

Race and Poverty: Five-Session Study Guide

Session 1

The Missional Moment

Focal Passage: Deuteronomy 15:7–11

Background Passages: Psalm 69:1–3, 13–15, 24–27, 24–36; Romans 11:33–35; 2 Kings 22–23; Luke 4:18–20

Session Synopsis: The hurricane has led to awareness. This is a missional moment for us to turn from our own selfishness. The poor have been present, but we've overlooked them, shunned them. The disaster has made many of us poor, poor in spirit, poor in soul. We must now use our passion for loving our neighbor to help us all arise from poverty.

Key Verse: “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’ ” (Deut. 15:11).

Session Objectives

Participants will:

- move beyond sadness, despair, defensiveness, or other common emotional reactions to hurricane Katrina and to move toward embracing this tragedy as a “missional moment,” an opportunity to speak prophetically, act faithfully, and experience personal transformation
- recognize that hurricane Katrina has revealed poverty in many forms: the real, day-to-day lived poverty of the poor and marginalized; the impoverished social structures that led to class and race distinctions and crippled response to the needs of the “least among us”; and the poverty of our own awareness and faithfulness that left individual Christians, churches, and denominations at a loss in knowing how to respond
- wrestle with the truth of God’s tremendous concern for the poor as evidenced throughout Scripture and in particular in Deuteronomy 15

Preparation

- Prayerfully review the session and ask God to open your eyes and transform your life so that you might lead others.
- Carefully read the Scripture text and engage in the Psalm 69 reflection activity as described in Gathering.
- Make copies and gather materials as noted in Materials Needed.

Materials Needed

- Bibles
- copies of Participants Pieces for each participant
- copies of your church covenant for each participant
- calculator

Gathering

Note: Take care in how you frame this gathering time. Do not let this introductory time become an hour of venting. Most of us do not need another opportunity to vent our anger, but we desperately need to renew our minds and hearts in the hope of the gospel. Tell the group up front that you must limit this exercise to a certain time, and try to help them see that the goal is to direct emotions toward redemption and hope rather than either stifling or venting them. Also, for the Psalm 69 meditation, do not be afraid of the silence. Do not move through it too quickly. We have been overwhelmed by images and sounds, by politicians and commentators. Let us begin a serious work with this silence, trusting that God has wisdom for us, a wisdom that confounds earthly wisdom (Rom. 11:33–35). Silence may be the most truthful thing we do.

Once participants have gathered, share with them the following:

Overwhelmed. We have been overwhelmed by a hurricane. Its waters have overflowed the levies; its winds have blown over homes and destroyed bridges and roads. We have been overwhelmed by the number of dead, by the breakdown of vital systems of order, and by the frightening realization that we are vulnerable to forces beyond our control. We have been flooded with concern for evacuees who are spilling out of our schools and gyms. We are paralyzed by the infinite needs. We are numbed by the media. And we do not know how to help.

Explain that you will be engaging together in a meditation on Psalm 69, reading a few verses, engaging in moments of silence and sharing brief responses. Introduce the psalm by explaining that this is a psalm for a people who are overwhelmed and out of control. It is a reminder that we are not the first to be swept off our feet and overwhelmed, but it is also an important opportunity to direct all of our overwhelming desires, hopes, and fears in a common direction. That direction is the worship of a God of justice.

Further note how Psalm 69 begins as a plea for help and becomes a powerful lament and even an expression of rage. It gives voice to a remarkable biblical vision: all creation (even the seas) giving praise to God as destroyed cities are being rebuilt. We will read parts of Psalm 69, and follow each reading with silence. After each reading the leader will give instructions, inviting the group to express first helplessness, then anger, and finally hope.

Psalm 69 Meditation

• *Explain the first silence:*

After the reading, try to remember the one most disturbing image of the events of Katrina. Bring to mind one person or place that you would help if you could. At the end of the first silence, you will be asked to name that one image in a word or very brief phrase.

• *Read Psalm 69:1–3*

“Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.
I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.”

- *Allow thirty to sixty seconds of silence.*
- *Invite participants to name the image.*

- *Explain the second silence:*

In the next silence try to picture yourself helping the persons or in the place you named earlier. What would you do if you could reach them/the location?

- *Read Psalm 69:13-15:*

“But as for me, my prayer is to you, O LORD.

At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me.

With your faithful help rescue me from sinking in the mire;

let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters.

Do not let the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up,
or the Pit close its mouth over me” (Ps. 13–15).

- *Allow thirty to sixty seconds of silence.*

- *Invite participants to complete the sentence “If I could be there to help, I would . . .”*

- *Explain the third silence:*

All of us are frustrated. Many of us are angry. Once again there is much finger pointing and poisonous speech in our country. In this silence you will be asked to bring your anger and frustration into the light of our common worship. It is important that we do not let anger fester within us, but we must also be careful so that our anger will be shaped by the Word of God and directed toward justice rather than mere spite. We will join the psalmist, offering our anger to God and asking God for justice. In the silence try to bring to mind the things that have made you angry or frustrated.

- *Read Psalm 69:24-27:*

“Pour out your indignation upon them, and let your burning anger overtake them.

May their camp be a desolation; let no one live in their tents.

For they persecute those whom you have struck down,

and those whom you have wounded, they attack still more.

Add guilt to their guilt; may they have no acquittal from you.”

- *Allow thirty to sixty seconds of silence.*

- *Invite participants to respond in one sentence to the question, “What has made you angry in the events of hurricane Katrina?”*

- *Explain the fourth silence:*

In the next silence bring to mind images of hope. Try to think of one person who has acted faithfully, or try to recall an act of kindness or mercy that you witnessed. After the silence you will be asked to share the image of hope that came to mind.

- *Read Psalm 69:34–36*

“Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them.

For God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah;

and his servants shall live there and possess it;

the children of his servants shall inherit it,

and those who love his name shall live in it.”

- *Allow thirty to sixty seconds of silence.*

- *Invite participants to give voice to images of hope.*

- *Close the meditation with prayer.*

The Missional Moment

Set the tone for this part of the session by reading Deuteronomy 15:7–11, noting that the text invites us to consider whether there are people in need among us; if we are simply unaware of the true needs around us.

Then, read aloud the following “Dispatch from Mississippi”:

As the first day after the hurricane was ending, I was preparing to go home from church. It had been a long, hot, and hectic day of securing our own house and checking on church members. Everyone seemed OK, and it was time to go home when the phone rang. It was my friend David from Nashville. “Have you checked on the poor in your community?” he asked. I had not. I had driven past the hidden neighborhood where the poor mostly live in Clinton, Mississippi, and I had wondered how some of the families I knew had fared during the storm. But I had spent my day checking on our members, and we have no one in our church who lives in that neighborhood. David understood. That was not surprising. “Now go check on the poor,” he said. Reminded by a good friend who does not mind asking me to be true to my calling, I went to check on the poor families I know in our community.

Invite discussion of the larger issues raised by this story (and the events of Katrina) of whether the poor have become invisible to us and if so, if that “invisibility” is due to active or passive neglect by people of faith. The following questions may be helpful for the discussion.

- How many poor people can you call by name? In what context did you learn their names?
- How far is your church from a poor neighborhood?
- Is anyone in your congregation in need?
- How far is your home from a poor neighborhood? How far is your home from your church?
- Do you know of a church that has moved out of a poor neighborhood? Do you know of churches that have stayed in poor neighborhoods despite pressure to move?

Push the discussion and reflection further with following:

- “Studies have shown that . . . whites begin to move out of their neighborhoods once the percentage of black residents rises above approximately 8 percent.”¹ Has our community seen neighborhoods changing in population because of racial migrations?
- Frequently there is a corresponding history of economic changes in such neighborhoods. How has our congregation responded to these changes? How have we talked about them? Are these issues too divisive for us to address?

Draw the focus to issues of race and poverty as exposed in the wake of hurricane Katrina, with the following:

- In the aftermath of Katrina, the Former FEMA director said “We’re seeing people we didn’t know existed.” Have the events of Katrina revealed poverty you did not know existed?
- Were you surprised to see the conditions of inner city neighborhoods in New Orleans? • Have the events of Katrina revealed that people of faith have grown too comfortable with rising poverty rates?
- The official poverty rate for 2004 was \$15,670 for a family of three and \$18,850 for a family of four.² According to the annual U.S. Census Bureau Poverty Report issued on August 30th 2005, as the levees of New Orleans were giving way, the official poverty rate for the nation rose from 12.5 percent in 2003 to 12.7 percent in 2004. . . . The number of people in poverty increased as well by 1.1 million to 37 million people in 2004.³
- Let’s do some math: (This will not be a true number, but it is a way to begin to wonder at how many poor people are in your community. The poverty rate itself is an imperfect indicator of poverty. The word *poverty* is even hard to define.) How would you define poverty—a lack of basic necessities . . . the inability to live without shame in the community?⁴
 - What is the approximate population of our city/town?
 - Multiply that population estimate by .127. That’s the number of people living in poverty in our community as of the end of 2004.
 - Multiply the population estimate by .125 and subtract that number from the previous number. This is representative of the increase in poverty in our community from 2003 to 2004.
 - The difference between 12.5 and 12.7 percent is small, and it is easy to be unaffected by that number. And yet that slight increase represents people with names in our community. How might we learn the names of those people?

The Missional Mandate

Review together Participants’ Piece #1, “Bible Background” and read again Deuteronomy 15:7–11. Then invite exploration with the following:

- Notice that Sabbath is the context for this text on economic justice and that these instructions are not set within a commentary on stealing or coveting. One might think these were more likely settings for such issues; instead, our care for the poor is set within a particular kind of social vision where land and people are not exploited and used up but given rest. Thus the larger biblical vision of economic justice raises enormous questions about our modern global economy, which is built on unquenchable desire and endless work. Ultimately, this passage demands that we ask larger questions about the structure of economic systems. Does our global economic system violate the principle of Sabbath rest?
- Notice that in order to obey this command, we must first know our neighbors (Deut. 15:7). Yet our neighborhoods are now developed so as to isolate us from one another and to segregate us by income. Is there a sense in which it will be more difficult to obey this command because of the way we have developed our cities? What can churches do to change our proximity to people in need?
- We are specifically exhorted to refrain from hostility to the poor (Deut. 15:9). Have we witnessed any “hostility” to the needy in our culture?

The Missional Merger

Activity 1: draft a statement of repentance

Explain that this study represents a combined effort of the American Baptist Churches in the USA and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. It began with a statement of repentance to the poor issued by the leaders of both bodies. Ask, “What would we as individuals and as a church most repent for and to whom?” Invite participants to either draft statements of repentance in small groups or to work together to prepare a challenge to the church to draft its own statement of repentance in the light of the events of hurricane Katrina.

Activity 2: review your church covenant

Pass out copies of your church covenant. Explain that Josiah’s repentance included reading the discovered scroll aloud before the people and asking them to recite their covenant with God. Talk about your church covenant: When do you read it? Does the covenant include mention of care for the poor? Should it? Could this text be the impetus for a renewed covenant in your congregation?

Commissioning

Explain that the closing litany (Participants’ Piece #2) is based on Luke 4:18–20, which is Jesus’ inaugural sermon in his hometown of Nazareth. Note that the reference to “the year of the Lord’s favor” is thought to be an allusion to the Sabbath year, which was a year designated for the release of all debts. Invite the group to depart following the litany in the same silence with which you began the session, in recognition that too many words have already been spoken on this divisive and difficult issue, as a pledge to listen to one another and to God as you continue this study, and as a way to allow Jesus to have the last word.

Join in the closing litany and depart in silence.

1. David Hilfiker, *Urban Injustice: How Ghettos Happen* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 25.
2. Ibid.
3. U.S. Census Bureau Video Webcast, from transcript of “Speaking of Faith,” American Public Media, <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/seeingpoverty/index.shtml>, 15 September 2005.
4. For a helpful theological discussion of the way we define wants and needs and a Christian vision of poverty, see David Matzko McCarthy, *The Good Life: Genuine Christianity for the Middle Class* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 108–13.

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Lesson by Stan Wilson, pastor of Northside Baptist Church, Clinton, Mississippi.

Participants' Pieces

1. Biblical Background

- The story is told (and most scholars believe) that this section of Deuteronomy is a form of the scroll that was found in the temple during the reign of Josiah (2 Kings 22–23). Josiah was a (rare) righteous king; and in the middle of his reign, he began a project of reform that included removing corruptive, pagan elements from the temple. During process, the high priest reported that he had found a “book of the law,” a text of law which had been previously lost or perhaps neglected. The high priest gave the scroll to Josiah’s secretary, and Josiah had the secretary read the book aloud [Mark E. Biddle, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2003), 2–3].

- Deuteronomy includes the commandment, which Jesus called the “greatest commandment” (Matthew 22:37 and parallels). It is known as the *Shema*, and it begins, “Hear, O Israel” (Deut. 6:5). *Shema* means “hear,” which to the Hebrew mind, meant obey. As you hear this text again, hear it as a neglected word from God that calls for your humble hearing and even your repentance.

- Deuteronomy was a central text for Jesus (he quoted it more than any other biblical book), yet it is relatively unknown to many Christians, so it is important to place this text in a larger context (Biddle, 9). Chapter 15 is part of the so-called “Deuteronomistic Code,” which includes chapters 12–26 and is widely considered to be a commentary on the Decalogue (or the Ten Commandments). Our text, 15:7–11, belongs to a commentary on the third commandment, “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy”) (14:22–16:17).

- There are other similar commentaries on the law in the Old Testament in Exodus (20–23) and Leviticus (17–26). All of them contain instructions concerning care of the underprivileged and warnings for those who oppress, but Deuteronomy is unique, and the contrasts highlight important features of this text. For example, in Leviticus a system is provided to keep borrowers from taking advantage of lenders, but the focus in Deuteronomy is on “the motivations of the lender.” (Biddle, 258). Notice that the lender is the one addressed here. While other texts address the responsibilities of the poor, Deuteronomy sets its sight on those who have an obligation to care for the poor.

- In Deuteronomy 15:1 we are instructed to forgive all debts in the Sabbath or seventh year; therefore, the instruction in verse 9 involves a risk: One may not recover capital if you loan in or near the Sabbath year. This is an exceptionally generous position. The warning that follows is sharp: If you view the needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing, that neighbor might “cry to the LORD against you” (15:9). The people of the Israel first cried to the Lord against the Egyptians (Exod. 2:23–25); to turn a back to the needy would be fatal failure of memory, to forget the Lord and his benefits.

2. Closing Litany (Luke 4:18–20)

Leader: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

People: because God has anointed me

All: to bring good news to the poor.

Leader: God has sent me

People: to proclaim release to the captives

All: and recovery of sight to the blind,

Leader: to let the oppressed go free,

People: to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Leader: And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

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