

### ***My Neighbor is Poor***

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, we don't know how well off the man who was beaten and left on the side of the road was before he was assaulted. But we know that afterwards he had nothing. And there were no insurance policies back then to cover his losses. Everything, including all his money, had been taken from him. So, he was poor.

I think quite often, as I hope you do, about what it means to be poor in the world today. Add a natural disaster on top of poverty and it makes the situation worse. When the hurricane and flooding hit the island of Puerto Rico last fall, the entire island was plunged into darkness, with no electricity for extended periods of time. So, whether or not people had money, they were left to survive in conditions that were challenging at best.

Those of us who live comfortably in the U.S. may find it hard to imagine what it is like to live in poverty. Nor is it easy for us to conceive of how many millions of people around the world wake up each morning wondering what (and sometimes if) they and their families will eat that day.

It's been estimated that on any given day 1.3 billion people groan for the possibility of having a cup of clean water. Such conditions are known as abject poverty, and this kind of poverty affects more than a billion of the world's people, most of them women and children. Sadly, we live in a world where, for the most part, the strong take care of themselves before (sometimes instead of) caring for the weak.

Let's not forget that even here in the U.S., and in other developed nations, millions live in poverty. They face difficult choices, for example, between paying for groceries and paying the electric bill. They live in substandard housing if they are not homeless, and they have limited access to basic medical care. This is not just true in Los Angeles or Houston – it's true in Charlotte today.

The music superstar Bono, in his efforts to combat poverty, has noted (as have many others) that caring for the poor constitutes one of Scripture's primary themes. In fact, more than 400 Bible passages, approaching a total of some 4,000 verses, focus in some way on those who are poor, who are disenfranchised or who have been treated unjustly. With all the attention the Bible pays to the poor, it ought to be clear that God does not want people to be living in poverty or in substandard conditions, and that God does want those who love Him to demonstrate their love by caring for the poor.

These related truths are reflected in the Lord's plan for the children of Israel as found in Deuteronomy 15:4, which states, "There should be no poor among you." I'm aware of Jesus' statement, found in John 12:8, that the poor will always be with us. Unfortunately, some people use this verse to justify a sort of apathy or inaction when it comes to caring for the poor. This is a perfect example of Scripture being taken out of context and misapplied. It's important to understand the difference between descriptive statements (what is) and prescriptive statements (what ought to be). I won't go into all the details, but suffice it to say that in this statement in John, Jesus is in no way saying it's okay to forget about poor people since they'll always be around. This interpretation flies in the face of a major theme of Scripture, namely, that we should care for the poor.

It is not unreasonable to think that we have enough resources on this planet to accomplish the goal of caring for the poor around us. The problem is that we who are in a position to help are not doing all we can do to achieve the goal. The Lord's message to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 15:5 is that there would be no poor among them "if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today."

That word "fully" is a very important word. It's easy for us to follow God's commands selectively. It's hard to obey fully. We're more comfortable if we can pick and choose what we want to do and what we want to believe.

Wayne Gordon tried to make this point several years ago in a speech to seniors at a Christian high school. He asked them to share with me their favorite Bible verses. The Bible teacher there got into the act by revealing that his favorite verse in Scripture was John 10:10. In this verse, Jesus says that the devil comes to steal, kill and destroy, but He came so that people might have life and have it abundantly. As soon as this Bible teacher revealed his favorite verse, Wayne began to ridicule his choice. He stared him down and said I couldn't believe that someone who claimed to be a Bible teacher could select such a terrible verse as his favorite. Wayne then opened his Bible and ripped out the page containing John 10:10, wadded it up, and threw it at him. He definitely had every student's attention in that moment!

They thought he'd gone crazy. But then he explained that he also liked John 10:10. He was merely trying to make a point about how many of us treat Scripture.

This illustrates what we do with the verses in the Bible that we don't want to obey—that we prefer to ignore. We simply tear them out of the Bible by not obeying them. The argument could be made that this is exactly what the Church as a whole has done by not coming to grips with the Bible's repeated admonitions to care for the poor. It's one of the reasons many people, including Bono, have become disillusioned with the Church.

The Bible states or suggests in various places that, in God's economy, when we serve others, we enrich our own lives. It is common for people to return from a short-term mission trip or a Habitat for Humanity work project saying they received more from those they were helping than they gave. One of the Proverbs states, "He who gives to the poor will never want" (Proverbs 28:27, NASB).

Could it be that the key to doing well in life is to help somebody who is less fortunate. People wonder why they can never seem to get ahead, and why life is such a struggle. I think often it's because they are not reaching out to those who are less fortunate. I'm not saying that if a person does something to help a poor family, his or her bank account balance will suddenly skyrocket. I am saying that people who serve the less fortunate with the right motives and a pure heart will find themselves experiencing a kind of joy and contentment that no amount of money or material things can provide.

Proverbs 29:7 states, "The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern." It's never a good idea to take a single verse from Scripture and develop an argument based on it. But in this case, the message is consistent with many other Scripture passages. If we want to live righteous lives as followers of Jesus, we need to care for those who are poor. We are not saved because we care for the poor, but ministry to the poor is an indicator of righteous living that is pleasing to the Lord.

So, we ask the question, "Who is my neighbor?" What if that person who crosses my path, my neighbor, is poor, has a need, and we're able to meet that need? Then, would it not be wise to consider the possibility that helping my neighbor in need might very well be the best way to begin to share the Gospel with them?

What if caring for a neighbor who is poor, thus obeying the Great Commandment, gives us an open door and opportunity to make a disciple for Jesus, obeying the Great Commission? Is that not why we are here? You know the answer. So, what are we waiting for?

Excerpted & adapted from Wayne Gordon's book, *Who Is My Neighbor? Lessons Learned From a Man Left for Dead*. Baker Publishing Group, 2010.

If you would like to know more about how we may care for those around us who are poor, join us for a special training event at the Great Commission Center:

## ***Bridges Out of Poverty***

**Thursday, February 22, 9 am - 4 pm**

*Presented by Dan Collison, Strategy Coordinator for Metro Charlotte with the State Convention.*

*Call 704.375.1197 for more information or to sign up: \$10 per person for a book, workbook, and lunch. Or email [missions@metrolina.org](mailto:missions@metrolina.org).*

