

An Inconvenient Truth

by David Servant

The church's failure to prioritize caring for the poor is a stark contrast to the biblical responsibility to love and serve our neighbors, and is a clear indication of our love of money and materialism.

Scripture: Matthew 25:41, Acts 2:44, Galatians 2:9, James 2:14, 1 John 3:14

Topics: "Caring For Poor", "Social Justice"

Description

David Servant delivers a powerful sermon on the biblical responsibility to care for the poor, highlighting the stark contrast between our indifference towards the suffering of others and our obsession with trivial matters. He emphasizes the apostolic priority of caring for the poor and challenges modern churches to follow this example. Drawing from Scriptures, he reveals how Jesus and the apostles placed great importance on helping those in need, making it a litmus test of authentic salvation.

Transcript

Provocative communicator Tony Campolo has been known to begin sermons with the following words:

I have three things I want to tell you. First, while you were sleeping last night, 30,000 children died of starvation or diseases related to malnutrition.

Second, most of you don't give a sh**.

Then, after a pause to allow some inward reaction to his first two statements, Tony drops the bomb:

What is even worse is that you are more upset that I used the word sh** than you are that 30,000 children died last night.

A point well made, and it indicts all of us. Most of us would seriously consider looking for a new church if the pastor used the word sh** twice during a sermon. Yet how many of us would be perfectly content to sit in a church for ten years without hearing a single sermon on our biblical responsibility to care for the poor? This reveals our tendency to strain out gnats and swallow camels.

Our biblical responsibility to care for the poor, especially the poor among our own spiritual family, is an inconvenient truth that receives much less sermon time these days than does global warming. Yet it is no obscure subject in Scripture. It was high on the list of priorities of the apostles. When, for example, the apostle Paul traveled to Jerusalem to submit to Peter, James and John (the top guys) the gospel that he'd

been preaching, they gave him three thumbs up and a reminder. Paul later recounted their meeting:

And recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They only asked us to remember the poor--the very thing I also was eager to do (Gal. 2:9-10).

In the minds of Peter, James and John, caring for the poor was second only to proclaiming the gospel. How many churches and ministries today can rightly claim they are following that apostolic pattern?

Peter, James and John practiced what they preached to Paul. Right from the beginning we find that as they taught their thousands of new disciples in Jerusalem to obey all of Christ's commandments (as He had commanded them; Matt. 28:20), they didn't neglect to teach them to give to the poor (as He had commanded):

And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need (Acts 2:44-45).

That is, those first believers did exactly what Jesus commanded His followers to do, selling their possessions to lay up treasure in heaven by giving to the poor (see Luke 12:33).

And we read just two chapters later in Acts this description of early church life:

And abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need (Acts 4:33b-35).

Clearly, a major part of the ministry of the apostles in Jerusalem was caring for the poor.

In Acts 6 we find those same apostles working out a way to ensure that no widows in Jerusalem would be overlooked in the daily serving of food.

The apostles also preached what they practiced. How important, in their minds, was caring for the poor among their spiritual family? They wrote of it as being the litmus test of authentic salvation. For example, John wrote:

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death....But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him (1 John 3:14, 17-19, emphasis added).

James wrote:

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? [The answer is obviously "no." So what example does James then offer of dead faith that cannot save? Read on...] If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself (Jas. 2:14-17, emphasis added).

Paul, who expended lots of effort raising money for poor believers, wrote:

But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints...For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or greedy man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God (Eph. 5:3,5).

These three scriptures weren't original thoughts by John, James and Peter. It was Jesus who made it ever so plain that caring for the poor and persecuted among His family would be an issue that would be brought up when we stand before Him, and is what will determine our eternal destiny in heaven or hell:

Then He will also say to those on His left, "Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me."

Then they themselves also will answer, "Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?"

Then He will answer them, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me."

These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matt. 25:41-46).

This scripture is so plain that only a theologian could misinterpret it. (And they often do.) Why do so many within the church ignore Jesus' plain warning? Why do so few pastors ever mention this?

This passage of Scripture (and others like it) also helps us understand who Jesus considers to be the most needy---those without food, water, shelter, clothing, those who are ill (I suspect Jesus was talking about illnesses that are beyond a common cold) and imprisoned (I suspect imprisoned for their faith...not that those who are incarcerated for crimes and who later are saved in prison should be forgotten).

All of this being so, we should focus our charity first of all towards our brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering in these desperate ways. I stress "our brothers and sisters in Christ," because they are who Jesus had in mind when He spoke of those who were hungry, thirsty, naked, and so on. He called them "these brothers of mine" (Matt. 25:40). Jesus is not the brother of those who are not submitted to Him (see Matt. 12:48-50).

This is not to say, however, that we have no responsibility to assist those who are not submitted to Jesus. We are commanded to love our enemies, and that includes meeting their pressing needs also (see Proverbs 25:21, Romans 12:20).

I think that one issue that we face living in the Western World (what I often refer to as "Disneyland"), is that we rarely stumble upon Christians who are facing the desperate situations that Jesus described. Those in the Western church who get anywhere close to those kinds of sufferings generally have plenty of safety nets, starting with relatives and continuing with social services run by churches, community organizations and governments. And if you've ever worked in a food bank, you've probably noticed that a good percentage of the people who come to pick up food are overweight. Even our street beggars usually don't look like they're starving.

In the last church I pastored, we had a "benevolence fund" that we would dip into to help people in our church who hit on "hard times." I remember being tempted to say to one couple who requested help (and whom we had already helped previously), "Has it gotten so bad that you've had to cancel your cable TV subscription, turn in your cell phones, and put your dogs to sleep?" They were struggling to get by on his \$40,000 salary.

The fact is, there is no one who is poor living in the Western World. Keep in mind that one-half of the world lives on less than two dollars a day. If your annual income is more than \$3,000, you are in the top 15% of the world's people (see www.GlobalRichList.com). This is very difficult for us to comprehend because we live among the millions of the world's elite. But there are people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America who are reading this article right now, and they have an entirely different perspective than you or I do. Unlike us, many are living in nations where they do not enjoy the rule of law, strong private property rights, or political and economic freedom to the degree that we do, making it practically impossible for most people to prosper.

Again, it is very difficult for most who are reading this to comprehend how wealthy we are compared to the rest of the world. Take a look at these statistics that show what the hourly base wage is for those who work in the apparel industry around the world. (These figures are ten years old):

Country: Hourly wage:

U.S. \$8.42

Canada \$6.70

Philippines \$0.62

El Salvador \$0.60

Mexico \$0.54

Honduras \$0.43

China \$0.30

Nicaragua \$0.25

Indonesia \$0.22

India \$0.20

Bangladesh \$0.17

I just checked the tag on the shirt I'm wearing right now. It was made in Bangladesh. Am I supposed to feel good that by purchasing this shirt, I helped provide a job for someone in Bangladesh that pays her 17 cents an hour?

There have been some very interesting photos being forwarded around the internet lately that show many families around the world with a week's worth of the food that they consume, along with the dollar cost. (I have added those photos at the end of this article.) As you work your way down through those photos, it solicits your sympathies as you see how little some people spend on food each week. But what most

people don't realize is that, of the fifteen family photos, the families in the first twelve photos are (most likely) not poor at all by the world's standards. It is only the last three families (most likely) that fall below being in the richest half.

But, back to those 30,000 children, under age five, who die every day due to poverty. This daily tragedy never makes headlines. That is 210,000 children each week. About eleven million per year.

Imagine the horror of the world if a major earthquake were to occur and people stood by and watched without assisting the survivors! Yet every day, the equivalent of a major earthquake killing over 30,000 young children occurs to a disturbingly muted response. They die quietly in some of the poorest villages on earth, far removed from the scrutiny and the conscience of the world. Being meek and weak in life makes these dying multitudes even more invisible in death. ---- UNICEF, Progress of Nations 2000.

The greatest tragedy is that these statistics could change by the collective efforts of those who belong to Jesus. It has been estimated that basic health and nutrition needs could be provided for every starving person in the world for about 13 billion dollars annually (1). Americans currently spend about \$41 billion annually on their pets (2), \$93 billion on soft drinks (3), \$110 billion on fast food (4), \$30 billion on cosmetics (5), \$40 billion on dieting, diet books, diet programs, and diet food (6), \$201 billion on Christmas (7), \$18 billion on coffee (8) and \$64 billion on cable TV (9). If only one-tenth of Americans are actual Christians (82% claim to be), and if that one-tenth of all professing Christians just denied themselves one-fourth of the above non-necessities, it would free up 15 billion dollars to feed all the hungry people in the world.

If the essence of following Christ is self-denial (see Matt. 16:24), where are the followers of Christ? If the true disciples of Christ are to be known by their love for one another (see John 13:35), where are the true disciples of Christ? If we know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren (see 1 John 3:14), where are those who have passed from death to life? If it is only those who feed the hungry and clothe the naked among Jesus' family who inherit eternal life (see Matt. 25:31-46), where are those who are going to escape hell?

How can millions of professing Christians continue to fool themselves in light of what Scripture plainly teaches? The answer is this: The love of money blinds us. Jesus warned of "the deceitfulness of riches" (Matt. 13:22). That is, riches can deceive us. Jesus warned that when we are deceived by riches, His Word is "choked." That is, riches make God's Word ineffectual in our lives. It's somewhat akin to a story I once heard:

A man sat down on an airplane next to an attractive woman. He began to converse with her, and after about an hour into the flight he quietly made her an offer of a million dollars to sleep with her that night. She asked him if he was serious, and he assured her that he was. She thought about his proposal for a while, and eventually agreed. Once they were off the plane walking through the airport, they finalized their plans for a later rendezvous at a local hotel.

The man then said to the woman, "Look, to be honest with you, I really can't afford to pay you a million dollars. Would you be willing to do it for ten dollars?"

She glared at him with indignation and said with a raised voice, "What do you think I am? A..."

He interrupted her, replying, "Madam, we've already established what you are. Now we are just haggling over the price!"

She was convinced that she was a virtuous woman, but an opportunity to gain wealth proved she was really a prostitute at heart. Similarly, so many are convinced that they are heaven-bound Christians who love Jesus, but by their disregard of His poor brethren---because of their love of money---they prove otherwise.

Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food, and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy (Ezek. 16:49)

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