

GOD LOVES THE POOR

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on May 5, 1968 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

From time to time from this pulpit we speak of the three major areas in which the Lord would have his church to work--evangelism, edification, and benevolence. Recently, we have spoken of the vital need for evangelism. Today we speak concerning the Christian's responsibility in the realm of benevolence.

Recently I read an article in the January 1968, Christian Herald which impressed me deeply. In fact, I cannot get it out of my mind. I want to read at least a part of that article to you now. The title is, "You're Asking Me What Poverty Is?" "Well, you've come to the right person, but you won't enjoy my definition. Are you sure you want to hear it? Here I am, dirty, smelly, with no proper underwear beneath this rotting dress. I don't know about you, but the stench of my teeth makes me half sick. They're decaying, but they'll never be fixed. That takes money.

"Listen to me without pity, now, for I don't need your pity; it won't help me at all, and it won't help my hungry children. Listen to me with understanding, if you can. Try to put yourself in my dirty, wornout, ill-fitting shoes--if you can stand the thought, much less the reality. What is poverty? Poverty is getting up every morning from a dirty and illness-stained mattress--a hard, lumpy mattress. Sheets? There are no sheets. They have long since been used for diapers, for there are no real diapers here, either.

"That smell? That other smell? You know what it is--plus sour milk and spoiled food. Sometimes it's mixed with the stench of onions cooked too often. Onions are cheap. We're like dogs in that we live in a world of smells and we've learned to identify most of them without searching them out. There is the smell of young children who can't make it down that long path at night. There is the smell of the filthy mattress. There is the smell of food gone sour because the refrigerator doesn't work. I don't remember when the refrigerator did work. I only know it takes money to get it fixed. And there is the smell of garbage. I could bury it, but where do you get a shovel without money?

"Poverty is being tired--dog tired all the time. I can't remember when I wasn't tired. When my last baby came, they told me at the hospital that I had chronic anemia caused by a poor diet, a bad case of worms, and the need for a corrective operation. When they told me about my condition, I listened politely. The poor are always polite, you know. We can't afford to offend those who might decide to be big and give us something. The poor always listen, for there really isn't much we can say. If we were to say anything, it might prejudice somebody with a little money. What good would it do to say there is no money for iron pills, better food, or necessary medicine? The idea of an operation is frightening even if you have the money required. If I had dared, I would have laughed. Who would have taken care of my children while I was in the hospital for a prolonged period?

"The last time I left my children with their grandmother was when I had a job. I came home to find the baby covered with fly specks and wearing a diaper that had not been changed since I left. When the dried diaper was removed, bits of my baby's flesh were on it. My middle child was playing with a sharp piece of glass, and my oldest was playing alone at the edge of an unprotected lake. On my job I made \$22.00 a week. A nursery school charges \$20.00 a week for three children. So I had to quit my job. Poverty is dirt. You may say in your clean clothes and coming from your clean house, 'Anybody can be clean.' Let me explain housekeeping with

no money. For breakfast, I give my children grits with no margarine, or cornbread made without eggs or oleo. For one thing, that kind of food doesn't use up many dishes. What dishes there are, I wash in cold water. No soap. Even the cheapest soap has to be saved for washing the old sheets I use for the baby's diapers. Look at these cracked red hands. Once I saved up for two months to buy a jar of Vaseline for my hands and for the baby's diaper rash. When I had the money and went to buy the Vaseline, the price had gone up two cents, and I didn't have another two cents...

"Poverty is staying up all night when it is cold to guard the one fire we have; one spark striking the newspaper we have on our walls would mean my sleeping children would die in the flames. In the summer, poverty is watching the gnats and flies devour my baby's tears when he cries, which is much of the time. I've never been in an air-conditioned house. I've just heard folks talk about them. Our screens are torn, but we pay so little rent that I know it's foolish to even talk about getting them fixed. Poverty means insects in your food, in your nose, in your eyes, and crawling over you while you sleep. Poverty is children with runny noses, even in the summer. Paper handkerchiefs take money, and you need all your rags for other things. Antihistamines are for the rich...

"Poverty is remembering--remembering quitting school in junior high school because the nice children from nice homes were so cruel about your clothes and your smell...I remember when I quit and the attendance teacher came to see my mother. She told him I was pregnant. I wasn't, but my mother knew they wouldn't make me go back to school if she told them that. She thought I could get a job and bring home some money. I had jobs off and on, but never long enough to earn much.

"I remember mostly being married. I was so young. I'm still young, but you can't tell it. In another town, for a little while we had most of the things you have: a little house with lights, hot water and everything. Then my husband lost his job. For a little while there was some unemployment insurance. But soon all our nice things were repossessed and we moved back here..." She then speaks of three years and three babies. A little later her husband decided to leave. "I knew the day my husband left that he wasn't coming back. I hope he has been able to climb out of this mess somewhere. He never could hope to do it here, with us to drag him down. It was after he left that I first asked for help. I finally got it: \$78.00 a month for the four of us. That's all we'll ever get. That's why there is no soap, no medicine, no needles, no hot water, no aspirin, no hand cream, no shampoo--none of those things ever. And forever, I pay \$20.00 a month rent. The rest goes for food: grits, corn meal, rice, beans and milk...

"Yes, I know there are health clinics. They are in the towns, and I live eight miles from any town. I can walk that far, but my little children can't, and I can't carry them...Poverty is an acid that eats into pride until pride is burned out. It is a chisel that chips at honor until honor is pulverized. You might do something if you were in my situation--for a week or a month. Would you do it year after year, getting nowhere?...I leave my despair long enough to tell you this: I did not come from another place, and I did not come from another time. I'm here, now, and there are others like me all around you."

The article was introduced by these words from C. E. Jackson, Jr., the interviewer. "The words in this poignant definition of poverty are not the exact words used by the mother. Some could not be printed. Her words have not been elaborated on. If anything, they are underplayed. Nothing has been added. Only grammatical corrections were made...The woman who made this statement is white and gives her age as twenty-eight or twenty-nine. She would not allow a picture to be taken because she looks old enough to be sixty. Her statement was made to an aide from the Lawrenceburg, Tennessee Center of the Elk and Duck Rivers Community Association. While this statement comes from one particular mother, it could well be a composite of the remarks of many. EDRCA serves a ten-county rural area with a population of

some 250,000 persons. Forty-four per cent of the families have incomes of less than \$3,900 per year. Of these, thirty-five per cent are Negroes and sixty-five per cent are whites. Over twenty per cent of the heads of families earn less than \$1,000 a year. In some counties more than ninety per cent of the people we serve are white. These areas are not ghettos; they are rural slums.

The Old Testament Scriptures

Some time ago I made a study of the many passages in the Bible which mention the poor. What I found had a tremendous impact upon me, and I want to bring the message to you in the way that it came to me, through the scriptures themselves. We begin with the giving of the Mosaic Law in the book of Exodus, for God's concern for the people is incorporated into his law: "And six years thou shalt sow thy land, and shalt gather in the increase thereof: but the seventh year thou shalt let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of thy people may eat: and what they leave the beasts of the field shall eat. In like manner thou shalt deal with thy vineyard, and with thy olive yard." (Ex. 23:10-11). One out of every seven years the fields were to be left idle. Always there would be some fields where the growth would be for the poor of the community.

Another passage says, "If thou lend money to any of my people with thee that is poor, thou shalt not be to him as a creditor; neither shall ye lay upon him interest." (Ex. 22:25). Still another passage reads, "And when you reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of the fields, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest. And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather the fallen fruit of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am Jehovah your God." (Lev. 19:9-10).

Poetical Books

Turning now from the Law of Moses we look at some of the poetical writings of the scriptures. First, from the Psalms, "Sing praises unto Jehovah, who dwelleth in Zion: declare unto the people his doings...For he forgetteth not the cry of the poor." (Ps. 9:11-12). Later we read, "Blessed is he that considereth the poor: Jehovah will deliver him in the day of evil." (Ps. 41:1).

From the Proverbs we select several passages: "He that oppresseth the poor reproacheth his maker; but he that hath mercy on the needy honoreth him." (Prov. 14:31). "He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto Jehovah, and his good deed will he pay him again." (Prov. 19:17). "Whoso stoppeth his ears at the cry of the poor he also shall cry, but shall not be heard." (Prov. 21:13). In that magnificent final chapter of Proverbs, by God's guidance Solomon included in his description of a worthy woman the sentence, "She stretcheth out her hands to the poor: yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy." (Prov. 31:20).

Prophetic Writings

In Isaiah's famous prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah, we read: "The Spirit of the Lord Jehovah is upon me; because Jehovah hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the poor; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the year of Jehovah's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn in Zion, to give unto them a garland for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment for praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of Jehovah, that he may be glorified." (Is. 61:1-3). When the disciples of John the Baptist came to ask Jesus if he were the Lord or not, Jesus replied, "Go and tell John the things which ye have seen and heard; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the

deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good tidings preached to them." (Luke 7:19-22,23).

New Testament

The New Testament is filled with teachings concerning Christ's compassion for the poor. Here is one of his messages, "Jesus lifted up his eyes from his disciples, and said, Blessed are the poor: for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall laugh...But woe unto you that are rich! for you . . have received your consolation. Woe unto you, ye that are full now! for ye shall hunger. Woe unto you, ye that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep. Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for in the same manner did their fathers to the false prophets." (Luke 6:20-26).

On another occasion Jesus was attending a feast: "And he said unto him also that had bidden him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, nor thy kinsmen, nor rich neighbors; lest haply they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, bid the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: and thou shalt be blessed; because they have not wherewith to recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed in the resurrection of the just." (Luke 14:12-14).

On another occasion Jesus penetratingly looked at a rich young ruler who asked, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?...And when Jesus heard it, he said unto him. One thing thou lackest yet: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (Luke 18:18-22). It was James, the Lord's brother, who said, "Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." (James 1:27).

The last passage that I have chosen to read to you is the magnificent and yet awful description of the judgment: "Then shall the king say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry, and ye gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me to drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in; naked and ye clothed me. I was sick and ye visited me; I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungry, and fed thee? or athirst and gave thee drink? And when saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? and when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, even the least, ye did it unto me. Then shall he also say unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and ye did not give me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me not in; naked, and ye clothed me not; sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungry, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall it be answered them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of these least, ye did it not unto me. And these shall go away into eternal punishment: but the righteous into eternal life." (Matt. 25:31-46).

Conclusion

Just why have I read this article and these scriptures to you today? Simply that all of us may feel more deeply concerning the needs of the poor. Even in a nation characterized by the highest living standard that the world has ever known, there are still poor people who suffer. Whether in a modern nation such as ours, or in ancient civilizations such as that which our Lord knew, there have always been

and there will always be the poor. God was concerned about the poor and so must be his disciples. Our Lord loved the poor and so must those who follow in his steps.

I have the faith to believe that when we feel deeply about the plight of the poor, we will have the initiative and ingenuity to know how to help them. It may mean that some of us will be able to provide an additional job for someone who is poor. It may mean that others of us who employ someone to work in our homes may have a greater concern for that person and her family. It may be that we will want to raise her wages and help to provide for the needs of her home. It may mean that some of the clothing that we have stored in closets and attics can be put to use among those who are without clothing. It may be that we will want to respond to some of the appeals of our brethren in various parts of the world for financial assistance. It may be that we will want to help some worthy boy to get advanced education which he is unable to provide for himself. It may be that we will find situations where we can provide groceries for unfortunate families who cannot provide adequately for themselves in these days of high prices.

I also have the feeling that if we will make adequate investigation, perhaps through some of the welfare agencies that now exist, families can be found in our own city who are in need of just the kind of help that we can give. Would it not be a wonderful experience for a family in this congregation to "adopt a family" in some section of our own city and provide some of the things that family now must go without? Undoubtedly there are families that would profit by knowing that another family is concerned about their needs. Undoubtedly there are families that could use some of the clothes which our children have out-grown. Undoubtedly some of us could help to provide some of the medical care and other extras that some families go without. Would it not be a wonderfully satisfying experience to come to know the children in a family, help to provide for them as they grow up, and even help them go to college? May each of us seek out means by which to show his concern for the poor and thus to walk in the steps of his Master.
