

“REMEMBER THE POOR”

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 19, 1954 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

After the apostle Paul had been to Jerusalem he spent fourteen years preaching the gospel to the Gentile world. At the end of those years he came back to Jerusalem for a brief visit with the apostles, Peter, James, and John. At the end of the visit these three apostles gave him the right hand of fellowship to continue his work among the Gentiles while they would continue among the Jews. At that point they gave one piece of advice. They said, “Remember the poor.” But let me read it as Paul said it: “When they perceived the grace that was given unto me, James, Cephas, and John, they who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship, that we should go unto the Gentiles, and they unto the circumcision; only they would that we should remember the poor; which very thing I was also zealous to do.” (Gal.2:9-10).

It seems to me appropriate at this season of the year, when we are giving gifts to each other, to stop and consider how important it is to remember the poor. If you should stop any Christian anywhere and ask, “Was the Lord concerned about the poor?” he would certainly answer, “Oh, yes.” He might even say it with some fervor, but I am sure that not one in a hundred really comprehends the depth of God’s concern for the poor.

Recently I made a study of the many passages in the Bible which mention the poor. What I found made a tremendous impact on me, and I want to bring the message to you in the way that it came to me, through the scriptures themselves.

Old Testament Law

We begin in the book of Exodus, for God’s concern for the poor is incorporated into the law of Moses: “And six years thou shalt sow thy land, and shall 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 beast of the field shall eat. In like manner thou shalt deal with thy vineyard, and with thy oliveyard.” (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 field, 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). In this connection you will remember the story of Ruth who went into the fields of Boaz to glean. Enough had been left by this God-fearing man for her and the other poor.

Here is another passage: “If there be with thee a poor man, one of thy brethren, within any of thy gates in thy land which Jehovah thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thy heart, nor shut thy hand from thy poor brother; but thou shalt surely open thy hand unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need in that which he wanteth ... Thou shalt surely give him, and thy heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him; because that for this thing Jehovah thy God will bless thee in all thy work, and in all that thou puttest thy hand unto. For the poor will never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt surely open thy hand to thy brother, to thy needy, and to thy poor, in thy land.” (Deut. 15:7-8, 10-11).

Poetry

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 among 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. Jehovah will preserve him, and keep him alive, and he shall be blessed upon the earth; and deliver not thou him unto the will of his enemies.” (Ps. 41:1-2).

From the Proverbs we select several passages: “The poor is hated even of his own neighbor; but the rich hath many friends. He that despiseth his neighbor sinneth; but he that hath pity on the poor, happy is he.” (Prov. 14:20-21). 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). “He that hath a bountiful eye shall be blessed; for he giveth of his bread to the poor ... Rob not the poor, because he is poor; neither oppress the afflicted in the gate: for Jehovah will plead their cause, and despoil of life those that despoil them.” (Prov. 22:9, 12-23). “He that giveth unto the poor shall not lack; but he that hideth his eyes shall have many a curse.” (Prov. 28:27). “The king that faithfully judgeth the poor, his throne shall be established for ever.” (Prov. 29:14).

In that magnificent final chapter of Proverbs, Solomon, by God's guidance, 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). In the book of Esther, there is the incident toward the end of the book when deliverance has come to Israel: "As the days wherein the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning unto a good day; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor." (Esther 9:22).

Prophecy

Turning now from the books of poetry in the Old Testament we come to the books of prophecy. Here are four passages from Isaiah: "Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees, and to the writers that write perverseness; to turn aside the needy from justice, and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey." (Isaiah 10: 1-2). The second is a tribute to God: "O Jehovah, thou art my God; I will exalt thee, I will praise thy name ... For thou hast been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shade from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones is a storm against the wall." (Isaiah 25:1, 4). "The meek shall increase their joy in Jehovah, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy one of Israel." (Isaiah 29:19). Finally, from Isaiah is this prophecy concerning our Lord: "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 of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of Jehovah, that he may be glorified." (Isaiah 61:1-3).

From the book of Ezekiel we read: "Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom: pride, fullness of bread; and prosperous ease was in her and in her daughters; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy." (Ezekiel 16: 49). Now it is Daniel speaking to King Nebuchadnezzar: "Wherefore, O king, (Nebuchadnezzar) let my counsel be acceptable unto thee, and break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by showing mercy to the poor; if there may be a lengthening of thy tranquility." (Daniel 4:27).

New Testament

Turning to the New Testament we find still more emphasis in this theme. When Jesus was at the temple "He sat down over against the treasury, and beheld how the multitude cast money into the treasury; and many that were rich cast in much. And there came a poor widow, and she cast in two mites, which make a farthing. And he called unto him his disciples, and said unto them, Verily I say unto you, this poor widow cast in more than all they that are casting into the treasury: for they all did cast in of their superfluity; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living." (Mark 12:43-44).

John the Baptist, even before Jesus came; had said; "And he answered and said unto them (John the Baptist), He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath food, let him do likewise." (Luke 3:11). In another passage: "Jesus lifted up his eyes from his disciples, and said, Blessed are ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are ye that hunger now, for ye shall laugh. Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for in the same manner did their fathers unto the prophets. 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).

We read again: "And John (John the Baptist) called unto him two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord, saying, Art thou he that cometh, or look we for another? ... And he answered and said unto them, 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, the poor have good tidings preached to them." (Luke 7:19; 22-23).

Difficult But Right

On another occasion Jesus was attending a feast: "And he said unto them 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). It is not wrong to invite your neighbors to dinner. This passage is designed to say you just do not get any credit from God for that. You still have your obligations to invite as dinner guests the poor.

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).

The apostle Paul reminds us of something else that Jesus said: "In all things I gave you an example, that so laboring ye ought to help the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he himself said, It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35). That same apostle Paul, when on his third missionary journey, went from church to church gathering gifts. Who were they for? For the poor at Jerusalem. He wrote: "I go unto Jerusalem, ministering unto the saints. For it hath been the good pleasure of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints that are at Jerusalem." (Rom. 15:25-26).

Pure Religion

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). Later he added: "If a brother or sister be naked or in lack of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Go in peace, be ye warmed and filled; and yet ye give them not the things needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it have not works, is dead in itself." (James 2:15-17).

The Judgment

The last passage that I have chosen to read to you is the magnificent and yet awful description of the judgment: "But when the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the angels with him, then shall he sit on the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all the nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as the shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats; and he shall set the sheep on his right hand but the goats on the left. 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 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 say also 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 he answer 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).

For what poor family have you provided a meal in the last twelve months? For what poor family have you provided clothing in the last twelve months? What have you done for the poor? It is better, when taking an examination, to know ahead of time what the questions are likely to be. It is better, before we get to the judgment, to know that our Lord is going to say, "You either did or you did not take care of the poor, and by doing so you either did or you did not take care of me.

Edwin Markham, that great American poet, has written a poem inspired by this passage. He describes a cobbler, working at his little bench making shoes. He dreams a dream, and in that dream he thought that the Lord said, "I am going to come to your cobbler's shop and visit you today." He swept the shop and cleaned the shelves. Everything was in readiness for the Lord was coming. He set a meager table; a little milk and bread. Then he waited. After a while a beggar came by and the cobbler invited him in and gave him a pair of shoes. Later, a poor woman came by. She too, was in need so he gave her the bread. Finally there came a lost child, weeping for his parents. He found the parents for the child. When night fell he was disappointed for the Lord had not come. He dreamed again and chided the Lord, "Why did you not come?" The Lord replied: "I did come. You gave me a pair of shoes, you gave me bread, you soothed away my tears." The central theme of this message is God's deep concern for the poor.

An Example From Life

There is another emphasis, too. Did you notice a while ago that I read you this passage? "Thou shalt surely give to the poor man and thy heart shall not be grieved when thou givest to him, because that for this thing Jehovah thy God will bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou puttest thy hand unto." "He that hath pity on the poor lendeth unto Jehovah and his good deed will God pay him again." Do you believe this?

I talked to a man a few days ago who does believe it. He has lived three quarters of a century and now lives in semi-retirement. Reminiscing, he said, "The Lord has blessed me greatly, and I believe it is because I have helped the poor. He told me some of the blessings which God has given him, and then indicated, in modesty, some of the things that he had done for the poor.

A little over fifty years, ago he established a company, with a capitalization of only \$25,000. In that half century the profits to the stockholders have exceeded \$100,000,000. He has made several men millionaires.

How has he used his wealth? He has supported a number of preachers who otherwise could not have gone into the mission fields. When you go through certain sections of our country you will see church buildings that were built by gifts from him. He has supported Brother Marshall Keeble, who has baptized more than 30,000 people. The man of whom I speak has paid his salary, for more than a

quarter of a century, enabling him to preach. He was instrumental in establishing the Central Church of Christ. By his contributions there was established a dental and medical clinic for poor people. By his contributions there was established a home for poor girls and a home for poor boys. He has helped Christian education more than any other man in the state of Tennessee. He has helped both white and black. I give this to you as a testimony of one of your brethren, as he looks back over fifty years of God's bountiful blessings. He says, "I attribute my prosperity, not exclusively, but largely to the fact that I have used it for the poor." He further says that he intends to use all that God has given him for the good of his fellowman while he lives. He fully intends to die poor.

Conclusion

God loves the poor. God will bless those who bless the poor. If we would be happy here and saved hereafter, we must remember the poor.