



UNDERSTANDING POVERTY

LESSON ONE: "THE POOR WILL ALWAYS BE WITH YOU"

STORY FOR THE DAY

A church has just received a \$50,000 bequest. On the church's business meeting agenda is a discussion of how best to use this money. Each church committee has a suggestion: the worship committee wants to renovate the sanctuary to make it more "seeker-friendly"; the children's committee wants to update the children's wing because, "after all, they are the future of the church"; the education committee wants to develop a program on discipleship for the church; and the outreach committee wants to use the money to help those living in poverty in their community meet their basic needs. After much discussion, one frustrated member raises her hand and states, "I don't know why we are arguing about this. We should use our money for programs related to the church. We can split the money between worship, children, and the education committees. After all, didn't Jesus say that the poor will always be with us?"

I'm sure we've all heard a story similar to this one or at least we've heard that phrase before. Does this story ring true to any of you? Where did you first hear "the poor will always be with us"? Who first told it to you? How did you respond?

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

"The poor will always be with you"

This phrase is first used in Deuteronomy and is spoken by Jesus in the New Testament in these four passages in the Bible.

- Deuteronomy 15:1-11 (NASB)
- Mark 14:3-9/ Matthew 26:1-13
- John 12:1-8

COMMONALITIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament passages have several characteristics in common. Each:

- occurs during a scene of a woman (John identifies her as Mary, Martha's sister) anointing Jesus.
- occurs during Passover and Jesus' final week on earth.
- recognizes that the perfume was valuable and the money from selling it could be used to help the poor.
- recognizes Jesus' anointing is preparation for his burial.
- claims that while the poor will always be among us, Jesus will not.

CONTEXT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

To determine Jesus' meaning behind this phrase we must look at the context of the New Testament passages:

- In each of the passages, this phrase is set within the context of a woman showing her total devotion to Jesus.
- In each passage, Jesus says that while the poor will always be with us, he will not.
- The emphasis is on total devotion to Jesus and preparation for his death.
- The passage directly preceding Matthew 26 is the passage on judgment between those who helped

the stranger who was hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned – “the least of these” – and those who did not.

- In each of these passages, Jesus is referring to Deuteronomy 15:11 and the laws regarding the poor neighbor:

DEUTERONOMY 15:1-11

In order for us to understand the reference Jesus was making when he stated “the poor will always be with you,” we need to look at Deuteronomy 15:1-11. In this passage, God commands:

- Remission of debts every seventh year (v.1)
- Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted but open your hand willingly to those who are needy in your community (vv. 7-8, 11)

In verse 11, we find the phrases “*Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’*” This is not a command to cease helping because the poor are always with us, but to continue to help. Poverty is not an unsolvable condition. Verses 4-5 point to this:

“However, there will be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today.”

Here it is clear that if the Israelites followed the commands of God to do justice and love mercy (including the remission of debts and willing and generous giving), then there would be no poor among them in their community. However, the Israelites did not live by this command.

BRINGING TOGETHER DEUTERONOMY AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Now let us look at this passage in conjunction with the three New Testament passages and with Jesus’ concern for the poor throughout the Gospels (Matthew 5, 11, 19, 25, 26; Mark 10; Luke 4, 6, 12, 14, 18; and John 12). The message is clear: We are to have total devotion to Jesus, and that includes taking care of the poor. It is not an excuse to ignore the poor because they will always be with us.

» MAKING IT REAL

Is this interpretation of “the poor will always be among us” new or different to you? What are your thoughts and feelings as you hear this lesson? Does it impact how you think about helping the poor? How would you explain the phrase to other people who might use it as a reason for not helping people experiencing poverty?

Spend 3-5 minutes discussing these questions with the people at your table.

CLASS DISCUSSION

We began the lesson with a story about how a church should use the sum of money it has just inherited. In that story, we see some relevant concerns about how to be faithful stewards to those within the church and those outside of it.

1. How do we balance our responsibility to care for the things (buildings, programs, etc.) that have been entrusted to us, while also caring for the people around us who experience need?
2. In Matthew, the judgment based on caring for people in need directly precedes the passage of anointing Jesus. What do you think the writer is trying to tell us by placing them so closely together?
3. How does caring for people experiencing poverty strengthen our relationship with and devotion to God?
4. For us, how does being devoted to Jesus connect with caring for people who are poor?

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Read Deuteronomy 15:1-5. Spend a few minutes in silence reflecting or journaling on this passage.

BENEDICTION

"I asked God for strength that I might achieve. I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health that I might do greater things. I was given infirmity that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy. I was given poverty that I might be wise. I asked for power that I might have the praise of men. I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life. I was given life that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am, among all people, most richly blessed."

Source: Unknown

CALL TO BE ATTENTIVE

This week look at the resources in your church and your home. What is one creative way that you can use one resource to help one person?



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Money doesn't grow on trees!

Charity begins at home.

Let the government take care of them.

Have you ever heard any of these expressions? Or said them yourself? Think about where you first heard these comments and what you think about them at this stage in your life.

