

# THE GOSPEL AND THE POOR

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The thesis is that all Christians are to minister in both word and deed especially to those in the world lacking material goods, 'social capital', and power. I'll refer to the weak, elderly, mentally and physically handicapped, refugees, new immigrants, working poor, natural disaster victims, unemployed, single parent families, orphans—all under the heading of 'the poor'.

## I. A BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF MINISTRY TO THE POOR

### A. Creation.

Adam is told to have dominion over all creation, both the physical and spiritual realms, to bring it under the order and rule of God (Gen. 1:28). God's servants are, therefore, to be concerned to subdue physical disorder as well as spiritual disorder caused by sin. Both are fundamental to covenant service.

### B. Fall.

Sin defaces all of nature. Man is alienated from God (Gen.3:8) causing guilt and hostility to the knowledge of the Lord. Man is alienated from himself (Gen.3:10), causing loss of identity and loss of meaning, as well as anxiety and emptiness. Thirdly, man is alienated from other men (Gen.3:7), causing war, crime, family breakdown, oppression, and injustice. Finally, man is alienated from nature itself (Gen. 3:17-19), causing hunger, sickness, aging, and physical death. God's first redemptive action, the clothing of Adam and Eve, points to the salvation of Christ's sacrifice, but it also meets a deep psychological need (for privacy) and a fundamental physical need (for shelter). In this first deed of ministry, God reveals that his redemption will heal all the effects of sin. We must follow Him in our own patterns of ministry.

### C. Patriarchal period.

Abraham's seed (through Joseph) first becomes a blessing to the nations through a hunger relief program (Gen 41:53-57). Job, who lived in this period, is aware that God's judgment falls on those who forget the poor (Job 29:15-16; 31:16-23).

### D. Early Israel.

God gave Israel many laws of social responsibility. Kinsmen and neighbors were obligated to give to the poor man until his need was gone (Deut.15:8-10). Tithes went to the poor (Deut. 14:28-29). The poor were not to be given simply a "handout", but tools, grain (Deut.15:12-15) and land (Lev.25), so that they can become productive and self-sufficient.

#### **D. Later Israel.**

The prophets condemned Israel's insensitivity to the poor as covenant breaking. They taught that materialism and ignoring the poor are sins as repugnant as idolatry and adultery (Amos 2:6-7). Mercy to the poor is an evidence of true heart commitment to God (Is.1:10-17; 58:6-7; Amos 4:1-6; 5:21-24). The great accumulation of wealth, "adding of house to house and field to field till no space is left" (Is. 5:8-9), even though it is by legal means may be sinful if the rich are proud and callous toward the poor (Is.3:16-26; Amos 6:4-7). The seventy-year exile itself was a punishment for the unobserved Sabbath and jubilee years (II Chron. 36:20-21). In these years the well-to-do were to cancel debts, but the wealthy refused to do this.

#### **E. The ministry of Christ.**

Jesus proves to the Baptist that he is the Christ by pointing out that he heals bodies and preaches to the poor (Matt 11:1-6) even as the prophets said he would (Is.11:1-4; 61:1-2 cf. Luke 1:52-53). Jesus teaches that anyone who has truly been touched by the grace of a merciful God will be vigorous in helping the needy (Luke 6:35-36; Matt. 5:43-48). God will judge whether we have justifying faith or not by looking at our service to the poor, the refugee, the sick, the prisoner (Matt. 25:44-46). Jesus, in his incarnation, "moved in" with the poor (Luke 2:24; II Cor. 8:9). He lived with, ate with, and associated with the lowest class of society. He called this "mercy" (Matt. 9:13). The Bible demands that we emulate Him in it (II Cor. 8:8-15).

#### **F. The early church.**

The church reflects the social righteousness of the old covenant community, but with the greater vigor and power of the new age. Christians are to open their hand to the needy as far as there is need (I John 3:16-17; cf. Deut. 15:7-8). Within the church, wealth is to be shared very generously between rich and poor (II Cor. 8:13-15; cf. Lev. 25). Following the prophets, the apostles teach that true faith will inevitably show itself through deeds of mercy (James 2:1-23). Materialism is still a grievous sin (James 5:1-6; I Tim.6:17-19). Not only do all believers have these responsibilities, but a special class of officers--deacons--is established to coordinate the church's ministry of mercy. This shows that the ministry of mercy is a required, mandated work of the church just as is the ministry of the word and discipline (cf. Rom. 15:23-29). Paul tells the Ephesian elders in his farewell address that he has taught them the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). It is highly significant, then, that in his very last words, Paul exhorts them to give to the weak and poor (v.35). Not only did Paul consider mercy to the poor as part of the "whole counsel of God", but he deemed it so crucial as to make it the very last piece of teaching he gave them.

#### **G. The end of history.**

The goal of history is a new heavens and new earth--a totally restored creation. Wholistic ministry looks to and is victorious in the consummation.

**Summary:** The church is not simply a collection of individuals who are forgiven. It is a "royal nation", a new society (I Pet. 2:9). The world must see in us the wisdom of God, namely, what

family life, business practices, race relations, and inter- personal relationships can be in all their beauty under the kingship of Jesus Christ. We are a pilot plant of the kingdom of God. (See Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, Tyndale, 1970, pp. 81-93.) The church is to use its gifts and power to heal all the results of sin, spiritual, psychological, social, physical.

## II. BIBLICAL MOTIVATION FOR MINISTRY TO THE POOR

### A. Its Nature. Luke 10: 34-37

The Samaritan meets physical, social, economic needs. Principle: Justice ministry is the meeting of human needs through deeds. cf. Matthew 25:35-36. The need for food, shelter, medical care, and friendship are needs which are "felt" needs. That is, "human needs" are needs which require no spiritual discernment to see in oneself or others. I John 3:17-18. cf. Luke 24:19, I Pet.4:11, and Acts 6:1-7. Human needs are needs which are met primarily through deeds, not words.

### B. Its Necessity Luke 10:26-29.

Jesus uses the Samaritan's ministry as an example of what it means to love one's neighbor. He is illustrating the righteousness that God requires in the law of God. Principle: Justice ministry is not an option or an addition to the work of the church but is an absolute command. Is. 1:10-17; Matt. 25:31-46; James 2:1-26. A sensitive social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to the needy is the inevitable outcome of true faith. By deeds of service God can judge true love from lip-service. Cf. Prov. 14:31; 19:17, Luke 16:16-31 with Matt. 25. God is the poor man "in disguise" to test us. And Acts 6:1-7, II Cor. 8:13-14; Gal. 2:10. shows that Jesus Christ has given not only individual Christians but the church this duty of justice.

*"I fear there are some Christians among you to whom Christ cannot say ["Well done, good and faithful servant"]. Your haughty dwelling rises...thousands ...have scarce a fire to warm themselves at, and have but little clothing to keep out the biting frost; and yet you never darkened their door. You heave a sigh, perhaps, at a distance, but you do not visit them. Ah! my dear friends! I am concerned for the poor, but more for you. I know not what Christ will say to you in the great day. You seem to be Christians, and yet you care not for his poor. Oh, what a change will pass upon you as you enter the gates of heaven! You will be saved, but that will be all. There will be no abundant entrance for you: 'He that soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly' ....I fear there are many hearing me who now know well that they are not Christians because they do not love to give. To give largely and liberally, not grudging at all, requires a new heart; an old heart would rather part with its life-blood than its money. Oh, my friends! enjoy your money; make the most of it; give none away; enjoy it quickly, for I can tell you, you will be beggars throughout eternity." - R.M. M'Cheyne, Scotland, 1838*

### C. Its Dimensions Luke 10:29.

The purpose of the law expert's question is to diminish the demands of neighbor love. Jesus' illustration shows that this obligation cannot be limited. Principle: To the best of our resources

we should render aid to any person, Christian or non-Christian, with fewer economic options than ourselves, and we should conclude our aid only out of mercy.

Luke 6:32-36; Matt.5:45; John 17:18; Gal.6:10. Lev. 19:18; Luke 3:11; II Cor.8:13-14; Prov.19:17; Luke 6:38; Matt.10:42; II Cor. 9:6-8. Lev. 19:18; Heb.13:2; Rom. 5:7-10. We must not wait until a man is destitute to help him. We would not wait until we were destitute to help ourselves, and we must love our neighbor as ourselves. We must not limit our aid to those we know well, for we must receive strangers. We must not limit our aid to only the "deserving" poor, for Christ did not so limit his ministry.

*"Yea, they who are very poor may be obliged to give for the relief of others in much greater distress even than they...We may, by the rules of the gospel, be obliged to give to others when we cannot do it without suffering ourselves...how else will we bear one another's burdens? If we are never obliged to relieve others' burdens but when we can do it without burdening ourselves, then how do we bear our neighbor's burdens when we bear no burdens at all?" -- Jonathan Edwards*

#### **D. Its Impact** Luke 10:36-37.

The law expert is forced to affirm the behavior of the hated Samaritan. Principle: Justice is an inseparable and indispensable partner to evangelism in the mission of the church.

II Cor.4:16-18. Evangelism is the most basic and radical ministry possible to a human being. This is true, not because the "spiritual" is more important than the physical, but because the eternal is more important than the temporal. John 17:18; Matt.11:1-6; I John 3:17-18. Nevertheless, diaconal ministry was inseparable from evangelism in the ministry of Christ, and therefore it should be inseparable in our own. John 9:1-7; 35-41; Luke 6:35. Justice ministry may precede the sharing of the gospel, but it should not be separated from evangelism. On the other hand, we must not withdraw aid just because a person is not receptive to the gospel. We are to give without expecting anything in return. Acts 4:32-35; Matt.5:16; Luke 6:32. Deeds of mercy and justice had an evangelistic impact in early church history. Our good deeds glorify God before men, because the world can see us meeting human needs in a way that it cannot see us ministering to spiritual needs. In particular, charity to strangers, Jesus says, is remarkable.

*"Nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of the Christians as their charity to strangers...the impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor, but for ours as well" -- Julian, a Roman emperor*

#### **E. Its Dynamic** Luke 10:33

The Samaritan has absolutely no "natural" obligation to the man in the road. There is no racial, national, legal obligation. This points to the supernatural obligation. II Cor. 8:2; Matt. 18:21-35; I Pet. 2:4. Here we can see why God can use justice as an index of true faith. If you believe that you were a completely undeserving sinner who was saved by the sheer, unmerited grace of God, then you will be generous toward others, even (and especially!) the undeserving. Luke 3:11.

*"Now dear Christians, some of you pray night and day to be branches of the true Vine; you pray to be made all over in the image of Christ. If so, you must be like him in giving... though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor'...Objection 1. 'My money is my own'. Answer: Christ might have said, 'my blood is my own, my life is my own'...then where should we have been? Objection 2. 'The poor are undeserving'. Answer: Christ might have said, 'They are wicked rebels...shall I lay down my life for these? I will give to the good angels'. But no, he left the ninety-nine, and came after the lost. He gave his blood for the undeserving. Objection 3. 'The poor may abuse it'. Answer: Christ might have said the same; yea, with far greater truth. Christ knew that thousands would trample his blood under their feet; that most would despise it; that many would make it an excuse for sinning more; yet he gave his own blood. Oh my dear Christians! If you would be like Christ, give much, give often, give freely, to the vile and poor, the thankless and the undeserving. Christ is glorious and happy, and so will you be. It is not your money I want, but your happiness. Remember his own word, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" -- R.M. M'Cheyne*

### III. THE BIBLICAL VOCABULARY FOR MINISTRY TO THE POOR

**A. Neighbors.** It is typical for us to think of our "neighbors" as people of the same social class and means (cf. Luke 14:12) The Old Testament, however, called Israel to recognize the immigrant, the single-parent family, and the poor as neighbors, even if they were of another nation or race (cf. Lev 19:34.) In Luke 10:25-37 Jesus goes further. He says that your neighbor is anyone you come into contact with who lacks resources, even someone of a hated race or of another religious faith. Our responsibility to neighbors includes love and justice--two things which in the Bible are closely linked. When God says "*love your neighbor as yourself*" in Lev 19:18, he also says "*do not defraud, pervert justice, show partiality against the poor, or do anything to endanger your neighbor's life*" (vv.13-17.) According to Jesus, God is still a God of justice and anyone who has a relationship with him will be concerned for justice as well (Luke 18:1-8.)

#### **B. Justice.**

Christians are to "do justice" (Titus 2:12)--*dikaionomai*. In Micah 6:8 we are told to "*do justice, love mercy*". When Job is taking an inventory of his life, he said, "*I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him. The one who was dying blessed me and I made the widow's heart sing. I put on righteousness as my clothing and justice was my robe and turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy and took up the case of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth.*" (Job 29:12-17) Job is saying that these people are not treated fairly or justly in the social system: the single mother, the lame, blind, and poor, the alien and disadvantaged children. God demands that people without economic or social "clout" not be taken advantage of.

*When the scriptural people of God seek redemption, they want something that goes far beyond personal salvation. In their eyes, God's redemption means justice is coming, the King of all the earth is coming! They want "justice to roll down like waters" (Amos 5:24.) Do contemporary Christians bring the same passion to their hope of redemption as the people in the Bible did?*

When our *earthly* kingdoms have a good year, we don't necessarily long for [justice] to break in. But if you are a slave in Pharaoh's kingdom, or in a Mississippi cotton kingdom "your kingdom come" means "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." -- Cornelius Plantinga<sup>1</sup>

1. What is 'doing justice?' According to the Old Testament, God's justice means to share food, shelter, and other basic resources with those who have fewer of them (Is 58:6-10.) Injustice happens when people are barred from fair wages and therefore from the same goods and opportunities afforded others. (cf. Lev 19:13, Jer 22:13.) In Luke 18:1-8 Jesus tells of a widow who seeks "justice" from a judge in her legal battle with some more powerful adversary. (The details of the case are not given.) The primary application is that God is a just judge and will ultimately bring about vindication for this people-- therefore we should persevere in our faith in him. But it is obvious from the analogy that the "justice" both the human judge (finally begrudgingly gives) and the justice that God will eventually dispense includes meeting their basic material needs. Meeting basic human needs for food, shelter, health, and education then, is thus not simply a matter of "compassion" but also of justice. God is committed to justice and those with a relationship to him will be as well.

2. Why is meeting basic human needs called not just mercy but justice?

We do not all start out with equal privileges and assets. For example, inner city children, through no fault of their own, may grow up with vastly inferior schooling and with an overall environment extremely detrimental to learning. Conservatives may argue that this is the parents' fault or the "culture's" fault while liberals see it as a failure of government and/or the fruit of systemic racism. But no one argues that it is the children's fault! Of course it is possible for youth born into poverty to break out of it-- but it takes many times more fortitude, independence, creativity, and courage to simply go to college and get a job than it does for any child born into a middle class world. In short, some children grow up with about a 200-times better opportunity for academic and economic success than others do. (You can't ask an illiterate 8 year-old--soon to be an illiterate 17 year-old--to 'pull himself up by his bootstraps'!) Why does this situation exist? It is part of the deep injustice of our world. The problem is simply an unjust distribution of opportunity and resources.

3. Why should we do justice? God tells Israel: "*The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.*" (Lev 19:34) The Israelites had been 'aliens' and oppressed slaves in Egypt. They did not have the ability to free themselves--God liberated them by his grace and power. Now they are to treat all people with less power or fewer assets as neighbors, doing love and justice to them. So the basis for 'doing justice' is salvation by grace! Christians may disagree about the particular political approach to the problems of injustice. But all Christians must be characterized by 1) their passion for justice, and 2) their personal commitment to ameliorate injustice through personal giving, sacrifice, and generosity.

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God's World* (Eerdmans, 2002) p.103-104.

### C. Service.

Christians are also to "serve"--*diakonia*. This word means to humbly provide for the most basic and simple needs through deeds. The root meaning of the word *diakonia* is to feed someone by waiting on a table. An example is in Luke 10:40, where Martha is preparing a meal for Jesus. A group of women disciples followed Jesus and the apostles and provided food and other physical needs, and this ministry is called *diakonia* (Matt.27:55; Luke 8:3). The work of providing daily necessities for the widows in the early church is *diakonia* (Acts 6:2). In Luke 22, Jesus asks the question: "who is greater? the one who sits at the table or the one who serves? (*diakonia*)" This question is remarkable because in the value of the Greek culture of the day, it was considered highly demeaning. Plato said, "How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?" Then Jesus makes the startling statement that Christian greatness is the polar opposite to the concept of the world's. "I am among you as one who serves (*diakonia*)." A *diakonos*! A busboy! This is the Christian pattern of greatness and the pattern of Christ's work.

### D. Mercy.

Christians are to "show mercy"--*eleos*. This word is used to describe wholistic ministry in Luke 10:25-37 and James 2:14-17, two of the key passages in the Bible about wholistic ministry. Because the famous parable of the Good Samaritan is so rich and full, we will do a fuller look at "mercy" through it below.

These last three Biblical words--*justice, service, and mercy* are really just three perspectives on the same ministry. (They match John Frame's tri-perspectives on knowledge.) "Justice" means we have to be "prophetic" and speak on behalf of the poor and demand equity for them. "Mercy" means to be "priestly" and to move toward the poor with compassion and deep sympathy. "Service" means to be "kingly" in that we are to be most practical and concrete in meeting needs. Actually, each word is a perspective on the whole of wholistic ministry.

**Sum:** Wholistic ministry is to meet basic human needs through deeds, out of a heart for justice and a heart of compassion. (Human needs are needs which require no spiritual discernment to perceive--see Matthew 25; they are "felt needs" that the world can see us meet--see Matt.5:16.) Wholistic ministry also unites deed with word. When Jesus raised the dead son of the widow of Nain, He spoke words of comfort (Luke 7:13). After he healed the blind man, he returned with a gospel charge (John 9: 35-38). It is both natural and necessary that ministers of mercy also minister the word while they are in the process of meeting human needs.

## IV. THE 'WHOLE CLOTH' OF MINISTRY.

### A. Word and Deed.

Jesus and the Bible weaves into a seamless cloth two things that we today would call 'personal/private' morality--e.g. prohibitions against adultery, lust, lying-- together with 'social justice.' God calls Christians to be 'witnesses,' to evangelize others, but also to be deeply concerned for the poor. In the West these two sets of concerns have been 'split' off from one another into rival

political parties for decades. Conservatism stresses the importance of personal morality and approves of evangelism and calling people to conversion. Liberalism stresses social justice and rejects any calls to others to convert. But Jesus calls his disciples both to ‘gospel-messaging’ (urging everyone to believe the gospel) and to ‘gospel-neighboring’ (sacrificially meeting the needs of those around them whether they believe or not!)

The two absolutely go together. First, they go together theologically. The resurrection shows us that God not only *created* both body and spirit but will also *redeem* both body and spirit. The salvation Jesus will eventually bring in its fullness will include liberation from all the effects of sin—not only spiritual but physical and material as well. Jesus came both preaching the Word and healing and feeding. The final kingdom will be one of justice for all. The only way for Christians to proclaim the gospel is through both our words and our deeds of compassion and justice, serving the material needs of people around us even as we call them to faith in Jesus. Secondly, they go together practically. In some ways gospel-neighboring *is* gospel-messaging. Loving deeds regardless of a person’s race or faith is of course a very attractive testimony to the truth of the gospel.

### **B. Mercy and Justice.**

Jesus provides a balance of motives for our sharing of our resources—he invokes both *compassion* (or ‘mercy’) and *justice*.

Jesus bluntly and shockingly contradicts the spirit and practice of the patronage system of his day (in which you helped those who could help you back), telling his disciples to give without expecting repayment (Luke 6:32-36; 14:13-14) and, if possible, in secret (Matt 6:1-4.) Jesus’ followers’ help of the poor was thus motivated by a) a sense of simple justice (e.g. Luke 18:1-8 and b) a real concern to alleviate misery (e.g. Luke 10:25-37 “*mercy*.”) The patronage system was characterized by neither compassion nor justice. It did not ‘re-weave’ together a society divided by class and race—it sustained the status quo. Jesus’ ethic of love attacked the world-system at its root.

We should keep in mind that people who are motivated strictly by a sense of justice or strictly by a sense of compassion tend to lose the sense God’s grace as the root of our giving. Often “conservatives” motivation to give to the poor is strictly mercy or compassion. They think we need to help the pitiful poor out of the goodness of our hearts. This misses the fact that the ‘haves’ have what we have to a great degree because of unjust distribution of opportunities and resources at birth. It is simple justice to spread the wealth around. On the other hand, often “liberals” motivation to give to the poor is strictly concern for justice. Poverty is seen strictly in terms of structural inequities. While the conservative “compassion only” motivation leads to paternalism and patronizing, the liberal “justice only” motivation leads to great anger and rancor. Both views, ironically, become self-righteous. One tends to blame the poor for everything, the other to blame the rich for everything. One over-emphasizes individual responsibility, the other under-emphasizes it. Jesus had it right. Do both ‘mercy’ and ‘justice’.



A balanced motivation arises from a heart touched by grace, which has lost its superiority-feelings toward any particular class of people.

## V. HISTORICAL CASE STUDY –JONATHAN EDWARDS AND MINISTRY TO THE POOR

How can we be sure that we aren't reading modern social-action-consciousness back into the Bible? Isn't all this emphasis on helping the poor a liberal social gospel?

Jonathan Edwards was literally a conservative, hellfire preacher in 18<sup>th</sup> century America. He was obviously not under the influence of modern liberal theology. Yet I know of no more powerful call to Christians to minister to the poor than Edwards' powerful discourse *Christian Charity: The Duty of Charity to the Poor, Explained and Enforced*. (I will refer to the version printed in volume II of the Banner of Truth edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*.)

First, Edwards concludes that giving and caring for the poor is part of 'living out the gospel.' Edwards asks "*where have we any command in the Bible laid down in stronger terms, and in a more peremptory urgent manner, than the command of giving to the poor?*" (p. 164 ) Edward believes that this command is an implication of all human beings being made in the image of God (p.164,) but "*it is especially reasonable, considering our circumstances, under such a dispensation of grace as that of the gospel.*" (p.165.) Edwards looks to 2 Cor 8:9 which asks financial generosity to the poor by pointing to the self-emptying of Jesus, who became poor for us, both literally and spiritually, in the incarnation and on the cross. Edwards also looks to Galatians 6:2, which enjoins us to '*bear one another's burdens*' and thus '*fulfill the law of Christ*' –this 'law' being, essentially, the gospel pattern of substitutionary sacrifice. Jesus took upon himself our burden of sin so it could be lifted off of us. In the same way, we should relieve one another of practical burdens, taking them on. What are these burdens? Paul has in view, at least partially, material and financial burdens, because Galatians 6:10 tells us to '*do good to all men, especially the household of faith.*' Edwards (rightly, according to modern exegetes) understands 'doing good' as including the giving of practical aid to people who need food, shelter, and financial help.

In one of the most powerful sections of the discourse, Edwards writes that the principle '*bear one another's burdens*' means that we must not wait until a man is absolutely destitute before we help him. After all, we would not wait until we were destitute to help ourselves, and we must love our neighbor as ourselves. We must not limit our aid to those we know well, for we must receive strangers. We must not limit our aid to only the "deserving" poor, for Christ did not so limit his ministry of spiritual burden-bearing to the deserving spiritually poor (there aren't any such people!) Edwards concludes:

*"Yea, they who are very poor may be obliged to give for the relief of others in much greater distress even than they...We may, by the rules of the gospel, be obliged to give to others when we cannot do it without suffering ourselves...how else will we bear one another's burdens? If we are never obliged to relieve others' burdens but when we can do it without burdening ourselves, then how do we bear our neighbor's burdens when we bear no burdens at all?" (p.171)*

Second, Edwards deals with a cluster of texts that seems to make our care of and concern for the poor the basis for God's judgment on the Day of the Lord. Matthew 24:34ff. famously teaches that people will be accepted or condemned by God on the last day depending on how they treated the hungry, the homeless and immigrant, the sick, and the imprisoned. Edwards notices that in the Old Testament giving to the poor is an essential mark of godliness. The famous verse Micah 6:8 requires that a man *'do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.'* Edwards concludes (rightly, according to Bruce Waltke in his recent Micah commentary) that this requires the godly man to be involved with the poor.<sup>2</sup> (p.164.) Waltke says, actually, that both *'do justice'* and *'love mercy'* mean to be kind to the oppressed and marginalized and active in helping people who are financially and socially in a weaker condition. (Bruce K. Walke, *A Commentary on Micah* Eerdmans, 2007, pp. 390-394.) But this emphasis is not only in the Old Testament. *"[Care for the poor] is a thing so essential, that the contrary cannot consist with sincere love to God (1 John 3:17-19.)* From this (and the text 2 Cor 8:8, that speaks of generosity to the poor as a *proof* of a grace-changed, loving heart,) Edwards concludes that doing justice and mercy is not *'meritorious reason'* that God will accept us on judgment. The reason is our faith and standing in Christ. Rather, doing justice and mercy for the poor is an inevitable sign that someone has justifying faith and grace in the heart.

Another version of the teaching of Matthew 25:34ff. is found in the book of James. Protestants who have wrestled with the teaching of James in chapter 2 have concluded that *"We are saved by faith alone—but not by faith that remains alone; faith without works is dead, not true justifying faith."* Absolutely right. But notice that, in the context, all the *'works'* James says are the marks of saving faith are caring for widows and orphans (1:27,) showing the poor respect and treating them equally (2:2-6,) and caring for the material needs of food and clothing (2:15-16.) James says, point blank, that those who say they have justifying faith but close their hearts to the poor are mistaken or liars (2:15-18.) James concludes that *'judgment will be without mercy for those who have shown no mercy!'* (2:13) The *'mercy'* James speaks of here is strong concern and help for the poor (D.Moo, *The Letter of James*, Eerdmans, 2000, p. 117.) Here again we have the teaching—you will not find mercy from God on judgment day if you have not shown mercy to the poor during your lifetime. This is not because caring for the poor saves you, but because it is the inevitable outcome of saving, justifying faith.

The principle: a sensitive social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to the needy is the inevitable outcome of true faith. By deeds of service God can judge true love of himself from lip-service (cf. Isaiah 1:10ff.) Matthew 25, in which Jesus identifies himself with the poor (*'as you did it to the least of them, you did it to me'*) can be compared to Prov. 14:31 and 19:17, in which we are told that to lend to the poor, or to trample on the poor, is to trample on God himself. This means that God on judgment day can tell what a person's heart attitude is to him by what the person's heart attitude is to the poor. If there is a hardness, indifference, or superiority, it betrays the self-righteousness of a heart that has not truly embraced the truth that he or she is a lost sinner saved only by free yet costly grace.

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<sup>2</sup> Waltke points out that helping the poor is sometimes called *'justice'* and sometimes *'mercy.'* I will use both terms and give a bit of an explanation of their difference later in the paper.

Edwards concludes his survey of the Biblical material with Proverbs 21:3- *“Whoso stoppeth his ears at the cry of the poor, he shall cry himself and not be heard.”* Edwards add: *“God hath threatened uncharitable persons, that if ever they come to be in calamity and distress they shall be left helpless.”* Edwards brings home the power of the Bible’s demand ***that gospel-shaped Christians be remarkable for their involvement with and concern for the poor.*** I have been very, very spare in making the Biblical case for this statement. Perhaps the most complete and accessible exegetical survey of all the material is Craig Blomberg’s *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical theology of possessions* (Apollos, 1999.) No one can read Blomberg’s study or Edwards’ discourse and not be struck by how relatively absent—in comparison with its power and prominence in the Bible itself—is this emphasis on the poor in evangelical preaching today, especially among conservative and Reformed churches. Why would this be? We come to under the next heading.

## V. BIBLICAL CASE STUDY – THE BOOK OF JAMES

The book of James, written by the brother of Jesus, might be the earliest of all the New Testament writings. It gives us a picture of ministry in the very first church of all--the church of Jerusalem--under the oversight of Jesus’ own kin.

- In 2:5-7, James says *‘has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom for those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you?....Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?’*
  - This cannot mean that God *only* chooses the poor or that the wealthy never become Christians (as we have seen in previous studies,) but it must mean *at least* that a) the poor and the despised classes of the world will always be especially prone to receive and respond to the gospel, and b) God himself delights in showering his grace on those the world discards. (Moo, p.107-108)
  - This passage also hints strongly that the early church itself was an embodiment of this principle, since James says that at that time the ruling and moneyed classes despised the name of Christ precisely because so many of his followers were people low on the world’s scales of wealth and power.
- The latter part of chapter 2 is famous for its seeming variance from Paul’s own teaching.
  - The key verse is 2:24-*So you see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.* There have been innumerable excellent studies and books that show that there is no actual contradiction here.<sup>3</sup> [“We are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone.” ]

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<sup>3</sup> “James and Paul use ‘justify’ to refer to different things. Paul refers to the initial declaration of a sinner’s innocence before God; James to the ultimate verdict of innocence pronounced over a person at the last judgment. While a sinner can get into relationship with God only by faith (Paul), the ultimate validation [proof] of that relationship takes into account the works that true faith must inevitably produce (James). D.Moo, *The Letter of James*, p.141-142.

- However, the controversy over the relationship of Paul to James has masked what the “works” are that James asserts are absolutely, inevitably the product of saving faith. James says if you have faith but look at others without adequate resources and do “nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? Faith...if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” (2:16-17) What then are the ‘works’ that James is talking about? He is saying something very radical: “A life poured out in deeds of service to the poor is the inevitable sign of any real, true, gospel-faith.”
- James essentially says the same thing in 1:27 when he ties the so-called ‘spiritual’ and ‘social’ aspects of living together into a seamless cloth. He writes: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. Notice that along with a pure heart, untainted by worldliness (a very ‘conservative’ sounding value!) is an equally important commitment to help those without social and economic power (a very ‘liberal’ sounding value!) James, unlike the contemporary church, has no trouble weaving them together, inextricably linked. Gospel faith in the heart inevitably expresses itself in such a life.
- Why would he say that? In James 1:9-10 he says that the poor Christian ‘ought to take pride in his high position’ but the rich Christian ‘ought to take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.’ This is a wonderfully paradoxical statement. Every Christian in Christ is at the same time a sinner who deserves disintegration and death and an adopted child of God, fully accepted and loved. This of course is true if you are a Christians regardless of your social status.
  - But James proposes that the poor person who becomes a believer would spiritually benefit by especially thinking about his or her new (in the gospel) high spiritual status, since out in the world he gets nothing but disdain.
  - And on the other hand James proposes that the rich person who becomes a believer would spiritually benefit by especially thinking about his or her new (in the gospel) realization of sinfulness before God, since out in the world he gets nothing but acclaim. His worldly riches (his identity as a wealthy person) is spiritually worthless, it will pass away.
  - Here we see why later James can say that concern for the poor and generous sharing of wealth is the inevitable sign of someone who has understood the gospel of grace. We are all spiritually bankrupt and saved by sheer generosity. The gospel gives us new identities that completely undermine the roles assigned to us in the world.
    - This reinforced in 2:1-4 where James warns Christians not to show preference or favoritism for the rich within the church. ‘If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothing and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man...“Sit on the floor”...have you not discriminated among yourselves?’ The poor person, whose rough speech, manner, and clothing are disdained in the world, must not be treated disrespectfully in the community of Jesus. Nor should the wealthy be treated with inordinate respect.
    - The world makes these things into bottom line identities. You *are* your social status and bank account--that is the basis for your self-value and self-regard. But in the

gospel these things are de-moted and made peripheral. Someone who does not show any signs of (at least gradual!) identity transformation along these lines does not give evidence of having really grasped the gospel. If you believe that you are saved by your goodness and merit, you will continue to base your identity in your performance and status and continue to evaluate people's *beings* in terms of their economic/social status. But if you are a sinner saved by grace that has to change. Thus James can say that faith without *respect, love, and practical concern for the poor* is dead. It's not gospel faith. Wow.

- James 5:1-6 contains one of the most severe condemnation of those who keep their wealth to themselves. *"You have hoarded wealth in the last days....Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence..."*
  - Doug Moo points out in his *James* commentary that in the 1<sup>st</sup> century the gap between rich and poor was widening. 'Small farmers' increasingly could not make ends meet and hired themselves out to the large landowners who were becoming more and more powerful. They were in a position to pay workers very poorly, often refusing to pay them for their last few days of work. There was nothing the workers could do about it. The landowners could offer such low wages because that was what the market could bear.
  - What makes this outcry interesting is that James is not simply complaining that the elites were not generous enough in their charity (though that is implied in the statement about their *living in luxury*) Rather, he condemns them in the strongest terms by simply paying the workmen the going rate at a time when the 'going rate' was practically inadequate for the needs of poor families. The current local economy was, therefore, unjust. James is not condemning them only for a lack of *mercy* but for a lack of *justice*.
  - Even a relatively conservative commentator like Craig Blomberg is moved to conclude that it is not enough for us to be charitable with our wealth. Even being involved in a normal market economy can be wrong if the economy grinds the poor. Blomberg writes: *"Christians need to reflect long and hard on this passage in James. In many countries today, vast tracts of land are owned by a handful of wealthy people or, in many instances, by large multi-national corporations that fail to pay decent wages. To what extent do we tacitly endorse such injustice by our purchases....or by supporting tax cuts for the upper and middle classes, when programs helping the poor at home and abroad are slashed in the process and not likely to be replaced by private-sector equivalents?"* (Blomberg, p.158.) That kind of statement is remarkable considering how conservative Blomberg is in his exegesis and his theology. The text, however, pushes him to ask such questions.

In summary-- God has a special (but not exclusive) concern for the poor of the world, and the church must reflect that in the most practical ways. Anyone who has a surplus of goods with which they could help others, but who refuses to do so, calls into question one's very understanding of and commitment to the gospel.

## VI. PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR WHOLISTIC MINISTRY.

## *A. Levels of wholistic ministry*

### **1. Relief.**

This is direct aid to meet physical/material/social needs. The Good Samaritan provides physical protection, emergency medical treatment, and a rent subsidy (Luke 10:30-35). Common relief ministries are temporary shelter for the homeless, food and clothing services for people in dire need, medical services, crisis counseling, and so on. A more active form of relief is "advocacy", in which people in need are given active assistance to get legal aid, help them find housing, and find other kinds of aid. In general, Christians are fairly open and active in these kinds of ministries. They are the most obvious, the most concrete and easy to define, provide the quickest emotional payoff, are the least expensive, and require the least effort and skill to carry out. But relief programs alone can create patterns of dependency.

### **2. Development.**

What is needed is to bring a person or community to self-sufficiency. In the OT, when a slave's debt was erased and he was released, God directed that his former master send him out with grain, tools, and resources for a new, self-sufficient economic life (Deut.15:13-14). "Economic development" includes education, job creation and training, housing development and home ownership, capital investments in a community, and so on--all these are means of economic development.

### **3. Reform.**

Social reform moves beyond relief of immediate needs and dependency and seeks to change social conditions and structures which aggravate or cause that dependency. Job tells us that he not only clothed the naked, but he "broke the fangs of the wicked and made them drop their victims" (Job 29:17). The prophets denounced unfair wages (Jer.22:13), corrupt business practices (Amos 8:2,6), legal systems weighted in favor of the rich and influential (Deut.24:17; Lev.19:15), a system of lending capital that gouges the person of modest means (Lev.19:35-37; 25:37; Ex.22:25-27). Daniel calls a pagan government to account for its lack of mercy to the poor (Dan.4:27). This means that Christians should also work for a particular community to get better police protection, more just and fair banking practices, zoning practices, better laws, etc.

## *B. Strategies for wholistic ministry.*

Over the last 50 years Americans have been isolated from one another into tightly zoned, large, separate regions of economic sameness. Thus the unskilled and the economically weaker people are warehoused into vast neighborhoods that are now blighted. It is no solution to simply rescue the isolated individual out of these places. What can we do to transform and rebuild them? All three of the following strategies will be necessary to help rebuild a neighborhood.

There are three specific parts to Christian Community Development. Each one contrasts with the other two models for helping the city--the older "Private Charity" model and the newer "Government Program" model.

1. ***Reneighboring*** (vs. commuting). The main reason that the city has deteriorated has been because the middle class and able, stable families have left behind the less stable and able. Traditional private charity and government bureaucracy only provide impersonal "commuting" compassion from people who drive in, provide services, and leave.

*"It is not difficult to create a ghetto: simply remove the more capable neighbors....We can create a culture of chronically dependent people merely by extracting the upwardly mobile role models from the community....All it takes is for us to pursue our own personal dreams and concentrate only on what seems best for our own families and leave the job of being a good neighbor--neighboring--to agencies. Those left behind...do not need more arm's length social services--government or religious. If social programs were effective substitutes for neighbors, the last thirty years of costly government investments would have eliminated their poverty. Programs do not restore communities--only neighbors do that....they need [once again] educated neighbors to raise the standards of their schools. They need politically active neighbors who will help to organize against crime and drugs on their streets and playgrounds. They need spiritual neighbors to re-open the churches and business-minded neighbors to stimulate legitimate enterprise. They need handy neighbors to help restore the charm of their streetscapes. They need the sturdy strands of neighbors with moral and ethical values..."<sup>4</sup>*

Jesus, of course, has spoken powerfully about the definition of being a "neighbor" to others (Luke 10: 25-37). We must distinguish "renewing" from mere relocation, which can lead to gentrification, which pushes up rents and pushes out the needy from a community. Re-neighboring means to come in looking to be an influence on the common good of the community and aiming to do "reweaving" and "reconciliation".

[We must remember that communities of need will need plenty of volunteer help from people who do not live in the community. But the leaders and main service providers must live in the neighborhood of need.]

2. ***Reweaving*** (vs. individualism). This is to move beyond the simple development of individuals and to look at a neighborhood as a whole, as a series of systems. Traditional private charity and government bureaucracy tend to look on poor individuals as "cases", people to be served. Both tend to simply put money into the hands of the needy. John Perkins wrote that simply putting welfare checks in the hands of the poor in small towns only ended up transferring capital into the accounts of the wealthy bankers and store owners on the other side of town. When Perkins helped people form farming co-ops, housing co-ops, and credit unions, they were able to develop their neighborhoods, keeping money, jobs, and training there.<sup>5</sup> Reweaving looks at a neighborhood systemically and aims to heal those broken systems and lift up the whole community.

<sup>4</sup> Robert D. Lupton, *Return Flight: Community Development through Reneighboring our Cities* (Atlanta: FCS, 1993), p.17

<sup>5</sup> John Perkins, *With Justice for All*, (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1982), pp. 146-166).

A healthy neighborhood is one with safe streets, honest/responsive public institutions, physical beauty, good schools, a good economy, good social-recreational opportunities, and wide participation in political life.<sup>6</sup> "Reweaving" aims to bring these things about. There must be a full range of measures designed to redirect the flow of financial capital, social capital, and spiritual capital back into the community instead of out of the community.

"Financial capital" refers to economic viability. A community must be able to attract businesses that provide goods and services that not serve consumers but which brings and keeps wealth and financial capital in the community. Typically, in blighted neighborhoods, there are few jobs, and the businesses that are there (even the banks) are those that take capital from local consumers and spend and invest it in other neighborhoods. Most institutions in poor communities are service providing (like hospitals, clinics, government centers, and schools). Most of the employees receive salaries from the government, but they neither live nor spend it in the neighborhood where they work. All this creates a flow of financial capital out of the community.

"Social capital" refers to the training and retaining of local leadership. For this to occur, the local schools must be strong and local institutions must employ people from the community, since that is the way that persons become more valuable and productive as they grow in their skills. Typically, in blighted neighborhoods, the schools are terrible and the businesses and institutions are run by people who do not live there. All this creates a flow of "social capital" out of the community.

"Spiritual capital" refers to the spiritual and moral influence of the churches in the neighborhood. The weakening of neighborhoods economically and socially goes hand in hand with their spiritual weakening. Strong Christians have left as fast (if not faster) than others. This leaves little leadership for the weakened churches. In addition, another dynamic has created a flow of spiritual capital out of the community.

*"Progressive thought in free America has redefined our constitutional guarantees of separation of church and state to mean that the two should have no working relationship with each other. Consequently...the expression of religious values has largely been muted in public education and social services. The church, which is often the last remaining bastion of hope within a disintegrating community, has repeatedly been sidelined by policies that, under the banner of fairness, discredit the best thing the community has left....Any sound strategy for community development must recognize the importance of the human spirit, acknowledge the need for the cultivation of spiritual and moral values...."*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.



**3. Reconciliation** (vs. paternalism). Traditional private charity and government bureaucracy leave the poor neighbors themselves "out of the loop". The care providers are often of a different race than the care receivers, who are seen as weak and helpless.

Christian community development seeks out the leaders of the needy community for real partnership. Not only do servant-Christians move into the community of need, but residents of the community are listened to and moved into partnership in the ministry. Mutual respect between the races is embodied in the churches planted and in the new institutions, businesses, and ministries begun.

Christians leading out in community development have a theology of race and racism which is lived out continually in the city. (See Week 4, above for more detail.)

**a. Origins.**

Genesis 10-11 tells how sin has caused races and cultures to be alienated from each other. Acts 2 shows us a reversing of the curse of Babel as the gospel buries racial hatred and cultural differences to unite men and women together in Christ.

**b. Definitions.**

Racism is inequitable treatment on the basis of one's race. God says: "*Do not consider his appearance or his height...the Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart*" (I Sam.16:7). There is hardly a more clear Biblical basis for the ideal as put by Martin Luther King, that we should judge by the "content of...character" not by the color of skin.

Another way to put it: racism is the placing of race over character. Miriam is cursed because she regarded Moses' wife on a racial basis over her spiritual condition (Numbers 12). Jonah is condemned because he is regarding Nineveh primarily on the basis of race and politics (their prosperity threatened Israel), instead on the basis of their spiritual need. Jonah 4:10 - *one hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left [spiritually]...Should I not be concerned about that great city?"*

Peter, through a vision and the conversion of Cornelius, must be taught about the sinfulness of "favoritism" (Acts 9:34, Grk *prosopolempsia*). Favoritism was forbidden to judges in OT (Lev.19:15), but now Peter sees he has been practicing it in his attitudes toward Gentiles. "*God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean*", he says, and then "*I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation those who fear him and do what is right.*" (Acts 9:35-37)

**c. Healing.**

In Acts 10-11 God showed Peter that anyone regardless of race and culture was equally lost in sin and equally loved in Christ, because salvation is totally by grace. Cornelius was brought into salvation not by his pedigree but by Christ's pedigree. Yet sometime

later Paul saw Peter refusing to eat with Gentile Christians, and he confronted him about his racism. But how? He did not say, "you are breaking the rule against racism", but he said, "they were not acting *in line with the gospel*" (Gal.2:14). To act "in line with the gospel" is to take the fact that we are sinners saved by sheer grace and draw out the implications and live in total consistency with that. Racial prejudice is wrong *because it is a denial of the very principle of grace vs. works.*

*"Once faith is exercised, a Christian is free...to wear his culture like a comfortable suit of clothes. He can shift to other cultural clothing temporarily if he wishes to do so, as Paul suggests in I Corinthians 9:19-23, and he is released to admire and appreciate the differing expressions of Christ shining out through other cultures."*<sup>8</sup>

When this theology of grace and race permeates the consciousness of a church, the resulting unity of relationships becomes both a means to "reneighboring" and "reweaving", plus a direct witness to the world of the reality of the gospel

### ***C. Local policy issues.***

As soon as a church engages in wholistic ministry it will soon run up against a number of practical policy issues. Often people with the same basic vision will disagree on them. Any church will have to come to consensus on them. They include:

**1. Level of priority.** *How much should we help?* Justice/service ministry is very expensive. How much of a priority should it be in relationship to other ministries? Should a church wait until it is bigger and established before you do something in this area? The needs are endless--so how can you know what percentage of the church's energy and money should go into it?

**2. Defining 'the poor'.** *Who should we help?* How 'needy' must someone be? How do we define 'need' and be sure we are serving those we should? What if someone in your church says: "We are helping *him*? Why he's not so bad off!"

**3. Conditions or unrestricted?** *When (under what conditions if any) do you help?* What should be required of those we help? Anything? Do you require that the persons come to your church or some ministry? Should you work more with members than non-members?

**4. Justice or only mercy?** *In what way do we help?* We mentioned that justice ministry can consist of helping individuals through simple relief--but it could also mean taking on the unjust social systems within needy individuals live. Should the church 'get into politics' or stick with feeding the hungry?

**5. Living there or coming in?** *From where should we help?* This is not simple. Should we move into areas of 'need' or work from where we already live? Will 'moving in' only lead to gentrification?

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, p.199.

**6. Respect or just pity?** *With what attitude should we help?* Do we help the poor by deciding what they need or by asking them, learning from them, sharing power with them in making decisions? How do we do that when they often seem (to us) less capable?

How do we answer these questions? Each church will have to come to a position that to some degree is a 'both-and' answer since each of these controversial areas is problematic because we need to hold in balance different aspects of the Bible's teaching. We need compassion *and* respect, justice *and* mercy, few conditions first and more requirements as time goes on, both those that live with the poor and those who help from the outside.

Keep this in mind--a) always try to 'err' on the side of being generous. b) always stay flexible and open to cases that don't fit the old policies.