

AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?

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Do you remember the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4)? Adam and Eve began to have a family. Cain was their firstborn. Then his younger brother Abel was born. Cain was a farmer; Abel was a shepherd.

At the time of harvest, Cain brought some of his crops as a gift for the Lord. Abel presented the best of his firstborn lambs to the Lord. God accepted Abel's gift, but not Cain's. This made Cain very angry and dejected. He stewed in his misery until one day when he said to his brother, "Let's take a walk." And as they walked, Cain attacked Abel and killed him.

It wasn't long before Cain heard the voice of God asking, "Where is Abel, your brother?"

"I don't know," Cain responded. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Well, was he? Are you? Am I actually responsible before God to know and care about my brother's condition?

Paul and Barnabas returned from a missionary trip and presented their report of God's activity among the Gentiles to the elders in Jerusalem. Paul reflected on their response:

Galatians 2:9-10

⁹ In fact, James, Peter, and John, who were known as pillars of the church, recognized the gift God had given me, and they accepted Barnabas and me as their co-workers. They encouraged us to keep preaching to the Gentiles, while they continued their work with the Jews. ¹⁰ Their only suggestion was that we keep on helping the poor, which I have always been eager to do.

"Their only suggestion..." The doctrine of Paul's preaching was sound. The attesting miracles of the Spirit were undeniable. His calling from God was plain. Their only suggestion—the only advice they had to offer—was to keep on helping the poor. Keep on helping the poor.

When we think about the poor and their poverty, many Christians think of the story of Jesus' anointing at Simon's house:

Matthew 26:6-13

⁶ Meanwhile, Jesus was in Bethany at the home of Simon, a man who had previously had leprosy.

⁷ While he was eating, a woman came in with a beautiful alabaster jar of expensive perfume and poured it over his head.

⁸ The disciples were indignant when they saw this. "What a waste!" they said. ⁹ "It could have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor."

¹⁰ But Jesus, aware of this, replied, "Why criticize this woman for doing such a good thing to me? ¹¹ You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me. ¹² She has poured this perfume on me to prepare my body for burial. ¹³ I tell you the truth, wherever the Good News is preached throughout the world, this woman's deed will be remembered and discussed."

If this were the only passage on the subject, we might reasonably conclude that it simply didn't matter that much; that we should concentrate on worshipping Jesus instead.

However, serious Bible readers are well aware of many passages on the subject, and would tend to conclude that God loves the poor and takes their circumstance very seriously. From this, some conclude that God wants to eradicate poverty, and they make it their mission to fight this social toxin.

Indeed, there will be no poor people in Heaven; all will be rich and have all that they need. Yet, Jesus said “always,” suggesting that poverty would remain among us until He returns. Therefore, the chief issue seems to be more than hating the plague, which may be protested politically and legally and countered with donations of money.

We heard last Sunday that multiplied billions of American dollars have been spent over the last 43 years to eliminate poverty, and yet the problem has not been solved. What's more, the problem has not even diminished! Apparently, Jesus knew what He was talking about.

Biblically, the central theme of this issue is not how we deal with *the problem*, but how we deal with *the people* affected by it. How will each one of us, as a follower of Christ, respond to those whom God sees fit to place in our path, especially the poor? In other words, as a Christian, what will you do for the poor people you know of or encounter?

Here are some passages that address that question:

Deuteronomy 15:10-11

¹⁰ *Give generously to the poor, not grudgingly, for the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do.*
¹¹ *There will always be some in the land who are poor. That is why I am commanding you to share freely with the poor and with other Israelites in need.*

The primary instruction here regards our attitude as we help the poor: not stingy, not begrudging. This early document also indicates that poverty will always exist; therefore, the command to give freely.

Psalms 41:1-3

¹ *Oh, the joys of those who are kind to the poor! The LORD rescues them when they are in trouble.* ² *The LORD protects them and keeps them alive. He gives them prosperity in the land and rescues them from their enemies.* ³ *The LORD nurses them when they are sick and restores them to health.*

The psalmist speaks to the blessings awaiting those who share what they have with the poor: protection, prosperity, rescue, care, and healing! All because they shared.

Proverbs 19:17

¹⁷ *If you help the poor, you are lending to the LORD—and he will repay you!*

When you help the poor, you are getting involved with God's work. Consider this: when God provides you a living, He is lending to you, and only asks for one tenth in return. When you give to help the poor, you are lending to God, and He guarantees your return on investment. This is not “a waste”; this is an investment, and it's a sure thing!

There are three proverbs that speak to our inclination to turn away from those who are in need—a deaf ear, a blind eye, a closed heart.

Proverbs 14:31

³¹ *Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but helping the poor honors him.*

Taking advantage of the poor is an insult to God, who loves them.

Proverbs 17:5

⁵ *Those who mock the poor insult their Maker; those who rejoice at the misfortune of others will be punished.*

Gloating at others' misfortune is not just unmannerly, it is sin against God.

Proverbs 21:13

¹³ *Those who shut their ears to the cries of the poor will be ignored in their own time of need.*

This is perhaps the most gripping consequence of ignoring poverty. We *all* will face times of need in our lives, during which we hope God will be available to strengthen us and bring us through victoriously. What if He were not?! Today's kindnesses are building up security for your future.

Isaiah 61:1

¹ *The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me, for the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.*

This is the passage read by Jesus in Luke 4:18, after which He said, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your presence." Applying Isaiah's words to Himself, He revealed that His primary messianic purpose was to announce God's good news *to the poor*. They are His primary mission target!

You probably remember something about the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, those ancient cities filled with such wicked people that God could not suspend their judgment any longer and consumed them with fire falling from the sky. He rescued Abraham's nephew, Lot, and his family—just barely—before burning the cities to the ground.

Most people are aware that sexual perversion was among their many sins. But perhaps you were not aware of the insight which Ezekiel shared:

Ezekiel 16:49

⁴⁹ *Sodom's sins were pride, gluttony, and laziness, while the poor and needy suffered outside her door.*

Fattening themselves, while ignoring the suffering of those right outside their doors. Ignoring the poor only heightens the offensiveness of our self-serving sins.

This is what created what we know as Phariseeism. The Pharisees were a strict religious class of Jewish believers, who believed that the Scriptures were the divine, inerrant guide to living, that God's spirit and angels and demons were active in the world, that God still worked miracles among men, and that worship was the privileged requirement of those who knew the Lord. In these ways, they mirrored modern Pentecostals. However, they wore their religion like a badge of merit, held themselves above all others, and used their faith as a cloak for oppressive behaviors. Jesus loved them, but confronted their legalistic religion repeatedly.

Luke 11:39-41

³⁹ *Then the Lord said to him, "You Pharisees are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and wickedness!"* ⁴⁰ *Fools! Didn't God make the inside as well as the outside?* ⁴¹ *So clean the inside by giving gifts to the poor, and you will be clean all over.*

Here, then, is God's prescription for internal cleansing: give gifts to the poor. Nothing reveals genuine repentance as clearly.

Luke 14:12-14

¹² Then he turned to his host. "When you put on a luncheon or a banquet," he said, "don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward. ¹³ Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you."

This is not a ban on meals for family and friends. But know this: the exchange of kindness that typifies these events is your limited reward. If you expect to see a divine reward, you will have to go an extra mile. Serve those who cannot serve you back, and God will make up the difference.

You are not God's gift to the poor; they are God's gift to you! Your attitude and response to those who are in physical, emotional, and financial need—and they are everywhere—is critical to your own spiritual growth. It is by this challenge, perhaps more than any other, that spiritual maturity is developed, for this is the arena where godly love happens.

Every time you ignore the call of "the voice of woe" you impoverish yourself, closing your heart instead of opening it, not only to other people but to God.

All that you have God has placed in your hands, for His honor and His purpose. Those skills, those gifts, those finances are your God-given means of showing Christ to the world. What do other people see in you?

Are you bringing the whole tithe into God's house? This is the base of a generous lifestyle.

Do you need to make or make up a personal commitment to give to missions outreach? Our Global Impact team of missionaries, at home and abroad, are an extension of our generous hands to the world's poor.

Do you want to pledge your help for the poor and suffering? Convoy of Hope is there to help in your place during major disasters and general poverty.

Do you know someone who is struggling to get by? What *one thing* could you do to help? Don't try to imagine how to solve their problem if you haven't first given something just to lift their load.

"Today is the day" to decide. Today is the day to choose to honor Christ. And being our brother's keeper does indeed honor Christ. Consider His own words about the consummation of the ages:

Matthew 25:31-40

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.

³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. ³⁶ I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.'

³⁷ "Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? ³⁹ When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

⁴⁰ "And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!'

The opportunities are all around you. You can find them every day. And when you respond, you will be doing it to Him!