



## Gospel Poverty as a Spiritual Discipline for Christian Leaders

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It seems as if our culture has enjoyed a fair amount of prosperity as of late. The United States median income from 2005 was reported to be at more than \$46,000 a year<sup>i</sup>. Retirement accounts are estimated to have reached over \$17 trillion<sup>ii</sup>. Home ownership is high; ownership in general is highly esteemed. Who needs a community recreation center when we can own a fitness machine or a pool. Why go to the park when the playground equipment at home rivals the city's resources? A national store chain claims that its goal is to give ordinary folks the opportunity to buy the same things as rich people<sup>iii</sup>. Another popular slogan guarantees "the good life at a great price." Generally speaking, the United States has enough to live on currently and has plans to live well in the future.

Yet, these financial blessings are plagued with troubles. The Federal Reserve reported total consumer debt in 2007 at \$2.5 trillion, up from \$1.7 trillion in 2001. The average household has \$8,500 in credit card debt<sup>iv</sup>. Though many Americans own homes, a significant portion of them are losing their homes. In April 2008, one U.S. Foreclosure Market Report reported a 23 percent increase in foreclosures from the previous quarter and an astounding 112 percent increase from the first quarter only a year prior<sup>v</sup>. Most of us could probably name someone we know who has filed for bankruptcy. Our personal deficits are reflected in national trends of large businesses, e.g. airlines, and the United States government.

Perhaps the "good life" is not purchased at any price. It seems like now is an opportune time for Christian leaders to offer a different way of life; a life that holds reward and abundance, but is independent of wealth and possessions. We need a way of life that promises freedom from a fear of recession or property loss. We want peace. Dave Ramsey, author of *Financial Peace Planner*<sup>vi</sup>, who is also a Christian, purports the slogan "Beat Debt. Build Wealth. Now." While rising out of debt is a noble and biblical path to a more

peaceful existence, does building wealth follow this same trajectory?

Richard Foster<sup>vii</sup> offered the spiritual discipline of simplicity as an alternative path to peace. The goal of living in simplicity, he averred, is to seek the kingdom of God first and our inner being will be free from anxiety. When we first pursue God's kingdom, we approach possessions with gratitude and generosity. In this attitude, we are connected with God, not our possessions, as our true source of security. Once our security is centered in God, our lives become centered and simple.

St. Clare of Assisi<sup>viii</sup>, though, leads us even further into the discipline of simplicity. Instead of seeking first God's kingdom, her goal was to seek first God. This can be seen in her writings, for example, when Clare exhorted Lady Agnes of Prague to "gaze upon Him, consider Him, contemplate Him, as you desire to imitate Him"<sup>ix</sup> Though Clare offered a rule of life<sup>x</sup> that included the practices of obedience and chastity in order to imitate Christ, she emphasized the practice of gospel poverty. Gospel poverty is the selling of all one's possessions and giving the proceeds to the poor. It is to live with nothing of one's own and to refuse regular gifts or endowments that could be relied on. Gospel poverty is to place one's utter security in the hands of God. Whereas Foster's discipline of simplicity practiced the refusal to be owned by anything, Clare's discipline of poverty practiced the refusal to own anything.

Logistically, there were a number of elements that enabled St. Clare to live in such holy destitution. First, St. Francis of Assisi, whom Clare highly esteemed, incited his followers to live in poverty. Francis also wrote a form of life for the Poor Ladies of whom Clare was abbess that especially upheld the way of poverty and continually encouraged them to persevere in the practice. Second, Clare repeatedly appealed to the highest authority in order to be granted the privilege of living in poverty. At first, the Catholic Church was opposed to the practice as they were concerned with the welfare of this group of women. Understandably, they wished to provide for those who served in ministry to the church and indeed had given money to all orders preceding the Poor Clares<sup>xi</sup>. But, Clare would not rest until she had the approval of Pope Innocent IV for herself and her followers to live in the poverty that Francis prescribed. Finally, a whole community supported Clare's desire to live in poverty for the purpose of holiness. The monastery grounds on which she and the sisters lived, San Damiano, was given to them by Assisi's Bishop Guido<sup>xii</sup>. House (2001) also pointed out that Francis assigned tasks, such as begging for food and collecting fuel, to a group of brothers from his order; the food and fuel were given by those in nearby towns who cared to see these ladies survive. In addition, certain brothers were tasked with providing protection for the ladies. Thus, Clare's commitment to live in poverty began with a command from Francis and continued with the eventual blessing from papal authority, and the support of community.

Most people would not follow Clare in her radical choice to live in utter poverty, but her unswerving devotion to this way of life certainly raises curiosity; Clare confronted the most powerful men of her day for the greater part of her adult life in order to have the *privilege* of living in poverty. Why was poverty so overwhelmingly important to her? It was through poverty that St. Clare believed she could most closely imitate Christ who “condescended to embrace [poverty] before all else” (1Lag17). Clare was single-mindedly focused on imitating the life and teachings of Christ that upheld poverty. Clare’s references to the life of Christ as it relates to Gospel poverty

- “the Poor Crucified” 1Lag13
- “the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” 1Lag18
- “chose to appear despised, needy, and *poor* in this world, so that people who were in utter poverty and want and in absolute need of heavenly nourishment might become *rich* in Him” 1Lag19-20
- “embrace the poor Christ” 2Lag18
- “in following the footprints of the poor and humble Jesus Christ” 3Lag4
- “by *following in His footprints*, especially [those] of poverty and humility” 3Lag25
- “the poverty of Him Who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling cloths. O marvelous humility, O astonishing poverty!” 4Lag19-20
- “dwell on the holy humility, the blessed poverty, the untold labors and burdens which He endured for the redemption of all mankind.” 4Lag22
- “And for the love of the most holy and beloved Child Who was wrapped in the poorest of swaddling clothes and laid in a manger...” Rule 2:18
- “Francis, who followed the poverty and humility of His beloved Son” Testament 13

Clare’s references to the teachings of Christ with regards to Gospel poverty

- “O holy poverty, to those who possess and desire you God promises the kingdom of heaven” 1Lag16
- “You have sought to store up greater *treasures in heaven* rather than on earth, where *rust does not consume nor moth destroy nor thieves break in and steal*” 1Lag22-23
- “You know, I am sure, that the kingdom of heaven is promised and given by the Lord only to the poor” 1Lag25
- “Such a person *cannot serve God and Mammon*” 1Lag26
- “and the one who lives in the glory of earth cannot rule with Christ in heaven” 1Lag27
- “that she should go and sell all that she has and take care to distribute the proceeds to the poor” Rule

2:4

- “Nor should they feel ashamed (in sending for alms), since the Lord made Himself poor for us in this world.” Rule 8:2

The reader may have noticed the undeniable link between poverty and humility in Clare’s writings. For Clare, Christ’s poverty was an expression of the absolute humility he embodied, an expression she deeply desired to emulate<sup>xiii</sup>. In her writings, Clare seems to linger over Christ’s choice to become poor. His poverty was not forced, but was a free expression of self-emptying, or kenosis. Bekker<sup>xiv</sup> noted that Philippians 2:5-11 is a central passage that guides Clare’s leadership. Within this passage, Christ is pictured as emptying himself by (a) becoming a servant, (b) becoming human, (c) humbling himself, and (d) becoming obedient to death. By humbly emptying himself, Christ became poor. This is the Christ with which Clare was enamored. It was in this spirit of unreserved admiration and imitation that St. Clare led those around her.

In addition to imitating the Christ she loved with all her heart, Clare also believed poverty opened her spirit to God’s presence in ways that could not be otherwise reached. House<sup>xv</sup> described a long-standing tradition of pursuing communion with God through poverty: “Throughout the ages Christians, Hindus, and Muslims have found that the practice of poverty has proved invaluable if not essential in releasing the soul from the clamor of self, leaving it free to identify solely with God and His purpose.” Foster<sup>xvi</sup> commented on this clamor of self as a desperate attempt to gain security, “Because we lack a divine Center our need for security has led us into an insane attachment to things.” Clare’s desire was to detach from all things that would interrupt her attempts to wholeheartedly focus on Christ. Recall her urgent plea to Lady Agnes: “gaze upon Him, consider Him, contemplate Him, as you desire to imitate Him.” Clare led through her single-minded focus on communing with her heavenly spouse.

Bekker<sup>xvii</sup> implied that by engaging in kenosis, not only did Clare open herself to communion with God, she was also able to experience deep communion with and commitment to others. Freed from the burden of ownership, she could expend her energy on those around her. Poverty also placed Clare on an equal ground with those she led. Having come from an aristocratic family<sup>xviii</sup>, Clare’s wealth could have formed a boundary between her and those less fortunate in life. Just as in our current day, those with more financial resources tend to move away from the areas that are considered poor. It is difficult to be around poverty and the endless struggle just to live. Clare’s self-emptying practice of poverty, however, enabled other-centeredness and service.

Poverty opened Clare’s experience to the presence of God by requiring her to trust Him entirely and

by setting her on equal footing with other image-bearers. In this way, gospel poverty became a means of setting Clare in the way of God's grace<sup>xix</sup>. Foster remarked that "by themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing," but they "allow us to place ourselves before God so he can transform us."<sup>xx</sup> Truly, Clare understood that forced poverty *per se* was empty. When a woman wished to join her order, she was to be told to "go and sell all that she has and take care to distribute the proceeds to the poor" (Rule 2:4). However, if the woman was unable to do so, Clare encouraged the sisters to not force the issue. Rather, she wanted the woman to "freely dispose of her possessions as the Lord may inspire her" (Rule 2:5). It is not the act in and of itself that Clare espoused; she understood that obedience to God's leading led her and her sisters into His grace.

In addition to being a path of imitating Christ, and a path to openness to God's presence in her life, poverty was a privilege to Clare because of its eternal reward. In her writings, she continually reminds her followers of the heavenly gains to come.

Clare's references eternal rewards as it relates to Gospel poverty

- "with a special reverent [prayer] that she attain the glory of everlasting happiness" I Lag2
- "O blessed poverty, who bestows eternal riches on those who love and embrace her!" I Lag15
- "O holy poverty, to those who possess and desire you God promises the kingdom of heaven and offers, indeed, eternal glory and blessed life!" I Lag16
- "so that people who were in utter poverty and want and in absolute need of heavenly nourishment might become rich in Him by possessing the kingdom of heaven" I Lag20
- "You have sought to store up greater treasures in heaven rather than on earth" I Lag22
- "Your reward, then, is very great in heaven" I Lag23
- "the kingdom of heaven is promised and given by the Lord only to the poor" I Lag25
- "one who lives in the glory of earth cannot rule with Christ in heaven" I Lag27
- "you have cast aside your garments, that is, earthly riches, so that ...you might enter the kingdom of heaven" I Lag29
- "What a great laudable exchange: to leave the things of time for those of eternity, to choose the things of heaven for the goods of earth, to receive the hundred-fold in place on one, and to possess a blessed and eternal life" I Lag30
- "so that by their help we may...merit to enjoy the everlasting vision" I Lag34
- "If you suffer with Him, you shall reign with Him, [if you] weep [with Him], you shall rejoice with Him; [if you] die [with Him] on the cross of tribulation, you shall possess heavenly mansions in the splendor

of the saints and, in the Book of Life, your name shall be called glorious among men” 2Lag 21-22.

- “Because of this you shall share always and forever the glory of the kingdom of heaven in place of earthly and passing things, and everlasting treasures instead of those that perish, and you shall live forever.” 2Lag23
- “to win the prize of heaven” 3Lag3
- “I see, too, that by humility, the virtue of faith, and the strong arms of poverty, you have taken hold of that incomparable treasure hidden in the field...” 3Lag7
- “Inasmuch as this vision is the splendor of eternal glory, the brilliance of eternal light and the mirror without blemish, look upon that mirror each day” 4Lag14-15
- “As you contemplate further His ineffable delights, eternal riches and honors...” 4Lag28
- “for you shall be crowned by Him with the garland of life.” LEB4
- “Our labor here is brief, but the reward is eternal” LEB5
- “Offer faithfully what you have vowed to God, and He shall reward you” LEB8
- “He will be your help and best comforter for He is our Redeemer and our eternal reward.” LEB16
- “We shall...gain the prize of eternal happiness” Testament6
- “In heaven, may He exalt and glorify you in His Church Triumphant among all His men and women saints” Blessing9

Clearly, St. Clare had a vision of what was to come, and lived the whole of her life in order to gain that reward. She persevered in poverty, so as to taste the promised eternal riches. Clare then led her followers, and she postulated that they would lead others, by steadfastly holding to this eternal vision.

In summary, Clare had the support of her esteemed brother Francis, the pope, and the surrounding community to be able to live in holy poverty. However, Clare pulled from a deep well within her to endure the effects of poverty and lead others in her path. Her inner strength arose primarily from her deep admiration and desire to imitate her Lord Jesus Christ. In addition to imitating him, she longed to commune with him and be open to his presence and grace. Finally, Clare held to a clear vision of the eternal rewards and pined for these more than that which worldly treasures offered. Poverty enabled the fulfillment of Clare’s desires.

### Leadership Today

As modern thinkers, it can be easy to dismiss the actions of early saints as naïve, unthinking, or unbalanced. Now that it is common for individuals to own even several copies of Scriptures, we look at

Clare's extreme commitment to poverty and wonder at her foolish dismissal of the church's desire to provide for her order. Surely, it requires as much trust in God to receive the church's provision as it does to beg for alms. However, one cannot deny Clare's influence. Bekker<sup>xxi</sup> reported the existence of as many as 20,000 members of Clare's order currently active in the vowed life. This figure, of course, does not take into account the many thousands of other women who followed Clare's way of life for the past 800 years. Perhaps Clare's leadership in the realm of poverty can teach us something we can then offer the world. What if we desired to imitate Christ above all else? What would happen if we led others by first doing whatever it took to commune with God? How would our organization be changed if we truly held before us the hope of our eternal rewards? Just as important as the change in our organizations, how would we be changed?

### *Possible Concerns*

As the story goes, a man whose home was overcome by floodwaters was clinging desperately to his roof, fervently praying that God would save him. Three different times, boats approached him and told him to climb aboard. Each time, the man declined insisting that God would save him. When he eventually drowned and went to heaven, he asked God why He didn't save him. Exasperated, God replied, "I sent you three boats!" As I learned about St. Clare's lifelong struggle with the church to allow her to live in poverty so that God might provide her sustenance, I could not help but think of this joke. Did Clare unwisely dismiss the provisions that God was offering her to obey the impulsive command of a man she loved (Francis)? It is certainly reasonable to wonder at whether or not gospel poverty is imprudent. Here are some concerns and possible counter points to consider as a leader considering gospel poverty.

First, it is virtually immoral to live in America and not be saving for retirement. Those reading the Proverbs might bring up the many verses that speak about prudent saving, and the financial blessings of wise living. A theology of money is beyond the scope of this paper<sup>xxii</sup> and I am not suggesting that we discard the verses speaking about planning, saving, and caring for one's family. Rather, I am suggesting that perhaps these activities have resulted in a condoned method of hoarding. Can we live well knowing our IRA balance(s), all the while hearing about the number of children living and starving on the streets? What would it look like if Christian leaders practiced some level of gospel poverty that allowed us to live out of the secure truth that our treasure is in heaven (Matt. 6:20-21). How would this change our world?

A friend of mine recently took this truth to task and liquidated retirement funds to follow what she understood to be God's movement in her life. Along her path of obedience, she encountered some who voiced concern. Her own mind, trained in financial planning, fought against her decision. Certainly we should not give away all we have, for then we have need for someone else to give to us. Surely it is better to have

some money so that we can provide for those who are poor. Just as my friend had to obey what God had impressed upon her, so also must we. What if God led Christian leaders to have less than others, to have financial needs, or even live in poverty? Are we in close enough communion with God that we would first hear, then obey his special calling for us?

Could we give up our strategies of keeping enough money to be able to give to others? Ironically, if we did give away all we had, became poor, then needed others to give to us, would we not be leading others to act similarly and end up in a place of deeper communion with God? Could this be how God calls some of us to lead? If so, the position certainly lacks prestige. As leaders, we have visions of being like Job or Solomon, blessed in all ways, including financially. It is very uncomfortable to even ponder what it would be like to give up our goals for our business, or church, or family. We tend to believe that God has entrusted us with the money we have and we are to do all we can to not lose it. If this is the case, could He also entrust us with nothing? James 2:4 says, “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him?” Has God chosen you?

#### *Possible Movement*

If you have been impressed upon to move toward gospel poverty, but despair over being interlocked with our culture’s attachment to money and things, there is reason for hope. There are several resources from the field of psychology that may be of assistance. It is not the purpose of this paper to assign tasks to achieve gospel poverty; rather, the following section is meant to offer resources that help us move in this direction. It is also important to highlight Foster’s (1988) warning that outward expressions of spiritual disciplines are dangerous to list out because they can lead to legalistic followings. The desired spirit here is in offering hope to leaders that they can in fact move toward gospel poverty so as to open themselves to the grace of God, the same grace in which St. Clare lived, breathed, and moved.

First, we can learn from the field of substance abuse counseling, where treatment is focused on a person’s unhealthy attachment to substances. In the past, there was a heavy emphasis on complete abstinence from the substance, so much so that if a person would not or could not quit cold turkey they were turned out of treatment. Many of those turned away truly wanted help. Currently, however, there is a belief that using less of a substance is better than using more; it is a model of harm reduction<sup>xxiii</sup>. Thus, it is acceptable to seek to get better, even if better is not the best. The same applies to those of us considering gospel poverty; even if we cannot give away everything, as St. Clare did, giving away something is better than nothing at all.

Second, the field of social psychology has offered a vast amount of information on ways to influence others. Sadly, this information has often been used to convince or coerce others to surrender their money or

allegiance to less than worthy purposes; however, we can use these influence techniques on ourselves to be a resource in our movement toward gospel poverty. For instance, the foot-in-the-door phenomenon<sup>xxiv</sup> tells us that if we commit to something small, we are more likely to commit to something bigger at a later time. A salesperson will have you invite him or her in your home hoping that you will buy his or her product later. What if we held a garage sale of unwanted things, and gave the money to the poor. This small act of charity could be our foot-in-the-door to giving away more things and giving more money to the poor. What other small thing can you commit to in the direction of gospel poverty that could lead to greater depths of trust in God.

Another influence technique is the practice of writing<sup>xxv</sup>. When we write out a position on something, even if we do not agree with it, we are more likely to be swayed by that position. For instance, we could write a page or two musing why God would say that the poor are rich in faith (James 2:5). A week later, we might meditate on paper over James' thoughts on those in humble circumstances being in high positions as compared to the rich who are in low positions. The more we write out the thing we are hoping to believe, the more we actually believe it. In fact, writing this very paper has been influential in my own commitment to gospel poverty.

There is an interesting dynamic that happens when we are confronted with two diverse things, one right after the other: the second seems especially different in light of the first. For example, if I am outside on a hot July afternoon, then step into an air-conditioned building, the temperature of the building will seem especially cold, colder than if the outside temperature had not been so warm. This is the principle of contrast<sup>xxvi</sup>. To use contrast to our gospel poverty advantage, first tally the amount in the budget that is spent or saved. This is probably not a big surprise. Then tally the amount in the budget that is given away. Next to the first figure, it is likely to look rather puny. Even for those who give what seem like sizable amounts, it simply does not hold water compared to what is kept. Perhaps this exercise might press us onward toward gospel poverty.

Finally, there are several advantages to surrounding ourselves with people who are living in poverty, or who value the spiritual discipline of gospel poverty. First, the field of cognitive neuroscience has recently discovered a system of neurons in our brain that is activated whenever we watch someone do something<sup>xxvii</sup>. It is as if when others do this act, we are doing it as well biologically. If I watch my friend give away possessions to which she is emotionally attached, I am doing that very thing in my mind. The more I watch, the more my neurons fire; the more my neurons fire, the more likely I will do this act myself.

In-group dynamics are another advantage of proximity. Groups that have a strong sense of identity

create natural boundaries to keep out those who do not meet the requirements for inclusion. A clear example of group boundaries is seen between young boys and girls who are concerned about the “cooties” contained by the opposite gender. There are also boundaries between the haves and the have-nots. Those who live with few financial resources think differently, talk differently, spend money differently, and so on than those who are “blessed,” as it were. As we place ourselves within the ranks, we may be able to overcome the prejudices we hold about the poor. With those living below the poverty line by our side, compassion and understanding may dissolve the judgments and hypocrisy within our hearts. As the natural boundaries of group identities soften, it may not seem too big of a jump to live among the poor, and then to live as the poor.

In conclusion, St. Clare provides us the role model of a leader who steadfastly held to Christ. She wished to imitate him, to commune with him, and to eventually celebrate her rewards with him. In order to be this close to her Savior, she chose poverty as a means of placing herself in the way of grace. It is in this very spirit that we ponder placing ourselves in a similar path. Our culture needs Christian leaders to offer a vision of life that is different from what is currently sought. Gospel poverty may be that new vision, but living in poverty is not easily done in America today, particularly among leadership circles. Psychological principles can act as resources for leaders as they consider what life might be like living in the spiritual discipline of gospel poverty.

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<sup>i</sup> DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B. D., Lee, C. H., US Census Bureau (2006). Current Population Reports, P60-231, *Income, poverty and health insurance coverage in the United States: 2005*. Washington DC: US Government Printing Office.

<sup>ii</sup> From [www.bahratbook.com](http://www.bahratbook.com) (accessed July 16, 2008)

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.businessplans.org/mission.html> (accessed July 16, 2008)

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/g19/Current/> (accessed July 7, 2008)

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.realtytrac.com/> (accessed July 7, 2008)

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- <sup>vi</sup> Dave Ramsey, *Financial Peace Planner: A step-by-step guide to restoring your family's financial health*, (New York: Penguin, 1998).
- <sup>vii</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of discipline: The path to spiritual growth*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988).
- <sup>viii</sup> For an introduction to St. Clare, see Sr. Marge Karecki, "Clare of Assisi: Foot-washing leadership," *Inner Resources for Leaders* 1, no.1 (n.d.).
- <sup>ix</sup> The translation of Regis J. Armstrong in *Francis and Clare: The complete works*, trans. Regis J. Armstrong & Ignatius C. Brady, (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 197.
- <sup>x</sup> St. Clare, 209-225.
- <sup>xi</sup> Adrian House, *Francis of Assisi*, (Mahwah, New Jersey: HiddenSpring, 2001)
- <sup>xii</sup> House, 2001
- <sup>xiii</sup> Karecki (n.d.)
- <sup>xiv</sup> Corné J. Bekker (2005), *Kenotic mysticism and servant leadership in the letters of Clare of Assisi to Agnes of Prague*. Paper presented at Servant Leadership Research Roundtable, published by School of Leadership Studies, Regent University.
- <sup>xv</sup> House, 102-103.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Foster, 80
- <sup>xvii</sup> Bekker, 2005
- <sup>xviii</sup> House, 2001
- <sup>xix</sup> Foster, 1988
- <sup>xx</sup> Foster, 1988, p. 7
- <sup>xxi</sup> Bekker, 2005
- <sup>xxii</sup> For an example theology, see Randy Alcorn (?).
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Patt Denning, *Practicing harm reduction psychotherapy: An alternative approach to addictions* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2004).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Allyn & Bacon, 2000).
- <sup>xxv</sup> Cialdini, 2000
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Cialdini, 2000
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Smith, E.E., & Kosslyn, S.M., *Cognitive Psychology: Mind and brain*. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, 2007).