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The ‘Undeserving Poor’ in the Early Church

Fiona J. R. Gregson

The undeserving poor: A current debate

Following the 2008 economic crash and the UK 2010 election and in the lead up to 2015 UK elections, there was a lot of political rhetoric about ‘strivers’ and ‘skivers’, about those who deserved to receive from the benefit system and those who did not. Both Conservative and Labour language about those on benefits or affected by benefit cuts included references to or implied the idea of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’, as Hannah Swithinbank’s essay notes.

In the New Economics Foundation Blog, Stephen Reid highlights the use of ‘striver’ and ‘skiver’ language and questions the basis for such a distinction.¹ Chris Bowlby explores how to bring change in the welfare system and whether it is possible to distinguish between ‘those who deserve help and those who do not’,² while Ros Wynne-Jones, writing for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, raises some of the ethical dilemmas for journalists writing about poverty and particularly about those who might be seen as ‘undeserving’.³ In these discussions, faith has been used to argue both for hard work and for provision for the poor.⁴

In *The Myth of the Undeserving Poor*, Charlesworth and Williams chart the re-emergence of the concept of the undeserving poor and note that both the numbers in poverty and negative attitudes towards those who are poor have increased.⁵ They also highlight the increase in the number of people in work in poverty⁶ and challenge the concept of the undeserving poor from a Christian perspective.

¹ Stephen Reid, ‘Mythbusters: Strivers versus Skivers’ <http://tinyurl.com/ydb854ht> (accessed February 2018).

² ‘The Deserving or Undeserving Poor?’ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-11778284> (posted 18 November 2010, accessed July 2015).

³ Ros Wynne-Jones, ‘Deserving vs Undeserving’, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (<http://tinyurl.com/ycwolah3>, accessed February 2018).

⁴ ‘The Deserving or Undeserving Poor’; and David Cameron, ‘David Cameron’s Easter Message to Christians’ (<https://www.premierchristianity.com/Topics/Society/Politics/David-Cameron-s-Easter-Message-to-Christians>, accessed July 2015).

⁵ Martin Charlesworth and Natalie Williams, *The Myth of the Undeserving Poor: A Christian Response to Poverty in Britain Today* (Tolworth: Grosvenor House, 2014).

⁶ Charlesworth and Williams, *Myth*, 20.

To what extent are these ideas of 'strivers' and 'skivers' part of the biblical framework? Prov. 14.23 says, 'All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty', yet it is easy enough to find passages that speak of other causes of poverty (Prov. 23.4-5), and the same chapter notes, 'It is a sin to despise one's neighbour, but blessed are those who are kind to the needy' (14.21). Similarly, in the New Testament (NT), there is a focus on giving to those in need: 'Sell your possessions and give to the poor' (Lk. 12.33); 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor' (Mk 10.21); 'All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along' (Gal. 2.10); and 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20.35). Yet there are also verses where Paul encourages the Thessalonian Christians to 'mind your own business and work with your hands . . . so that you will be not be dependent on anybody' (1 Thess. 4.11-12) and gives that rule, 'Anyone who is unwilling to work shall not eat' (2 Thess. 3.10).

This essay considers whether the concept of the 'undeserving poor' is one that is present in the NT. It provides a brief overview of giving and poverty in the NT before considering three case studies, two where money is given to those in need (Acts 11.19-30; 2 Cor. 8-9) and one where limits are placed on provision (1 and 2 Thessalonians).

What about the NT?

Concern for the poor and provision for those in need is a key strand in NT thought.⁷

Jesus's teaching

Jesus, in his teaching, addresses those in need and encourages giving to those in need. In Lk. 4.18, Jesus announces that he has come 'to proclaim good news to the poor' and in the Sermon on the Mount teaches about giving to the needy, focusing on the how to do it, not whether to do it (Mt. 6.1-4). Jesus does not just encourage some people to give but praises the poor widow for giving (Lk. 21.1-4) as well as challenging the rich young ruler (Mk 10.17-22).

The Actions of Jesus and the Early Church

Giving to those in need is also seen in the actions of Jesus and the early church. One of the ways that Jesus and his disciples use the common purse is to provide for the poor (Jn 13.29).⁸ The early church in Jerusalem, as they shared together, gave to those in need (Acts 2.45; 4.34) and responded when the Hellenistic widows were left out in the daily provision (Acts 6.1-7). We also find support being sent to Jerusalem for

⁷ For more in depth studies of poverty/giving/money in the NT see Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*, NSBT (Leicester: Apollos, 1999); Ben Witherington III, *Jesus and Money* (London: SPCK, 2010); Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church* (London: SCM, 1974).

⁸ Fiona J. R. Gregson, *Everything in Common? The Theology and Practice of the Sharing of Possession in Community in the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 9-10, 12-13.

the church community when they were affected by famine and other challenges (Acts 11.27-30; 1 Cor. 16.1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9; Rom. 16.1-4).⁹

The Letters

Similarly, the teaching in the letters includes concern for those in need. In Romans, Paul instructs his readers to share with those in need (12.13) and to feed their enemies (12.20). In Galatians, Paul has been asked to remember the poor (2.10) and then encourages the Galatians to 'do good to all people' (6.10). The Corinthians are encouraged to give generously to those in need, knowing God's provision for their giving (2 Corinthians 8-9). Paul expects Christians to care for those in need within their families and their church communities, but also limits those who should be put on the list of widows to receive (1 Tim. 5.4-16). James is concerned that his readers' actions match their faith in providing for those in need (2.14-17) and speaks against favouritism based on wealth (2.1-11) and oppression of workers (5.1-6).

Underlying many of these exhortations is an understanding of God's actions: for example, God's choice of the poor to be rich in faith (Jas 2.5), God's generosity and undeserved grace (2 Cor. 9.6-15; Rom. 12.1), and Jesus's grace and giving (2 Cor. 8.9).

What's expected?

The concern for those in need and encouragement to give does not seem in most instances to be dependent on whether those in need are deserving or undeserving, but on the presence of the need. However, there are examples where some sense of expectation of action is present. We have already mentioned the example of the widows in 1 Timothy 5. There is the example of the ἀτάκτοι (idle/disruptive) in the Thessalonian letters which we will look at later. Paul himself says that he works so that he is not a burden (1 Thess. 2.9) and encourages those who were formerly thieves to work so that they are able to share with those in need (Eph. 4.28).

A wider welcome

Charlesworth and Williams, in *The Myth of the Undeserving Poor*, point to NT passages which may not be directly about poverty or giving to the poor but which suggest an openness to those who would be seen as undeserving by others. For example, Jesus associates with the poor and values even those that others shun (Lk. 4.18; 5.27-32);¹⁰ Jesus heals all the lepers, not simply the one who is thankful (Lk. 17.11-19);¹¹ and the landowner in Mt. 20.1-20 does not reject those who turn up later at the market place.¹²

It also seems probable that the question of blame for circumstances was a live issue at the time. In the instance of the tower of Siloam (Lk. 13.4-5) and the man

⁹ As we will consider later, this giving is not simply because it is the church in Jerusalem but is due to their needs. Paul anticipates that such giving will occur in other directions (2 Cor. 8.14).

¹⁰ Charlesworth and Williams, *Myth*, 2.

¹¹ Ibid., 86.

¹² Ibid., 62.

born blind (Jn 9.1-3), Jesus rejects the idea that their circumstances are caused by the individuals' actions. While Jesus is not speaking about poverty in either example, he is addressing areas where individuals at that time could be seen as being deserving of their circumstances.

Overview

Concern for and exhortation to care for the poor can be found throughout the NT. In most cases, the provision for those in need seems to be due to their need rather than their worthiness, although there are examples where limits are placed on those who are to receive. The majority of NT examples are about care within the Christian community rather than for those in need in general. However, there are passages that point to wider care for those in need. In Gal. 6.10, Paul encourages the Galatians, 'Let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers', and in 1 Thess. 5.15, 'Strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else'.

Jesus's teaching is less specific about whether it is those inside or outside the group of Jesus-followers who are to receive. Jesus's command to love enemies (Mt. 5.44) might point to provision beyond the Christian community. The example of the early church beyond NT times suggests that the church's interpretation of these passages included care for those outside the Christian community. Emperor Julian notes, 'The impious Galileans support not only their poor but ours as well' (362 CE),¹³ while Dionysius notes the way that Christians cared for the sick in the second great epidemic (c. 260 CE).¹⁴

We turn now to consider in more detail three examples of giving within the NT and to examine to what extent these include the concept of the 'undeserving poor'. In doing so, we will also explore how these examples compare to patterns in the surrounding cultures.¹⁵

Responding to famine: Acts 11.27-30

Here, the church in Antioch responds to a prediction of worldwide famine by sending a gift to the believers in Jerusalem. Given that the prediction was of widespread famine, we may wonder why the Antiochenes chose to provide assistance to the believers in Jerusalem rather than anywhere else. There are three reasons that the Antiochenes may have focused on Judaea as the recipients of their help.

First, they already had an existing link to Judaea and Jerusalem in particular. It was believers from Jerusalem who had first evangelized in Antioch (11.21).

¹³ Julian the Apostate, *Letters* 3.22 (1923, *Works* vol. 3, 2–235; trans. W. C. Wright) (http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/julian_apostate_letters_1_trans.htm, accessed June 2016).

¹⁴ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 22.7 (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.xii.xxiii.html>, accessed June 2016).

¹⁵ In this we focus on Graeco-Roman culture, while acknowledging the continuity with the care for the poor in the Jewish tradition.

Secondly, the Antiochene church had an ongoing relationship with the believers in Jerusalem. This relationship started with the men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who first shared the faith (11.20), and continued with Barnabas being sent (11.22) and then the prophets who came (11.27). So the Antiochene believers would have known some of the Judean believers and would also have been aware of their specific circumstances. The arrival of the prophets would have provided an update.

Thirdly, the believers in Jerusalem faced specific challenges which would have made them more vulnerable to food shortages. Some of these challenges were issues that affected Jerusalem and Judaea as a whole: the number of people who returned from the Diaspora to Jerusalem in their old age, the confiscation of land by Herod the Great, the increase in the number of large land holdings, the greed of high priestly families and high taxes and tithes.¹⁶ It is also likely that a sabbath year was approaching, which would have exacerbated any other difficulties, particularly the food shortages mentioned earlier.¹⁷

Other challenges in Jerusalem were specific to those who followed Jesus. We have already noted the persecution and scattering out from Jerusalem. Those who remained may have faced ongoing persecution or, at the least, may not have been able to access help if they were seen in a negative light. They may have included people who had come from Galilee with Jesus (and those who had come for Pentecost and come to faith in Jesus) and had stayed in Jerusalem and therefore were away from their main occupation and would have found it more difficult to earn. Various scholars suggest that that the community of goods in Acts 2 and 4 may have depleted resources and created need.¹⁸ However, Cassidy notes that Luke does not indicate that the community of goods led to the later need, and Finger argues that the community of goods may have actually helped the Jerusalem community survive in the surrounding challenges.¹⁹

The needs of the Jerusalem believers seem to be mainly due to the circumstance in which they find themselves. However, those who had come from outside Jerusalem could have chosen to go home.

The Antiochene believers, with their ongoing relationship with the believers in Judaea/Jerusalem, are probably aware of the specific challenges that the Jerusalem believers face, and, therefore, when they hear the prediction of famine, they know that the Jerusalem church will face particular difficulties and choose to send help to them. There is no mention of whether the believers in Jerusalem are deserving or undeserving, but rather, it is a response to a known need.

¹⁶ S. E. Johnson, 'The Dead Sea Manual of Discipline and the Jerusalem Church of Acts', in *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed. Krister Stendahl (London: SCM, 1958), 129–42, here 133; Gerd Theissen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 89–90; S. Guisjarro, 'The Family in First-Century Galilee', in *Constructing Early Christian Families*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 42–65, here 43–46; Hengel, *Property*, 23.

¹⁷ Joachim Jeremias, 'Sabbathjahr und neutestamentliche Chronologie', *ZNW* 27 (1928): 98–103, here 99.

¹⁸ Richard J. Cassidy, *Society and Politics in the Acts of the Apostles* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 29; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT, 3rd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 101; Jacques Dupont, *The Salvation of the Gentiles* (New York: Paulist, 1979), 94.

¹⁹ Cassidy, *Society*, 29; Reta Halteman Finger, *Of Widows and Meals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 140.

The Antiochene believers respond to the need they see and provide help. In Acts 11.29 each of them gives ‘as they are able’ (καθὼς εὐπορεῖτο *kathōs euporeito*), and there is an element of individual decision (‘each of them’, ἕκαστος αὐτῶν *hekastos autōn*). However, the verb ‘decide’ here is in the plural (ᾠρίσαν *hōrisan*), suggesting that while there are individual contributions to the collection, it is seen as a *corporate* venture. Further, when at this point Luke writes about the Antiochene believers sending the gift to Jerusalem, he calls them ‘disciples’ (μαθητῶν *mathētōn*), which might indicate that Luke saw such provision as being key to learning to follow/being discipled by Jesus.

The Antiochenes then entrust the gift to Barnabas and Saul – so it is clearly seen as an important task, as it would have taken two key teachers away from the community for some time. Barnabas and Saul then take the gift and hand it over to the elders in Jerusalem, who presumably then decide how it is used.

Having considered how the Antiochenes respond to the prediction of famine, we now turn to examine whether they respond to the prediction of famine just as any other Graeco-Roman community would have, or were there ways in which their response was distinctively Christian? To discern the answer to this question, we will compare the example of the Antiochene church to how the Graeco-Roman world responded to famine.

Food crises were an ongoing issue in the Roman Empire and, therefore, strategies were developed to respond in times of need. Outside Rome, usually an individual or a group of individuals would be appointed as the *curator annonae* to be responsible for subsidizing the grain market.²⁰ In return, they would receive honour: they might receive titles, or a monument might be erected in their honour.²¹ Sometimes, money might be distributed. For example, in Oenoanda, an inscription notes that the town clerk ‘gave a distribution in money to each of the citizens – ten denarii’.²²

When we compare the Graeco-Roman response to famine to how the Antiochene believing community responded to famine, we see a number of differences. First, the focus in appointing a *curator annonae* is not necessarily those in need. The poorest may well have been unable to buy the subsidized grain. While in the Oenoanda example, money is provided to individuals, it is provided to citizens who may well have been better off to begin with. Also, the way that the appointment of a *curator annonae* worked would mean that the incentive of honour was one of the attractions of providing in this way. In contrast, while the Antiochene believers’ actions are noted in Acts 11.29, there does not seem to be the same expectation or receipt of titles and honour for their actions, and the main focus seems to be the need of the believers in Jerusalem. Secondly, the Antiochene believers do not simply choose one or two richer believers to provide the gift; rather, each of them is involved as they are able. Thus, the focus of the giving is more specifically the needs of the community, and giving in response to need is seen as something for each person to participate in.

²⁰ Bruce W. Winter, ‘Acts and Food Shortages’, in *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf, BAFCS 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 59–78, here 72–74.

²¹ A. R. Hands, *Charities and Social Aid in Greece and Rome* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1968), 42–43, 53.

²² *IGRP* III 493.

Plenty supplying need: 2 Corinthians 8–9

In 2 Corinthians 8–9, Paul writes to persuade the Corinthians to contribute to the gift for the church in Jerusalem/Judaea. The fact that Paul organizes a collection for the church in Jerusalem suggests that the initial community of goods in Jerusalem and the gift from Antioch did not enable the Jerusalem believers to provide for themselves and they continued to be in need. While Rom. 15.27 indicates Jewish believers in Jerusalem were owed this help by Gentile believers elsewhere, the Corinthian church included Jewish believers (Acts 18.1–8), so it is not just a gift from Gentiles to Jewish Christians. In addition, Paul emphasizes that the gift is voluntary and to supply need (8.8, 13–14). He also anticipates that in the future, plenty in Jerusalem might provide for the Corinthians (8.14).

Paul spends chapters 8 and 9 encouraging the Corinthians to give and explaining why and how they should give. Paul has already written to the Corinthians about the collection (1 Cor. 16.1–4) and he now writes to encourage them to finish the work they started (2 Cor. 8.11).

The example of the Macedonians

He begins with the example of the Macedonians who give in the midst of trials and poverty (8.2) and also give beyond their ability (8.3). Paul sees the Macedonians as rich in generosity (8.2, 13) and encourages the Corinthians to be wealthy in the grace of generosity (8.7).²³ Paul crafts his words carefully not only to encourage the Corinthians to participate but also to prompt their contribution to be freely given. He reminds them of their own desire to participate and by using 'to complete' (ἐπιτελέω *epiteleō*) Paul 'evokes the image of a benefactor who fulfils an obligation.'²⁴

The example of Jesus

The ultimate example that Paul gives the Corinthians is that of Jesus and his grace in becoming poor for their sakes. The Macedonians gave beyond their ability (8.3), Jesus gave – becoming poor (8.9); however, Paul limits himself to encouraging the Corinthians to give according to what they have but not necessarily beyond that (8.12). Paul reassures the Corinthians that his aim is not to impoverish them or for them to suffer hardship (8.13),²⁵ but rather for equality²⁶ and relief from need. The Corinthians' plenty will supply the need in Jerusalem, and in due course, the plenty of those in Jerusalem will supply the Corinthians' need (8.14). Paul's reference to gathering manna speaks of each person having sufficient even though they gathered different amounts

²³ John M. G. Barclay, 'Because He Was Rich He Became Poor' (unpublished paper), 14.

²⁴ Jerry W. McCant, *2 Corinthians*, Readings (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 82.

²⁵ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 589.

²⁶ Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians*, Int (Louisville: John Knox, 1987), 79.

(8.15), but may also remind the Corinthians not to hoard their plenty in the same way that manna could not be hoarded.²⁷

Generosity based on God's generosity

As well as focusing on the Corinthians providing for what the Jerusalemites need, Paul is clear that the gift should not be given grudgingly (9.7). Paul's focus is less on the worthiness of the Jerusalemites and more on their need and the Christian imperative to be generous. Paul reminds the Corinthians of God's generosity and of the way that God provides for them to be generous (9.6-12) and is the ultimate provider;²⁸ so thanks is given to *God* rather than the Corinthians for the gift (9.12).

Paul's exhortation indicates that Christian giving and sharing is rooted in grace (8.1, 4, 6; 9.8, 14), is core to being a Christian (9.13), is rooted in Jesus and his example (8.9), provides for those in need (8.13-14), is voluntary (8.7, 8; 9.5, 7), involves generosity based in God's grace and provision (8.1, 9; 9.8), is active and practical (8.11), involves everyone (8.12; 9.7; see also 1 Cor. 16.2), is in relation to what they have (8.12), is relational and has relational effects (9.14), has potential reciprocity (8.13-14) and has God at the centre as the ultimate benefactor (9.8-15).²⁹

Paul, as he writes to the Corinthians, uses patronage and benefaction language in his description of the collection.³⁰ In addition, Paul's refusal of support from the Corinthians (2 Cor. 11.9) is probably because he does not want to be seen as a client of the Corinthians and constrained to limit his preaching to that which will please them.³¹ It, therefore, seems likely that the Corinthians would have seen the collection in terms of patronage/benefaction.

While Paul uses benefaction language, and there are some similarities between the giving that Paul encourages and patronage/benefaction, there are significant differences. First, Paul subverts patronage/benefaction expectations by bringing God into the equation as the supreme benefactor³² who is the person to be thanked rather than the Corinthians for the gift, making it a three-way relationship. This contrasts with the expectation in patronage relationships that thanks and honour should be returned to the giver (Seneca, *Ben.* 2.35.1).

Secondly, Paul focuses on the need of the recipients (8.14), while in *De Beneficiis*, Seneca emphasizes that it is important to choose the right recipients:³³ those who will

²⁷ Best, *Second*, 80; Kar Yong Lim, 'Generosity from Pauline Perspective: Insights from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians', *ERT* 37 (2013): 20-33, here 28.

²⁸ Harris, *Second*, 646.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 638.

³⁰ McCant, *Corinthians*, 99; F. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St Louis: Clayton, 1982), 320-62; David E. Aune, 'In Search of a Profile of the "Benefactor"' (review of Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field*), *Int* 38 (1984) 421-25, here 424.

³¹ Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 202; Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 413.

³² McCant, *Corinthians*, 96-99; Gary W. Griffith, 'Abounding in Generosity: A Study of Charis in 2 Corinthians 8-9' (PhD thesis, Durham University, 2005), 72.

³³ G. W. Peterman, *Paul's Gift from Philippi. Conventions of Gift Exchange and Christian Giving*, SNTSMS 92 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 67.

show gratitude (*Ben.* 1.1.2; 1.10.4) and who are worthy (*Ben.* 4.35.2–36.2)³⁴ but not necessarily those in need.

Thirdly, Paul encourages them all to participate in the giving rather than simply those who are more well-off.

Boundaries and expectations: 1 and 2 Thessalonians

Our third example is that of the ἀτάκτοι *atakttoi*/those living ἀτάκτως *ataktōs*, whom Paul addresses in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The Greek words are usually translated as 'the idle'/'those living idly', but they have a wider meaning which includes the idea of being disruptive, disorderly or standing against good order or out of line in battle ranks.³⁵ Does Paul see them as 'undeserving poor'?

The main passages where Paul addresses the issue about the *atakttoi*/those living *ataktōs* are 1 Thess. 5.14–15 and 2 Thess. 3.6–13. We will also look at 1 Thess. 4.9–12 as Paul addresses work in that section. Let us see what we can find out about the situation.

In 1 Thess. 4.9–12, Paul praises the Thessalonians for their love before responding to the issue. He links their love for one another to leading a quiet life, minding their own business and working with their hands. 'To have an ambition' (φιλοτιμεῖσθαι *philotimeisthai*) was used of political ambition and seeking honour (Philo, *Rewards* 11),³⁶ so it is an unusual word to use with 'to live quietly' (ἡσυχάζειν *hēsuchazein*). Paul goes on to instruct them to 'be concerned with your own affairs' (πράσσειν τὰ ἴδια *prassein ta idia*). The phrase is used in contrast with being a busybody (Plato, *Resp.* 433AB) and was used in the sense of affairs appropriate to the person.

The background to Paul's instructions may well be patronage, and Paul appears to be instructing the Thessalonians to seek to mind their own affairs rather than those of a patron and to make it their ambition to work quietly with their own hands rather than to make it their ambition to gain through patronage relationships.

Paul encourages them to work with their hands (although the idiom can refer to work in general),³⁷ so that they may have right relationships with the community outside and 'you may have need of nothing/no-one' (μηδενὸς χρεῖαν ἔχητε). 'Need' (χρεῖαν *chreian*) usually takes a thing rather than a person as its object.³⁸ This, together with Paul's example of sharing himself (1 Thess. 2.7–8), indicates that Paul does not intend this to be independence from every person. The lack of nothing could be individual, but it could also be collective, particularly as the verb is plural.³⁹

³⁴ Seneca does instruct his readers that what is given should fit what the receiver might need. However, it is not in terms of the person receiving being in particular need; rather, it is about not giving something that is unwanted.

³⁵ David J. Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, NIBC 12 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 96.

³⁶ Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, AB 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 246; B. Rigaux, *Saint Paul: Les Épitres aux Thessaloniens* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1956), 520.

³⁷ Earl J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, SP 11 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2007), 220.

³⁸ Williams, *Thessalonians*, 78.

³⁹ Robert Jewett, 'Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church: the Implications of a Form-Critical Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 3.10', *BR* 38 (1993), 23–43, here 42; Reidar Aasgaard, *My Beloved Brothers and Sisters! Christian Siblingship in Paul* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 165.

Later in the letter, having encouraged the Thessalonians to treat their leaders well (1 Thess. 5.12-13), Paul instructs the Thessalonians to admonish the *atakttoi*. Paul goes on to encourage them to avoid repaying evil with evil and to pursue good to each other and to all (5.15). The word Paul uses for pursuing 'good' (ἀγαθός *agathos*) has benefaction connotations,⁴⁰ and such good is to be done to outsiders as well as others in the congregation.

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul spends more time addresses the issue around the *atakttoi* (idle/disruptive) (2 Thess. 3.6-13)⁴¹ and is sharper in his tone, commanding the believers to keep away from them. Paul contrasts the actions of these people with his own actions while he was with the Thessalonians and the way he and his companions worked and toiled so they would not be a burden despite the fact they had the right to help (3.8-9). He also reminds the Thessalonians of the rule he gave them while he was with them: 'Anyone who is unwilling to work shall not eat' (3.10). The present tense of the verb 'to work' indicates a habitual refusal to work⁴² and the imperative (shall not eat) indicates that the community had the capacity to withhold food.⁴³ This suggests that the community was regularly eating together.

Paul identifies the ἀτάκτοι as 'busybodies' (περιεργαζόμενοι *periergazomenoi*), a word used of people concerning themselves with affairs that are not their own (Polybius, *His.* 18.51.2) and of correcting others but not one's own behaviour (Plutarch, *Mor.* 516A).

Paul addresses these disruptive people directly, instructing them to work quietly and eat their own bread. Paul goes on to encourage the Thessalonians to 'never tire of doing what is good (καλοποιέω *kalopoieō*)', again using a word which was used in benefaction. Paul's instruction is not just a call to keep out of trouble, but rather an expectation of 'doing good which benefitted the lives of others'.⁴⁴

What led the *atakttoi* to be disruptive and idle? One suggestion is that some Thessalonians expected Jesus to return imminently and therefore did not see any point in working, or thought that the most important activity in such a situation was evangelism. While Paul addresses both issues in the two letters, he does so separately and does not link the issues.⁴⁵ Rather, he links the idea of work to love within the community.⁴⁶ If Jesus's return (the parousia) was the issue at hand, we might expect Paul to have said, 'All must work right up to the parousia', or 'All must work because the parousia might not come as soon as you suppose'.⁴⁷ It is possible that some Thessalonians may have felt that manual work was inappropriate for them now that

⁴⁰ Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 35, 42.

⁴¹ We are working on the basis that 2 Thessalonians is Pauline and was written after 1 Thessalonians (Gregson, 'Everything', 217-19).

⁴² Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 254.

⁴³ Morris, *Epistles*, 255.

⁴⁴ Winter, *Welfare*, 57.

⁴⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009) 324; Malherbe, *Letter* 254; Ben Witherington III, *1 and 2 Thessalonians A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 245.

⁴⁶ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 162.

⁴⁷ A. L. Moore, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, NCB (London: Nelson, 1969), 118.

they had freedom in Christ,⁴⁸ as only intellectual work was seen as appropriate for free men.⁴⁹

Patronage may have lain behind the issue. We have seen how a number of the words Paul uses point to a patronage background to the issues around the situation of the *ataktoi*.⁵⁰ Paul encourages the Thessalonians to acts of benefaction (1 Thess. 4.12; 5.15; 2 Thess. 3.13)⁵¹ in contrast to concerning themselves with the affairs of a patron (1 Thess. 4.11). It seems likely that the *ataktoi* presumed they could be dependent on a patron in return for concerning themselves with the patron's affairs. The *ataktoi* may have been looking for patrons within the Christian community⁵² to avoid compromising their faith by being required to fulfill the expectations of a non-Christian patron.⁵³ They may have found it more difficult to find or continue with their work once they became Christians because of how they were perceived and, therefore, looked for support.⁵⁴ Paul is concerned about the Thessalonian believers' witness through their actions and thus encourages them to do good, in effect encouraging them to be patrons rather than to depend on patrons.

It is clear from Paul's letters to the Thessalonians that the Thessalonians have close familial relationships where they love and share with one another, with Paul and with believers further afield (1 Thess. 4.10). However, there is the issue of those who seem to be choosing to be dependent on others and disruptive. Paul praises the Thessalonians' love and sharing and uses love as the basis for encouraging work and placing boundaries on the sharing that is taking place. It seems likely that Paul's call not to be a burden is both individual and communal and that the call to benefaction encompasses the whole community.

While Paul uses patronage and benefaction language, his expectations are different from normal patronage expectations. First, the focus on work and not being a burden is different from patronage, where there was an expectation of being able to receive food and/or money from a patron. Secondly, who the benefactors are is different. Paul encourages all the Thessalonians to acts of benefaction rather than just a few, both within the community and then to outsiders in blessing.

Conclusion

We have seen in both the general overview of the NT and in the specific examples the way that concern for the poor is a key strand in NT thought. It is there in Jesus's

⁴⁸ Beverly R. Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Int (Louisville: John Knox, 1998), 59.

⁴⁹ Ernest Best, *The First and Second Letter to the Thessalonians*, BNTC (London: A&C Black, 1972), 338.

⁵⁰ While Paul does not use the word 'client', this may be because it could be seen as being demeaning (Richard P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 9).

⁵¹ David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity. Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 147; Bruce W. Winter, 'If a Man Does Not Wish to Work . . .' *TynBul* 40 (1989): 303–15, here 314–15.

⁵² Ronald Russell, 'The Idle in 2 Thess. 3.6–12: Eschatological or a Social Problem?', *NTS* 34 (1988): 105–19, here 112–13.

⁵³ Witherington, *Thessalonians*, 249.

⁵⁴ Peter Oakes, *Philippians From People to Letter*, SNTSMS 110 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 90–92; Blomberg, *Poverty*, 180.

teaching; in the actions of Jesus, his disciples and the early church; and in the letters. The concern for the poor and provision for them is not generally based on whether those receiving deserve it, but on the existence of need, on the relationships between those involved and on God's action, grace and generosity.

While most NT examples are of care within the Christian community, there are pointers to care and provision for those outside the Christian community and this is borne out by the example of the actions of the church after the first century.

Giving in response to need has a greater emphasis in the NT tradition in comparison with Graeco-Roman culture. While Seneca is concerned with finding worthy recipients of gifts and a *curator annonae* would be concerned about honour and would not necessarily focus on those most in need, the NT witness repeatedly focuses on need as a reason for giving.

Giving takes place in situations of ongoing need and there is not necessarily an expectation that recipients will find their feet. With the church in Jerusalem, we see an ongoing situation of need – where the local church responds, then the church in Antioch and then a wider collection.

However, there are examples of *boundaries in giving* and providing for those in need. We have mentioned the widows in 1 Timothy, where there is an expectation that only those in particular need and without any other recourse would receive, and therefore an expectation that families would provide where they were able to do so. The position of 'widow' on the list also appears to be a specific ministry position rather than simply a way to help widows. There is also an underlying concern for the way widows in this ministry position reflected on the church.⁵⁵ In 2 Thessalonians, there is an expectation that individuals who are able to work will work (and presumably contribute and participate). It seems likely that those Paul labels *ataktōi* were not simply lazy, but that there were a mix of cultural and theological reasons why they were not working – it is quite possible that the ἀτάκτοι thought they were doing the right thing. Paul writes to correct their misunderstanding and to encourage the community as a whole to work to support themselves and to continue to do good to those within the community and beyond.

There is, therefore, for those within the Christian community an expectation of participation in and contribution to the community where possible. More widely, giving and sharing are seen as key parts of being Christian disciples. In our overview of the NT and our case studies, we saw that there is a call on all Christians to be involved in giving, doing good and providing (patronage/benefaction) for those in need, even if they are not rich. This contrasts with patron-client expectations within the Graeco-Roman world where patronage expectations were usually of those who were more affluent, and also with the practice of the *curator annonae*. This call to all Christians to behave as patrons subverts the usual expectations of hierarchy. Together with Paul's emphasis on equality (2 Cor. 8.14), it suggests an equalising of relationships.

Underlying this subversion of the patronage system is the vision of God as the ultimate benefactor, and it is God's generosity that enables and provides for his people

⁵⁵ Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, Int (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 153–8.

to be generous. Paul reminds the Corinthians of the way that God provides so that they are able to be generous (2 Cor. 9.6-15).

In conclusion, the NT does not, in general, support the concept of the 'undeserving poor'. In fact, the NT focuses on provision in response to need more strongly than the Graeco-Roman culture of the time. There are examples of boundaries on giving and on who is to receive and there may a possible link with the idea of the 'undeserving poor' is in the situation of the ἀτάκτοι in 1 and 2 Thessalonians with the expectation that they will not behave as clients. However, this is also about wanting the Thessalonians not to be concerned with the affairs of a patron rather than God. Within the NT there is also a wider call to participate in giving and sharing based on God's example and generosity rather than the status of the person to whom one is giving.