

## GIVE ME YOUR TIRED, YOUR POOR

Amy Carmichael when criticized for her humanitarian work in India, responded, “One cannot save and then pitchfork souls into heaven...Souls are more or less securely fastened to bodies...and as you cannot get the souls out and deal with them separately, you have to take them both together.”<sup>1</sup> In an ideal world every person every helped by Christians would become a Christian, but that’s not really the point of helping others. We can’t hold people hostage to the gospel.

Jesus certainly didn’t beat people over the head with His message, and what a message it was! The Sermon on the Plain, unlike the Sermon on the Mount, is brief and comes with a set of less happy verses after the verses about blessings. It’s somewhat reminiscent of God giving blessings and curses in the book of Deuteronomy.

*He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. Looking at His disciples, He said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”*

The poor are blessed to be poor? In what universe is this true? The beatitudes from Matthew’s gospel say blessed are the poor in spirit, which is completely different. This verse just says poor, and that’s exactly what it means. Poverty then was not like poverty now because there was less of a middle class. The wealthy were not that many income levels above the poor, and God’s commandments always made provisions for the poor.

Where did we lose that sense of care for the poor? The church can’t do it all anymore and many believe the government shouldn’t have to. So where does this leave us? If we heed God’s word in Deuteronomy, we will be compelled to act. Jesus calling the poor blessed is not anything like we would call blessed.

Jesus completely contradicts the ideas and values of a materialistic society which equates happiness with house, car and bank account. From before He was born, Jesus lived in that kind of a world. His mother Mary proclaimed that He already had brought down the rulers and lifted up the lowly. He had already filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

In other words, these blessings and woes announce that God, in Jesus Christ, already sees the world in a strikingly different way than we do. The “real world” for all those who are in Christ, is one in which most of the major status roles in life are utterly reversed. Jesus is just pronouncing the facts. Jesus is making defining statements of the way life is inside and

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/social\\_gospel.htm](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/social_gospel.htm)

outside the reign of God. It is a reversal of fortunes for the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, the full and the empty.<sup>2</sup>

The proper biblical definition of poor is destitute, helpless, needy, lacking in anything, reduced to begging. When we talk about first world problems, as we will be this month, we should know what exactly we mean, so we'll have a little history lesson. For those of you who, like me, did not know the origin of the first, second and third world distinctions, they came out of the Cold War era.

Simply speaking, the first world consisted of The United States, The United Kingdom, and their allies in the war. The second world was made up of The Soviet Union, China, and their allies. The third world was all neutral and non-aligned countries, basically the rest of the world. As a political distinction this terminology made sense even if it did sound a bit arrogant.

Through the years, however, we have lost this kind of political format and the third world countries have come to represent those with the most repressive regimes in the world with state control over daily life and retribution for independent thought or action.

What makes a nation a third world socially speaking? High infant mortality, low economy, poverty, lack of natural resources, dependence on industrialized nations, high population, illiteracy and disease, and of course, a lack of the middle class.

We can probably visualize what a third world country looks like and how its citizens would be among the poorest of the poor. These are the kinds of places where children's rescue organizations flourish, where children are orphaned due to AIDS and where they die from common childhood illnesses.

Jesus was speaking to, at that time, basically what we might call a second or in some cases, third world people. They knew they were poor, under an oppressive government and even destitute. They didn't expect anything else in life. They discovered that what they needed most was not a change in circumstances but a change in their relationship to God and in their outlook on life.

Do we know what we who are fortunate enough to live in a first world country would expect to find among our citizens? I was reminded last week that people in the US experience second or third world conditions, like Flint, Michigan, for example. Parts of the US are indeed like a third world country, right here at home, in fact. The poorest county in the US is one of our own Dakotas conference mission and ministry areas on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in southwest SD.

They experience 65-80% unemployment, they have an 85% alcoholism rate among the population and their children live in abject poverty and hunger. Their suicide rate is higher

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<sup>2</sup> [http://day1.org/1029-blessing\\_or\\_curse](http://day1.org/1029-blessing_or_curse)

than the national average and the life expectancy of an adult male is 47, one year younger than in Haiti.

A more skeptical person might look at that information and quote Deuteronomy 15:11, “*There will always be poor in the land.*” This was not an excuse to do nothing; rather, there was a mandate attached to that reality about the poor. *Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.* Notice that God didn’t blame the poor for being poor, He simply acknowledged the reality of their place in the nation of Israel.

John Wesley certainly was not daunted by the reality of the poor. On the contrary, he threw himself right in the mix and devoted his life to social justice. Not only did Wesley beg on behalf of the poor, he preached to them and found ways to be with them. The false stereotypes of the day were shattered as he came to work with and to know the poor and needy of the world.

Had he ignored God’s urging to ministry with the poor he would have missed a large segment of the population that turned toward Christ through the Methodist movement. He would also have missed living and witnessing to a balanced faith that emphasized love for God and love for neighbor in very simple and practical ways. He was certain that if God was God of all, then no follower of God could turn away from the pain, suffering, or need of any of God’s children.<sup>3</sup>

Even our psalm today speaks to that natural balance between right and wrong, good and bad. *The truly happy person doesn’t follow wicked advice, doesn’t stand on the road of sinners, and doesn’t sit with the disrespectful. Instead of doing those things, these persons love the Lord’s Instruction, and they recite God’s Instruction day and night! They are like a tree replanted by streams of water, which bears fruit at just the right time and whose leaves don’t fade. Whatever they do succeeds.*

Don’t miss the meaning of that last line; whatever they do succeeds. They are blessed to be a blessing, not to themselves, but to others. God does have a way of rewarding our good behavior through service to others. If you’ve never been on the receiving end of a helping hand or a form of assistance you don’t really have a feeling for the emotional toll it takes.

As a young mother of a newborn with a husband away at basic training I had to apply for food stamps because the recruiter promised more monthly benefits than we actually received. As a first-year seminary student trying to stretch a buck I had to visit the campus food pantry, all the while dreading meeting someone I knew. We shopped at discount food stores and dollar stores as a rule.

I consider those times in my life as simply a stopping point because much later I volunteered in a food pantry and so I felt I was indeed giving back. Not everyone has that luxury to be able to give back because they are still very much in need.

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<sup>3</sup> Job, Reuben, *The Wesleyan Spiritual Reader*, pg. 67-68

We are expected to be of service to others, even something as simple as a drink of water given in the name of Christ is a blessing. No, we can't fix the plight of the poor, but we are expected to be more of a solution than a problem. We can't give just to those we know or who are like us, but to those we don't know and likely wouldn't talk to if we passed them on the street. Judge not lest you be judged applies to our judgment of everyone, not just commenting on someone's outfit at church or the color of the neighbor's house.

Do we imagine those people asking for help don't judge us by how we respond? We have in our hymnal a song called *They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love*. They are watching for us to fail in our mandate and our love for God by showing love for them. It's not up to us whether they have the right to judge us or not. Our responsibility is to help where we can.

How can we be effective in ministry to the oppressed? We can work toward social structures that will provide opportunity for the poor and meet their needs. And we can, in our personal decisions, reflect the compassionate heart of a God who cares deeply for the widow and fatherless and all those crushed by their position within society. It may well be that our involvement in the needs of others is too often through institutions, too little in deep personal caring and contact with the needy.<sup>4</sup>

The project I have planned for us this month through the First World Problems calendar offers a slightly tongue-in-cheek, but a very real way of being in ministry to others. Other opportunities abound in our community; we just have to go in search of them. May this object of inspiration prove to be a starting point for you to put yourself in the place of the poor and needy. We don't live in a third world country, but some of our citizens live in a second or third world existence. Wouldn't we be blessed to bring them into ours?

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<sup>4</sup> Richards, Lawrence O., editor, *Encyclopedia of Bible Words*, pg. 492 and 494