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Teaching Leaflet

Understanding Poverty



Lesson One: The Poor Will Always Be With You

“Biblical Commentary”

This teaching leaflet provides background information on the passages of scripture used in this lesson.

Deuteronomy 15

The book of Deuteronomy is a book of law outlining how the Israelites were to live and worship in the Promised Land. It is what constitutes the covenant between Yahweh and the children of Israel. Chapter 15 is to be understood as instructions for worship as this chapter is situated in a section of Deuteronomy focused on describing the worship codes. The previous chapter, Deuteronomy 14, separates animals into clean and unclean. If a person were to eat or touch an unclean animal, he or she would be considered unclean. One must be clean in order to enter the temple for worship. Therefore, it was important to abstain from unclean animals in order to be suitable for worship. The following chapter, Deuteronomy 16, discusses the Passover feast and other festivals within the Israelites' worship calendar.

Deuteronomy 15 can be seen as a foreshadowing of God's remarks in Isaiah 58:6-7 when God states what God requires from worship:

Is this not the fast which I choose,
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free
And break every yoke?
“Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;
And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

In this way, Deuteronomy 15 is outlining the way in which the Israelites were to live their lives as worship to God. The Israelites were to observe the sabbatical year every seventh year in which debts were to be forgiven (vv. 1-3). They were to open their hearts and hands to those in need providing whatever they lack (vv. 7-10). There were to be no stipulations. If there was a need, it was to be met.

Deuteronomy 15:11 begins, “the poor will never cease to be in the land” and seems to be in direct contradiction to Deuteronomy 15:4, “there will be no poor among you, since the LORD will surely bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess.” This is not, however, a contradiction. Deuteronomy 15:5 clarifies verse four, “if only you listen obediently to the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today.” There would have been no poor among them if they had kept the commands God laid out above. God knows the brokenness of humanity and knows that the Israelites would not keep these commands, and therefore states that the poor will always be among us. Since this is the reality in which we all live, we are to “freely open [our] hand to [our] brother [and sister], to [our] needy and poor in [our] land” (Deuteronomy 15:11).

Matthew 26:1-13, Mark 14:3-9, and John 12:1-8

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The story of the woman at Bethany is found in both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Mark. The chapters begin with the priests plotting to kill Jesus and includes Jesus' stop in Bethany, Judas' meeting with the priests, Jesus' last meal with the disciples, Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, and Jesus' arrest and questioning. Jesus stopped in Bethany to visit his friend Simon for the Pass-over feast when a woman breaks a perfume bottle on Jesus' head and anoints him.

This scene is Jesus' preparation for burial, which he calls "a beautiful thing" (Mark 14:6). In Matthew, it is the disciples who complain about the "waste" of expensive perfume. They knew that Jesus was always working to help others in need and believed that he would see this as a waste of a valuable commodity that could bring enough money to help others. Jesus, however, knew the heart of the woman. He knew that this anointing was showing her devotion to him and knew that this was preparation for his death and burial.

In John's account of the story, we uncover a few additional details. The woman anointing Jesus is identified as Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha. Mary pours the perfume on Jesus' feet, not his head as it is recorded in Matthew and Mark. This variation may be told as a way of mirroring the scene of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. John also identifies the questioning disciple as Judas, who will later betray Jesus. Judas was the money keeper, which may explain his knowledge of the price of the perfume and his concern with such a costly gift. It is interesting that the one who turns Jesus over to death plays a prominent role in the act that is his preparation for death and burial.

Jesus' reference to the poor always being with us what not meant to be a justification for not caring for those in need. It was meant to be a way of recognizing this woman's devotion and love. Jesus wanted the disciples to always be working to help people in need, but they would not always have an opportunity to show their devotion to Jesus in this way. Jesus was rebuking them for criticizing the woman for her seemingly extravagant love and devotion when this is exactly what they should have been doing – worshipping God and serving others.