

Cicero Speech Contest:
Should The Rich Give To The Poor?

Once upon a time, in the north of England, lived a young man called Robin Hood. An outlaw, he took refuge in Sherwood Forest, hiding from his enemy; the Sheriff of Nottingham. With his band of Merry Men beside him, Robin Hood lived by one motto: steal from the rich and give to the poor.

Now it is unknown whether Robin Hood ever actually existed, although court records from the medieval period show someone like him did exist, and indeed literature perpetuates this idea. Nevertheless, the man is a legend, an idol. Revered in his time by the poor he was helping, Robin Hood is looked upon today with the same hope; he has become the symbol of support for those in need.

In fact, he has become a symbol for a lot of things, even beyond the simple idealism of his legend: he is the symbol of the county of Nottingham for one, the name of Doncaster's new airport, countless pubs, a battalion of the British Territorial Army and the name of the leading poverty-fighting charity in New York City.

Good afternoon, my name is Alexandra Summers. I am here today to talk to you about our society, a society made up of people from all different countries, cultures and wealth. I am here today not to speak to you from a specific perspective; for the purpose of this speech I am neither Italian nor English, rich nor poor. Rather, I am simply one voice among many who see it as our duty to address and rectify the issues facing us as a whole, the issues of today and more importantly, of tomorrow.

The divide between the rich and the poor is growing continually. So much that *The Onion*, the American satirical news organization, reported it to be the 8th Wonder of the World. We see it every day, we feel it. This issue is at the base of social unrest and the economic crisis, causing massive implications for the future, our future.

So how do we overcome this?
Is it as simple as living by Robin Hood's motto?
Should the rich give to the poor?

However, before we start trying to answer this question, we need to deal with the very serious issue of what we are actually being asked: what does 'should the rich give to the poor' even mean?

Well, in everyday language, 'rich' means having great wealth and possessions, being abundantly supplied with resources, means or funds. 'Poor' on the other hand means having little or no money, goods or other means of support, living in poverty. And what about 'give'?

Give is defined as to present voluntarily, without expecting compensation, to bestow. Great, so we are talking about the resources people have, or at least one specific resource: money and people's willingness to share it.

So let's get back to the question: should the rich give to the poor? Well, in light of the definitions it seems that the more relevant question is now do the rich want to give to the poor? In Robin Hood's time, the rich weren't given a choice. Now, perhaps they do.

But, despite the reasons behind that choice, it seems silly that the rich have an abundant supply of wealth while the poor struggle to survive. Money shouldn't be allowed to waste away in banks when it could be used to feed a starving child, build a shelter for a homeless man or provide the right medication for a pregnant woman. So it seems that the answer is simple. Should the rich give to the poor? Yes.

But unfortunately, the world is a little bit more complicated than this. So the real answer is in fact, no. As P.J. O'Rourke said, 'you can't get rid of poverty by giving people money.' So the Robin Hood lifestyle does not work. But that does not mean the rich should ignore the poor.

A few years ago, a humanitarian group decided to visit Burkina Faso in Africa. The specific area they visited was made up of a collection of small villages and the people living there were the epitome of poverty. There was no clean drinking water, no sanitation services, no roads and no access to a school. Suffice to say that infectious disease claimed the lives of many of the villagers and they were considered really lucky if they lived past 16.

This humanitarian group was so flabbergasted at what they found that they immediately set to rectify the situation. They built a well with a water purification system, they built a waste disposal system, laid the foundations to the roads that would connect them to the other villages and they set up plans for a school. They paid a lot of money for all of these new things but they had managed to give the villagers a solution to their problems.

The following year, the humanitarian group returned to Burkina Faso to visit the same villages. Much to their surprise, they found the villages in a state of ruin; their Robin Hood ideals had backfired on them. The new systems installed had fallen into disrepair, no work had been done to complete the roads and the school had been completely ignored. Their act of charity had been for nothing.

Devastated by what they found but still wanting to help the villagers, they had to come up with a way to fix the problems in such a way so as that they would remain fixed. This time, they sought the help of the villagers. Instead of just building new systems and saying 'tada' at the end, the humanitarian group involved the villagers in every aspect, in every step of the way. The villagers were trained how to look after and repair these new systems, they were taught the skills to complete the roads. Together, they built the school. This time, the new systems were restored but the villagers had respect for them because they were a part of the solution.

Now this humanitarian group goes back every year to this area, continuously working with the villagers to improve life one step at a time. My aunt Tina has been part of this group for the past two years. She told me that 'charity is not giving, but helping. If you give money to the poor, you are taking the easy way out. You may feel proud that you helped someone less fortunate than you but as soon as that money is gone, they are right back to the beginning.'

What this shows is that just giving away aid does nothing but sustain a person's immediate needs. It does nothing to help them overcome whatever obstacles they are facing and it does nothing to provide a solution to getting out of poverty once and for all. But we do not have to fly to Africa to find people in need. We can start right here.

By investing time and effort, we can teach everyone the necessary skills to be able to move forward in life, together. The answer is not so much to give people the solution, but to empower them to reach it themselves.

Poverty is not ideal, but material. It is not about the social disparity between the rich and the poor; it's about a real, material need on the part some, and an excess on the part of others. Until we address the issue that we are not using our resources as well as we could, and should be, there will always be poor people. The Robin Hood legend is still applicable here in the sense that where some are lacking, it is obscene that others have excess. But, Robin Hood lived in a different time; a time when giving a few coins back to the people was enough to lighten their burdens.

Now, as we face a future of dwindling material resources and increasing population, it is not enough to simply redistribute wealth, instead we have to apply actual societal and structural changes to avert the crisis of poverty in our modern times. People should be willing to share resources, not only money but skills and knowledge, in order to better society as a whole. This is the only way we can overcome poverty.

This is not a call for action - but if you want to take it as one, please be my guest. This is a call for awareness. This is a call for an understanding of the implications of poverty in modern times.

Should the rich give to the poor? No. Robin Hood cannot exist in the modern world. We have to find our own legend.

'Give a man a fish; you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish; and you feed him for a lifetime. Teach a man to sell fish and he eats steak.'