

What did you glean today?

Gleaning was an ancient and widespread practice across many cultures. David Parish translates it into the modern practice of gleaning slightly out-of-date or overstock food from supermarkets and donating it to the homeless and deprived. But it extends beyond food. A large company asked if they could send volunteers to help out at a foodbank. Can you use margins of your time to give professional advice pro bono, or a free service on your slack day to those on benefits, or some spare office space to a charity?

One of the iconic Realism School paintings is Jean-François Millet's 'The Gleaners'. In the foreground of the painting you see the gleaners in a small isolated group, while in the background is a large group of farm workers, working in rhythm and community to reap what appears to be a plentiful wheat harvest. The workers are supervised by an overseer on horseback and there is also the outline of a large

farmhouse, further emphasising the gap between poverty and wealth. The poor women gleaning are bowed low and look weary. They would need to gather around 500 stalks to get enough grain for a kilo loaf. Millet was the son of a farmer and knew this way of life. His parents were devout Catholics and religious themes appear in his paintings, such as one of Ruth and Boaz a few years later and another portraying

two peasant farmers with heads bowed in prayer as the evening Angelus bell tolls in the distant church.

'The Gleaners' was first exhibited in 1857 when the Industrial Revolution was driving demand for wheat in Paris as its factories drew in the rural population. The train line had already reached the area near Fontainebleau where the scene was painted and field gleaning



The Gleaners (1857)

Jean-François Millet
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Photo: Wikimedia



was ending as mechanical harvesters were introduced. In 1826 the Scottish clergyman Patrick Ball had invented his Reaper Machine which was driven by horse power. He refused to take out a patent, believing the invention should be free to benefit all.

Steam-driven harvesters would soon follow, leading to today's GPS-guided combine harvesters, which strip a field in a few hours and leave just short stubble right up to the field edge.

Perhaps Millet realised he was painting a way of life that was soon to disappear, though the full mechanisation of farming in France began a decade later in 1865.

Historical Background

The word glean comes from Latin *glennare*, to collect or gather. Gleaning is ancient in practice and is widespread across many cultures.

One of the oldest written references to it is in the Torah, the law books of the Hebrew scriptures. The regulation described in Leviticus 19 requires harvesters 'not to reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest' (v9 ESV). Instead the marginal crop was to be left for the poor and for the sojourner. In the later Rabbinic era, in his writings in the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides confirmed this was to be Jewish practice. He included gleaning in a whole section devoted to property law.

It is also known that gleaning was permitted under the Anglo-Saxon legal code. In China the ancient practice of leaving parcels of land for the poor is similar in principle.

There are three principles at work in allowing the poor to glean: compassion, care and commitment.

These principles are wonderfully illustrated in the story of Ruth in the Old Testament. Ruth the Moabitess accompanies her mother-in-law Naomi back to her homeland in Israel, after a series of family and economic disasters leaves both of them without protection, home or money.

Their one source of income is from gleaning wheat and barley in the Bethlehem fields of a near relative, Boaz. There Ruth is shown care. The Hebrew word for care, *chesed*, includes mercy and compassion.

American Professors of Business Bruce Baker and Tom Parks write in an article on gleaning in Christianity Today:

*The Scriptures consistently place gleaning in the context of God's sovereignty and empathy that comes from being rescued by God. The heart of the matter revolves not around legalities but around righteousness - of the landowner, workers and gleaners, all of whom are transformed by the experience. By incorporating the complexities of society, faith, and the market, Christian business leaders engage in a distinctive process.*¹

Attitudes to the poor

In England, from the monastic age and even up to today's legislation on welfare support, the attitude to the poor is often one of condescension. The appalling Victorian phrase "the deserving and undeserving poor" puts it well.

In England a court case, brought in the House of Lords in 1788 by a wealthy landowner against a poor peasant woman, ruled that property rights ranked higher than the common law practice of gleaning. That case, *Steel v Houghton*, entered into the list of many acts of Parliament that have disadvantaged the poor.²

The Enclosure Acts of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, which robbed the poor of free grazing and wood collection, gave rise to widespread poverty in England.³ They also drove the landless poor into the cities to be exploited by industrial employers, who with the exception of a few Christian mill owners, like Titus Salt in Yorkshire and Samuel Gregg in Cheshire, were indifferent to the suffering of their workers or the conditions in which they lived.

A sense that the poor are poor because of lack of effort still frames a lot of public rhetoric on the topic.

In the six months from April to September 2023 Trussell Trust gave out 1.5 million food parcels, of which 260,000 went to families with children living in poverty. Many of these were the working poor where the gig economy fails to provide a living wage and the constant variations in income have to be reported to enable the Universal Credit to be adjusted. Often these adjustments arrive late.

Gleaning Today

Almost every day a van from the Felix Project pulls into the delivery yards of Waitrose and Whole Foods in Richmond-upon-Thames and drives

up Richmond Hill to the Vineyard Community Centre. This is to drop off slightly out-of-date or overstock food to be used in their café or for the breakfast they provide each morning to the clients who are from various backgrounds and need support, either because of homelessness or lack of social connection.

About ten years ago I was chairing a local grant-making charity when the fund was approached by a group of Christians who wanted to set up a café and support centre in the basement of a church. Now ten years on VCC is a thriving enterprise, offering drop-in breakfasts in the morning, then a café open to the public for lunch and a venue for various activities to support the community in the afternoons. They also run a charity shop and a foodbank.

Frequently a large corporate company will ask if they can send volunteers from the company to help out for the day. A few years ago, a group came from one of the big five accounting companies to help with a stock check for the foodbank. Something that would have taken a day for the staff, this team did in a few hours. I was also able to have lunch with them and share some of my research into volunteering. One of the key findings is that when people start volunteering in their teens or twenties, over 80% do it for the rest of their lives – often, as at work, in increasingly responsible roles and on the boards of charities. Some of the accountants were already enthusiastic volunteers. Some thought that one corporate day ticked

the “volunteering box” on the CV. But most approached me afterwards about how to get information on volunteer roles in their area of London.

Across the UK an organisation called Feedback is training groups on how to glean unwanted food from grocery chains, food producers and restaurants and get the food to community groups that need it.⁴ In the USA the food conglomerate General Mills supplies food for school breakfasts for children from deprived backgrounds.

Admittedly, this is not a precise analogy. In Old Testament gleaning recipients had to work – very hard – for the produce on the margins that they garnered. It may be tempting to see it as the equivalent of a ‘work-for-welfare’ scheme. This type of approach has been tried in the USA but has not been successful as it has proved hard for the state to find meaningful work for the unemployed. It is also coercive in its application. Here the rules governing Universal Credit are that as the person gets back into work the benefit begins to taper off. There is also positive action taken, as the long-term unemployed are given a workplace coach to help them back into work.

In the above examples companies and charities are doing the hard work on behalf of the needy. But the principles of compassion, care and commitment are relevant, along with a concern that needy people should benefit from food that would otherwise go to waste. Often those benefitting offer to volunteer with the charities that help them.


Personal Implications

What are the implications for each of us? If you are engaged in professional services can you use margins of your time to advise those who normally could not afford your fee? I recently found a wonderful lawyer to represent someone facing wrongful eviction. A local hairdresser offers reduced price haircuts to those on benefits on a Monday which is his slack day.

If you are a business owner with spare office space, could a local charity make use of it?

If you lead a team in a large company would the corporate CSR programme allow you to take your team for a day volunteering at a local charity? One of the tragic ironies of both the City of London and Canary Wharf is that within a mile of both are two of the areas of greatest social deprivation in London. You would be one short tube ride from meeting a need.

What social outreach is your church doing? Could you run a community café or evening drop-in for those needing social contact? A few years ago, I did a survey for our local deanery and almost every church was doing something. One of the largest had a drop-in, debt advice, refugee welcome programme and help for the elderly. Another runs a leading dementia day care centre with the NHS. Even those with less than 100 members had a lunch for the elderly or a “knit and natter” social group.

3000 years on we can learn from the example of Boaz, the farmer in the story of Ruth who showed compassion and as a result earned himself a place in the genealogy of Jesus. 

1. See article by Baker and Parks in *Christianity Today*, Vol 63 no 6, July 2019, pp 28 ff.
2. For detail of the *Steel v Houghton* case, see Peter King's article in *Law and History Review* 1992, pp.4-6.
3. Between 1604 and 1914, over 5,200 individual Enclosure acts were put into place, enclosing 6.8 million acres (Wikipedia).
There was a satirical rhyme in the 1800s:
*They will fine the man or woman who steals the goose from off the common,
But let the bigger brigand loose, who steals the common from the goose.*
4. See <https://feedbackglobal.org/>



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