

THE PROPHETIC CALL FOR CARE OF THE POOR

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When it comes to the poor and afflicted of this world, the Church at large has generally abandoned its duty and allowed the secular authorities to usurp its role as caretaker of the needy, the afflicted, the destitute. If this were not so, there would be no such thing as a state welfare system, social security, medicare, and innumerable other government aid programs. There was a time in this country (and others) that the Church fulfilled the role of charity and provision for the poor in society. Amazingly enough, it was at that time that the Church was also at its zenith of activity and influence. Coincidence? I do not think so.

I trust it does not surprise you when I say that a principle burden of our Lord is for the poor (in terms of finances, power, influence) of this world. God reveals that burden throughout the Scriptures, but nowhere is it more prevalent than in the writings of the prophets. If the poor are a heart concern of our Lord's, should they not concern us also — so much so that we are moved to act on their behalf as God does? Even a brief overview of the prophetic message is sufficient to demonstrate clearly that more is required of us than prayer!

The Prophets' Foundation

The prophets, of course, did not make things up as they went along. The Spirit of God moved upon them to apply God's previous revelation to Israel and the nations, as well as to reveal further aspects of grace and judgment as he laid the foundation for further revelation through Jesus the Christ and his apostles. Most of the prophetic writings, however, do not *foretell* but *forthtell* — declaring to their generation how they stacked up against God's law. The law concerning the poor and afflicted among the people is amply represented in Deuteronomy 15:7-11.

If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs. Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, "The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand," and your eye be evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing, and he cry out to the LORD against you, and it become sin among you. You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand. For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, "You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land."

Israel would continually abuse both the spirit and the letter of this law, manifesting their unbelief and ingratitude for their own deliverance thereby. God had opened wide his hand to his

poor people in their bondage: they were in turn to show that they had an inkling of an idea what mercy was by demonstrating it to the less fortunate (Mt. 5:7). The prophets did not have to look far among the people to find reason for dismay, since the nation neglected, and often abused, the poor among them. This neglect and abuse was among the reasons that God delivered his people over to oppressors themselves, as we shall see.

The People's Sin Against the Poor

The prophets starkly shed the light of God upon the wickedness of God's people. Consider the following:

- Isaiah 3:14, 15 - “The LORD will enter into judgment with the elders of His people and His princes: for you have eaten up the vineyard; the plunder of the poor *is* in your houses. What do you mean by crushing My people and grinding the faces of the poor?’ says the Lord GOD of hosts.”
- Isaiah 10:1, 2 - “Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees, who write misfortune, *which* they have prescribed to rob the needy of justice, and to take what is right from the poor of My people, that widows may be their prey, and *that* they may rob the fatherless.”
- Ezekiel 16:49 - “Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: she and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.”
- Amos 5:12 - “For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins: afflicting the just *and* taking bribes; diverting the poor *from justice* at the gate.”

Here is what the people had done: they had greedily consumed their abundance solely upon themselves without regard for the needs of the poor; indeed, they had done so with arrogance and cruelty. They had written laws so as to keep the poor in poverty, and made life for widows and orphans a horror. They had neglected works of charity and provision. They had made justice a matter of who had money and influence.

Please notice that none of these crimes against the poor are “spiritual” in nature: they have to do with the actual physical needs of people. When we neglect the needs of the poor, cast a jaundiced eye upon them, find them repulsive, elect officials who abuse their power through taxation and legislation, and even discourage the poor from the Lord's house (by our attitudes, if nothing else), it makes no difference how much we talk about loving our neighbors or preaching the love of Christ. We are as guilty as Israel was, and the prophets would be no kinder to us in their declarations were they here to speak to us in person.

The Penalty for Disobedience

As I mentioned earlier, one of the reasons Israel and Judah were sent off into captivity

was that they had broken God's law in this most important area of ministering to the poor. Showing mercy to the poor is not an extra ministry that the church is to get around to if and when it is convenient. It's a matter of certain judgment if you neglect your responsibility to the poor:

- Zechariah 7:9-12 "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Execute true justice, show mercy and compassion everyone to his brother. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. Let none of you plan evil in his heart against his brother.' But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear. Yes, they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets. Thus great wrath came from the LORD of hosts."
- Isaiah 10:3, 4 - "What will you do in the day of punishment, and in the desolation *which* will come from afar? To whom will you flee for help? And where will you leave your glory? Without Me they shall bow down among the prisoners, and they shall fall among the slain. For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand *is* stretched out still."

The marvel of the decline of the contemporary visible Church is not that it is declining: rather, the marvel is that we haven't figured out the reason! Currently, large-scale efforts at evangelism are being undertaken by various evangelical organizations. I fear the results will be less than encouraging to the true Church. Theological considerations aside regarding the faithfulness (to the Scriptures) of the message presented, when you preach truth without deeds to demonstrate that truth, your audience will simply consider what you say to be a lie. What good is a gospel devoid of action? Why should a lost world want an emasculated faith? Show your faith by your works!

God's Standards for Ministering to the Poor

The prophets are equally clear in declaring what God has in mind for the proper treatment of the poor and needy:

- Isaiah 11:4 - "But with righteousness He shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked."
- Isaiah 25:4 - "For You have been a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shade from the heat; for the blast of the terrible ones *is* as a storm *against* the wall."
- Isaiah 41:17 - "The poor and needy seek water, but *there is* none, their tongues fail for thirst. I, the LORD, will hear them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them."
- Isaiah 61:1-3 - "The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to *those who are* bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to

comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.”

Note from these passages in Isaiah’s prophecy that there are two aspects to the Lord’s labor that ought to be reflected in our own. First, there is the aspect of meeting physical, temporal needs of justice, strength, and sustenance. Second, spiritual needs are also prominently in view. Fundamental churches have too often focused on the latter without benefit of the former aspect, to the detriment of the message. God does both. In Isaiah 58:5-8, God gives the Church her marching orders, as well as the prescription for restoring vigor to her ministries:

Is it a fast that I have chosen, a day for a man to afflict his soul? *Is it* to bow down his head like a bulrush, and to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD? *Is* this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? *Is it* not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

If you want to see your church spiritually flourish, be sure that it will not happen unless you are obedient to all of God’s word: including ministering to the needy both spiritually *and* physically.

The Prophets’ Call Confirmed in Christ

Lest there be any doubt about all of this, the Spirit of God saw fit to reiterate these Old Testament truths in the New Testament writings. Taking care of the poor cannot be regarded as OT “legalism” or simply be spiritualized away. Charity to the needy — in word *and* deed — is a part of the true religion of the whole of Scripture. Our Lord Jesus, the Christ stated so plainly:

- Matthew 11:2-6 - “And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, ‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: *the* blind see and *the* lame walk; *the* lepers are cleansed and *the* deaf hear; *the* dead are raised up and *the* poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.’ ”
- Luke 14:12-14 - “Then He also said to him who invited Him, “When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite *the* poor, *the* maimed, *the* lame, *the* blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

And when a certain tax collector was redeemed, the first thing he did was to desire to show his gratitude to Christ by laboring for the poor:

Luke 19:8 - "Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.'" (Compare Luke 18:22.)

The apostles were no less concerned about these matters. Paul indicates that having a regard for the poor, especially of the Church, was every believer's business: "For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem" (Romans 15:26). The first council in Jerusalem made a special point to Paul that he "should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do" (Galatians 2:10).

James also speaks directly to our responsibility to minister to the needy of this world. "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (1:27). He gives the ground of this principle a few paragraphs later: "Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world *to be* rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?" (2:5).

Conclusion

Isn't it time we started taking the commands of Scripture to heart, as did our forefathers? It doesn't matter how much money you have — it takes no money to show an act of kindness and speak the truth of the gospel's hope to a person who is destitute. For those with means, God has given you those things in stewardship. Use those means not just for great halls and grand projects but for food, clothing, Bibles, shelter, and righteous government. Let us take seriously the Lord's burden for the poor, and as his vessels fulfill the great commission of Matthew 28 in the context of all the demands of Scripture. Then only will the Church demonstrate that the gospel is about more than words.