

## DEAD FAITH

There are three people in history who have put quite a burden on Christian believers. The first is Jesus, the second is His brother James, and the third is John Wesley. All three have their words documented with regard to service and love and compassion toward others. I guess they didn't believe a personal faith should be a private faith. Jesus called it like it was as we have already witnessed in Luke's gospel this month. With brevity and focus He spoke blessings on the poor, the hungry, the crying and the persecuted.

Not exactly the group you would picture as being blessed, but when Jesus says something is a blessing, you can be sure He will make good on that statement. It may not make sense in the moment, but in time we will see the truth of His promise. James put it rather plainly in his letter as well. We can see the family tradition of speaking bluntly at work as he wrote in words that would have pleased his brother Jesus.

*My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!"? What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs? In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity.*

It has been said that we are not saved because of good works, but we are saved for good works. It's a "which came first, the chicken or the egg?" argument. If we mix up the order we will forget that works are not for our benefit, but for the benefit of others. Wesley called them works of mercy, so that should tell you who is on the receiving end.

Why would anyone say to a hungry person, "Hope you get some food?" What good are your words? Will they magically turn into food? They are as empty as that person's stomach. Real hunger, real need deserves a helping hand and not a blind eye. I know we all feel we are being scammed sometimes when asked for help, but that is a chance we must take. If the person we help does something other than eat with the money we give, that's on them, not on us.

Food and clothing are basic needs of every human being, whether they are saved or not. As believers, we have an obligation to help meet the needs of the people, no matter who they may be.<sup>1</sup> Besides, as much as we could do for an individual, what we can do for a community is much greater. That's why our food pantries are so essential and should remain in the forefront of our minds. When the sales are great in the stores we can easily buy something that's 2 for 1 and give half to the pantries.

John Wesley wasn't interested in waiting for sales to fill pantries or waiting for an opportunity to help someone. His thoughts were these: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people

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<sup>1</sup> Wiersbe, Warren W., *The Bible Exposition Commentary, New Testament, Volume II*, pg. 354

you can, as long as you can.” In our United Methodist doctrine he urged us to do good whenever possible.

As one of our late bishops wrote, “To singly attend to doing good is a simple rule, but it is also unbelievably challenging. But wait a minute. What if I forget about myself? It is an incredible idea but one that Jesus seemed to like a lot. What if I really did think about and put God first in my life? What if I did think of the needs of others first? What if I permitted what is good for the community to be my guide rather than my own personal needs? Would this bring me nearer to what Wesley had in mind? What Jesus had in mind? I have a feeling that it would.”<sup>2</sup>

Giving cans of food is important, but we are called to address those who plunder the lives of our brothers and sisters. Advocacy in areas of public policy can seem overwhelming, but perhaps it is the avenue of the most help. What would Wesley think of Walmart being the largest recipient of food stamps and welfare assistance? How is this possible that a corporation can employ millions and pay them less than a living wage so they must rely on public assistance to live, then turn around and use those forms of assistance shopping at Walmart?

As the largest private employer in the world, Walmart makes \$6.2 billion dollars from federal assistance a year through what its employees spend in the stores. This perpetual cycle of poverty is far from what Jesus implied when He said the poor will always be among us.

In his book *Quit Going to Church*, author Bob Hostetler says “Most of us, living in immeasurably more affluent circumstances than Jesus or any of His followers, are removed from the poor – even insulated from them – in ways the first Christians could not have imagined. When Jesus said, ‘You will always have the poor among you,’ He meant, *among* you. Not on your drive to the office. Not under the highway overpass. Not in shelters or in neighborhoods far from your community. He meant *among* you.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus was homeless and poor. Ever think about that? He lived mainly on the hospitality of others or on meager funds. He didn’t have a paying job but He didn’t worry about where His next meal was coming from and said that we shouldn’t waste time worrying either. But the truly hungry do wonder and worry unless we are part of the solution. They live in the moment and don’t think much about the future.

There are 15.3 million children in the US who eat their school lunch on Friday and nothing else until school breakfast on Monday, unless their school participates in the backpack program. While we’re here thinking about where we should eat lunch they are feeling the advanced pains of hunger, thinking about filling their stomachs tomorrow morning.

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<sup>2</sup> Job, Rueben P., *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*, pg. 44-45

<sup>3</sup> Hostetler, Bob, *Quit Going to Church*, pg. 135

The Old Testament speaks as much if not more about hunger. The book of Amos was a prophecy against those who oppressed the poor and hungry. Proverbs gives us good rules to follow, so we can't overlook its references to hunger. It too has a verse about blessing, *"The Lord blesses everyone who freely gives food to the poor."*

Isaiah described what God wants from His people. *"Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family? Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and God will say, 'I'm here.' If you remove the yoke from among you, the finger-pointing, the wicked speech; if you open your heart to the hungry, and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted, your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will be like the noon."*

God doesn't want empty devotion from us or shows of religion. Fasting means nothing if it doesn't result in greater devotion or faith. The fast or the act of devotion He wants is to share food with the hungry, provide housing for the homeless, and clothe the naked; all the things Jesus stated in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25.

Augustine is quoted as saying, "You owe your conscience to God, to one another you owe nothing but mutual love." Mutual love can't go one way. By its very name it involves two persons, so in thinking we can show love by doing good without allowing those we help to be loving in return is shutting both of us out of the equation. Love does not have to be physical, but it does have to be equal. To be grateful is to love.

Amos is the truly fascinating one for me. Listen to verse 8:11, *"The days are surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send hunger and thirst on the land; neither a hunger for bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the Lord's words."* I stumbled across this verse a few years ago and it has haunted me ever since. As with Isaiah, God was using Amos to speak to a people ignoring God. Isaiah hinted at how our giving to others opens up a line of communication between God and ourselves.

Thousands of years later a hunger and thirst for God's word seems unthinkable by today's standards, but back then not hearing from God would be like losing contact with the source of all you know. It's not only physical hunger we should be concerned with, it's spiritual hunger as well. The two really go hand in hand, for if we neglect the hungry we too are empty inside. We suffer from a dead faith.

Remember that when tempted to create bread from a stone Jesus told the devil that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Nothing has changed for us. His words are preserved for us and when we pray, as the old hymn says, we commune as friend with friend.

Whether you suffer from righteous indignation about the plight of the poor and hungry or you silently wish things would get better, Scripture is clear about our role in making things better for others. It's a condition of our faith established a long, long time ago.

Once there was a very old man who used to meditate early every morning under a large tree on the bank of the Ganges River in India. One morning, having finished his meditation, the old man opened his eyes and saw a scorpion floating helplessly in the strong current of the river. As the scorpion was pulled close to the tree, it got caught in the long tree roots that branched out far into the water. The scorpion struggled forcefully to free itself but got more and more entangled in the complex network of the tree roots.

When the old man saw this, he immediately stretched himself onto the extended roots and reached out to rescue the drowning scorpion. But as soon as he reached it, the animal jerked and stung him wildly. Instinctively the man withdrew his hand, but then, after having regained his balance, he once again stretched himself out along the roots to save the agonized scorpion.

But every time the old man came within reach, the scorpion stung him so badly with its poisonous tail that his hands became swollen and bloody and his face distorted by pain. At that moment, a passerby saw the old man stretched out on the roots, struggling with the scorpion and shouted, “Hey, stupid old man! What’s wrong with you? Only a fool risks his life for the sake of an ugly, useless creature. Don’t you know that you may kill yourself to save that ungrateful animal?”

Slowly the old man turned his head, and looking calmly in the stranger’s eyes, he said, “Friend, because it is the nature of the scorpion to sting, why should I give up my own nature to save?” Well, that’s the question; why should new give up our nature to be compassionate even when we get stung in a biting, stinging world?<sup>4</sup>

The answer, of course, is because God saved us when we were sinful creatures, useless to save ourselves. His nature is to love first and to love last. In between there will be times when He is stung by our disregard for His word, for our casual observance of His commands, but His love never ends and He can deal with our inconsistencies and faults. So we too can deal with the errors in judgment or unavoidable situational forces that leave the hungry unfed. Our role is to feed and not to ask why, but if we do ask why, let it be to overcome issues of social injustice and inequality.

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<sup>4</sup> Durbach, Robert, editor, *Seeds of Hope, A Henri Nouwen Reader*, pg. 124-125