

Adria W. Pearson
John 12:7-8; Deut 15:4-11

Grace Community Church
July 18, 2010

"Loving Our Neighbors: The Poor You Will Always Have with You"

The phrase... comes from John 12:8, the words of Jesus, "you will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." I've heard people quote this as a reason for not doing much for the poor, or that Jesus is saying helping the poor is futile, it won't help solve the problem, so we might as well focus on more important things. Is that what Jesus meant?

Before we can understand, we had better read the whole passage. That's the first step in interpreting Scripture--you have to read a verse in context. For instance, what if you asked me what to do if a co-worker is bullying you, and I responded, "Go and do likewise." That would be taking a verse out of context! ... first read the whole passage and try to understand a verse in relation to its whole context.

[read text]

Was Jesus really saying that giving to the poor is not important? That we should focus on other things, like lost souls, Christian education, as some people have suggested? It looks to me like something else is going on in this passage.

context of Jesus' ministry

And to be honest, it is hard for me to believe this is what Jesus is saying, that... considering what he says elsewhere:

-- the speech he gave at the start of his ministry, his inaugural address if you will, says that it is part of his mission... we find it in Luke 4:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Luke 4 then continues: "Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'"

Jesus was reading from Isaiah 61, from the texts that describe the Messiah, the Lord's servant, and his future ministry -- Jesus is saying that he is *that* servant, and part of his mission will be to "proclaim good news to the poor"

-- not too much later in his ministry, John the Baptist sends his disciples to Jesus to ask if in fact, Jesus is the Messiah, and Jesus' answer is in Matthew 11:4-5-- Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor."

Jesus again echoes the prophets in his answer, saying, "see, I am doing what it was said the Messiah would do, and that includes the poor..." and indeed, he reached out frequently to those on the margins of society; he himself came from a poor family and depended on a few rich followers to fund his own ministry.

-- in several places, **Jesus' teaching** touched on the issue of the poor:

-- in Luke's version of the beatitudes, in Luke 6:20-26, Jesus says...,

Looking at his disciples, he said:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. [skipping down to verse 24]

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

I find it ironic how we much prefer Matthew's version, "blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness"...

-- in Luke 14:13, he urges his wealthy listeners, when they are giving a banquet, to "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed."

-- he taught in Matthew 25 that someday all the peoples would be before him, and he would judge them for what they did to the least of these, saying that righteous people, the ones that God favors, are the ones that reach out to the hungry, thirsty, the stranger, those who needed clothes, those who were sick or in prison.

-- he criticized the Pharisees for making a big deal of tithing from their herb plants, while neglecting the love of God, justice and being generous to the poor.

-- Jesus told parables on the issue of riches and poverty, justice and compassion: the foolish rich man, or the parable of the beggar Lazarus

-- in many of **Jesus' encounters** with people in the gospels, it was their possessions and pocketbook that were transformed -- consider Zaccheus, who once he has experienced Jesus' grace, gives half of his possessions to the poor and pays back those who he has cheated.

-- or the rich man who comes to Jesus and earnestly desires to be a good disciple, and Jesus tells him to sell all his possessions and give to the poor

So it's hard for me to understand how Jesus could be interpreted as saying that caring for the poor is not important or is somehow useless.

OT Background / Deut 15

So, let's consider the text again. Is there anything else we should know about the context? What about Old Testament background? Since Jesus is quoting here from Deuteronomy 15, we had better look at that passage, and understand how it might relate to this one.

Deuteronomy 15 is part of Moses' last speech to the Israelites before they enter the Promised Land, kind of Moses' summary of the Law, everything he wants them to remember.

-- Verses 1-3 talk about the seven year cycle they are to follow, where they are to cancel debts in the seventh year. Which would be an interesting topic in and of itself. Somehow debts might be related to poverty. Because starting in verse 4, Moses starts talking about the poor. [**read Deut 15:4-11**], and he goes on to talk about also freeing slaves in the seventh year.

Interesting that he says in verse 4, "there need be no poor people among you," sometimes translated, "because there shall not be any poor among you," why? because the Lord will surely bless them in the land.

-- in **God's ideal world**, there would not be any poor people. He set up the Law so that the Israelites would each have their own plot of land, to be passed down through the generations. Each person would have enough land to raise their own food, and as long as they followed the commands of the Lord, the Lord would bless the land and they would have enough to eat. *In God's ideal world, there would be*

enough for everyone. Did you know that some experts estimate that there is enough food in the world right now to feed everyone? But somehow it is not distributed fairly, and some do not have enough.

-- this is God's ideal, but Moses knows that **human reality** will prove different. he says in v. 7, "if" or "when" there is a poor person among you, be openhanded and lend freely to them. God's ways are the right ways, but we humans don't always follow them. Romans says that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." When sin entered the world, it damaged us, it damaged our institutions, our ways of doing things. Because we as humans walked away from God, the world is now a broken and imperfect place. Unfortunately, injustice happens. Resources are not always shared fairly.

-- It's true that some poverty is by choice.. Prov 10:4 states, "Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth." Certainly, in the ideal world, righteousness and hard work produce wealth. But then look at 13:23, "An unploughed field produces food for the poor, but injustice sweeps it away." Eccl 5:8 echoes this...

Unfortunately, injustice does happen. Humans and human systems are sinful. Some people may work hard, but still not have enough to live on. And we are not appointed their judges, why they are poor.

And so, there are **provisions in the Law for caring for the poor.** When farmers harvested their fields, they were to leave the edges and corners, for the less fortunate to come and take. In the book of Ruth, this is how Ruth ends up in Boaz's fields. Also, the Israelites were to give their tithes and firstfruits to the Levites, and some were distributed to others in need. These are just some of the regulations in the law concerning the poor.

Moses says in Deut 15, "Give generously and do so without a grudging heart." And here is where we see the the phrase that Jesus quotes, v11, immediately followed by... Because of the brokenness of this world and of humanity, there will always be poor people, and so *we must always be willing to give.*

Taking care of those who had needs, the poor, the foreigner, the widow, and the orphaned, was part of the Law that God gave Israel. Later, in the **prophets**, we hear the Lord judging them when they did not do this: Isaiah 3:13-15...

A few other examples: Isaiah 58, Jeremiah 2, Ezekiel 16, Amos 2 and 5, and so on.

Why was it so important for them to take care of the poor?

-- the Lord gave the Law to Israel as how they were to live and worship as God's people. *The Law set Israel apart as God's people.* And in so doing, they would be a testimony to all the other countries and peoples around them. Isaiah 49:6 says, "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." **[like a candle]** The Law was based on the **character of God**, so as they lived it out, they proclaimed the identity of God to their neighbors. Israel was meant to show the world, through the way they treated one another, who this God is.

In taking care of the poor among them, the Israelites would be reflecting the character of God. That God is a God who cares about each person, no matter how important they are in the world's eyes, and he has a heart for the vulnerable. Isaiah 25:4, "You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat." *Since God is a God of love and grace, and the Israelites were to give freely to those in need. Since God is a God of justice and righteousness, he wanted his people to all live in justice and do the right thing.* And as they cared for their neighbors in

need, they helped heal the brokenness of the world, reflecting their God the Redeemer, the one who takes broken things and put them back together.

Intent of John 12

So, when we come back to the passage in John 12, we have to read it in this light. Jesus, the disciples, and the onlookers would have known that the Law had provisions for taking care of the poor. They would have known the judgment written in the prophets and the promises for the Messiah.

We have to understand what Jesus is saying in *this* context. *Because caring for the poor was the "default mode" for God's people--they knew that.* So Jesus cannot be saying anything that would lessen our care and attention to the poor among us. One of the **principles of Biblical interpretation** is "the text cannot mean today what it could not have meant for the original hearers." [repeat] So, we cannot interpret this text in a way that justifies neglecting the poor. We *cannot* say, "okay, Jesus is on the scene now, so we can focus on more important things and leave the poor to themselves."

What then is Jesus saying--is he even making a statement about the poor?

Look at the second half of John 12:8: "*but you will not always have me.*" This is Jesus' point. This event happened right before the procession into Jerusalem, the final week before Jesus was crucified. No doubt the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities had reached a fevered pitch. They were looking for any way to kill Jesus; Jesus was headed into Jerusalem. Things had reached a climatic, feverish point. People will soon have to *choose sides*: do they believe that Jesus is who he says he is and so will follow him even to their death? Or will they deny him, side with those who oppose him?

In the midst of this drama and tension, we have this extraordinary moment when Mary pours expensive perfume on Jesus' feet. This was a **unique moment in history**: the son of God, the promised Messiah, walking on earth, about to face his death and resurrection, which will bring about redemption for those who believe in him. This is a unique moment in history that called for a unique celebration. Judas--the one who criticized Mary--was missing the enormity of what was happening, missing the importance of Jesus and what was coming. Judas doesn't get Jesus' purpose on earth at all. He's basically saying, "Jesus, you are not worth this expenditure!" He doesn't see that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, come to die for the saving of the world. But Mary sees clearly who Jesus is--she is declaring that she believes Jesus is the Messiah. And she is choosing sides. Jesus see her act as an act of extravagant devotion, an act of faith and gratitude.

The question for the readers and hearers of the book of John was, "**how will you respond to this Jesus?**" Will you also make such a bold declaration of faith? This passage is as a call to courageous faith and extravagant gratitude.

Because of the injustice of the world, the brokenness of humanity, the poor WILL always be with us. Jesus is responding more to Judas' criticism of Mary, not really making a statement about the poor: since there will always be poor people, "you will always have the opportunity to care for the poor (that is part of what God's people do), but in this moment, this is what is appropriate."

This passage puts our focus securely where it should be, on Jesus and our response to him. But that does not mean neglect of the poor--it can't because of the context. In fact, **we care for the poor because of Jesus**. Because of Jesus -- Because our God is a God of self-giving love, who in his grace sent Jesus as

the promised Messiah, who gave up his life for us, that we might have peace with God. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we turn in gratitude and give, because we cannot but love our neighbors.

And when we follow the commands of God, to love God and love our neighbors, we will carry on who Israel was meant to be: **we will show the world who God is**--that God is a God of love, a God of justice and righteousness, a God who cares for the least of these.

Some of you know that I worked for a year with a non-profit organization. We often had reporters and other visitors learning about our humanitarian work. I can't tell you how many times one of them asked me why I was involved in that, and I got to tell them, "I do it because I am a follower of Jesus, because he commanded me to love my neighbor." I think I talked more about God to non-believers doing that job than I have at any other job so far.

What if we, the church, went beyond talk and were truly present in the community? What if we started addressing the issues of poverty, abuse, injustice with real conviction and authenticity? Would the unchurched community notice? You bet! *We would be in a place of sharing the love of God.* When we carry on the work of Christ, when we love the least and the lost, when we love our neighbors, we are giving the world a glimpse of the Kingdom of God--God's way of doing things. It's like a little bit of eternity breaking through.

Well, you might be asking, **HOW?** How do we love the poor people among us? This I think is the difficulty of this short sermon series is that there has been so much ground to cover on each topic that we were not able to get into the nitty-gritty of HOW. And it's not really my place to tell you how. Part of *our hope with this series was to start the conversation*--to bring awareness and conviction, but then let the application be up to you. That's a question between you as an individual and God, and between us as a whole and God--and I certainly can't tell you how God might be leading you or leading us as a church.

My only suggestions is this: **learn and pray.** And I would say this for all the topics we have discussed, on the immigration dilemma, on families in crisis, on those battling addictions, and the poor... LEARN more about these issues and how they affect your neighborhood, Tucson, and the wider world. Perhaps you could invite someone to speak to your small group. Or as a family go volunteer in the city. PRAY. PRAY. Pray that God will show you what specifically he would call you to do. Pray about what God might call us as a church to do.

If you are willing to learn and pray, I believe that God will show you the specifics. I believe he will show you something that you cannot turn away from. And as we as the body of Christ, mobilize to love our neighbors, the world will sit up and take notice, and want to know more about this Jesus.

[unison prayer]

O Lord our heavenly Father, your Son came not to be ministered unto but to minister. Therefore, we ask you to bless all who, following in His steps, give themselves to the service of others; that with wisdom, patience, and courage, they may minister in His name to the suffering, the friendless, and the needy; for the love of Him who laid down His life for us, your Son our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*