

Caring for the Poor

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One of the most recurrent problems in Biblical interpretation is that of overreaction to an extreme. Too much of the time, when we see somebody teaching or practicing some unscriptural extreme, our tendency is to rush all the way over to the other extreme, even though the Biblical truth often lies in the middle. Let me give you an example. Back during the Renaissance, the Catholic Church taught an extreme form of salvation by works of merit, which, led, among other things, to the sale of indulgences. Basically, you could buy a license to sin from the church.

Martin Luther, one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, was so repelled by this extreme that he went all the way to the other extreme and insisted that only faith was relevant to salvation. He even rejected the book of James as a “straw book” because it didn’t line up with his doctrine. In doing so, he overshot what the Bible actually teaches, which is that both faith and works of obedience are crucial to salvation. This isn’t just a problem for other people. It can be a problem for us too. Let’s look at one area where we need to make sure it isn’t a problem: caring for the poor.

God and the Poor

From the very beginning, God through His word has always shown concern for the poor. We often read right through these passages because they don’t apply to us, but there are many parts of the Law of Moses that make specific **PROVISION** for the poor. For example, look at Leviticus 23:22. This Scripture is clearly addressed to those who own wheatfields. The fields belong to them, but they can’t reap the corners of the field, and they can’t go through the field and glean after the reaping is over. That grain is to be left for the poor, so the poor can come through later, collect it, and eat. In the book of Ruth, we see Ruth herself take advantage of this provision to feed herself and her mother-in-law.

This is only one of many provisions in the Law of Moses designed to benefit the needy. In fact, as it was applied to the nation of Israel, the Law of Moses had a redistributive effect. It was designed to prevent the rich from accumulating wealth and to ensure that the poor had enough to live on. It is also clear from the history of Israel that these provisions were largely ignored, that the wealthy preferred to oppress the poor rather than obey God. Nonetheless, these laws express God’s determination that His covenant people be involved in caring for the less fortunate.

Similarly, God promised His **PROTECTION** to those who lacked the resources to protect themselves. Let’s consider Proverbs 23:10-11. In ancient Israel, every family was assigned a particular plot of farmland, and that land was handed down through the generations. The dimensions of those plots of land were marked by piles of stones. However, in that day, it was an all-too-common occurrence for a man to die young, leaving behind male children who were not yet grown themselves. To unscrupulous neighbors, the property that belonged to those boys seemed like an easy target. The boy doesn’t know his own land yet, so the neighbor would go out one night and move stones around to make his field larger and the boy’s field smaller. Alternatively, the really bold neighbor might just start farming the boy’s whole field for himself and dare the kid to do something about it. Those might have seemed like easy ways to get ahead, but in reality, they only attracted the anger of God, who would be sure to punish the evildoer both in this life and in the life to come. The point is plain. The weak and vulnerable members of society, the ones who don’t have any money or power or influence, may not concern anyone else, but they do concern God, and He wants to see them cared for and treated right.

In the instances where that didn’t take place, God was quick to give His people **WARNING** about the consequences of disobedience. Once again, there are many examples of this, but one appears in Amos 2:6-7. We often think of idolatry as the reason the children of Israel were carried into captivity, and although idolatry certainly was a reason, it wasn’t the reason. In fact, one of the most common charges God levels against His people is that they oppress the poor. The selling here is quite literal. Some of the Israelites were selling their brethren into slavery for nothing more than the price of a pair of sandals. Even if all the poor had was the dirt on their heads, their rich oppressors wanted that too. It seems counter-intuitive to take money from people who don’t have any money, but it actually works out pretty well, because people in that position can’t defend themselves. They’re easy targets.

For instance, back in the day, before he got disgusted with it and quit, my brother used to do foreclosures off of house-title car loans. Here’s the way it works: poor guy comes into the car dealership, wants to buy a car. He’s got lousy credit, so in order to get a loan for the car, he has to put up his house as collateral. Then, in a few months or a few years, he misses a payment, the loan holder comes in, repo’s the car, and forecloses on the house to cover the rest of the loan. The car dealer gets the money, and the poor guy gets left with nothing. It’s perfectly legal, or at least it was in Virginia in the mid-’90s, but just because it’s legal doesn’t make it right, and God will punish those who are involved in such things.

When the poor were suffering and being oppressed, the righteous men of old took **ACTION**. We see the story of Nehemiah doing this in Nehemiah 5:1-13. Apparently, while Nehemiah and the Jews are trying to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, the land is struck by a famine. The people can’t grow their own food, so they are reduced to selling their lands, and finally even their children and themselves, to buy food. On the one hand, Nehemiah and other righteous men are

doing their best to buy their brethren out of captivity, but on the other hand, less scrupulous Jews are busy selling others back *into* captivity. To people like that, the famine wasn't a chance to help. It was a financial opportunity.

Nehemiah contrasts this behavior with his own. As the governor, he had the right to tax the people, famine or no famine, to support his household. Instead, Nehemiah refused to collect the tax that was his right, and he further loaned food and money to the poor without charging them interest. Instead of seeking to enrich himself, he sought to carry out the work of the Lord, at great expense to himself. To Nehemiah, people were more important than money, and even the poorest people in Judah were people he was willing to spend money on. This wasn't the easy path for him to take, but it was the righteous one, and he knew that God would remember him for good because of it.

Jesus and the Poor

Although the Old Testament does a wonderful job of showing God's perspective on the poor, it's even more important for us to turn our attention to Jesus and what He said about the responsibility of His disciples toward the poor. Jesus discusses this subject in too many different places to cover in one lesson, so we're going to turn our attention to the parable of the dishonest steward, which appears in Luke 16. This will also prepare us to partake of the Lord's Supper.

The parable begins with a discussion of **THE PROBLEM** it eventually solves. Let's look at Luke 16:1-3. In most of the parables of Jesus, there is a main character, a "good guy", if you will. Usually, the good guy is a sympathetic character. Not here. This guy is pretty slimy. That's why we call him the *dishonest* steward. In modern terms, his master has caught him embezzling, and, just like any of us would do if we had an employee who was enriching himself at our expense, his master tells him to hit the road. At this point, all of us are cheering because the dishonest steward gets what he has coming, but Jesus continues to focus on this unlovable protagonist. Now that he's been caught, he has a serious problem. Between his incompetence and his pride, he is going to be left without any way to support himself.

However, we see **THE SOLUTION** at which the steward arrives in Luke 16:4-7. We didn't like the steward when we met him, and we don't like his solution either. He's already gotten in trouble for misappropriating his master's stuff, so what does he do? He misappropriates more. Even though he's already proven his untrustworthiness, the master has given him a few days to get his accounts in order. Simply doing a good job at getting the accounts in order would be of no benefit to the dishonest steward, so he uses the time he has left to give markdowns to all of his master's debtors. His thinking is that when he gets shown the door, maybe the debtors will like him well enough to take him in. The dishonest steward began the parable as a thief, and he continues as a thief all the way to the end.

We're surprised, though, when we see **THE RESULT** of the dishonest steward's embezzling. Consider Luke 16:8-9. The master gets wind of what the dishonest steward is up to, and apparently he's amused by the cleverness of this rogue he has employed. In a dog-eat-dog world, the dishonest steward is at least a smart dog.

Next, though, comes the curveball. Jesus tells us that we are supposed to imitate the dishonest steward. We do not want to do this. We do not like the dishonest steward; we want nothing to do with him. And yet, for all of his corrupt ways, the dishonest steward showed wisdom in one area. He took thought for what was going to happen to him, and he used the resources he had available to make friends that would look after him then. Jesus tells us that we need to do the same. At this point, we're tempted to make the parable about some reassuringly Christian activity like giving to the Lord's work, but I don't think that is where Jesus is headed either. After all, if this were only about giving to God, the steward would have given to one capital-F Friend instead of several friends. Instead, the point that Jesus appears to be making is the opposite of the point that James makes in James 5:4. Here, James issues a warning to the rich that because they have oppressed the poor, the outcry of the poor has reached the ears of God and invited His wrath. By contrast, Jesus wants us to understand that when we use our money to care for the poor, they will receive us into eternal life. We could extend the point to our time and our energy, but Jesus here specifically focuses on money.

Finally, let's consider **THE APPLICATION** that Jesus wants us to make. It appears in Luke 16:10-13. Jesus begins this section of the parable by illustrating another way in which the unrighteous steward is like us. He provided for his future by giving away wealth that did not belong to him, and we are to provide for our future by giving away wealth that does not belong to us. The point here, of course, is not that we should take this literally and embezzle from our employers to care for the needy. Instead, Jesus wants us to understand that none of the possessions that have our names on them, not our houses, not our cars, not our bank accounts, truly belong to us. After all, if they did belong to us, we would have the capacity to hold on to them indefinitely. In reality, every one of us is going to lose every last thing we "own", when we die if not before. Only in heaven can we have riches that will not pass away, and how we use the riches we can't keep here will determine whether we receive the riches that we can keep there.

Then, we get to the punch line in v. 13. This is certainly a familiar verse, but in context, it takes on a completely different meaning. I'll be the first to acknowledge that I usually misapply this passage. Typically, I use it to mean that we shouldn't spend so much time on the job that we don't have time to work for the Lord.

That's a true statement, but it's not really Jesus' point here. Instead, in context, He's talking about whether we use our money to help the less fortunate or whether we reveal our greed by keeping it for ourselves. Sometimes, I fear

that we consider the poor of our day to find reasons *not* to help them instead of looking for reasons *to* help. This becomes most evident when we start drawing distinctions between the undeserving and the deserving poor. We shouldn't help the undeserving poor; instead, we should reserve our funds for the deserving poor, as though every poor person on the planet fits neatly into one of those two categories. I certainly wouldn't claim to be an expert, but most of the people in poverty whom I've talked to have a much more complicated life story than that. Sure, they've made plenty of bad decisions, but they've generally also had to deal with a bad environment and work their way through all sorts of bad luck.

To me, a car breakdown is an annoyance. To a single mom who's living on the edge, a car breakdown is the start of a cascade of disaster. She doesn't have the money to fix the car, she can't make it to work, she gets fired, and she and her two kids end up on food stamps, looking awfully undeserving to middle-class Joe and Jane Christian. I guarantee you that the poor of Jesus' day lived lives that were just as complicated, just as resistant to simplistic analysis. Jesus didn't say, "Sort through until you find the one person who got struck down despite doing everything right." He said "Help". If we aren't willing to help, we may well find ourselves in the category of people who love Mammon, not God.

Before the Lord's Supper, let's consider this from two main perspectives. First, let's ask if the generosity of spirit that Jesus wants to see from us is evident in the way we live. If we have money, do we share that with those who don't? How about our time? How about our energy? Generally speaking, do our lives reflect love for others, or for ourselves?

Second, and as one final comment on the deserving versus undeserving distinction, let's ask where we would be if Jesus had died only for deserving sinners. Now, I don't know what a deserving sinner would look like, but I do know that I wasn't one. God saved me not because I had earned being saved, but because He is rich in mercy. As we partake of the Lord's Supper this morning, let's remember Jesus, who saved us not because we deserved it, but because we didn't.

Us and the Poor

Finally, this morning, let's explore our own responsibilities to the poor. This must begin with a discussion of **THE CHURCH** and general benevolence. Look with me at 1 Timothy 5:16. The first point in this passage is extremely familiar to most of us: "Let not the church be burdened". This passage clearly illustrates that an individual responsibility to help the poor does not magically become a church responsibility. There are numerous examples in Scripture of the church caring for the poor among its own members, but never an instance of the church providing for the poor of the world. That, although it is undeniably a good work, is not part of the work God designed for the church.

However, I fear that we've done such a good job hammering home the not-a-work-of-the-church point that we've made it seem that caring for the poor isn't a work of individuals either. We've gone from one unscriptural extreme—church-supported charities—to another unscriptural extreme—no individual involvement in helping the needy. That's understandable, but it is certainly not what God intends for His people.

This responsibility to help begins with **OTHER CHRISTIANS**. Consider Galatians 6:10. This is another verse that features prominently in discussions of authority and institutionalism. We point out, and correctly so, that this verse is addressed to individuals and not to the church. However, if it's addressed to individuals, then we individually need to be doing this, beginning with the household of faith. I think we have another blind spot here. Because the care of needy Christians is part of the work of the church, we tend to leave it entirely in the church's hands and not do anything about it ourselves. We assume that if our brother isn't willing to bring his financial troubles before the elders or, God forbid, before the whole men's meeting, he doesn't need help. I don't know about the rest of y'all, but I can think of *lots* of reasons why I wouldn't want to do that, even if I were in need. Instead, as individuals, those of us who do have resources to spare should have a sense for who of our number is living on the edge—and we do have members who are—and look for ways to quietly help them. Even if we can't get over the deserving-poor thing, we can at least bless our brethren.

Next, we must consider **THE GENERAL POOR**. This takes us to yet another passage that generates a lot of discussion, James 1:27. Once again, if it isn't a work of the church, and it isn't, it must be a work of the individual. It must be our work. The text here is not concerned with orphans and widows per se. Indeed, in our society, there are plenty of rich orphans and rich widows out there. Instead, it is concerned with the most vulnerable members of society, people who have trouble providing for their own needs in the way that widows and orphans in the first century did. We're talking about the physically and mentally ill, the old, and those who have simply found themselves in the wrong set of circumstances. I've heard it argued that the church should not support orphanages because those in the orphanage were actually abandoned babies and not orphans, and, though I agree with the conclusion, that's terrible logic. The precise reason why someone needs help doesn't matter. The fact that they need help does. We should be prudent in the way we help—giving a wino \$10 in cash probably does not actually help him—but we should never allow the need for prudence to become an excuse to do nothing.

We see something of **THE IMPORTANCE** of benevolence in Galatians 2:9-10. This is Paul's description of an encounter that probably took place in Acts 11, when Paul sought the blessing of Peter and John and the other apostles before he began his first missionary journey. The only restriction that the three pillars laid on Paul was that he remember the poor. This sounds very strange to our ears. If we were preparing some brother to go off and preach the gospel in

Nigeria or the Philippines, would we send him off with the instruction to remember the poor? That might indicate that our values are not the same as those of our first-century brethren. We see Paul remembering the poor on a large scale in his efforts to collect funds for famine relief among the saints of Jerusalem, but we saw in the passages already cited that remembering the poor expressed itself on a smaller and individual scale too. Tradition tells us, for instance, that early Christians were known for rescuing babies abandoned by their mothers and raising those children as their own. Such good works ought to be a significant part of our discipleship too.

Finally, we see **THE RESULT** of Jesus' concern for the downtrodden in Mark 12:37. Jesus had few fans among the religious elite of His day, but the ordinary, downtrodden masses loved Him, probably because they heard and saw that He cared for them. When Jesus healed the sick and the lame, He wasn't just proving His divinity. He was making a statement that even society's castoffs were worthy of love and concern. He was consistent in His care for the inward and the outward man. Sadly, a lot of Christians today appear to be equally consistent in the opposite direction. They make little effort to tell the lost about the gospel, and they don't have anything to do either with alleviating the want of others. They are just as unloving physically as they are spiritually, and that's as unworthy of the name of Christ as we can be.

In closing, let me make one application of this. On March 23rd, Sacred Selections, an organization that raises funds for Christians to adopt unwanted children, is having a fundraiser here in Joliet. This is not a work of the church, nor should it be. Sacred Selections does not accept funds from churches. However, it is a work in which every individual Christian here should participate. There are many ways that we can contribute. We can buy tickets, attend the fundraiser, and bid on a number of auction items. We can help with the behind-the-scenes prep work, and if you would like to help with that, or more information generally, talk to Lauren. If we can't spare the time, we can donate to Sacred Selections directly. If we can't spare the time or the money, then what in the world is going on in our lives and our hearts? Let's do our part to provide loving homes for children who don't have one.