



## Gospel / Life

### Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

#### **Study 18: The Fellowship Offering and the Poor**

(I am very dependent for the following study on the writing of Tim Keller in *Generous Justice* and *Ministries of Mercy*. It is from these books that the quoted sections of this study are taken.)

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? *He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.* (Micah 6:6-8)

The sacrifices that Israel offered only made sense as what they did and what they symbolically enacted worked out in concrete ways in the daily life of the people of God. Likewise, the New Testament is very clear that the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ has only reached its goal in us when our lives are impacted and changed by that saving grace in tangible and concrete ways, in particular how it is we deal with those who are less fortunate than us. James says,

*What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? *You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.* And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. *You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.* In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? *As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.* (James 2:14-26)*

### **The sacrifices and the poor**

As we have seen in previous studies, the fellowship offering ended with the offeror taking the large part of his sacrifice and eating it with gathered family and friends, Levites and others, at a clean place near the Tabernacle. In particular, the tithe, which the people of Israel collected from the produce of their fields, was to be eaten in celebration with the Levites, and every third year the whole tithe was to be given to provide for the poor, the alien, the fatherless and the widows. These last four groups have been called “the quartet of the vulnerable”. In the agrarian, subsistence living societies of the Bible, these groups had no social power and no security, which the possession of some land gave to people. Whenever trouble hit an area (e.g. famine, war, social unrest), these people were the first, the hardest and the longest hit. Trouble was a life-threatening reality for them.

Micah 6:6-8 stresses that the sacrifices with which Israel came to the Lord were only of value as Israel in its daily life did what the LORD really desired, that is to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with their God. The fellowship offering was a symbol of how God wanted His people to live day by day. “To walk humbly with God is to know Him intimately and to be attentive to what He desires and loves.” This involves the dual action of doing justice and loving mercy. From the wide use of these terms in the Old Testament, we see that mercy (*chesed*) is God’s unconditional grace and compassion; justice (*mishpat*) is what people are due (whether punishment or protection and care.) In Deuteronomy 18:3 the portion of the sacrifices which is to be given to the priests is called their *mishpat*, their due or their right. This word is used in the same way in Proverbs 31:9—“Defend the rights (*mishpat*) of the poor and the needy.” In Micah 6:6-8 justice and mercy are actually closely linked—“...*mishpat* puts the emphasis on the action, *chesed* puts it on the attitude or motive behind the action. To walk humbly with God, then, we must do justice, out of merciful love.” These two are inseparable. It is possible to claim love, and not do justice (James 2:15; 1John 3:17); and it is possible to do justice and not to love (1Cor. 13:3)—this must not be so!

### **The concern of God for the poor**

When God introduces Himself in the Scriptures, He very often chooses to make His connection with the poor and vulnerable to be the main thing to be known about Himself. Psalm 146:7-9 says this:

He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but He frustrates the ways of the wicked.

The Old Testament is filled with this picture of God. It is hard to understand, shaped as we are by 2000 years of Christian history, just how revolutionary this self-identification of the LORD with the poor was. God’s justice has been called “scandalous justice”. In nearly all ancient religions, the power of the gods was channelled through and identified with the elites of society—the kings, priests, and military leaders—and certainly not the outcasts and the vulnerable on the edges of society. To oppose the elites was to oppose the gods. But the living God, the Lord of heaven and earth, the King of all the earth, says that to oppose the weak, the orphan, the widow, the immigrant meant opposing Him. It is in this way that God expresses a

kind of preference for the poor: He is the defender of the poor, in a way that He is never described as defender of the rich. )

Injustice is not equally distributed. The vulnerable in any society are more exposed to injustice than the powerful (either through wealth, position or education.) God Himself expresses a zealous desire to advocate and intervene for these who have no access to power to redress wrongs done to them. Likewise, God's people should have a tender love and close involvement with the vulnerable in society. In fact, to refuse to do this put one at enmity with God Himself, and under His curse. "Any neglect shown to the needs of the members of [the quartet of the vulnerable] is not called merely a lack of mercy or charity, but a violation of justice... God loves and defends those with the least economic and social power, and so should we."

'Cursed be anyone who withholds the justice due to the immigrant, the fatherless, and the widow.' Then all the people shall say, 'Amen!' (Deut. 27:19)

### **The poor in the New Testament**

Jesus was very clear to the rich man who wanted to follow him: to do so meant a renunciation of his riches, the disposal of assets so that the money could be given to the poor (see Matt. 19:21, Mark 10:21, Luke 18:22, cf. Luke 12:33). Jesus' own declaration concerning his ministry in Luke 4, as he read from Isaiah 61:1-2 (see also Matt. 11:5) echoed the words of Psalm 146 we read earlier. This must mean that we cannot *completely* spiritualise the words that Jesus quotes as being about his concern for *spiritual* conditions rather than about actual poverty, vulnerability and injustice. Jesus never calls people to follow him in a way that they have to do something he never did!

Jesus noticed the poor and gave them honour. When a poor widow placed her two pennies in the collection box in the Temple (Mark 12:41-44, Luke 21:1-4), no one noticed it except the Lord. His praise of her was lavish. In other ways too we see how Jesus' concern was for the vulnerable and weak, seeking to give them honour. When he blessed children, or dealt kindly with lepers, or attended to the cries of widows whose sons had died, Jesus was bending his ear and his concern to the vulnerable. This was not exclusive of concern for others, but it is marked. He tells his disciples that they too are to have concern for the poor. When they hold parties they are not to invite those who can repay them, but rather "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind (Luke 14:12-14)." That is just the way God has been gathering people for His eternal banquet (Luke 14:15-24).

In his woes upon the Pharisees, who seemed religious but were actually selfish, Jesus responded to their pious criticism of the disciples who ate without washing first (see Luke 11:37ff). These critics had no concern inner cleanliness, but rather held on to greed and wickedness. Greed expressed itself in a disregard for the plight of the vulnerable. They ate from clean dishes, but nothing from those dishes ever made its way to the needy (11:39-41). True cleanliness is more than a matter of rituals: it is a matter of justice and mercy meeting in compassionate action for the needy.

Jesus said one thing that seems to downplay care for the poor: in fact, this is not so. His saying, "The poor you will always have with you" is recorded in Matt. 26:11, Mark 14:7, and John 12:8. This is not a callous disregard for the poor. In context, Jesus was answering a criticism directed at a woman who had anointed him with the lavish gift of expensive perfumed oil. The disciples had argued that instead of being

wasted like this, the oil could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus' answer is actually pointing to the hypocrisy of their hearts. Firstly, they had criticised—*harshly*—a vulnerable person (a woman) in their supposed care for mercy! Secondly, as John makes clear, Judas seems to have been the ringleader of this movement of moral outrage, and yet he himself was a fraud, for being treasurer of the disciples' purse, he made use of his ability to “help himself to what was put into it.”

### **Considering the needy and defeating the flesh**

The tendency for sinful human beings is to see others for how they can be of benefit. We are, because of sin, essentially *users* of others. In such a state of heart, all kinds of evil become possible. Christians are those who live by the Spirit, and who are called to put to death the deeds of the flesh by the power of the Spirit. We still find sin present in our mortal bodies. If we do not live by the Spirit's power and enabling, then all kinds of evil is possible for Christians. Something in the order of more than \$1 billion is defrauded from Christian ministries each year around the world. Judas is still among the disciples.)

It is not only the evil of theft that is possible. Far worse, because it is much more insidious, is the favouring of the wealthy, the powerful, and the influential, and the disparagement, in various ways, of the poor. James wrote about this in his letter—James 2:1-7. That he wrote about this must mean that he had seen this happening: the sycophantic cosy-ing up of members of the church to wealthy visitors, and the way the poor and shabbily dressed were accorded little respect and treated rather like slaves.

[Actually, there is little direct teaching in the letters about this matter. Perhaps this indicates that, by and large, the early church did well in these matters. The ministry of the Spirit, writing the gospel in their hearts, gave them a concern to help those in their community who were in need. This is the testimony of the book of Acts. See Acts 2:45, 4:34-35, 9:36, and 24:17.]

Undoubtedly the motivating power for our considering the poor is the union we have with Jesus Christ through the Spirit. We see into the heart of the Father. We recognise the love He has for the vulnerable, and the Spirit pours that abundantly into our hearts. By the Spirit, the truth that the Lord Jesus, who was rich yet for our sakes became poor so that we who are poor may share in his wealth, becomes the touchstone for our living. It is the mercy and the justice of God at the cross which moves the believing community to walk humbly with Him in mercy and justice to others.

### **The good Samaritan**

The decision of the good Samaritan in Jesus' parable (Luke 10:30-37) to help the vulnerable person, who previously may have been perceived as an enemy by him, involved this man in both an expensive and an inconvenient course of events. Whatever he was going to do was put on hold; whatever that money was going to be spent on remained unbought. The ministry of merciful justice is always costly. The beauty of the grace of God, seen even in this story, is that it teaches us that the cost is finally no real cost. It is in fact seen as more painful to not help, to not give, to not do what is possible to do.

*Questions: What demands will this make on your lifestyle? What does Hebrews 13:5 say to us in the affluent West? Who are the vulnerable in your circles? What if no one you mix with is vulnerable—should you change your social group? How?*