



The Christian And The Poor

I can tell you from personal experience that few things focus the mind as sharply on the subject of the poor as living in a place where you go to sleep at night knowing that within a mile radius there are over a million people on the verge of starving to death.

Real Poverty

During my years as a missionary in Sudan I have seen people

desperately fighting each other, sometimes with knives, while in line for daily bread rations. I am still haunted by the memory of watching a member of our church slowly walking along a silent line of mothers with babies. She would give to some a ticket for an appointment with the clinic doctor. But she would have to say this to others: "I'm sorry. Your baby is too far gone. I regret we cannot help you." The mothers with no ticket would take themselves away into the gloom, tightly clutching their little bundle of baby. The really poor seldom have the strength to argue or fight.

Making Excuses To Jesus

Once scenes like this are indelibly etched on your mind, it becomes difficult to read Jesus' words, "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" (Mt. 5:42). This command makes me feel very awkward. These may be the most overlooked words in the Sermon on the Mount. Their context demands that they be seen as the spirit of the Law, not to be applied legalistically.

Sadly, it is easy to dismiss Jesus' words by using excuses like: "The government tells us not to give to beggars"; or "There are beggars who deform their own children to make a better story"; or "If I help one, there will be a hundred at my door tomorrow"; or even "It's the government's responsibility."

The foundation for Matthew 5:42 is the following verse, itself a quotation from Leviticus 19:18: "Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." Jesus is teaching us the right Christian response to situations we face. The world may want revenge, seeking recompense and retaliation for the exploited. The world may respond with understandable hatred, saying it's "them" and "us." The world may feel angry at being taken for a ride or being emotionally blackmailed. The world may throw a coin into a hat and simply walk away. Our Lord Jesus expects higher standards of His disciples. He wants Christians living His kingdom life to be outstanding examples of what His kingdom is like.

The Poor Will Always Be With You

It is likely that Jesus and the disciples gave to the poor from their common purse (Jn. 13:29; 12:4-6). The first Christians certainly had the poor on their minds. At least six times in Acts they are seen giving their possessions to relieve poverty (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37; 6:1-6; 9:36; 10:2,22; 11:28-30). Paul encouraged believers to use whatever they had to meet the needs of others (Rom. 12:13; 15:25-29; 2 Cor. 8:1-21; Gal. 2:8-10). The Christians in these early churches are examples we should be following today. Notice that even the poor gave to help those who were poorer: "Their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity ... they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability" (2 Cor. 8:2-3). I have often witnessed this grace of giving among many poor Christians in Sudan.

On one occasion I had taken a carton full of clothes to give away to pastors who were attending our conference. Part way through I noticed that one pastor was wearing the same clothes every day. I took him aside and gave him a new suit, shirts and trousers. The next day he was wearing the same clothes he had worn before. I asked him if the clothes I gave him were the wrong size. He looked down at the floor and said: "Please don't be angry with me. I am delighted with your gift. But back in my village there are people with no clothes, and at least I already have these I can wear and wash each day. I am going to take the new clothes you gave me and give them to others back

home.” Needless to say, he took the entire carton back with him to the Mabaan tribe!

Poverty: Different Things To Different People

At this point I'd like to try to define “poverty.” This is necessary for the following reason: When I visit Sudan from my home in England I am a rich man. My wallet and bank balance would buy more than most Sudanese could even dream about ever owning. Yet when I visit the plush commuter suburbs of wealthy American or European cities I am a poor man. What I earn in one year would not allow me to keep up with my neighbors if I lived there. So poverty is seen in different ways in different places by different people.

Poverty is defined in the dictionary as “the condition of being without adequate food, money, clothing, etc.” And “poor” is defined in the same context as “lacking financial or other means of subsistence.” The New Testament Greek word for a poor beggar (*ptochos*) means “one who cowers down or hides oneself because of fear.” The Old Testament Hebrew word (*dal*) means “one who is low, reduced, helpless and weak.” Simply reading these two definitions helps me to discern between those who thrust their needs into my face, and others, much less visible, who are desperately in need of help.

Another definition puts it this way: “Poverty is the shortage of the common things such as food, clothing, shelter and safe drinking water, all of which determine the quality of life.” These definitions remind me of James 2:14-17, another uncomfortable Bible passage. If a fellow human being is without clothes and daily food, as a Christian I am not allowed to just wish him well or say I'll pray for him. I must put my faith into action on his behalf. I must try to ensure “regular” food in his stomach and clothing on his back.

Helping People Help Themselves

I slipped the word “regular” into the last sentence of my paraphrase of James because I firmly believe in the need for development aid rather than relief aid. Development aid helps people learn the skills necessary to help them live at a fair standard. Relief aid – obviously necessary immediately following a

disaster, like an earthquake or a home gutted by fire – only helps for a few days or weeks, and may unintentionally cause the continuing dependence of the recipient on the donor. We must remember that God created humans to work to provide for their own needs. Enabling people to do precisely that is a great way for Christians to help the poor get out of poverty.

In Sudan I saw these examples of development aid: setting up a small local business and training apprentices before supplying them with tools for their own business; teaching people to make simple clothes by equipping them with a sewing machine, scissors and cloth; helping people plant and care for gardens and groves, and teaching them related marketing skills. The emphasis is on “development” not merely “aid.” This type of aid can be of help to missionaries anywhere in the world.

A Long Tradition

We have looked at some verses about how the earliest Christians cared for the poor. But God’s concern for the poor can be traced back to the earliest times when He told the Israelites this: “If there is a poor man ... in any of the towns of the land ... God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. rather be open handed and freely lend him whatever he needs” (Dt. 15:7-8). Farm owners and workers were told to always leave some of the harvest for the poor, aliens, orphans and widows to glean (Dt. 24:19-22). In keeping up this long tradition, what practical things can we do to obey Jesus’ command to “Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (Mt. 5:42)?

Seven Ways To Start

1. Be content with enough to live on for yourself and your family. Enjoy the great gain that comes from “godliness with contentment” (1 Tim. 6:6-10).
2. Trust yourself and your family’s welfare to God. Share generously from your resources, investing what God has given you in this life in the next – “a life that is truly life” (1 Tim. 5:8; 6:17-19).
3. Regularly set aside a portion of your income to build a fund from which you can give to those in need (1 Cor. 16:1-4; Mt. 19:16- 30; Mk. 12:41-44).
4. When God brings real needs to your attention, give from this fund as much as is appropriate. remember that it is God’s money, not yours (Acts 11:27-30; 1 Jn. 3:16-18).

5. Try to look beyond the news. The world responds well to disasters. Christians should help those who are struggling quietly, away from the glare of publicity. “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25; rom. 8:5,9,13-14).
6. Count the cost before you commit to regularly help with development projects (Lk. 14:28- 30). Plan to help over the long term in order to sustain the project (2 Cor. 8:8-12).
7. Remember that giving to the poor is a part of your loving God and loving your neighbor (Lk. 10:25-37).

Concluding Thoughts

Our attitude toward wealth and poverty reveals our eternal values, as well as our character and relationship to both God and others. The only limit to a Christian’s generosity is a limit that love itself might impose. Because there were so many poor people living around our church in Khartoum, our congregation had several programs for helping them. Perfect love is a desire to help people, regardless of whether they receive or reject it. Christians should seek to further God’s love in the world in every possible way, even suffering personal loss to do so, because they know they have a good reward awaiting them in heaven (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

I began this article with a quotation from Christ’s Sermon on the Mount: “Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (Mt. 5:42). I close by quoting from that same Sermon: “You cannot serve both God and Money” (Mt. 6:24). When people look at our lives, whom do they see us serving? Instead of serving money as a god, we should be using our money to serve the God.

By Colin Salter