

“The poor will always be with you.” If you can believe it, I’ve heard preachers use this passage to justify neglecting the poor. The argument’s basically, ‘Jesus said they’ll always be here, so we should focus on him instead.’ A bigger theological swing-and-a-miss is hard to imagine. These are two separate thoughts connected by context. Jesus is here now, so be extravagant with him while you still can. AND use the rest of your days to serve the poor. And to be clear, Jesus doesn’t say the poor will always be here because that’s how the world ought to work. He says our society’s hearts are so hardened that we’ve constructed systems that require steep socioeconomic stratification. As long as yachts bigger than churches house people with more money than an entire country, the poor’ll be with us. I don’t think Jesus wants there to be poor people, so we get this line that’s one part lament and one part opportunity. It’s an abysmal situation that poverty’s baked into our systems. But it’s also an enormous chance for us to live into our ministries of serving Christ in all we meet, particularly the poor. I may not have a salad dressing cruet of nard to pour on ‘em, but I can still serve ‘em with extravagance. And if our tradition has anything to say about it, that service to them is service to Christ himself.

That’s great, but there’s a problem we face right now. Not everyone looks on the poor with the kind of mercy and generosity Jesus does. Some even think they must’ve done something to deserve being poor, and if they did, then it must be immoral to help them. ‘It only reinforces bad choices, after all.’ None of y’all’ve ever heard complaints about learned dependence or fraud or the spectre of the welfare queen, right? ‘The poor are always with us, but surely they could take some personal responsibility.’ Let’s take a second, let’s take a second to see why “personal responsibility” isn’t everything that’s going on here. Let’s take a second to talk about Welfare Queens. It goes all the way back to the days of the Civil Rights Movement when segregationists organized so-called Reverse Freedom Rides.<sup>1</sup> Is it just me, or does “Reverse Freedom” sound like just another word for oppression? Anyway, they organized these rides to send black people on welfare out of their states and into the sympathetic North. This was great for them. It got welfare recipients off the dole and kept segregation going. And it gave everyone down South permission to say good riddance. The wild thing is, just as Jesus said, even after they Reverse Freedom-ed busloads north, they still had the poor among them, white poor, but still poor. But it also laid the foundation for the pernicious myth of a black mother on welfare not because she needs it but because she’s too lazy or irresponsible to work. ‘The system is so rife with fraud,’ they’d say, ‘that we’d be better off scrapping the whole thing.’ Now, fraud is not non-existent; but nearly every investigation into welfare recipients proves fraud to be more of a boogiemer than a reality.

There’s the claim that women on welfare have oodles of babies because each baby means they’ll get more money. The truth is that women on welfare have fewer babies than other women by almost half. Also, welfare isn’t as rare a thing as at least I was raised to believe. Most adults, something like 2/3s of us will be on some form of welfare for six months or more as adults. And fully half of American children survive on food stamps. Now, we all know fraud is rampant in our welfare systems, right? Nope. For every 10,000 SNAP-recipient households, only 14 had some degree of fraud. Okay, that’s not much, but surely the fraud committed had to be egregious? Nope again. For every \$10,000 paid in benefits, only \$11 accounts for fraud and overpayments combined. That’s basically a tithe of a tithe of a tithe. I don’t know about you, but a 99.89% success rate feels acceptable to me.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://time.com/6697055/welfare-queen-stereotype-origins/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/from-mothers-pensions-to-welfare-queens-debunking-myths-about-welfare/>

If you wanna talk about who the greatest recipients abusing welfare really are, take a look at corporations like Wal\*Mart and many, many others.<sup>3</sup> They pay their employees so poorly that most of them have to go on welfare even while working. Some economists have crowned the Wal\*Marts of the world as the true welfare queens.<sup>45</sup> Think of it this way. Wal\*Mart's got a big pot of money to make use of every year, and their expenses come out of that. Whatever's leftover is corporate profit. If you can get away with paying your workers less, the amount in the big pot of money stays high, and corporate profits soar. You can get away with not paying your workers what they deserve because you know the government will do just enough to keep them alive so they can make it back in for their next shift. That's a subsidy even if they don't call it that. And that kind of unofficial subsidy gets repeated with corporation after corporation. If you really want to find the culprit, if you really want to find the reason so many people struggle so deeply with poverty, it ain't 'cause 14 people out of 10,000 hoodwinked the government.

We should also talk about minimum wage for a second. In case you haven't read up on this lately, minimum wage was not intended to be what it's turned into, the bare minimum a company can get away with paying you. In this country, the minimum wage started in 1938. When FDR made his plea to establish a minimum wage, he said, "It seems to me to be equally plain that no business which depends for existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country. By 'business' I mean the whole of commerce as well as the whole of industry; by workers I mean all workers, the white collar class as well as the men in overalls; and by living wages I mean more than a bare subsistence level-I mean the wages of decent living."<sup>6</sup> Minimum wage was the minimum that a worker could receive that still guaranteed a decent life. It also wasn't meant to be what we pay children who work as opposed to what we pay adults. The first shot at a national minimum wage actually tried to get rid of all laborers under the age of 16, so no, the minimum wage wasn't meant to be just for kids flipping burgers. It was meant to ensure that hard-working breadwinners, oftentimes sole breadwinners, could provide a decent life for their families. The current federal minimum wage isn't just insufficient for a decent life. It's below the poverty line for a household of one.<sup>7</sup> By the end of the Great Depression, Americans knew all too well what happened when we let the robber barons loose. They made a lot of money and everyone else suffered. And roughly a hundred years later, we're here again. Robber barons strip workers of what's rightly theirs and hide behind the spectre of a fraudulent few. Did you see that Florida is looking to legalize worse conditions for child workers? They got themselves in this situation, too. By purging so many immigrants, they lost such a good chunk of their workforce that they need to make up the difference somewhere.<sup>8</sup> So now we may end up with children working 40-hour work weeks with overnight shifts on top of the demands of school. It seems that yes, Jesus was right, we're making sure the poor will always be with us.

The poor are always with us, but y'all, if we keep going down the track we're on right now, I won't have to tell you about this stuff anymore 'cause we'll all be learning it in real time together. I've been poor. I don't want to be poor again. I know many of us rely on very tight finances. There's no shame in that, but y'all, the poor with us are about to skyrocket in numbers, and those numbers may well include us. As long as yachts bigger than this church ferry billionaires through lawless waters, the poor will be with us. As long as children

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/19/walmart-and-mcdonalds-among-top-employers-of-medicaid-and-food-stamp-beneficiaries.html>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2013-11-13/how-mcdonald-s-and-wal-mart-became-welfare-queens?embedded-checkout=true>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.heritage.org/welfare/commentary/corporate-welfare-queens>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-nira>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.epi.org/blog/a-history-of-the-federal-minimum-wage-85-years-later-the-minimum-wage-is-far-from-equitable/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/25/business/florida-child-labor-laws/index.html>

bear the brunt of adults' greed, the poor will be with us. As long as corporations get to define what workers need, the poor will be with us.

You know, much as I think Jesus is right, I kinda want to prove him wrong. I know, that may not sound like the most humile of priestly statements, but think about it. We may not defeat poverty, but what if we could, what if we worked like we could, served like we could, showed up and demanded change like we could? The poor will always be with us? Okay, Jesus, challenge accepted.