sup>60</sup> In Deuteronomy 15:4 God decreed that there should be no poor people in the Israelite community. However, Amos describes how the rich turned God’s good intention for his people into bitterness.

The Israelites wandered away from God’s righteousness. Instead of upholding God’s righteousness out of thankfulness as a natural result for what God had done for them, they put it in a place of contempt. “God’s gracious work in the believer is the reason for the justice and righteousness that is (and is to be) evident in the lives of his people.”<sup>61</sup> Israel was not showing themselves to be God’s people. In verse 10, the corrupt judges of Israel, who were supposed to provide the weaker members of Israel legal protection, choose to be greedy leaders who took an unfair tax of grain from the poor. The righteousness of God they were supposed to uphold

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60. R. Reed Lessing, *Amos*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 308.

61. Lessing, *Amos*, 309.

proved to be nothing but a facade in the courts. “The Israelites in Amos’ day were religious, but they rejected Yahweh’s grace, and so they themselves failed to be gracious toward each other.”<sup>62</sup>

Therefore, it was crucial for Amos to call God’s people to true repentance. They needed to turn from their wicked, evil, and greedy ways and turn toward the God of compassion and grace. “Seek good, not evil” (Amos 5:14a). It seems like such a simple plea for the people of Israel to obey. Amos reiterates this sentiment just one verse later, “hate evil, love good” (Amos 5:15a).

Very rarely does God choose to use the word hate in a positive manner. In Psalm 97 God says that those who love him should hate evil. Four times in Psalm 119 hate is used as what happens when God’s people are intent on following God’s Word. In Proverbs we learn the six things God hates and that if we fear God, we too will hate evil and falsehood. Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time to hate. Those are the only times that hate is used positively in the Old Testament. Of these 10 uses, only from Amos do we see that hating evil is part of social justice. Israel was to hate the evil, detestable practices that stripped justice from the poor and needy. We can learn from Amos that we too should have our eyes towards maintaining justice.

### ***Zechariah***

God’s command for Israel to care for the poor is a repeated theme throughout the Old Testament. In Zechariah the command is paralleled with the concept of maintaining true justice. Amos gave similar commands to maintain justice. However, Zechariah’s justice is to be shown specifically through acts of mercy and compassion. “This is what the Lord Almighty said: ‘Administer true

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62. Lessing, *Amos*, 341.



justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other” (Zech 7:9–10).

As if it were a sermon, Zechariah appropriates God’s message and then gives specific examples on how to apply it in everyday life. He tells the people to live their lives worthy of the standards God has set up for Israel. He tells them exactly how they can do it. “Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor” (Zech 7:10a).

Each word from Zechariah’s positive command, “administer true justice,” “sums up the importance which had always been attached to justice in the community since the time of Moses.”<sup>63</sup> This is how God wanted the people to worship. The worship that God prescribes in these verses is not done to him but rather to our neighbor.<sup>64</sup> “These verses directly quote the Lord’s prescription for true righteousness. Echoing themes that occur frequently in the prophets, God commanded the people to focus less on fasting and more on ‘justice, mercy, compassion, and not oppressing’ the downtrodden.”<sup>65</sup> The traits of justice, mercy, compassion, and not oppressing are often desired when the poor are involved. When these traits are shown, God’s nature of love and compassion is reflected.<sup>66</sup>

Zechariah’s idea of being merciful to the helpless consists of more than having mercy on our loved ones. This is because God’s mercy towards us is found in more than just his general love for his people. It is also his forgiveness, blessing, protection, and general kindness which he

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63. Joyce C. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*, IVP (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 145.

64. Eric S. Hartzell, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, People’s Bible (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1991), 73.

65. George L. Klein, *Zechariah*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2008), 220.

66. Klein, *Zechariah*, 222.

pours out on his people.<sup>67</sup> If this is how God shows mercy to his people, then Zechariah contends that his people should have this same attitude of love and loyalty that is displayed in the family, in friendship, or between allies.<sup>68</sup> When Zechariah warned Israel to not oppress their fellow Israelite, he wasn't limiting mercy to just the widow, fatherless, foreigner, or poor. Zechariah was using this group as a representation for anyone who did not have a defender.<sup>69</sup> Someone experiencing homelessness can be easily classified in this group. As we put the needs of our neighbor ahead of our own, we are showing the mercy that Zechariah implores Israel to have for one another.

The theme of protecting the downtrodden is also essential to show compassion. The Hebrew idea of compassion is tied to motherly love. The Hebrew word for compassion is related to the word for womb. Compassion manifests itself in gentleness and is displayed when someone does something that goes beyond what ought to be given.<sup>70</sup> “When someone we love and care about is hurting, we feel it too, in the pits of our stomachs. Compassion can actually be a hurting thing. We *feel* for each other.”<sup>71</sup> The pain and brokenness we feel for the homeless can move us to have programs of compassion for them.

For Israel, the directive was for the wealthy to not exploit the weak. For today's Christians, these directives guide new programs to pour out our love for the homeless. Klein says that a church's culture of loving spirituality is manifested when the church cares for those who

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67. Klein, *Zechariah*, 222.

68. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 146.

69. Klein, *Zechariah*, 223.

70. Klein, *Zechariah*, 223.

71. Hartzell, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 74.

are perceived to be unable to contribute to the community's economic well-being.<sup>72</sup> One way to manifest our spirit of love is to have a ministry for the homeless.

### Scriptural Proof from Wisdom Literature

The following section will give short applications from the wisdom literature sections of the Old Testament. Many of these passages deal with the poor and needy. God wants his people to look out for them, but another theme that is found in the wisdom literature section is that God himself makes provisions to care for the needy. Often, Christians take up these provisions and are moved to be the instrument God uses to care for those in need.

#### *Psalms*

Psalms 72 is written by Solomon. This Psalm shows that God has an ear to the pleas from the needy. God listens to those who cry out to him. "For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight" (Ps 72:12–14). Through the prophets the Lord often warned his people to not oppress the needy. In this Psalm, Solomon tells the needy that God will make provisions for them; he will rescue them from their oppression.

An application of this verse can be found in Jesus' miracles. "When he came to earth, he showed compassion for the poor and needy, for the weak and oppressed. He often delivered them from bondage to physical ailments, even from death. But even more importantly he delivered

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72. Klein, *Zechariah*, 223–24.

them and us from bondage to sin and Satan. He delivers us from spiritual and eternal death.”<sup>73</sup>

This Psalm, which is about the Messiah’s kingdom, shows just how Christ will deliver the poor and needy. It is a spiritual deliverance. Therefore, a practical ministry application for compassion ministry is to have the gospel message proclaimed in each program. To aid the ministry, the church can pray that rulers of all nations give proper aid and attention to the needy and poor who have no other help.

Psalm 140 also shows how God provides for the needy. “I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy” (Ps 140:12). “God’s judgment is harsh against those who use their words to harm others—through lies, gossip, slander, or other “poisonous” speech—as well as those who harm others through violence or subtle traps. God is on the side of the poor, the weak, and the oppressed.”<sup>74</sup> Prof. John Brug named Psalm 140 “Rescue Me from Evil Men.”<sup>75</sup> The evil men from which David needed rescue were those trying to slander his reputation. David has confidence that the Lord will help those who are oppressed.

An application we can draw from this verse is that the Lord’s will is what we want done here on earth. If God cares about maintaining justice for the poor and caring for the needy, then why shouldn’t God’s people also do the same? Evil is not tolerated by God. Those who do evil towards the needy will be dealt with by God. “Romans 12:17–20 speaks of proper balance of praying for the repentance and welfare of our enemies and leaving room for God’s fierce judgement on those who do not repent. If we love holiness, we must love justice.”<sup>76</sup> God’s

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73. John F. Brug, *A Commentary on Psalms 1–72* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2004), 668.

74. *The Lutheran Study Bible*, 985.

75. John F. Brug, *A Commentary on Psalms 73–150* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2004), 464.

76. Brug, *Psalms 73–150*, 468.

people pray for the well-being of all the world. When we do, we know that God will deliver the poor and needy from injustice in his own time.

### *Proverbs*

“Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God” (Prov 14:31). This Proverb is parallel to Jesus’s words in Matthew 25:40.

Christians want to show their love to their neighbors. God tells us that being kind to the poor is one way to honor him and show that love. The positive statement is in direct opposition to the sin stated in the first line of the verse. The one who oppresses the poor shows that they have no respect for the crown of God’s creation.<sup>77</sup> In Matthew 25, Jesus deals similarly with those who don’t do the gracious acts for the needy. “Anyone who oppresses a poor person insults God, the Maker of poor and rich people alike.”<sup>78</sup>

In a section that explains how to live peaceably with your neighbor (Prov 22:22–23:14), Solomon begins with a warning against oppressing the poor. “Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the LORD will take up their case and will exact life for life” (Prov 22:22–23). God is the defender of the defenseless, as noted in verse 23. Solomon warns his audience that there are consequences for failing to uphold this standard. God will exact life for life. God will deal with the unjust as they dealt with their contemporaries.

The reason for not taking advantage of the poor is that Yahweh is their Maker too (Prov 14:31; 17:5; 22:2), and he is the Redeemer (Prov 23:11) of the lowly and vulnerable. Though the poor or oppressed may appear to have no means to ward off those who would plunder what little they have, they have a surer defense (Psalm 46) than the rich who rely on their riches, since God can take away life itself from those who victimize the poor.<sup>79</sup>

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77. Andrew E. Steinmann, *Proverbs*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 338.

78. Steinmann, *Proverbs*, 338.

79. Steinmann, *Proverbs*, 463.

The Christian will want to guard their heart against prejudice and ill will toward the needy and poor. Through programs for the needy, the church can foster an attitude of love and concern for the homeless.

Proverbs 31 has two different passages that describe a believer's care for the needy. The first passage is a reminder for those having authority in the church to be encouraging a community of love and respect for those who cannot defend themselves. "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Prov 31:8–9). If there is a lawyer in a congregation, he or she can defend the rights of a homeless family who may have been forced out of their home. A pastor can foster this attitude by knowing his members' gifts, talents, and abilities and giving them the opportunity to use them to serve the needy in the area. As Steinmann says, "These proverbs remind those in power, and indeed all believers, that God calls them to defend the defenseless.... Believers who serve as advocates reflect Christ, the righteous one who is the sole and universal advocate for sinners before God the Father (Job 16:19; 1 Jn 2:1–2)."<sup>80</sup>

The second passage comes from the description of the noble wife. "She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy" (Prov 31:20). Leaders of the church are not the only ones called to be compassionate to the needy. A lay woman can show the noble character of a wife by loving those who need help. "This verse shows that her hands are not merely for domestic crafts, but also benefit others as she shows her compassion to the poor and needy, just

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80. Steinmann, *Proverbs*, 624.

as a wise man is called to do [e.g. Prov 14:21, 31; 17:5; 19:17; 22:9, 22; 31:9]. A wise wife knows God has compassion on the poor, and she imitates his provision for the poor.”<sup>81</sup>

### **New Testament Proof for Compassion Ministry**

By Christ’s fulfillment of the Law, the New Testament church was freed from the regulations of the Mosaic Law. Therefore, the New Testament church was not required to follow a specific Sabbath day anymore. No longer were there restrictions on what animals the believers could eat. The believers were not condemned for marrying a Gentile. The church was free from the laws that governed the nation of Israel. One of those commands was to care for the needy of Israel.

The New Testament church is not governed by the institutional laws that God had set for Israel. Yet out of love for what Christ has done, the church is to show the same love and compassion for the needy that Israel was commanded to show for the needy. In America there are government programs designed to do this exact work. However, these programs don’t eliminate the need for churches to have compassion ministries. As Christians work to advance the gospel message throughout the world, they strive to follow Christ’s directive in Matthew 25:31–46. We do works for the “least of these” and pray more come to the true faith. This section will look at New Testament directives that explain how the church can serve the homeless and needy of society.

### **Scriptural Proof from the Gospels<sup>82</sup>**

#### ***Matthew***

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81. Steinmann, *Proverbs*, 642.

82. For more information concerning gospel proof for compassion ministry, see Appendix 1.

Jesus shifts gears in his Sermon on the Mount from family relationship towards relationships with neighbors. With this shift, he delivers a message about giving to the poor.

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you (Matt 6:1–4).

Jesus set the scene for this short charity discourse in verse 1. Good works by believers are not to be noticed. This is an anti-Pharisee thought. In other words, Jesus tells his audience that charitable practices should be done in private.<sup>83</sup> A specific example of this today would be the use of social media. If you want to volunteer your time and treasures for non-profits or for the needy, there is no need to post it on social media. The honor that you receive for these works should not come from friends, family, or followers on Instagram or Twitter. The honor for these works all goes to the Lord, who has prepared the works for his people as an opportunity to serve him (Eph 2:10).

The Old Testament never specifically commands Israel to give charitably. God's commands for his people were to simply care for the poor and needy. However,

During the intertestamental period almsgiving became a critical aspect of true piety (Sir 3:30; Tob 4:10; 12:8–9). By the time of Jesus righteousness and almsgiving were virtually synonymous, and almsgiving was an important part of temple and synagogue services. Synagogues functioned as social agencies in the first century, providing relief for the poor who depended on contributions from people in the community. Therefore, it was natural that ostentation became connected with giving; it was a perfect way to be seen as particularly pious.<sup>84</sup>

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83. Gibbs, *Matthew*, 312.

84. Osborne, *Matthew*, 219.



Jesus' goal from this discourse was for people to live righteously in the sight of God rather than to gain approval from their contemporaries. Gibbs notes, "In a culture and time in which relative status, honor, and shame were primary forces and values, his teaching is a truly radical invitation to live life in view of the status and honor that God the Father bestows!"<sup>85</sup> The hearts Jesus tried to reach "were more interested in ensuring that they were known as benefactors than in genuinely helping the poor; reputation rather than relief of poverty was what matter to them. Jesus teaches that it is important to give, not to be known to give."<sup>86</sup>

The spirit of giving in church should be as Jesus directed. Give but don't worry about being seen as the giver. I was taught growing up to put my offering envelope upside down into the plate. No matter what you gave, whether it be \$1 or \$10,000, the only thing that mattered was how you gave. As the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 9:7, "God loves a cheerful giver." Jesus similarly commands us to not even let our left hand know what the right is doing when we give. He tells us that this sort of private giving has an eternal promise attached to it.

What does this verse have to do with a compassion ministry for the homeless? There is no doubt that Jesus' teaching here is more concerned about the attitude of giving than the programs that encourage charitable giving and actions. This verse gives a church an idea of how to implement these programs. Since Jesus understood the command to help the poor and needy, he wanted God's people to do so in a way that honored God. If a church decides to start a compassion ministry, Matthew 6:1-4 tells the church to do it humbly and discreetly. There is no need for a press release or a write-up in a local paper about the work. Simply let the congregation know what work is being done and let the work be done. This compassion work is an act of

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85. Gibbs, *Matthew*, 312.

86. Morris, *Matthew*, 136.

worship. It is done not to show the worth of an individual or congregation, but rather to show the compassionate concern one has for all of God's people.<sup>87</sup>

### *Luke*

The people came to John the Baptist to be baptized in the wilderness. John wasted no time in telling them to be on guard for their faith. John warned the Pharisees that they were children of vipers, and he warned the people to not take pride in their Jewish heritage. He warned them that they were unfruitful trees about to be cut down. The crowds asked in earnest, "what should we do then?" (Luke 3:10). John's very first answer was to be compassionate. "John answered, 'Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same'" (Luke 3:11). It was a practical answer. There was no question what John was hinting at. He was saying to the people that they should share their possessions with those who had nothing.<sup>88</sup>

It seems that Luke had a particular interest in recording Jesus' work for the poor and unfortunate.<sup>89</sup> "It is evident that not all of the teachings of John are here recorded; but we can be sure that the chief matters are set down."<sup>90</sup> It makes sense that Luke would record John's instruction regarding the poor and hungry too. These instructions are part of sanctified living. As

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87. Osborne, *Matthew*, 221.

88. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 96.

89. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 133. For example, see Luke 6:30; 12:33; 14:12–14; 16:9; 18:22.

90. William F. Arndt, *Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 110.

Luther stated in his first thesis, the entire life of a believer is one of repentance. So, the works mentioned by John are works that express true repentance.<sup>91</sup>

As we apply this to our church's or personal policies today, it is important to note that John did not say, "If you have *extra* food, share with another who has nothing,' but if you have 'food.'"<sup>92</sup> John wants these people to truly rely on God with all their body and soul. "John is not addressing people who have 'many possessions'—they have only two undergarments—and he does not expect them to give 'in proportion' but even beyond reasonable limits. If they cannot give a shirt away, they do not own the shirt; it owns them."<sup>93</sup> If we have an abundance of food left over after a potluck, should we have a policy to give the extras to a homeless shelter? John didn't want his audience to merely go through the motions; he wanted them to devote their attitudes and actions to helping those they saw in need.

#### Scriptural Proof from the Epistles

As the Apostles went out and preached and established churches around the world, they brought with them a profound knowledge of what Christ taught and how to apply it to the world in which they were living. The Scripture passages from Matthew 6 and Luke 3 gave specific instructions from Jesus and his forerunner. After Jesus' death, the church did not crumble and forget his teachings. The followers of Jesus devoted their lives to spreading Christ's work to the ends of the earth. Included in that work were instructions on how to fight the good fight of faith. In the

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91. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 143.

92. David E. Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 157.

93. Garland, *Luke*, 157.

following passages, Paul, James, and John give their interpretations of how to fight that good fight by showing compassion to the needy.

### *Ephesians*

The second part of Ephesians, chapters 4-6, primarily deals with the natural result of our justification by grace through faith. Paul's main idea in chapter 4 is for the Christian community of believers to grow together in maturity.<sup>94</sup> Paul wants the Ephesian church to give up falsehood and treat the members of the church as one true body that works together (Eph 4:25). As they work together, Paul gives this instruction, "Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need" (Eph 4:28). Paul asks the Christian to give up his relentless way and to let kindness rule through the new man.<sup>95</sup> He makes an exhortation to rid the new man of thievery and then appeals to the new man to develop a social virtue of hard work.<sup>96</sup>

Paul exhorts the Ephesians to no longer live in the old self that is subject to a life of sin; theft is the specific sin he condemns.

Paul does not necessarily suggest that someone among the Christians at Ephesus is still thieving and should stop, but rather that anyone who once lived that way should stay away from his old life, which was destructive of community, and give his attention to what supports and strengthens it. The concern is not with the principle of personal property or the right to wealth, but with the welfare of one's Christian brothers and sisters.<sup>97</sup>

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94. Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 296.

95. Irwin J. Habek, *Ephesians: Amazing Grace* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1985), 92.

96. Arnold, *Ephesians*, 298–99.

97. Thomas M. Winger, *Ephesians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), 525.

Paul implored the Ephesian church to live honestly with one another. The reason for this honest living was so that the community of believers could be built up. If a member is caught stealing, even if it is only a few supplies from work, it tears down the reputation of the whole church.<sup>98</sup> What community would want help from a church that has a reputation of stealing? Therefore, it is important for the church to work with a high moral standard and to do its work with integrity.

As the church works with integrity, they work to cultivate virtues that build up the community around the church. The virtue they work to cultivate is love.<sup>99</sup> This loving culture and community welcomes and gives aid to those who are truly in need. “There is a stewardship lesson here. One of the purposes for which the Lord entrusts a portion of this world’s goods to our management is that we are to use some of them in helping the needy.”<sup>100</sup> A way for the church to manage those gifts is through a compassion ministry for the homeless.

### ***James***

Of all the Apostles, James might have had the most unique perspective on Jesus’s directives. Having lived with Jesus and seen how he perfectly lived out God’s commands, James wrote a letter to Jewish Christians about living out their faith and not taking it for granted. Faith without works is dead. In chapter 2 James specifically deals with the lazy Christian. He wants his audience to understand that faith is not just a profession; faith is an active, living conviction to live in the Spirit. “Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you

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98. Armin J. Panning, *Galatians, Ephesians*, People’s Bible (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997), 192.

99. Arnold, *Ephesians*, 296.

100. Habeck, *Ephesians*, 94.

says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?’ (Jas 2:15–16).

James points his audience to an illustration from everyday life. Suppose a person is without clothes or food. This person could very well be homeless. If this person passes by the homeless man with a sign, “Hungry. God Bless.” and does nothing but say, “Be warm and well fed!” this person has done nothing but show fruitless faith. “Real faith inevitably yields good works. And if the works are absent, the faith claimed must be phony.”<sup>101</sup> The person described in James’ illustration does not have real faith.

James’ audience would have been accustomed to seeing the poor around them. From context in his book, James treats his audience rather harshly when it comes to neglecting the poor altogether for the sake of the rich (Jas 2:1–13). The poor person presented in the illustration in verses fifteen and sixteen seems to be someone who was “habitually underfed, constantly falling short of the ‘daily supply’ of food required to sustain life and health.”<sup>102</sup> The negative example James describes is someone who truly believes God is able to help anyone. However, this person does not understand that God has called them to be involved in the process of providing for the needs of the poor.<sup>103</sup> “Instead of food and clothing the needy receive ‘cold deeds with warm words,’ which ring as hollow sentiments.”<sup>104</sup>

The application to this passage is obvious. James answers it in verse 17. This type of faith is actually not faith at all. Faith is living and active. Faith shows itself in action and love for your neighbor. Our churches can give their members ample opportunity to show this love through

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101. Mark A. Jeske, *James, Peter, John, Jude*, People’s Bible (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2002), 28.

102. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 125.

103. Craig L. Bloomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 143.

104. Ralph P. Martin, *James*, WBC (Waco: Word Books, 1988), 85.

works of compassion that are described specifically in this passage. James' application does not have to stop at the doors of our churches; it extends to those whom we come in contact with on a regular basis. "What was at stake for James's hearers was much akin to what was at issue in John's first epistle [1 John 3:17–18]."<sup>105</sup> The church loves those who walk through their doors. We want to show Christ-like love and spread the message of the gospel through our preaching and church programs for those who haven't yet come through our doors too.

### ***1 John***

The example of Christian living that John used in chapter 3 is almost identical to James's illustration. John, however, qualified his example with a direct correlation to Jesus's love shown at the cross rather than faith proving its life in acts of love.

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:16–18).

In context, this passage is in direct opposition to Cain's hatred that manifested in murder (1 John 3:12–15). Cain's story is an example of what happens when people let their evil emotions and desires go unchecked.<sup>106</sup>

John wanted his audience to do the direct opposite of Cain. Rather than allowing evil to fester in the heart, he urged his audience to look at Christ's example and let it move them to loving actions. It was stated above that Jews had moved away from anonymous giving towards a

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105. Kurt A. Richardson, *James*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 130.

106. Jeske, *James, Peter, John, Jude*, 240.

pious type of giving. This is not the type of giving that John is expressing. John wanted his audience to care for the needy as a result of having the cross of Christ in view.<sup>107</sup>

John doesn't see a limit to the amount of giving that a Christian can do. He goes so far as to say that "we ought to lay down our lives" for one another. The only time this phrase "to lay down one's life" appears in the New Testament is in John's Gospel and letters. Karen Jobes believes John's teaching in 1 John 3:16 alludes to John 15:12–17.<sup>108</sup> In John 15, Jesus tells his disciples that the greatest expression of love is found in laying down one's life for one's friends. This is how a Christian bears fruit according to John 15:13 and 1 John 3:16.

I am not recommending one go out and try to find ways to lay down their life for others. Rather, in an expression of love, do not be afraid to give up anything for your brother or sister in need. It can be as simple as handing out a hat to a person who is cold or as great as giving a room in one's home to a homeless person. There is no specific instruction that John gave his audience. Rather, he simply exhorts them to love in action and in truth.

If the church is to have a compassion ministry for the homeless let it be conducted in truth. The church should not let any donation meant for compassion ministry be used elsewhere. This seems like a simple step, but John gives us a good reminder. If a church is going to commit to a program for the homeless, then let it be done with a team that is prepared to give as much time and effort as is needed to finish the task. John doesn't call for half-hearted devotion to love. He calls for a church to fully commit to the programs they start.

#### Scriptural Proof from the Book of Acts

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107. Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 204.

108. Karen H. Jobes, *1, 2, & 3 John*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 158.



The book of Acts is a wonderful example of true Christian living. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he left his disciples with a command to go throughout the world and preach the message of repentance to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Throughout the book of Acts, there are remarkable showings of selflessness and communal love. One of the first examples of this comes in Acts 2. “They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need” (Acts 2:45). This verse comes directly after the events of Pentecost. The believers were baptized and then devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. One of the ways they showed their devotion was by no longer being attached to their earthly possessions. They weren’t worried about having the best new toys or materials. They were concerned with a devotion to true fellowship and serving their brothers and sisters out of love for the Lord.<sup>109</sup>

As this verse shows the love that Christians had for one another, one thing it doesn’t prove is that a church should have a compassion ministry. Rather, it shows that Christians, through guidance from the Holy Spirit, are willing to give up anything for the benefit of Christendom. “Christian fellowship is Christian caring, and Christian caring is Christian sharing.”<sup>110</sup> David Peterson says that this sharing was voluntary and occasional; it was not required nor was everyone expected to contribute. It came in response to the social and physical needs they saw that were not being fulfilled.<sup>111</sup> Because this was not a command but rather a response,<sup>112</sup> our churches can see the early Christian church as an example of going above and beyond to take care of those who are less fortunate.

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109. Richard D. Balge, *Acts*, People’s Bible (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1988), 38.

110. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 84.

111. David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 163.

112. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 74.

Another portion of Acts that shows how the early Christian church cared for the needy is in chapter 4. The Jerusalem church is set as an example of true Christian love and fellowship.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet (Acts 4:32–37).

The believers in Jerusalem were intent on being the new people God had called them to be.<sup>113</sup>

Verses 34 and 35 are of special note for the establishment of a compassion ministry for the homeless. The church did not allow any needy persons to exist. The Jerusalem church was so loving they made sure that no one lacked any earthly need. Those who gave generously also gave humbly. They understood what it meant to lay the gifts at the apostles's feet knowing that it would be given to those who needed it most.<sup>114</sup>

Luke also records the example of Joseph called Barnabas. Barnabas was a man who had a deep affection for the needy people in the church. He was compelled to sell his field so that the proceeds might be used to serve the needy. Barnabas was not commanded to do so, but he did it out of loving submission to the benefit of the church.

Many of the commentators on this section warn against using the Jerusalem church as an example of giving to the needy. I agree with their reservations. My goal in talking about Acts 4:32–37 is showing that even from the infancy of Christianity, the church was intent on loving their neighbors in an unmistakably Christian way. The Jerusalem church showed their love to

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113. Peterson, *Acts*, 203.

114. John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 153.

one another and to Christ by not being attached to earthly possessions but holding fast to their eternal possession won for them by Christ.

### **Summary of Biblical Proofs for Compassion Ministry**

As stated in the *Sedes Doctrinae* section, there are no specific passages in the Bible that direct a church to have a compassion ministry for the homeless. There is no doctrine of compassion ministry. I do not believe there should be a command to do so based on these passages either. These 18 passages show that compassion ministry for the homeless is not a radical idea. It is something that the community of believers has been doing since the time of Moses. However, the needy people described in those passages were almost always members of Israel or the early church.

From its infancy, the church has cared about the poor. Professor Armin Schuetze pointed out that the church's mission is to preach the gospel of forgiveness in Christ. This preaching includes preaching the fruits of faith, which is a significant part of Christian welfare work.<sup>115</sup> Professor Nass gives guidance for how to conservatively apply this principle outside of the church. He quotes the second principle from the Humanitarian Aid Fund for the Board for World Missions. "Acts of Christian love ... may assist Christians in carrying out Christ's commission by providing a point of contact with non-Christians."<sup>116</sup> Jesus did not stop proclaiming his kingdom just because he went through Samaria (John 4:1–26). He did not turn the poor and outcasts of society away but preached to them the forgiveness of sins (Luke 5:12–16; 21:1–4).

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115. Armin W. Schuetze, "Scriptural Principles with respect to the Church's Mission and Christian Welfare Work," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 70:3 (July 1973), 205–06.

116. Nass, "The Church and Its Ministry," 13.

The early church wasn't afraid of putting the poor at the center of their mission efforts. "It is strange indeed to place the poor at the center of a strategy for expanding a kingdom, but history indicates that this unconventional strategy has actually been quite successful."<sup>117</sup> Our goal in properly implementing a compassion ministry for the homeless is not to increase our church membership nor our budget but to gain souls for Christ by preaching the forgiveness of sins through Christ's redemptive work. There is Scriptural evidence for creating new forms of ministry to match the needs of the people. One of these ministries for churches, especially in cities with large homeless populations, is a targeted compassion ministry for the homeless.

### PART III: PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR COMPASSION MINISTRY

Compassion ministry is not a new concept. Israel, Jesus, the apostles, and the early church all showed compassion to the needy. One thing God said through Moses in Deuteronomy (15:11) and Christ reiterated (Mark 14:7; Matt 26:11) was that the poor will always be here on earth. The church has been given a unique task.

Let us make the following claim: After three hundred years of Enlightenment progress, scientific and technological advances, the glory of the market economy, and the determination of policymakers, human poverty has not only not been eliminated, but arguably has actually grown worse. Let us conclude: the poor stand as a permanent aspect of the human condition, ineradicable by human means or ingenuity. This means that the church of Christ exists not as the institution for the eradication of poverty, but rather as God's emblematic institution for how the poor are to be treated, welcomed, cared for, and respected.<sup>118</sup>

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117. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself*, enl. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2012), 42.

118. Ashley Woodiwiss, "Christian Economic Justice and the Impasse in Political Theory" in *Toward a Just and Caring Society: Christian Responses to Poverty in America*, ed. David P. Gushee (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 141.

Despite all the advances of society, the church can still fill a void in its community through a compassion ministry. The number of homeless on any given night over the last couple of years have remained relatively steady.<sup>119</sup>

What can a WELS church do that the government cannot? The government has more resources, money, and established programs that have helped many a homeless family out of the streets and into permanent living conditions. The government has assistance for single-night and short-term housing. But what the government lacks is the ability to have a meaningful relationship with those they are helping. This is where our churches can play a vital role in providing aid to the homeless. One interviewee said that our churches should make a meaningful impact in their immediate neighborhood. If the church were to abruptly leave, the neighborhood should notice, because a loving institution is no longer helping the area. If the church were to leave and there were no effect on its neighborhood, was the church doing all it could to be a positive impact?<sup>120</sup> I agree with this viewpoint. If a community doesn't feel safe around a church or if they don't want to go in because it has turned their parents, relatives, or friends away, how has the church shown Christ-like love to "the least of my brothers?"

I believe our churches are thoroughly equipped to have that positive impact on their communities. This part of the paper will explore ways in which WELS churches can implement ministries to aid the homeless. Interviews with multiple pastors will be referenced. Their work over numerous years and in various cities has shown me that compassion ministry is not as

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119. For numbers for each state in the United States see Appendix 2 Table 1. The trend for each state is categorized in Appendix 2 Table 2.

120. I asked multiple interviewees this question; the results were mixed. On the one hand, the church should be a place that brings comfort and be a positive influence on its neighborhood. On the other, the church is not a charity for the needy. If the church becomes a crutch, then it is no longer a church. Considering the multiple viewpoints on the issue of homelessness and at times its consequences on the church, I will not reveal the personal opinions of the interviewees.

complex as it may seem. From asking for the congregation to support a different non-profit for each quarter of the year to fixing peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, there is no shortage of work that can be done to serve the homeless.

## **Personal Compassion Ministry Experience**

### Hometown Experience

I was not aware of any compassion ministry programs in which my home church, Faith Lutheran in Mt. Pleasant, MI, participated. Towards the end of my family's tenure in Mt. Pleasant, our church started a food pantry, "loaves and fishes," to help out families in the congregation. My experience with compassion ministry growing up was minimal. However, "Project Christmas" was one of my favorite annual youth group activities.

My first exposure to compassion ministry was participating in Project Christmas. Project Christmas was a partner project between Faith and St. Matthew's in Benton Harbor, MI. Benton Harbor is where my home pastor, Michael Biedenbender, grew up. Because of his deep love for not only his home church but his hometown, Faith assisted underprivileged families by helping hand out Christmas gifts and food for the holiday season. Our church would donate 100 boxes of toiletries. St Matthew's would provide the gifts and a meal while families came to pick up the gifts.

The youth group's job was to help load the gifts into the cars and sit down with the families while they came and ate. Many of the families would bring their children as they picked up the gifts. Our youth group would play with the children in the gym, sit down with them to help them eat, or draw at the craft table. This was an invaluable experience for me. Not only was I introduced to an extremely impoverished area, but at times the gifts wouldn't fit into the needy

family's car. Therefore, we would take a truck with all of the donated items and help unload it at the needy family's home. It was eye-opening to see just how much our gifts meant to them. For some families they were the only Christmas gifts they would have that year.

There was nothing spectacular about what we did for these families. We didn't give them hundreds of dollars nor a new home or car. We likely wouldn't see them again until the next Project Christmas. We simply loaded gifts onto carts and took them to cars. We simply poured bowls of chili for the families. We simply sat and had conversations with the families who came. There was nothing spectacular about our actions. There were spectacular results in the reception of these actions, however. The number of hugs and tears that we shared with these families could not be counted. As stated above, Lupton says these actions bring a "deep sense of satisfaction"<sup>121</sup> to the one giving aid. More importantly, these works of faith are pleasing to God.

### Vicar Experience

During my vicar year at Grace Lutheran in Glendale, AZ, I saw beggars on just about every street corner. On my twenty-minute drive from church to my apartment I can vividly remember four street corners that consistently had a beggar. Around our church building, we had two regular homeless men scrounge the area for anything they could use. Our church office building was next door to a social aid office. The number of homeless people I directed to that building was more than I could count on my hands.

This was all new to me. Other than the experience of driving to St. Marcus in Milwaukee for worship, I had not had personal interactions with the homeless before. My heart went out to many of these beggars that I saw regularly when driving around to my different responsibilities

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121. Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 47.

in the greater Phoenix area. I usually didn't have an extra water bottle in my car. I didn't have a bank nearby to withdraw cash without a charge. I didn't travel with granola bars in my car. Those were things I had never thought of having in my car. Now, I try not to leave my house without a couple of granola bars in my backpack that are designated for handing out to those on the street corners.<sup>122</sup>

### **Compassion Ministry from the Perspective of a Social Worker**

I had the privilege of interviewing two social workers who have worked in the area of homelessness.<sup>123</sup> The perspective that professional social workers bring to the church is encouraging. Both of them recognize many different ways that a church can implement compassion ministry for the homeless without the need for a large budget. Our churches are made up of lay members who have a plethora of different gifts, talents, and professions. Many of these gifts, talents, and professions are able to serve a specific need for the homeless in the area.

How can the average person in a church assist the homeless? The social workers gave many suggestions. A talent survey can be conducted within the church to connect a member's gifts to the specific needs of a homeless person. Many times, the homeless need legal help; they might have been removed from their home and they need help in court, or they might be fighting to not be evicted. If there are lawyers in your congregation, see if they would be willing to do some pro bono work. This could help the lawyer build a positive reputation in the community as someone who fights for the rights of all. Other talents or professions that can be used to help are

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122. This idea was prompted by my wife. She was called to St. Marcus, Milwaukee. At the end of the school day she would take the leftover raisin packets, granola bars, or fruit snacks that would otherwise be thrown away. When she saw someone on the street corner who had a "hungry" sign, she would hand out these items. Pastor Paul Biedenbender also reinforced this idea in our email correspondence.

123. Questions asked during the interview will be included in Appendix 3.



barbers, photographers, stylists, dentists, or optometrists. A podiatrist within a congregation might be the professional who can provide the most specific help. Often, the homeless don't have proper shoes or have foot diseases that need to be addressed.

Another way a congregation can get involved with homeless ministry is through job training classes. Many of the homeless people that these two social workers helped had a dream of being self-supporting, but they didn't have the training or schooling to find and keep a job. Employers in the congregation could offer a mentoring program in their business. The interviewees admitted this option might be a little more hands-on than other programs, yet this shows the Christ-like love described in 1 John 3:18.

The two social workers gave many other ways for churches to implement a compassion ministry for the poor. However, the one that both mentioned as the greatest help is a regular service. For example, a church can pick one night a week to serve food at a homeless shelter. Other churches may use the same service, so find a night that can be exclusive to just a WELS church. The tips they suggest are to bring along a Bible study, have a group of people ready to sing a hymn before the meal and halfway through the serving time, and have enough people each week that there can be a rotation of servers and floaters. They want the floaters to sit down and actually get to know the people being served. Of all the work that a church can do, both interviewees believe that meaningful conversation and regular visitation is the most beneficial help anyone can give to the homeless.

### **Compassion Ministry from the Perspective of a Pastor<sup>124</sup>**

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124. I asked WELS circuit pastors from Atlanta, Denver, Houston, Milwaukee, Phoenix, and Washington D.C., to help identify pastors who had experience with compassion ministry. I also tried to gain a perspective from non-WELS sources. Of the 30 non-WELS churches asked in these areas, only one responded to my inquiry. That church eventually declined to participate for the paper.

I had the privilege of also interviewing six WELS pastors who have experience with a compassion ministry program.<sup>125</sup> Five of the six pastors serve in cities that are larger than 250,000 people. The other pastor is my home pastor, who grew up in the impoverished city of Benton Harbor, MI. Their experiences are all unique, yet they all have the same goal in mind. They want to provide the community with a loving church that focuses on Christ. The natural result of a church focusing on Christ is an unwavering devotion to loving their neighbors the same as they love their members.

Pastor James Behringer was able to give me a unique perspective on WELS compassion ministries because of his position as Director of Special Ministries. Behringer was involved with a compassion ministry for the homeless in California as well as in Milwaukee. He would encourage churches to be involved in a community partnership. What he meant by this was church members should not direct the homeless to a service and leave them. Our church members should accompany the homeless person to the job placement locations in the area. In doing so, if the interviewing process didn't go well, we would have firsthand knowledge why and can work with the homeless person to have a better interview in the near future. On top of that, if the church member takes this person to the job agency, this is an easy opportunity to witness about Jesus.

Another one of Pastor Behringer's ideas was that each pastor should know the other pastors in the area; this includes non-WELS pastors. This does not mean that our churches will partner with these other pastors. Behringer told an anecdote about a certain beggar who would go to the different churches throughout his area and get \$20 at each church. Eventually, the churches started contacting each other and found out the man was scamming them. Helping the

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125. Questions asked during the interview will be included in Appendix 4.

homeless is not about money. It cannot be about money, Behringer said. If it is about money, then it is about immediate relief. Helping the homeless is a commitment to bringing the homeless out of despair and moving them towards a hopeful future.

Pastor Behringer's other piece of advice was to set boundaries. This is a theme that will be repeated by each pastor interviewed. It is important to set boundaries and policies so that the grace/guilt complex is not violated. Our churches should have policies that teach the members how to help the homeless. Our churches should have boundaries for how much aid they give out per interaction. He gave the following example. When a Christian sees someone who is in obvious need and God has blessed us with the ability to help, it's hard to say no. At times, we go so far out of our way that we treat them better than we would our own family. Would you give \$100 to a random stranger when you question your spouse for wanting a new purse? If you gave away that \$100 without consulting your wife, that would most likely raise some questions the next time you review the budget together. Pastor Behringer implores churches to set boundaries and stick to them.

Pastor Michael Biedenbender is the pastor from my home congregation in Mt. Pleasant, MI. Faith Lutheran Church participated in "Project Christmas" for about seven years. Project Christmas was initiated by St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Benton Harbor, MI. Benton Harbor is an economically challenged city. As stated before, Pastor Mike's hometown is Benton Harbor. He grew up in this challenging area, and as a result his heart goes out for the people of the city. Faith Lutheran partnered with St. Matthew to bring aid to those who would accept help.

Project Christmas was designed to help 100 families. Step one had two parts. First, St. Matthew would purchase appropriate gifts for each family. They would also buy one frozen turkey for each family. The second part happened in Mt. Pleasant, where Faith would be

responsible for collecting 100 boxes of toiletries for each family who was being helped. The toiletry boxes would include toilet paper, toothbrushes, toothpaste, bars of soap, shampoo, cotton swabs, deodorant, etc. Faith and its youth group would take these boxes down to Benton Harbor and help with step two.

Step two of Project Christmas was distributing the gifts, toiletry boxes, and turkey to the families in need. When the families came to St. Matthew they would register and then head to the gym. The ladies' aid group would serve a meal for the families. This would give an opportunity for the pastors, volunteering members, and Faith's youth group to sit with the families and talk with them. Pastor Mike said that the success of the program was only ever measured in the opportunities presented to share the gospel message. In the multiple years that I helped with Project Christmas it was always a success.

Pastor Paul Biedenbender and I communicated through email. He was gracious enough to take the time to answer my questionnaire. He is a pastor in Denver, CO and has been there since 2005. He has developed a couple different programs in his ministry primarily through the help of two members. One member was a previously homeless person, and the other served as a nurse to the homeless.

Christ Lutheran focuses on putting together "blessing bags," as Paul Biedenbender calls them, that members can pass out to those in need. The blessing bag is filled with items such as a pair of gloves, a pair of socks, toothbrush and toothpaste, bottled water, a protein bar, and a comb. Also included in the bag is a devotion about God's love found in Jesus. They intentionally do not put any contact information in the bag so that no one is misled into thinking Christ Lutheran has more resources to hand out. Rather, a note in the bag encourages the needy person to get connected with a Bible-based church community.

The congregation also supports a clothing drive. The two members who helped establish the programs are in charge of the clothing drive and know which items are particularly useful to donate. Another ministry Christ Lutheran has for the homeless is simply a welcoming atmosphere. The members of the congregation have been trained to welcome anyone into the building and to strike up a conversation. This is because the focus of their compassion ministry is rooted in helping the homeless and needy to see the love Jesus has for them and not to let their circumstances define their identity in life. The needy person's identity is found solely in Christ.

Pastor Lucas Bitter's interview probably gave me the greatest understanding of what it means to be aware of the socio-economic issues in a given area without specifically having a compassion ministry. By his own admission, Bitter's church, Intown Lutheran in downtown Atlanta, does not specifically do anything with the homeless. Rather, the church and its leaders are involved with community leaders who work with homelessness, and the church is in a setting where homelessness is a big issue and they have to think about it often.

Intown selects a non-profit organization for each quarter of the year. The non-profit of the quarter is selected by a committee. The organization chosen comes in and gives a presentation twice a quarter about their mission and objectives. Bitter believes this is a good way to get new people in the church and to also put the church's name into the community. The second part, putting the church's name in the community, is part of the compassion ministry mission of Intown Lutheran.

In my interview with each pastor I asked, "What do you try to have as the focus for your (mercy) compassion ministry?" Intown Lutheran has a three-part mission statement that lends itself to compassion ministry. "Intown Lutheran church exists because we have: A God worth

knowing. A city worth loving. A life worth living.”<sup>126</sup> Each part of the mission statement shows how a compassion ministry is built into the mission of the church. Because we serve a God worth knowing, we shouldn’t exclude anyone from hearing the message. Because each city is filled with people for whom Jesus died, the city is worth loving as Christ did. Because God did not spare his only Son but gave him up for us all, we now enjoy a life worth living.

Pastor Kevin Wattles was the first pastor to respond to my inquiry in September. He was excited to talk about the subject, because he has multiple programs at his church in Falls Church, VA. He also wrote his senior church history paper about the history of the WELS’s mission for the poor. His work on the paper and programs in Falls Church have benefited my research greatly.

Wattles’s church, Grace Lutheran, has programs that run annually and monthly. The annual programs include supporting a local food bank (Falls Church Community Services), volunteering at the hypothermia shelter, and caroling for cans. The monthly programs include a community compassion day and sandwiches for the homeless. These monthly programs are alternated every month. For example, if in January Grace had a community compassion day, then in February they would do sandwiches for the homeless. The monthly programs are designed in such a way that the school kids can get involved and receive service hours.

Community compassion day (CCD) came about naturally as a result of the numerous people who would randomly drop by the church asking for help. CCD is a program that is offered at a specific time so that the poor could receive lunch and monetary assistance. They have a specific timeframe in which aid is available so that they aren’t serving people all day

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126. [Intownlutheran.com/about-us/](http://Intownlutheran.com/about-us/). For a more detailed description of each part, the website offers a full paragraph for the basis of the mission statement.

long. Members of the church coordinate efforts and volunteer their time to make CCD run smoothly.

The other annual program Grace does is sandwiches for the homeless. For some members, participating in CCD is intimidating or too great a time commitment. Sandwiches for the homeless is a less-intensive program in which any member can participate. The program asks members to help make 2000 bologna sandwiches that are then taken to Martha's Table to be distributed.

Pastor David Clark differs from the other pastors on this list. In part one I stated that there are times a church should not have a compassion ministry. Clark's church in Glendale, AZ fits this description. At the beginning of my vicar year I was confused as to why we didn't have a compassion ministry. By the end of the year it was clear that our church was better suited for other forms of ministry.

Grace in Glendale is situated in a perfect location to conduct a compassion ministry. The new church building, built in 2005, actually blocks off a street. Anyone who goes to downtown Glendale will see Grace and its steeple. However, there are many other churches in this downtown district. One of them, First United Methodist, is a third of a mile away from Grace. First United hosts a meal every day for the homeless. Next door to Grace is a Christian social justice center, Leslie Law Office: Christian Legal Aid, for the homeless. Homeless people frequented Grace's campus. However, some of them took advantage of its facilities. Some would hop the fence at night and sleep in the school bathrooms. On more than one occasion during my tenure, we found our trash cans had been raided and trash had been strewed all over the campus. We also found used needles in the bushes that were on the south side of the church building. At other times we found that the homeless people relieved themselves in those bushes as well. I

regularly showed up to the church office on Sunday mornings hours before the service to help quell my nervousness before preaching or leading Bible class. One time I found that our church office building had been vandalized and a boot had been tossed through the kitchen window.

Considering all of these factors, plus others that occurred before my time at Grace, I believe that Grace was and is correct by not having a compassion ministry for the homeless based at church. Grace's mission is not to relieve the city of its ills. Its mission, as all WELS's churches' missions, is to proclaim the gospel. If Grace were to have a compassion ministry for the homeless, I believe it would actually hinder its ability to have a fully functioning gospel, outreach mission. The homeless population of Glendale is notorious for their addiction to drugs and convictions as sex offenders. Due to the increasing number of students in preschool and grade school at Grace, security would become an issue if they were to have a ministry for the homeless centered at the church facility.

### **Compassion Ministry for the Future**

When I started my research for this paper, my goal was to devise a realistic ministry plan that I could use in my future ministry. I believe that through the help of research and interviews with multiple WELS pastors I have an idea of what is feasible. As stated before, I think every church should assess their ability to perform and maintain a compassion ministry for the homeless. It would be hypocritical of me to not have general suggestions of how to accomplish this.

No matter where ministries are located, I think Pastor Bitter's advice is crucial. Each church that has any ambition of executing a compassion ministry should have a binder of policies and government programs available for any member to review. This way if a homeless person stops by, we can direct them to the type of help they need. The goal in having this binder



is to help break a stigma that Belcher notes. “People who are homeless often have a lot of things done *to* them, but little done *for* them.”<sup>127</sup> Congregations would be well-served to be ready to personally serve the homeless who stop by rather than merely point them to the right locations.

Another program that I would suggest is to select a non-profit of the quarter. This gives the members of the church an opportunity to see the work that non-profits do in the community and to interact with them on a personal level. I would propose that at least once per quarter members plan to visit the non-profit’s location and help clean up. A monthly program I would suggest is volunteering to serve a meal at a homeless shelter. Part of compassion ministry is giving the ministry a face so that anyone who sees it knows who is helping. If the church members are in the homeless shelter, personal relationships can be formed with those in the shelter. Both the workers at the shelter and those staying at it would get to know that we are concerned with more than just perception; we care about interaction.

#### A Warning against Social Gospel

A compassion ministry for the homeless might be perceived by some as a part of the social gospel. The social gospel is concerned with taking the biblical command to do justice, love and kindness but has forgotten the command to walk humbly.<sup>128</sup> Early advocates of the social gospel were more concerned with a visible kingdom of believers on earth than in heaven. “Christ is a pretty popular figure after all. If we can find in his teachings the impetus to change the world,

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127. Belcher, “Helping the Homeless,” 185.

128. Alan Keith-Lucas, *The Church and Social Welfare: Christian Perspective on Social Problems* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 11.

perhaps enough people will join the crusade, and we can establish the kingdom of God here on earth in the essence of true happiness, justice, and prosperity for all people.”<sup>129</sup>

Social gospel can be described as teaching the life of Christ without teaching repentance, conversion, and faith. This has been compared to “polishing brass or rearranging chairs on the Titanic as it was sinking. What was needed when the Titanic was sinking was to get people into lifeboats. In the same way this world is sinking, and we need first and foremost to get people into the lifeboat of faith in Jesus Christ.”<sup>130</sup> Compassion ministry for the homeless may at times seem like social gospel. Compassion ministry involves relieving the stresses of earthly strife; it involves loaning a bed, feeding a family, and clothing the undressed. “Lutherans who espouse the social gospel may point to Martin Luther, his reformation of the ills of the Church of his day, his suffering for what is right, good, and just, as a heritage that compels them to work for the rectitude of society today.”<sup>131</sup>

However, compassion ministry differs from the social gospel. The goal of compassion ministry is ultimately to show Christ-like compassion to the needy. Compassion ministry focuses on feeding soul and body. It does not focus on destroying social injustice. Compassion ministry takes to heart the two warnings Professor Nass worries about.

First, [social programs] could result in people coming to church for the wrong reason. If you give out food after the church service, people may come to receive earthly bread rather than the Bread of Life.... A second danger with social programs is that the church in this way may lose its focus on preaching the gospel. There is so much human need on every hand that the church could easily and innocently be drawn into spending the best of its energy in trying to supply these physical needs. Then gospel preaching could suffer.<sup>132</sup>

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129. Jonathan E. Schultz, “Lutherans and the Social Gospel” (WLS Essay File, 1987), 1.

130. Nass, “The Church and Its Ministry,” 18.

131. Schultz, “Lutherans and the Social Gospel,” 4.

132. Nass, “The Church and Its Ministry,” 13.

If a church is aware of these two dangers and is intent on not letting these two factors define its compassion ministry, I believe there is no reason to worry about its ministry being called a social gospel program.

## CONCLUSION

“Next to the proclamation of the Gospel it is the task of a good pastor to be mindful of the poor.”<sup>133</sup> Martin Luther believed that the poor should have a primary focus in a pastor’s ministry. Today, the poor can be found on the streets, in homeless shelters, and living with friends and family as they attempt to get their lives back together. These homeless families and individuals should not be shortchanged when they come to church. The church should be ready for them to come, and the church should be ready to serve.

The Christian church has historically followed Luther’s teaching of being mindful of the poor. Luther followed the early church’s example. We would do well to follow his example too. The grace/guilt complex that can easily make a person wary to give aid can be quelled by understanding how to advance the mission of the church. The early Christian church showed itself to be uniquely loving by taking care of those that society had tossed aside. Our churches have a unique ability to be active in a homeless person’s life rather than wait for them to come to us. At the infancy of the WELS, our churches went out of their way to take care of the sick and needy. We would do well to remember this principle. “Responsible Christians do not just sit on their hands passively waiting for judgment day. God makes us responsible for our neighbor and for our use of his world.”<sup>134</sup>

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133. LW 26:105.

134. Joel C. Gerlach, “Luther and Humanism” (WLS Essay File, 1983), 3.

The Bible gives no direct instruction to the church concerning compassion ministry. The Old Testament prescription for Israel was to care for the poor and needy in their community. The concept didn't stop in Israel; the Gentiles were to be taken care of if they were in the Israelite camp. In the New Testament, Jesus praised those who gave to the needy without expecting earthly reward. The apostles implored their congregations to be compassionate not with words but in deeds and to do so with a sincere heart.

Compassion ministry for the homeless is one opportunity for the church to show its community that it cares for those who have been left behind by society. The Bible teaches us to love everyone and to leave room for God's judgment. As we show love to all, we show the Christ that St. Luke wrote about. Luke didn't write about an example to follow. He wrote about a Savior who took away the sin of the world. He wrote about a Savior who changed the lives of some of the most outcast members of society. Therefore, as our churches implement compassion ministries for the homeless, let our prayer be: "As Luke presented a Savior who is sympathetic to sinners, give us compassion and patience as we touch the lives of the least and the last of our society, so that they, too, might share in the riches and beauty of your kingdom. Amen."<sup>135</sup>

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135. James Tiefel, written for the Commemoration of St. Luke, Evangelist, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2019.

## APPENDIX 1: THE *SPLANCHNON* IN COMPASSION MINISTRY

The book that I found most influential during my research was *Christ Have Mercy: How to Put Your Faith in Action* by LCMS President Matthew Harrison. Harrison's book has personal stories, biblical principles, and congregational applications of compassion ministry. The third chapter is entitled, "Mercy Incarnate: Have this mind in you." In this chapter, Harrison makes an argument for compassion ministry on the basis of Jesus's *splanchnon* (σπλάγχνον). *Splanchnon* is the Greek word for the inner body that is seen as the seat of human emotion. In its verbal form, *splanchnizomai* (σπλαγχνίζομαι) is usually translated somewhere along the lines of "have pity" or "feel sympathy for someone." Harrison says,

Each time *splanchnon* occurs as a conviction or sentiment or emotion in Christ (or of characters in parables), there is consequent merciful *action*. Compassion *begets* actions. Mercy *makes* something *happen*. For Jesus, *splanchnizomai*, the verb form of *splanchnon*, is always "compassion giving birth to action." e.g., Matt 9:36–38; 14:13–21; 15:32–39; 18:21–35; 20:29–34; Mark 1:40–45; 8:1–10; 9:14–29; Luke 7:11–17; 10:25–37; 15:11–32.<sup>136</sup>

According to Harrison, *splanchnon* is the moving force behind true compassion ministry.

Jesus didn't just have pity on those he saw who were struggling. He didn't just exhibit sympathy or empathy. He went so far as to have compassion on them. Jesus did not turn his head from those who were struggling or walk on the other side of the road. Jesus showed compassion in real ways. "These compassionate actions [Jesus doing miracles] are significant because they flow from and point to Jesus as God Incarnate and Savior. . . . In Christ's compassionate actions (his miracles and ultimately his suffering and death on the cross), this mercy is a revelation of the Father."<sup>137</sup> Though Jesus was perfect and holy, he did not let his position in heaven stop him

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136. Matthew C. Harrison, *Christ Have Mercy: How to Put Your Faith in Action* (Concordia: St. Louis, 2008), 41.

137. Harrison, *Christ Have Mercy*, 45.

from coming down to earth and having compassion on sinners who need help. And while he was helping sinners be freed from death's grip, Jesus proved his power as true God through his miracles. Compassion for Jesus was not a feeling, but a feeling that required an appropriate action to negate the problem.

The following chart shows that Jesus's *splanchnon* was not a one-time event, but a pattern that the church and individuals can mirror.

<b>Scripture</b>	<b>Story</b>	<b>Compassion</b>	<b>Action</b>
Matthew 9:36–38	Jesus Saw the Crowds as Sheep without a Shepherd	v 36	vv 37–38
Matthew 14:13–21	Jesus Feeds 5,000	v 14	v 16, 18
Matthew 15:32–39	Jesus Feeds 4,000	v 32a	v 32b
Matthew 18:21–35	Parable of the Unmerciful Servant	vv 26–27a	v 27b
Matthew 20:29–34	Jesus Heals Two Blind Men	vv 32–33	v 34
Mark 1:40–45	Jesus Cleanses a Leper	vv 40–41a	vv 41b–42
Mark 8:1–10	Jesus Feeds 4,000	vv 2–3	vv 5–6
Mark 9:14–29	Jesus Heals a Boy with an Unclean Spirit	vv 21–22	vv 23–26
Luke 7:11–17	Jesus Raises a Widow's Son	vv 12–13	vv 14–15
Luke 10:25–37	Parable of the Good Samaritan	v 33	vv 34–37
Luke 15:11–32	Parable of the Prodigal Son	v 20a	vv 20b–24

APPENDIX 2: HOMELESS STATISTICS 2010–2018<sup>138</sup>

	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010
AL	3,434	3,793	4,111	3,970	4,561	4,689	5,209	5,558	6,046
AK	2,016	1,845	1,940	1,956	1,784	1,946	1,913	2,128	1,863
AZ	9,865	8,947	9,707	9,896	10,495	10,562	11,302	10,504	13,711
AR	2,712	2,467	2,463	2,560	2,936	3,812	4,214	3,424	2,762
CA	129,972	134,278	118,142	115,738	113,952	118,552	120,098	125,128	123,480
CO	10,857	10,940	10,550	9,953	10,028	9,754	16,768	15,116	15,482
CT	3,976	3,388	3,902	4,047	4,450	4,448	4,209	4,456	4,316
DC	6,904	7,473	8,350	7,298	7,748	6,865	6,954	6,546	6,539
DE	1,082	994	1,070	953	901	946	1,008	1,035	982
FL	31,030	32,190	33,559	35,900	41,542	47,862	55,170	56,687	57,551
GA	9,499	10,174	12,909	13,790	16,521	16,971	20,516	20,975	19,836
HI	6,530	7,220	7,921	7,620	6,918	6,335	6,246	6,188	5,834
ID	2,012	2,037	2,247	1,966	2,104	1,781	1,968	2,199	2,346
IL	10,643	10,798	11,590	13,177	13,107	13,425	14,144	14,009	14,395
IN	5,258	5,438	5,798	5,863	5,971	6,096	6,259	6,196	6,452
IA	2,749	2,756	3,064	3,081	3,122	3,084	2,928	3,134	3,014
KS	2,216	2,287	2,255	2,588	2,783	2,693	2,684	2,511	2,024
KY	3,688	4,025	4,237	4,538	5,089	5,245	5,230	6,034	6,623
LA	3,059	3,305	3,994	4,081	4,606	5,226	7,772	9,291	12,482
ME	2,516	2,280	2,241	2,372	2,726	3,016	2,393	2,447	2,379
MD	7,144	7,247	7,689	8,390	7,856	8,205	9,454	10,208	10,845
MA	20,068	17,565	19,608	21,135	21,237	19,029	17,501	16,664	16,646
MI	8,351	9,051	9,316	10,516	12,227	11,527	12,592	13,185	13,058
MN	7,243	7,668	7,341	7,546	8,377	8,214	7,744	7,495	7,869
MS	1,352	1,472	1,738	1,983	2,226	2,403	2,413	2,306	2,743
MO	5,883	6,037	6,194	6,482	7,282	8,581	10,237	8,989	8,122
MT	1,405	1,529	1,418	1,709	1,745	1,878	1,833	1,768	1,615
NE	2,421	2,287	2,754	2,744	3,026	3,145	3,789	3,548	3,877
NV	7,544	7,833	7,398	8,743	8,582	7,039	8,497	9,150	11,205
NH	1,450	1,456	1,366	1,445	1,376	1,447	1,496	1,469	1,574
NJ	9,398	8,536	8,895	10,098	11,671	12,002	13,025	14,137	13,737

138. United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, *Homelessness Statistics by State*, January 2018, <http://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/map>. Please note that statistics are *estimates* based on community counts. Though the statistics are estimates, the numbers represented are still a valid representation of a state’s homeless rate.

<b>NM</b>	2,551	2,482	2,263	2,629	2,746	2,819	3,245	3,601	3,475
<b>NY</b>	91,897	89,503	86,352	88,250	80,590	77,430	69,566	63,445	65,006
<b>NC</b>	9,268	8,962	9,559	10,685	11,491	12,168	13,524	12,896	12,191
<b>ND</b>	542	1,089	923	1,305	1,258	2,069	688	603	799
<b>OH</b>	10,249	10,095	10,404	11,182	11,823	12,325	13,977	13,030	12,569
<b>OK</b>	3,871	4,199	4,107	3,777	4,191	4,408	5,032	4,625	5,229
<b>OR</b>	14,476	13,953	13,238	13,226	12,164	13,822	15,828	17,254	19,492
<b>PA</b>	13,512	14,138	15,339	15,421	15,333	15,086	14,736	15,096	14,516
<b>RI</b>	1,101	1,180	1,160	1,111	1,190	1,384	1,277	1,070	1,282
<b>SC</b>	3,933	3,916	5,051	5,354	5,057	6,544	4,915	5,093	4,473
<b>SD</b>	1,159	943	1,072	1,036	885	1,094	859	826	731
<b>TN</b>	7,883	8,309	8,779	9,123	9,415	9,528	9,426	9,113	10,276
<b>TX</b>	25,310	23,548	23,122	23,678	28,495	29,615	34,052	36,911	35,121
<b>UT</b>	2,876	2,852	2,807	3,025	3,081	3,277	3,527	3,130	3,284
<b>VT</b>	1,291	1,225	1,117	1,523	1,559	1,454	1,160	1,144	1,220
<b>VA</b>	5,975	6,067	6,268	7,001	7,020	7,625	8,424	8,816	9,080
<b>WA</b>	22,304	21,112	20,827	19,419	18,442	17,760	20,504	20,439	22,878
<b>WV</b>	1,243	1,309	1,387	1,835	2,013	2,240	2,410	2,211	2,264
<b>WI</b>	4,907	5,027	5,685	6,057	6,055	6,104	6,027	5,785	6,333
<b>WY</b>	639	873	857	798	757	953	1,813	1,038	579

	<b>Total Homeless</b>	<b>US Population</b>	<b>Population Growth (%)</b>	<b>Population Growth (#)</b>	<b>% of Population: Homeless</b>	<b>% of Homeless Growth</b>	<b># of Homeless Growth</b>
<b>2010</b>	630,206	309,326,085	n/a	n/a	0.2037%	n/a	n/a
<b>2011</b>	618,611	311,580,009	0.73%	2,253,924	0.1985%	-1.84%	-11,595
<b>2012</b>	616,556	313,874,218	0.74%	2,294,209	0.1946%	-0.33%	-2,055
<b>2013</b>	584,483	316,057,727	0.70%	2,183,509	0.1849%	-5.20%	-32,073
<b>2014</b>	570,514	318,386,241	0.74%	2,328,514	0.1792%	-2.39%	-13,969
<b>2015</b>	558,573	321,418,820	0.95%	3,032,579	0.1738%	-2.19%	-11,941
<b>2016</b>	544,084	323,071,342	0.51%	1,652,522	0.1684%	-3.59%	-14,489
<b>2017</b>	548,098	325,147,121	0.64%	2,075,779	0.1686%	0.74%	4,014
<b>2018</b>	547,264	327,167,434	0.62%	2,020,313	0.1673%	-0.15%	-834



### APPENDIX 3: QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEW WITH A SOCIAL WORKER

#### Experiences -

What makes you qualified to be a resource for this paper?

What have you done in the past with homelessness?

What are your feelings after an encounter with a homeless person?

#### Contacts -

Would you have other people that I should contact?

#### Vision -

What do you see as the church's role in helping the needy?

#### Your Role -

As a lay member, do you feel more or less qualified than a pastor to start a needy ministry at church?

What can the average person do to help show compassion to the homeless/needy?

#### Literature -

Do you have any books that I should read? Articles? Websites?

## APPENDIX 4: QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEW WITH A PASTOR

### Experiences -

What makes you a qualified candidate to talk about homeless ministry (compassion ministry)?

Do you remember your first encounter with a homeless person? If so, how did it go?

What is your mindset when interacting with a homeless person?

When you are interacting with a homeless person, what do you then do?

Do you have thoughts that move your mindset into the grace/guilt complex?

### Literature -

Is there a Scripture passage that you know that you base your compassion ministry off of?

Secular resources that you might know of?

### Contacts -

Any other people that you would suggest for me to talk to?

Do you know others that have a ministry that I could contact?

### Programs -

Do you have a ministry for the homeless? What does it look like?

What do you try to have as the focus for your (mercy/compassion) ministry?

Do you partner with any other church bodies/pastors?

Do you know of/make use of the government help available in the area?

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