

The poor we will always have with us?

**Jesus isn't pitting himself against poor people.
He's one of them.**

by [Liz Theoharis](#) in the [April 26, 2017](#) issue



[Timothy P. Schmalz](#), *When I Was Hungry & Thirsty*, sculpture, 2006. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Owen Byrne](#).

A full understanding of what Jesus meant by “the poor you will always have with you” (Matt. 26:11) requires familiarity with Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy is the Old Testament book most cited in the New Testament. It is the bridge that connects covenantal law, shalom justice, alternative power systems, and economic rights from the Torah through the New Testament.

Theologian and social theorist Ulrich Duchrow writes:

We may say that Deuteronomy, with the help of the ancient Israelite traditions about a free(d) people, updated by the prophets, Hosea and Jeremiah in particular, succeeded in reforming the kingship system fundamentally. The monarchy was fully bound into the social system of solidarity and participation and lost its instruments of economic exploitation and political oppression.

Continuing in this vein, Walter Brueggemann writes, “Deuteronomy has a peculiar and persistent propensity for the poor and marginal and continually urges generosity and attentiveness towards widows, orphans, and sojourners, those who are legally and economically disinherited.”

The Deuteronomic Code speaks of mandated sabbatical and Jubilee years, prohibitions on charging interest to Israelites, protection of pledges given as collateral for loans, just weights and measures, prompt payment of wages, equity in legal proceedings, and direct provisions for the poor through tithing and gleaning.

Some of the individual regulations include the elimination of state tribute, setting a year for the remission of debts (Deut. 15:1-11), freeing slaves (15:12-18), allowing the poor and weak to go on pilgrimage (16:11), forbidding interest and pledges taken from the weak (23:20, 24:17), and mandating that harvest leftovers remain in the fields for the hungry (24:19). These instructions are given with reminders to the people that God led them out of slavery in Egypt and with the highest commandment, the *Shema Israel*, in 6:4. The people bound themselves and all this in a covenant (26:16-19); keeping that covenant was viewed as a matter of life and death (30:15-20).

The Deuteronomic Code in Deuteronomy and the Covenant Code in Exodus emphasize the humanitarian side of Sabbath: slaves, animals, and everyone have a

rest. But the priests also insist that observing Sabbath is about copying or emulating God. This combination of piety and economic practice are merged: rather than choosing between helping the poor and worshiping God, the Deuteronomic Code demonstrates that the way to worship God is to structure society around everyone's needs. God's intention with God's laws and commandments is to eliminate poverty and inequality on earth.

The Deuteronomist also connects debt forgiveness, land fallowing, and slave manumission. These verses broaden the law to apply to the entire society (rather than just the practices of individual families or clans). The message is that freeing slaves and forgiving debts is a moral obligation to God. Rather than simply a suggestion to care for the poor in a more transitory and temporary situation, which is often the way Deuteronomy is interpreted, the Deuteronomic Code offers a way of living with shalom justice at the center. It is a model for humanity's relationship with God that neither decenters the poor nor spiritualizes poverty. The Sabbath isn't about a holiday or taking a break on the backs of others who are unable to take a break. It is about economic equality and right relationship with humanity and God.

Matthew's Gospel takes up the concept of Sabbath when it names Jesus as the "Lord of the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:8). The emphasis in this title on economic justice shines through when Sabbath is understood through the Deuteronomic Code. Roman lords were not interested in the well-being and prosperity of their subjects except to compel more work from them. This title for Jesus emphasizes that he is from the underside of the empire—Jesus is truly on the side of the poor; he is a leader who represents the popular struggles of the poor. He values the lives and livelihoods of the other poor subjects of the Roman Empire and believes they deserve rest and justice.

Keeping in mind these emphases of Deuteronomy, we can grasp the liberative dimension of Jesus' words in Matthew 26:11, "you always have the poor with you." After an unnamed prophetess anoints him to be ruler of God's kingdom, Jesus responds by quoting to his disciples from Deuteronomy 15:11, which is embedded in one of the most radical Sabbath and Jubilee prescriptions in the Bible. Deuteronomy 15 says that there will be no poor person among you if you follow the commandments of God: to forgive debts, release slaves, and lend money even when you know you won't get paid back. But Deuteronomy 15 also says that because people will not follow those commandments, there will always be poor among you.

When Jesus quotes this phrase, he isn't condoning poverty. He is reminding us of Deuteronomy's message: that God hates poverty and has commanded us to end poverty by forgiving debts, by outlawing slavery, and by restructuring society around the needs of the poor.

Therefore, Jesus' words are a critique of empire, charity, and inequality. Rather than stating that poverty is unavoidable and predetermined by God, he says that poverty is created by human beings—by their disobedience to God and neglect of their neighbor. Matthew 26:11 does two things: it refers to people's failure to follow God's law and commandments, and it instructs us on how to establish a reign of prosperity and dignity for all. In God's kingdom, there will be no poor because poverty (and perhaps wealth?) will not exist.

Jesus comes to his ministry from his own earthly poverty: from his experience of the severe dispossession and subjugation of the Roman Empire. John Dominic Crossan asserts that Jesus was a poor, illiterate worker. In the introduction to *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, Crossan writes, "If, for example, we are tempted to describe Jesus as a literate middle-class carpenter, cross-cultural anthropology reminds us that there was no middle class in ancient societies and that peasants are usually illiterate, so how could Jesus become what never existed at his time?" Instead, as Crossan asserts:

If Jesus was a carpenter, therefore, he belonged to the Artisan class, that group pushed into the dangerous space between Peasants and Degradeds or Expendables. . . . Furthermore, since between 95 and 97 percent of the Jewish state was illiterate at the time of Jesus, it must be presumed that Jesus also was illiterate . . . like the vast majority of his contemporaries.

Stephen Patterson has proposed that Jesus fits into the category of those most exploited and oppressed by the empire: "In the gospels, canonical and noncanonical, and in Paul—in the broad memory and praxis of the early church—Jesus is recalled as living outside the system of brokered power and economy of Rome's Empire." Patterson asserts that the company that Jesus kept was poor and expendable, and, by association, he may have fit into this category himself. "Jesus knew expendability, he knew expendables, and he invited those who had not fallen out of the Roman system of brokerage and patronage to step out voluntarily and to become part of a new thing, the Empire of God." In Matthew 8:20, Jesus says that he

has nowhere to lay his head. This most likely is a statement that Jesus himself is homeless. At his burial, Jesus is too poor to have his own tomb; instead, Joseph of Arimathea, a rich disciple of his, claims Jesus' body for placement in his own tomb (Matt. 27:57-60).

Citing Deuteronomy, Jesus declares that poverty is the result of a human failure.

Matthew's account of the anointing of Jesus (26:6-13) is situated within the context of impoverishment and marginalization, and it emphasizes questions of money with almost every word and detail. Jesus is staying in Bethany, only a few miles from Jerusalem, where he has come to observe the Passover holidays. An unnamed woman appears at Simon the Leper's house with a jar of very expensive ointment. *Bethany* means the "house of the poor" in Hebrew (from *bet*, meaning "house" and *'ani*, meaning "poor"). It is not clear how much this literal sense would have been "heard" in the name of this place, but the allusion establishes a metaphorical connection to the poor and poverty.

While Jerusalem (and the Temple in particular) may represent a place of wealth and power, Jesus and his followers are staying in a place of poverty and marginalization. This could be out of convenience but might also be because they do not have the resources to stay somewhere else. It is also an indication of who Jesus is and with whom he associates. Jesus is staying with Simon the Leper, in the "house of the poor," because Jesus himself is concerned with the problems of the poor. The fact that Simon has leprosy may also mean that he is poor and is considered ritually unclean. He is certainly not the type of person who hosts dinners for the Jewish high priests and Roman authorities in Jerusalem.

Reclining over this meal with his disciples, Jesus shares an open commensality: he socializes and eats with all kinds of people, including lepers and women with unknown backgrounds. Jesus stands for a kingdom/empire/realm of God that challenges the very foundations of the Roman Empire. He practices a "radical egalitarianism" that includes people of all classes, statuses, and abilities. He asserts that God's kingdom is made up of those who are considered expendable or excluded from society. For this, Jesus is called "a glutton and a drunkard" by his contemporaries.

Some scholars argue that Bethany is a place of refuge or sanctuary for Jesus and his followers after he caused a stir at the Temple during the Passover festivities. He has

fled to Bethany for protection or cover among the poor and marginalized. Jesus may be staying in Bethany because the poor peasants of that town desire to welcome and protect him and his followers. Richard Horsley points out that “the Jewish peasants not only supported bandits and viewed them as heroic victims of injustice, but also protected them and were willing to suffer the consequences.” It is clear in the company that Jesus keeps that he is a leader in a popular movement and a budding revolutionary. By anointing Jesus in this story, the unnamed woman amplifies his teachings, feedings, and acts of protest, which puts him in further contrast to his opponents and the ruling class.

Other scholars claim that poverty was not a main concern of Jesus, but rather that other things, such as religious observance, mattered more to him. Such claims separate religious practices from the economic structure surrounding them. Such scholars tend to pit Jesus and the poor against each other and insist that Jesus desired luxury in this case because he was so close to his death, even though he valued simplicity in other situations. Still others deny that Matthew 26:11 is about poverty at all.

But the fact that it is a poor person who makes the statement that “the poor you will always have with you” is significant. Rather than a person of wealth condemning those he has impoverished to everlasting poverty, Jesus is a poor person talking about the reality and brutality of being poor and marginalized. He is not romanticizing poverty; only those who are not poor can do that. He is not pitting himself against the poor, because that distinction cannot be made in his case: Jesus also is poor. Given an understanding of the economic context of the Jesus movement, we realize it is inconceivable that Jesus would spiritualize the poverty and problems that people were facing around him. Given a longer biblical-theological arc of justice and the earthly poverty of Jesus, we see clearly his stance on the issues of his day: poverty is an abomination to God. He is a poor person who challenges the status quo and promotes justice and peace for all.

When Jesus says, “You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me,” he is doing more than reminding his followers of the Deuteronomic Code and God’s admonition to forgive debts, release slaves, and be generous with one’s possessions. He is also reminding his followers that he is soon to be executed for his vision of God’s kingdom on earth. Jesus is passing many of the responsibilities of building a popular movement on to his disciples—other movement leaders—right before he is killed.

In this reading of the anointing scene, a turning point in the larger Passion narrative, Jesus is a threat to Rome because of what he stands for and his role in developing leaders committed to his same vision. Jesus is poor; his disciples are also poor. His statement is not about pitting the poor against himself. Instead, Jesus is trying to suggest his significant role and the role of the disciples in the ending of everyone's poverty. He is reminding his disciples that with his impending death, they are charged with carrying on his legacy.

This interpretation is backed up by the grammatical structure of his critique. There is no future prediction in his statement. The verbs used are not in the future tense. The disciples "have" the poor around them (the verb here is *echete*, meaning "you have" in the present tense); they are the people on whom the Jesus movement is based. But time is running out for Jesus. His disciples need to understand what needs to be done to end poverty and to follow Jesus' vision for the realization of the Deuteronomic Code: the release of slaves, forgiveness of debts, and generosity in the face of economic hardship. They too must become popular movement leaders, even though they too are poor and seemingly powerless.

The Gospel of Mark includes more details of the anointing and the entire scene than Matthew does. Mark's version makes the point that because the poor will be surrounding the disciples for some time, they have many opportunities to care for them. But Matthew sets up a contrast: you always have the poor; you do not always have me. The emphasis of Matthew's version is this juxtaposition between having the poor and not having Jesus.

Later in Matthew, in the Great Commission (28:16-20), Jesus tells the disciples that he will be with them to the end of the age. When we contrast this statement with Matthew 26:11, it seems that Jesus is contradicting himself. But in Matthew 26:11, Jesus could be saying that the disciples will not have him in the way they want him: as their leader and anointed ruler. He is passing on his responsibilities as teacher, leader, and anointed king/messiah of the poor. He is demanding that his disciples rise to the occasion.

At the same time, he is reminding the disciples that the poor are a stand-in for him (as he established in Matthew 25:31-46, the Last Judgment). God's children are not the rich, not the usual philanthropists or change-makers, but the poor. They are the foundation of a movement to materialize God's reign on earth, corresponding to the new logic of God's kingdom in their community practices. God is not only aligned

with the poor but is, in fact, present in—and is of—the poor (see Ps. 14). The disciples must understand this role of the poor and of themselves as the poor. They must accept both Jesus' untimely death and the fact that Jesus' memory and legacy will carry on as they are sent out to build this movement and recruit for this kingdom of God. In the poor who are organizing to bring God's reign to earth, Jesus is forever present.

A version of this article appears in the April 26 print edition under the title "The poor we have with us." It was adapted from Liz Theobald's book Always with Us? What Jesus Really Said about the Poor, published this month by Eerdmans.