

## THE DEAREST PLACE ON EARTH (18)

### A Merciful Community

#### A. Introduction

1. The local church is a community of God's people.

2. What kind of community should we be?

When people look at this local church what should they see?

3. The local church should be both an evangelistic community and a merciful community.

"Christians should not be concerned about poverty and social conditions, but about saving souls."

Evangelism is more important, not because the spiritual is more important than the physical, but because the eternal is more important than the temporal.

Yet both are needed.

*"It is unthinkable that we could truly love an individual and not want both to share the gospel as well as to meet the person's basic human needs."* (Tim Keller)

When the gospel is preached, people respond in faith, and faith is always accompanied by deeds.

#### B. Two kinds of needs both caused by sin

1. Physically poverty.

Oppression – any social condition or unfair treatment that brings or keeps a person in poverty.

"If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a money-lender; charge him no interest." (Exodus 22:25)

"Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin." (Deuteronomy 24:15)

"Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly." (Leviticus 19:5)

"You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins." (Amos 5:11-12)

Natural Disasters.

"And all the countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the world." (Genesis 41:57)

Personal actions.

"Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest." (Proverbs 6:6-7)

"For drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags." (Proverbs 23:21)

"He who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich." (Proverbs 21:17)

## 2. Spiritual poverty.

Not everyone is physically poor, but everyone is spiritually poor because of sin.

Those who recognise they are spiritually poor will trust in Jesus for salvation.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:3)

## 3. The root cause of poverty is sin.

*"The Fall has made poverty the default setting, an ever-present gravitational pull intent on dragging us down."* (Aaron Armstrong)

*"If we had stayed in perfect fellowship with God, we would nevertheless have had needs. However, we would have known no pain, since all our needs would have been immediately and continually met in Him."* (Tim Keller)

As long as there is sin, there will be both physical and spiritual poverty.

## C. What is our responsibility to those in need physically?

### 1. God commands His people to love their neighbour and to take up the care and cause of widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor.

"Jesus replied: 'Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40)

This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Administer true justice: show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.'" (Zechariah 7:10-11)

"The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:37)

### 2. To ignore the needs of the poor is to sin against God.

"He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God." (Proverbs 14:31)

"He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done." (Proverbs 19:17)

### 3. God told Israel that there should be no poor among them.

"However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today." (Deuteronomy 15:4-5)

If Israel kept God's laws there would have been no permanent long-term poverty in Israel.

Looking after the poor was a way that Israel could display God's glory and character to the world.

"Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as the body of laws I am setting before you today?" (Deuteronomy 4:6-8)

God is a Father to the fatherless and a defender of widows.

"A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling." (Psalm 68:5)

4. Jesus both preached the gospel and met the physical needs of people.

"He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people." (Luke 24:19)

"I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat." (Mark 8:2)

5. An essential mark of being a Christian is helping those in need.

"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." (John 20:21)

"Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (Mark 10:27)

"What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptised. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse falsely – be content with your pay." (Luke 3:10-14)

"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" (1 John 3:17)

6. The early church was an example of a merciful community.

"Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." (Acts 2:45)

"There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need." (Acts 4:34-35)

#### **D. How should we help those in need physically?**

1. Our focus.

Our first responsibility is to help those who are closest to us (family).

"If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." (1 Timothy 5:8)

Our next responsibility is to other believers – local church, then believers further away.

"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." (Galatians 6:10)

We also have responsibility to non-Christians in need when opportunities arise.

We must make sure that we are not ignoring needs that are right in front of us.

We should have a special concern for those who cannot help themselves.

Those in need who are false teachers or lazy we should not help.

2. Our motivation.

We should help those in need out of love for God who has made people in His image.

"And from every man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man." (Genesis 9:5-6)

*"Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God. One day we will learn that. We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man."* (Martin Luther King Jr.)

We should help those in need in response to God's grace saving us.

"And you are to love those are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt." (Deuteronomy 10:16-19)

*"Only if you see that you have been saved graciously by someone who owes you the opposite will you go out into the world looking to help absolutely anyone in need."* (Tim Keller)

We don't help those in need simply to gain an opportunity to share the gospel, although it might lead to one.

Emperor Julian: *"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."*

### 3. Our actions.

Those in need require both relief and development.

Relief = direct aid to meet immediate needs.

Development = help with moving to self-sufficiency.

Local churches should provide relief and development to their own needy members (see Acts 6:1-7), and certainly relief to the needy in their community they are seeking to evangelise.

Local churches should equip and encourage their members to start or get involved in organisations that are involved in development for non-Christians in need, rather than running these ministries.

The priority of the local church is to preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations.

Individually we must do all we can with the resources we have. But we are not all called to serve those in need in the same way or to the same extent.

### 4. Our expectations.

Jesus says the poor will always be with us.

"The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me." (Mark 14:7)

We will never be able to eliminate poverty so we should not feel guilty about the presence of the poor.

We will always have an opportunity to serve Christ by caring for the poor – although you are not called to meet every need.

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25:37-40)

A day is coming when Jesus will end poverty.