"Homelessness is not a sin."
An analysis of homelessness, the response by religious institutions, and the differing theologies under the personal/structural paradigm.

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To the average housed American, a stroll down the streets of a major urban area can be like walking through the gates of hell. The surrounding sins are not murder, sexual immorality, or deceit, and the people are not convicts, outlaws, or offenders. The sin is homelessness and the people on the streets are guilty. Too often the blame is hoisted solely on back of the individual, and if repenting of the sin of homelessness were the solution, Lord knows the problem would be solved. Viewing homelessness as the personal fault of the individual is the easiest and most available view. Even the churches, which provide much of the needed outreach, focus their solutions not on structure of homelessness, but on minute by minute needs. This is not surprising, since at the root of a current trend in Christian theology is the idea of individuality over structure, wealth over poverty, and personal deeds over God's grace. While not discounting personal responsibility, this paper will urge a shift in the view of these homeless issues toward the side of structure.

An analogous shift has already taken place in our society's view of alcoholism. In large part viewed as a problem of the irresponsible individual, alcoholism is now seen as a product of genetics and the socio-cultural structure. The system, which includes target marketing and advertising, has been able to drive people to an addictive substance, enable them to obtain it easily, and hook them on the addictive qualities. The alcoholic is also surrounded by a psychological system of doubt and enablement, and alcoholism is now considered a disease in need of treatment. I would argue that homelessness is a disease as well, and the symptoms include self-pity, anger, disassociation, and self-reliance.
caused by the situation of homelessness. Each situation, however, needs to be considered as a result of the structure. The Church is an institution that must recognize and become involved in the structure, and Christian theology must question its application of the structure of God's grace. Using the personal/structural paradigm to analyze actual individuals, the examples will be able to speak for themselves.

America is a country of individuals. It's a country where independence means respect and responsibility means power. Individuals strive for the "American Dream," however defined, it usually spells success. American individuals, however, cannot deny that their success, even the opportunity for success, is due to something greater than themselves. American citizens work and live out their individuality within the structure of our country's formation; freedom, democracy, and capitalism. The success, which flows out of that, is often aided even more by government subsidies. Examples abound of other countries that lack this structure, therefore the people lack opportunity for success.

When foreigners arrive in the United States, they expect to see evidence that the economy is thriving, that the unemployment rate is down, and that growth is continuing. What they don't expect to see is people living on the street.

The answer to the homeless question has usually been approached in one of two ways, a structural approach or a personal approach. Because of the popular ideology of individualism in America, heavy weight is often given to the personal approach. "Homeless people are lazy." "Homeless people are drunks and drug addicts."
"Homeless people have mental problems." "Homeless people have made bad decisions."

The term "bootstraps" is rarely used in any other topic. These statements may or may not
be true, but are cited more often than reasons that could be considered structural, such as; "They can’t afford housing on minimum wage." "They weren’t given equal access to education." "They weren’t able to get good health insurance."

According to the Stewart B. McKinney Act, 42 U.S.C. & 11301, et seq. (1994) a person is considered homeless who "lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence or; ... has a primary night time residency that is: A) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accomodations...B) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized, or C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings." Unfortunately, the number of people in the United States who fall under this definition is increasing. The best estimates of homelessness say that about 700,000 people a night, or 2 million/year will experience life without a place of their own (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 1999). The demographics of homelessness are becoming less and less stereotypical. 25% of urban homeless population is children under 18, and families make up 38% (US conference of mayors, 1998). Other statistics show that 40% of homeless men have served in the armed forces, as compared to 34% of the general adult male population (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 1998).

Just as aids or downs syndrome can become an overarching label put on their victims, homelessness becomes an identity for those afflicted by this disease. The prevailing attitudes view the homeless no longer as a human being who is part of the society, but as a nameless face, living as an animal in the downtown streets, much like a pigeon or a squirrel. Just as one might feed the birds, the homeless are hoping for
anything that might be tossed their way. "Homeless" no longer describes a person's situation, but now is a label for the person themselves, coming complete with a package of stereotypes informed by public opinion. This prevailing societal view is a direct result of seeing homelessness as a personal problem. History has shown the danger of categorically lumping "inferior" people into one mental image of who they are and their use to society. Only with the homeless, they don't even have the luxury of being put into ghettos. Viewing homelessness only as a personal problem could have serious consequences for human rights. Both the structure and the person's situation must be thoroughly examined before a judgement is made.

The corner of 15th and L St., NW, in downtown Washington D.C. is considered home for a variety of things. The Washington Post Building sits on one corner, on the other rests the former offices of Monica Lewinsky's lawyers. The business district sparkles, the light reflects off the clear glass buildings just enough so the men in suits can see their reflection as they walk past. These men are ambitious. These men are successful. These men are going somewhere.

These men are walking past men who are none of the above. Sitting in the shadows, occasionally emerging for the soup truck or a dime, the homeless provide a stark contrast between the classes that rub shoulders in the pulse of America, specifically the downtown of our nation's capital. They sit on crates next to their shopping cart houses, philosophizing, criticizing, and eulogizing the life they once had, and may even hope to have again.

Charlie is the king of this corner, 15th and L. With long, scraggly black hair flowing out of his cap, liquor on his breath, and a cane to hold him up, Charlie lives his
routine. A night of sleep in front of one of the largest banks in the downtown, followed by a quick drink and a smoke, and Charlie is off using his entrepreneurial skills. He runs errands for the hot dog vendors, washes windows for some of the businesses, and occasionally asks passersby for a quarter. He repeats his motto constantly with vigor and enthusiasm: "I refuse to have a bad day." Charlie was an electronic repairman, hit by a car in 1982. His insurance didn't cover the bills, and his family couldn't help. He has since been acclimated to life on the street, a life of humiliation and degradation, perhaps the lowest position in American society.

"God doesn't make junk," Charlie repeats over and over, mostly for himself to hear. He has found self-worth and dignity in the idea that he was created by a loving God who views him with value, unlike pedestrians who equate him with the trash he sleeps beside. He has been a patron of many of D.C.'s church-based outreaches, relying on assistance for food, clothing, blankets, and occasionally shelter. His outgoing personality and strong opinions make being around him an interesting occasion (Gudauskas, 1999).

Insert video A “Charlie”: 4 min.

One question remains: Why is Charlie still homeless? Seventeen years after his accident and he hasn't been able to raise himself up out of the mire, or is it that he hasn't held out his hand to let others help him out? Would he rather be homeless? At one point, Charlie was an average American worker, who was in the just the wrong place at just the wrong time. Without support from his surrounding structures (family, insurance), Charlie was relegated to the street. Once on the street, Charlie had one goal—survival. One of the easiest and most convenient helps for street survival is alcohol. The warm, numbing
effect gets street residents through the harsh winters and masks the harsh realities of their low position.

Is alcohol, then, a cause of homelessness, or merely an effect? While addiction disorders appear disproportionately among the homeless population, such disorders cannot, by themselves, explain the increase in homelessness. Most drug and alcohol addicts never become homeless, but people who are poor and addicted are clearly at increased risk (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1998). It is likely that if a person is not an alcoholic before they arrive on the streets, they will be shortly thereafter. Statistics and surveys disagree, but the number of homeless addicts range between 22 and 65% (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1998). For many, the cycle of addiction is the cancer that spreads and inhibits a return to functionality. Currently, there is no federal program targeted to assist homeless people in overcoming the obstacles that keep them from mainstream treatment programs and services. The 1999 Federal Legislative Agenda for the National Coalition for the Homeless promotes this as a high priority. "NCH calls for the establishment of a federal homeless addictive disorder treatment competitive grant program which will allow communities and service providers to respond to the treatment and recovery needs of their communities in forms appropriate to them" (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1999).

Charlie ended up on the street for a number of reasons, but one of the main forces that keeps him on the street is his addiction to alcohol. Even if addiction is viewed as a personal problem, it must also be seen within the structural view. He became homeless because of an accident for which he didn’t have insurance (structural), he became chemically dependant while on the street (personal?), and he remains homeless largely
because he can’t get treatment (structural). Whatever personal problems he has are imprisoned in the bars of structure. Other nuisances that hinder the recovery of the homeless include the lack of documentation, waiting lists, scheduling difficulties, daily contact requirements, lack of transportation, ineffective treatment methods, lack of supportive services, and cultural insensitivity. Research shows that housing stability is essential for successful treatment and recovery. Supportive services, work, and therapy can all steer the addict back on course. Unfortunately, not everyone has access.

Many homeless people do have access to shelters, though many never utilize them. The overwhelming response to the question of shelters by most homeless is an emphatic “no.” Charlie has tried the shelters, more than once. And more than once did he find out what happens when federal dollars are handed out to organizations designed to help the less fortunate- the fortunate become more fortunate. The crime, prostitution, lack of supervision, and filth of some shelters make the streets look like a much safer and more inviting home (Gudauskas, 1999).

In support of the personal position, Donald Kimelman, in a short essay, asserts that “laws must be adopted to prohibit panhandling and loitering in these areas and to encourage the homeless to seek shelter and help for their problems.” In addition, he sees homeless people as nuisances who must be removed from the streets because they harm commerce by driving away shoppers, tourists, and others from cities’ downtown areas. “They’ve been in and out of the shelter system and various treatment programs, and because they continue to smoke crack and drink heavily, they are no longer welcome. So the question arises: What does society owe them? The answer: Not much.” (Cozic, 1993). This representative opinion is difficult to hold. The personal position, by its
nature, is subjective, and holds its merit in qualitative rather than quantitative analysis and evidence. To hold either the personal or structural position without considering the other could be deeply misleading.

What exactly is the structure that leads people to the streets? A detailed look at the factors of homelessness reveals the disturbing realities of this complicated problem. Two structural trends can be held responsible for the homeless increase in the last 20 years: growing shortage of affordable rental housing and a simultaneous increase in poverty.

Homelessness is directly related to poverty. When the going gets tough and a person does not have enough money to cover all expenses, the most costly commodity is dropped from the budget. For low-income families with limited resources, "Being poor means being an illness, an accident, or a paycheck away from living on the streets" (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1999). In 1997, 13.3% of the U.S. population or 35.6 million people lived in poverty (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Two factors can be blamed for increasing poverty: eroding employment opportunities for large segments of the workforce, and the declining value and availability of public assistance.

The nightly news may report a thriving economy and boast a low unemployment rate, but what goes unnoticed are the stagnant and falling incomes coupled with less secure jobs and fewer benefits. For many in the working class, even a job is not enough to keep them on their feet. Despite an increase in the minimum wage, the real value of the minimum wage in 1997 was 18.1% less than in 1979 (Mishel, Bernstein, and Schmitt, 1999). Factors contributing to the decrease in minimum wage include the drop in number and bargaining power of unionized workers, the decline in manufacturing jobs and
corresponding expansion of lower-paying service sector employment, globalization and increased non-standard work (temporary and part-time).

As a result, housing is simply out of reach for a great number of Americans. Minimum wage is not enough to pay for a one or two bedroom apartment in every state (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 1998). The average minimum wage worker would have to work 87 hours a week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at 30% of income - which is the federal definition of affordable housing. The evidences are clear, and can be seen by the full-time wage earners who rely on shelters. A survey of 30 U.S. cities found that almost one in five homeless persons is employed (U.S. conference of mayors, 1998).

The future isn't looking any brighter. A 1998 study estimated that 46% of the jobs with the most growth between 1994 and 2005 pay less than $16,000 a year. 74% pay below a livable wage ($32,185 for a family of four). (National Priorities Project, 1998) While the economy is high and unemployment low, the benefits of growth have not been distributed, or as some say, "A rising tide does not lift all boats."

The laws to reform welfare can highlight the lack of public assistance. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 repealed the AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children, whose benefits had fallen 47% after inflation) and replaced it with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). (Greenberg and Baumohl, 1996). "Currently a TANF benefit for a family of three is approximately one-third of the poverty level." And because of a loss of benefits and low wages, many families leaving welfare struggle to get food, shelter, and medical care. Housing is not possible for families leaving welfare for low wages, and subsidized
housing is so limited that fewer than one in four TANF families nationwide lives in public housing or gets a housing voucher to help them rent a private unit. A conclusion could be made that established and current policy have done little to increase effective public assistance. Several states have reduced or eliminated GA (General Assistance) benefits for single impoverished people, despite evidence that the availability of GA reduces homelessness (Greenberg and Baumohl, 1996). Public assistance examined, then, shows that most states have not replaced the old welfare system with an alternative that enables families and individuals to obtain above-poverty employment and to sustain themselves when work is not available or possible.

Other factors of homelessness include the lack of affordable housing and inadequacy of housing assistance programs. Between 1973 and 1993, 2.2 million low rent units disappeared from the market (either abandoned or converted to condos and expensive apartments). By 1995, the number of low-income renters in America surpassed the number of low-cost rental units by 4.4 million rental units. (Daskal, 1998) The result has been high rent burdens, overcrowding, and substandard housing that increase the risk of being homeless. In its 1998 study of 30 US cities, the US Conference of Mayors found that applicants for public housing were forced to wait an average of 24 months from the time they applied to the time they received assistance. When housing is not an option and the shelters get clogged, people inhabit the streets.

Other factors can be included into this mix. The lack of affordable health care can turn a serious illness or disability into the beginning of a downward spiral leading to the loss of job, savings, and housing, such as the case with Charlie. In 1997 approximately 43.4 million Americans had no health care insurance (US Bureau of the Census, 1998).
Also, domestic violence often forces the choice between an abusive relationship and homelessness. In a study of 777 homeless parents in ten US cities, 22% said they left their last place of residence because of domestic violence (Homes for the Homeless, 1998).

The factor of mental illness in relation to homelessness cannot be ignored, and labeling it a personal problem is bordering on inhumane. Approximately 25% of single adult homeless suffer from some form of severe and persistent mental illness (Koegel et al, 1996). But, this is not because of the release from mental institutions. Most patients were released in the 50's and 60's yet the homeless boom occurred in the 80's. According to the Federal Task Force on Homelessness and Severe Mental Illness, only 5-7% of mentally ill homeless need to be institutionalized (1992). Most can live in a community with appropriate supportive housing options. The problem remains in a structure where mentally ill homeless are unable to obtain access to supportive housing and/or other treatment services.

Only a concerted effort to ensure jobs that pay a living wage, adequate support for those who cannot work, affordable housing, and access to health care will bring the structural opportunity to end homelessness.

The second phase of analysis involves the response of religious institutions to the homeless problem. Always known for their outreach and provisions, churches have carried a bulk of the load in response to the homeless problem, especially since the 1980’s. In the 1960’s, Johnson’s Great Society legislation fed trillions of dollars into the urban areas, giving the cities a natural feeling of dependency on the federal government.
In the conservative Reagan era of the 80’s, the cash flow began to stop as government pulled out. With less money to throw around, the cities began to rely on non-government organization and other voluntary organizations, such as churches, to help with the homeless problem. Surely, when the government fails to fund a certain piece of homeless legislation, they must appease their conscience with the comforting fact that at least the churches will still help them. In the outreach toward the homeless, business has been good. The responsibility became balanced between the cities and the citizens, and the churches became a reliable source of outreach to the needy, providing food, clothing, and shelter. As kind and as pure as these intentions are, their approach could be saying something about the church’s view on the personal/structural debate. Food, clothing, and shelter are all serious needs, but can also act as mere band-aids that cover the problem, rather than medicating the disease to begin the healing process.

The “9:30 Club” in a local Washington D.C. church provides a familiar meal program scene. The large church cafeteria, staffed solely by volunteer white high school students from out of state, is loud and active, the homeless are eating their meals in a loud and boisterous atmosphere. A sign on the wall says “No drinking, No smoking, No lying down.” A few feet away, those three events are taking place without a second thought. The homeless who attend this program will get a meal. They will live to see the next day. But most likely, they will still be homeless. The Church, most respectably, is responding to the needs of the individuals, yet the needed involvement in the structure (fair housing, minimum wage, and health insurance) goes untouched. It’s easy to provide a meal, a blanket, or a bed, but to get to the root of the problem requires a new approach.
A few examples exist that can be an inspiration to religious institutions who desire to make a lasting impact on the homeless situation.

In 1976 Janelle Goetcheus arrived in Washington DC to work at Columbia Road Health Services, an inner-city health clinic and ministry of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour. Every day she walked by an abandoned, trash-filled building near the clinic. A number of homeless people slept out on its front steps, and in bitterly cold weather they sometimes went inside to sleep, starting fires to keep warm. As the story goes, “One day Janelle and a fellow nurse stopped in front of the building after work. Together they had a sense that somehow the building might be used for good and that it might affect the lives of the homeless. They stood in silence, praying that they might listen to whatever God had in mind...” (Hollyday, 1988). After seeing the horrors that result when the healthcare needs of the homeless go unmet, Janelle began to develop a vision for a temporary medical facility that served the homeless. Her vision was confirmed when a homeless man whom she saw each day at the abandoned house had frozen to death in a telephone booth. With faith she proceeded with her vision, praying expectantly for funds to create her unique ministry. She shared her vision with her pastor, who shared it with a woman who decided to give a gift of 2.5 million for the purchase of a building, renovation costs, and the first months of operation. Christ House now exists in what used to be an old abandoned building, and homeless men in desperate need of medical attention now cross the steps they once stood idly on, the same steps where Janelle Goetcheus had once prayed. Christ House is now a 34-bed health care facility that offers comprehensive medical care and social services to the homeless. Instead of ignoring the
structural problem of health insurance, Christ House is committing their efforts to the
needs that the current structure can’t provide.

Across town is a ministry of Luther Place Memorial Church called N Street
Village, which is considered the first homeless shelter in D.C. opening its doors in 1973.
Rooted in the biblical concept of hospitality- "welcoming the stranger" - N Street Village
now works to meet both the immediate and long-term needs of homeless women. More
than just emergency services, N Street Village is a home, family, and community for
those struggling to regain control of their lives, providing permanent and transitional
housing for the addicted and the mentally ill. They, too are responding to the need for
structural applications to solve the homeless situation.

A main problem of homelessness is that homeless people no longer feel like
people. This could be considered personal. A church-based program called Miriam's
Kitchen goes beyond its daily breakfast program to bring self-worth through
opportunities for creativity. They give respect to the individuals, and also demand
respect in return. Located in the clean and wealthy neighborhood of George Washington
University, members who attend the breakfast are told to be especially courteous in order
not to ruin their reputation in the area. The after-breakfast programs include poetry,
creative writing, drawing, painting, and women’s groups. These activities get at the heart
of what the structure has been telling them- that they have no value, dignity or purpose.
These creative opportunities have become outlets for their emotions, and homeless art
and poetry have been featured in print and public display.

While interviewing homeless men on the streets of Washington DC, they spoke very highly of the area churches and the services they provide. "You'll never go hungry in this city," they said. There is always a meal program to be found and an open church door. But as they continued to reflect on this, one commented, "Yeah, you get a lot of church when you're on the streets, sometimes too much church." The effect of this outreach could be detrimental if they become dependent on the church, if the church is not contributing to structural reform and progression. It is, however, tough to ask more of someone who is already volunteering out of the goodness of his or her heart. This puts unneeded stress on the churches, which are already overwhelmed by the demand for services. Because they try to provide both the physical needs as well as the spiritual, churches often only have the time, energy, and resources to fulfill the immediate need. If religious institutions are some of the main providers of homeless assistance, and if they only provide the day to day necessities, the long-term structural problem still exists.

Underlying the work of the church is the theology upon which it is based. This aspect can also be seen under the umbrella of the personal/structural debate. The Bible has led to two seemingly opposite interpretations that offer a solution to the human condition. One focuses on the deeds of the human being, i.e. "Do good and earn your way to heaven." The other focuses on God's plan of salvation for all of mankind through the grace offered through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To do, or not to do: that is the question. In relation to homelessness, the theology of works has heavily emphasized personal responsibility. It is their personal sin that needs atoning, so their personal response that must take place. If a person must work to get to heaven, they
must be expected to work to get out of homelessness. If a person is homeless, they must have done something wrong, it is their sin. The lines of reason overlap so that when theology is seen strictly from a personal position of works, homelessness is easily paralleled.

The theology of works can be directly related to the modern theme of success theology. In this view, it is God's will for you to be "successful," therefore if you are homeless, you must not be in God's will. Roots of this can be seen in the Old Testament in Deuteronomistic theology, or "retribution" theology, which says good things happen to good people and bad things to the bad. The resulting tendency is a condescending attitude toward the homeless. These lines of thought can be seen at work in the religious view toward the homeless. In order to be accepted, they must clean up their act. Their appearance, their habits, and their activities must conform to what is thought to be the moral standard. In view of the source of Christian thought, this line of thinking must be seriously questioned, and ultimately balanced.

About two thousand years ago there was a homeless man who traveled around with a band of followers. He was looked down upon by society. His words and actions deeply disturbed the religious leaders of the day. His lifestyle and relationships didn't conform to what was accepted by the religious elite. Because they couldn't ignore him, they killed him. It was Jesus of Nazareth. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." From the time he was born, in a dirty manger, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords demonstrated shocking paradoxes to the religious community. "The last shall be first and the first shall be last." "He who is the greatest will be the servant of all." "He who wants to save his life will lose it, he who
loses his life for my sake shall find it." He turned over tables in the temple, upended cultural norms in the marketplace, and exposed the hypocrisy among the Pharisees.

If Jesus could be dropped into our society today, what would the reaction be? Modern Christians, who respectably want to emulate the man who has changed history, seem to think they know him well enough to predict and project his actions. The "WWJD" (or "What Would Jesus Do?") bracelet phenomenon is a noble attempt. From a reading of the Gospels, however, it seems that Jesus was constantly surprising those around him. John Fisher, in CCM Magazine, wrote an article that analyzed this idea, and concluded that we often equate "what Jesus would do" with our own religious upbringing. The rules and norms that our churches produce are retro-inserted into the life of Jesus.

An important issue to dissect is the way Jesus, on the margins of society, related to others on the fringe. Coming to "seek and save the lost," Jesus said about his ministry, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Did he make them go to church in order to be healed? Did he put them in a program to "clean up" their lives? No. He met them where they were at and offered a love and grace which went beyond their temporary personal situation, focusing not on their problems but on what God, in His ultimate plan (structure) had worked out for their salvation.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus continued to give headaches to the religious leaders of his day by going against the grain. He healed on the Sabbath, he associated with Samaritans, and he touched lepers. Through his miracles he did provide immediate needs, (feeding 5,000) and he encouraged others to do the same. Although he never offered shelter, he did offer a permanent solution to the homeless problem. "My father's
house has many mansions, I go there to prepare a place for you.” His solution was God’s grace, given to mankind through the one who paid for their sins.

Because of his relationship with “sinners,” Jesus became notorious for his associations with the wrong crowd. He was even accused of being a glutton and a drunk. "While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners.' On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'"

He blessed the sinners he called and he called the sinners blessed. In fact, his most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, began in this way:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

These “Beatitudes” in Matthew 5:3-10 (NIV) create a problem for the theology of works and the need for success in God’s will.

His real name is Harmon, but his street name is "Anthony." A young veteran of the Persian Gulf war, Anthony sometimes leaves his wife and kids when it becomes more
than he can bear. Shaking, he says, "When I go through my thing, and my nightmares get bad, I come out here and hit the streets." The stress from his inner struggle is eased by his self-admitted alcoholism. On the streets his finds acceptance in Charlie's community.

One particular day Anthony is particularly drunk, and strung out on some other substances, and finds it an appropriate time to "boost" a few large boxes of Tylenol from the corner drug store. He says he has to survive, and this is one thing he's good at. Anthony realizes his desperate situation. He has applied for help at a veterans assistance program, but they told him that in order to receive help he must have proven homicidal or suicidal tendencies. So he talks about killing people, but he can't (Gudauskas, 1999).

In one memorable occurrence, our group had gathered in a circle to pray at a park across the street from the store where Anthony had been shoplifting. We invited him to join the circle. After the prayer was offered, Anthony held back tears as he whispered repeatedly, "The meek shall inherit the earth...the meek shall inherit the earth..." There is a truth in the mystery of the words of Jesus, that somehow those who are lowest, last, and least, and looked upon with favor by God. There is less pride, success, and personal gain to get in the way of accepting the grace that God has to offer.

Jesus brought to the "homeless" of his generation a feeling of worth and dignity, as well as the message that he was the way to better streets, streets of gold, which could not be earned through what they did.

Brennan Manning wrote in his book Raggamuffin Gospel: "Jesus spent a disproportionate amount of time with those people described in the gospels as 'the poor, the blind, the lame, the lepers, the hungry, sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, the persecuted, the downtrodden, the captives, those possessed by unclean spirits, all who
labor and are heavy burdened, the rabble who know nothing of the law, the crowds, the little ones, the least, the last, and the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Manning, 1990).

Does current theology form the mind that Jesus had for the people of his day? Or does the focus on personal responsibility overtake the structure for salvation that God has provided through grace?

An illustration can be found in a story of grace that is told about former New York mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who resided during the Great Depression. One cold night LaGuardia showed up at the courtroom for one of the poorest wards of the city. He dismissed the judge and took the bench himself. An old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing bread. She pleaded with him, telling him that her daughter’s husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. The shopkeeper refused to drop the charges in hopes to set an example. LaGuardia sighed and said, “I’ve got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions- ten dollars or ten days in jail.” But as he was finishing his sentence, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a bill, saying “Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread to that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Baliff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant.”

Theologically, grace is getting what we do not deserve. Mercy is not getting what we do deserve. If we recognize in our theology that salvation is by grace, our hope is in the structure of God’s plan. At the same time, we have a personal responsibility for our actions. Our works are an outworking of our faith in God’s grace, the two are inevitably
linked, just as a homeless person’s situation is usually some combination based on the self and the structure.

While the personal/structural debate around homelessness will continue, a balance must be reached that will allow a homeless individual to be seen as a human being with a disease in need of treatment. If we can accept the grace and mercy that God has lavished on us, we will extend grace and mercy to those in need, realizing the complexity of the situation.
Bibliography (APA)


*Each reference to specific homeless people is based on personal interviews and life experiences with those individuals. This research was conducted in the downtown area of Washington, D.C., most of it specifically on the block of 15th and L St. For about 30 hours, I participated in an “urban plunge,” dressing and living as a homeless person, communicating and interacting with homeless people. Most of the corresponding video was shot after the plunge, with people whom I had lived and built a trusting relationship with. While the sample may or may not be representative of the whole, the variety of people represent at least a few true stories and current experiences that cannot be argued.


National Coalition for the Homeless website: (www.nch.ari.net)


