

Commentary On Seven Verses That Establish The Biblical Mandate To Help People In Need

By Rich Henderson, Director, Love INC of Santa Clara County

I want to look at the Biblical mandate given to God's people commanding them to help the poor. I'm starting here for a strategic reason. If there is no Biblical mandate for what we are talking about, then it can be treated as an optional activity. If it is optional then the work Love INC does can take its place among all the other good things that people can do **if they want to** in order to make the world a better place. If I understand the Bible correctly, when I stand before the judgment seat of Christ to have my life evaluated to see what rewards I'll have in heaven, He won't hold me accountable for not participating in **optional** activities. Jesus won't say to me, "you should have volunteered for the Humane Society, or you should have given your money to the Police Activities League." Don't get me wrong, those are good things to do. My point is that they are a much lower priority than those things that we have a Biblical mandate for.

It was a huge challenge to me to get down to just these seven verses we will be looking at because there are hundreds of verses in the Bible that touch on this issue of helping the poor. Merrill Unger in his Unger's Bible Dictionary puts it this way, "The Scriptures frequently mention the poor, and teach that no inconsiderable part of the duty required of believers under both Testaments has respect to the treatment accorded to the poor" (page 875). If you want to do a study on this yourself, get out a concordance and do a study on words like poor, needy, poverty, widow, orphan, alien, etc.

Let me say that in selecting these seven verses, I looked for verses about how God's people should treat the poor in the most general sense. I specifically avoided verses that could be interpreted to apply only to helping other Christians. So for instance the famous verse in Matthew 25 about serving those in need being equal to serving Jesus didn't make it in the list because someone might say, that only applies to "brothers" of Jesus or fellow Christians. I tried to give you verses that fellow Christians couldn't find a loophole in when it came to their Biblical responsibility to help those in need. So with that as a background, let's put the first arrow in your quiver:

Proverbs 29:7 The righteous is concerned for the rights of the poor, The wicked does not understand such concern.

Pretty basic. The person who is righteous is concerned for the rights of the poor. He or she is concerned that they are not treated unjustly. He genuinely cares for the plight of poor people. This is a characteristic you will find in the life of a person who is right with God. The wicked does not understand this. The NIV says, "The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern." In fact, the wicked person looks for ways they can exploit the poor to their advantage. If a person's response to the plight of the poor is "I don't care", according to this verse they are in the camp of the wicked, not the righteous.

Arrow #2

Let me give you the background to this second verse. Jeremiah 22:11-17 is a denouncement upon King Jehoiakim the wicked son of the righteous King Josiah. Jehoiakim became rich by exploiting his fellow Israelites. Jeremiah says that Josiah defended the cause of the poor and needy.

Jeremiah 22:16 He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; Then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?" Declares the Lord.

One of the indicators that a person knows God is the way he or she treats the poor. Jehoiakim's selfishness and exploitation of the poor was evidence that he did not know God.

In evangelical circles, we don't think of how a person treats the poor as measure of whether they know God or not do we? We tend to look at things like: Do they read the Bible? Do they share their faith with others? Do they practice the spiritual disciplines? In fact there was a time not so long ago that a concern for the poor would have been looked upon with suspicion in evangelical circles.

Around 1900 in America there was a growing movement by liberal churches that has been named the "Social Gospel". The focus of the movement was that our Christianity should affect the way we deal with others in society, especially the poor. Since the prime proponents of the Social Gospel were liberal in their theology, they didn't believe in the doctrine of the depravity of man. Thinking that man was essentially good they came up with a utopian goal for society that neglected the need for personal salvation from sin. Evangelicals tended to react to this movement by moving too far to the other extreme. They put an over-emphasis on the message of salvation of individuals and tended to neglect meeting the practical needs of the poor.

What an effective scheme the Devil had going. Those who had the true gospel that could bring salvation to the poor were reacting to theological liberalism by neglecting them. Those that were devoting themselves to the poor had a corrupt and deficient gospel. Now obviously there were exceptions, the Salvation Army being a notable Evangelical denomination that has ministered to the poor since it's inception in 1855. But in general terms that was the trend for a long time.

Thankfully the pendulum is swinging back to the middle for Evangelical churches. Evangelical churches have caught on that in our culture now it's hip to be concerned for the poor. Churches don't want to be seen as out of touch with the culture or behind the times on this.

Here's the deal. If the Bible is your compass, helping the poor is not something you stop doing because you don't want to be labeled a liberal. Nor is it something you start doing because it's now hip. It's something you devote yourself to over your lifetime because God commands it. It's one of those things that people who really know God have adopted into their lifestyle.

Let's move to the five arrows from the New Testament.

Matthew 5:16 "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven"

This is from the section in the Sermon On The Mount where Jesus tell His followers that they are salt and light in the world. He instructs them not to lose their saltiness or cover their light. Notice what it is that people will see that will cause them to glorify God—their good works. I would submit to you that acts of benevolence to the poor are to be a part of those good works. Now later on in the Sermon On The Mount Jesus is going to tell us not to boast about our alms-giving. The idea I get is that helping the poor is to be such a part of our routine that our unsaved neighbors and co-workers can't help but notice it.
On to arrow #4

In verses 7-8 of Galatians chapter 6 Paul explains the law of the harvest—you reap what you sow. He encourages Christians to sow to the Spirit, not to the flesh. He then gives this encouragement to those who might be weary of doing so. “And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary”.

Let me make a quick aside here. Benevolence work is hard. It can wear you out. It's tough working with sinners. People will disappoint you. We expect this from unbelievers, but it will happen with Christians also. Serving others is not what our sin nature wants to do. That's why it's so difficult to find volunteers to meet client needs. We are not naturally inclined to want to serve. The Holy Spirit has to make us willing to serve. It requires death to self. Harvest time is coming. Be encouraged by that fact. The Lord **will** reward you for your labor—so keep at it.

Now here's arrow #4 for your quiver:

Gal 6:10 So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, especially to those of the household of the faith.

The Greek word translated opportunity is the word “kairos”. It denotes a “season”, a period of time marked by certain characteristics. For instance, there is a “summer fruit season”. You can't by locally grown strawberries, melons, peaches and plums in winter. Once summer is over, you will have lost the opportunity.

Similarly believers will be given opportunities to do good to people. You have to take those opportunities when they pop up because they go away. I bring this up because one of the big objections we hear at the Love INC office concerning why people can't help meet the needs of clients is because they are too—what? BUSY!

In giving this command to the Galatians Paul clearly expected that they would have opportunities to do good. If you never take those God-ordained opportunities to do good because you are too busy, something is wrong.

Now let me say that I understand that there will be seasons in all of our lives where we legitimately are too busy to help people. If you are getting married in a week and are in the throes of preparing for a wedding, you legitimately may not have time to give someone a ride to a doctor's appointment. If you are a CPA and it is tax season, you probably don't have time to

fix someone's car right then. **But if you never have time to help someone, you are just too busy and you have an inflated view of your own self-importance.** Really! It is a pretty self-absorbed person who thinks their time is so valuable that they never can spend any of it performing simple acts of service to a fellow human being.

While I'm on the subject, let me ask you, "as a Christian how much time is your own?" The Biblical answer is "none". All of your time now belongs to Jesus. The problem with the sentence, "I just don't have any time to help people" is that it is three words too long. If we cut off the last three words and said, "I just don't have any time" we would have a much more accurate statement of our role as stewards.

Let me tell you a story from my own life of how God used a service opportunity with a Love INC client to call me to repent. A number of years ago, before I was the Director, I received a call from the Love INC office asking me if I could take an elderly woman to a medical appointment. I agreed, thinking that it would only take about an hour and a half of my time. Well the medical office was running late and the appointment took a lot more time than I had planned on. I remember sitting in the car waiting for the client and getting really annoyed that it was taking so much of my time.

The Holy Spirit had to adjust my attitude. The Lord brought these thoughts to my mind. "You know Rich, I really love this person and this appointment is important to them. It's OK with me to have you wait. By the way, when you gave your life to me at 13 years old, didn't that include **all** your time? Or was this one particular hour excluded? Isn't it true that you are just a steward of your time, but that all of your time now belongs to me? Why are you getting so bent out of shape by Me asking you to spend time waiting for this woman? If I really am the Lord of your time, don't I have the right to have you spend your time however I desire?" God used that service opportunity to speak to me about His Lordship over my time and teach me a lesson in humility.

One of the other things I like about Galatians 6:10 is that it is clear that Paul includes unbelievers as objects of our benevolence. How do we know this? Because after giving the command to do good to all men, he then emphasizes a smaller subset, "especially to those of the household of the faith". We are especially to help other Christians, but as we have opportunity we are to do good to all men, Christian **and** non-Christian.

Arrow #5

Our next two arrows come from the same chapter in the Bible—Titus chapter 3.

In verses 4-8a Paul makes a strong pronouncement of the fact that we are saved not on the basis of good deeds, but by grace. This gives us the confidence that we can know that we have eternal life. Once we have this confidence, we are supposed to do something with our confidence, specifically here we are to engage in good deeds.

Titus 3:8b so that those who have believed God may be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men.

The idea of “careful” here is that it is something you think about, care about and pay attention to. He’s saying, “Don’t neglect this”. How many Christians do you know who are **careful** to engage in good deeds that are good and profitable for men? How many are **careful** to include this in their schedule? Many Christians will tell you that they make time in their schedule for daily Bible reading and prayer, weekly worship and small group fellowship, but how many are careful to engage in helping people in need? “I do that every year at Christmas time” some might say. What would your spiritual life be like if you read the Bible once a year at Christmas time? From this verse I get the idea that helping people in need is to be a consciously chosen, regular, common, habitual practice in the life of every Christian.

On to arrow #6

Titus 3:14 And let our people also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, that they many not be unfruitful.

Some things to note here: 1. All Christians are to serve people in need. Note that Paul didn’t say, “Let the really mature people among us, the super-saints, engage in good deeds”. Nor did he say, “Let the youth among us engage in good deeds”. In a lot of churches serving gets dumped on the youth--“Let the youth clean out the elderly widow’s back yard, it’ll be good for them”. Well it will be good for them, but it is commanded of every Christian. A good slogan for many churches would be, “Service, it’s not just for youth anymore”. 2. Serving others in need is a learned behavior. As I was saying earlier, it doesn’t occur naturally. What occurs naturally is selfishness. You have to learn to do it. 3. Priority is given to meeting pressing needs. Some needs, like yard clean up, can wait awhile. If someone doesn’t have any food to eat, you better meet that need first. 4. Meeting needs keeps the person serving from living an unfruitful life. It gives you a sense of fulfillment in life when you help another person—the kind of fulfillment you won’t get from playing golf or watching TV. Here’s a saying I read off a tombstone: “The best portion of a good man’s life are the little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love.” Wouldn’t you love to have that engraved on your headstone someday? How much time could be redeemed for Kingdom service if we American Christians grabbed a hold of this truth.

Here’s my last arrow. Arrow number #7

If you’ve read the book of Hebrews you know that the author puts forth Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system. In verses 15 & 16 of chapter 13 he puts forth two things that Christians can now do as acceptable sacrifices to God. The first is praising God with our lips. The second is found in verse 16.

Hebrews 13:16 And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

“Doing good” focuses on using our time for acts of service to others. “Sharing” has to do with giving our money and possessions to those in need. Again the warning is to not neglect these things. Why the warning? Because it’s easy to neglect them. Notice what the author of Hebrews says about serving and giving to help those in need—it is a sacrifice that pleases God.

Service to people in need is one way Christians can sacrifice for a God who made the ultimate sacrifice for us.

So those are my seven arrows establishing the Biblical mandate for God's people to help those in need.