

Loving the Needy
Leviticus 19:9-18

Last week, James challenged us to put our faith into practice, and the specific example he gave us was making sure that those who lack the basic necessities of life, food and clothes, have what they need. This, in turn fleshes out what he said at the end of chapter 1: that visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction is an essential part of true religion.

So much is obvious. But living as we do in one of the poorest parts of what is one of the poorest states in the union, helping the needy can be overwhelming. While I was preparing this sermon, one young man came to the house looking for work. Another one has been calling on the phone, saying he needs help getting back to Claiborne County from a job in Tennessee. What to do? James says we should visit the fatherless and widows in their afflictions. Does this mean we give a handout to everyone who asks?

Well, when we look into the law of Moses for guidance, we might find a few surprises. Our passage from Leviticus begins in a strange way, discussing the way that the ancient Hebrews were to harvest their crops. Moses said they weren't supposed to reap their fields all the way to the corners, and they weren't supposed to go over the ground again to make sure they picked up every last bit of grain. In a similar fashion, when they were harvesting the grapes from their vineyards, they weren't supposed to pick up the fruit that fell on the ground during the process.

And why is that? In both cases, the extra grain and grapes were to be left "for the poor and the stranger," for those who had no land of their own, and were thus truly needy. Ruth, you may remember, took advantage of this law. She and her mother-in-law Naomi were destitute, so Ruth went into Boaz' fields to glean, to pick up the kernels of grain that the reapers left on the ground. In fact, in his generosity, Boaz told his reapers to make sure they were a little sloppy in their work, so there would be plenty leftover for Ruth to gather.

This idea of gleaning what remains from commercial agriculture also forms the inspiration of the Potato Project carried out by the Society of St. Andrew. For example, in a recent letter, they cite the example of a farmer in Virginia who had a million pounds of potatoes in his fields that he wasn't able to sell. A berry farmer in Tennessee had lots of extra fruit because his U-pick customers had been deterred by the summer heat. So, the Society recruits thousands of volunteer gleaners to gather this food that would otherwise go to waste and provide it to the poor. It's a great hands-on mission project, but is that what Moses and James have in mind?

Let's think again. When Moses told those Israelite farmers to leave some of their crops in the field, who did the Lord intend to do the gleaning? Not volunteers, but the poor and the strangers themselves, just like Ruth did. The job of the believer is thus to leave some work for people like Ruth to do. In other words, God is telling His people to give folks who are able to work a job, not a handout.

And why would that be the case? Well, you know that a job gives you more than a paycheck. It gives you a reason for getting up in the morning. It gives you an opportunity to

help others, to make a contribution to society. After all, when God created Adam, even before He gave him a wife, He gave him a job – to tend and keep the garden that God had planted. Work is good for us, body and soul.

But jobs aren't all that poor folks need, and the rest of our passage from Leviticus points this out. In verse 11, Moses commands us not to steal, or deal falsely or lie to one another. In verse 12, he commands us to keep the promises that we make. I'm sure we would all agree, but what does honesty and protection of private property have to do with helping the poor?

Well, think about it. Rich folks can often replace things that are stolen from them, but poor people stand in much greater need of the law's protection of what little property they have. Rich folks can afford to lose some money if a deal goes bad, but working folks have a great interest in the importance of contracts being honored – not least because they need to be paid for the work they have done. Verses 11 and 12 thus remind us that preserving honesty and upholding the rule of law are the fundamental building blocks of prosperity for everyone. Without the existence of such social trust, it is very hard for the poor to rise out of poverty.

But the poor don't just need the right sorts of laws to exist. They also need those laws to be enforced fairly. Look at the first part of verse 13 – you shall not oppress or rob your neighbor. How can anyone ever expect to better his condition if those who are already well-off take advantage of their power to keep everyone else down? Verse 14 makes a similar point, in a more extreme, even graphic fashion. You know it's wrong to curse someone who can't hear what you are saying. You know it's wrong to put something in a blind man's way so that he stumbles and falls. So, if this is true for those who are physically weak, why wouldn't the same thing be true of the economically weak as well?

And oppression can be the product of social situations as well as individual cruelty. How can kids trapped in dysfunctional families and failing public schools hope to succeed? How can unskilled adults get their foot on the economic ladder when so many of the bottom rungs have been removed by offshoring or automation or unreasonable regulation?

And verse 13 reminds us that it is possible to oppress, or even rob a poor man without being aware of it. We must not only pay those who work for us fairly. We must also pay them on time, because the amount of money in that paycheck is probably much more urgent for the poor working man than it is for his employer.

But if a fair day's pay is in order, a fair day's work is too. Look again at verse 15. Notice that God commands His people not to be unrighteous in judgment, which means not to be partial. Of course we shouldn't show favoritism to the rich – James has already told us that at the beginning of chapter 2. But Moses says we also shouldn't be partial to the poor. All judgment should be in accordance with righteousness, in agreement with the Law of God. The justice someone receives shouldn't depend on how much or how little money he has, any more than it should depend on the color of his skin or the contributions he makes to powerful politicians.

That means if it's right to be upset about corporations who ship jobs overseas and make it hard for working folks to make a living, it's just as right to be upset about rioting and looting in

poor neighborhoods where folks have a hard time repairing the damage and putting their lives back together again. No matter what the media may say, the rich have no corner on evil and the poor have no corner on good. Envy and hatred are no more righteous than greed, and justice is supposed to be for everyone, rich and poor, white and black.

Now, none of these ideas are particularly politically correct. But this is what God says the working poor need more than a handout: they need real opportunity, fair treatment and equal protection of the laws. And history shows that societies who live by the principles in today's passage tend to succeed and prosper. Nations whose stable, predictable, fairly administered laws make it possible for businesses to create both profits and jobs find everyone doing well, rich and poor alike. On the other hand, nations whose governments are corrupt, those who favor one group over another, those who reject the rule of law and refuse to uphold the validity of contracts find themselves descending into chaos and poverty. Rhodesia was the breadbasket of Africa. Zimbabwe – in the same location, with the same natural resources and the same people, is a basket case.

Okay, so if poor folks can work, we need to try to help them get a job, make sure that they are paid fairly and that the property they have is protected. But what about those who can't work? James says we need to take care of widows and orphans, those who in the Ancient World were least able to work and to protect themselves. So, surely that means we modern people are supposed to help those who are truly helpless, right?

Of course, and that leads us back to the two reasons that Moses told us we should help the poor in the first place. For it is in this passage that he tells us, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," a commandment so important that Jesus Himself said that, along with loving God with all we are and all we have, sums up all the Law and the Prophets. We just don't have an option where it comes to helping the truly needy.

For how did Jesus explain this Great Commandment? By telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. He thus made it plain that our neighbors aren't just our close personal friends, or even the people living next door – when the Samaritan helped a Jew in Jesus' story, he was reaching across lines of theological orthodoxy, across lines of racial distinction, and across years, generations of enmity. No, we can't plead immunity from helping anyone who is truly needy, no matter how undeserving we might consider him to be.

No, we are to love our needy neighbors, whoever they are, in the same way and to the same extent that we love ourselves. For, if you needed a job, wouldn't you want someone to give you a chance? If you had been wronged, wouldn't you want justice? If you couldn't work, if you were helpless, wouldn't you want your church family to gather around you and support you when you are down?

But there's one more reason that we should give generously to those who are truly in need. Five different times in our passage from Leviticus, God concludes a command with a statement: I am the Lord, or I am the Lord your God. The ultimate reason that we should give to others is because God has first given to us. Everything we are and everything we have comes from Him.

And we must never forget that God doesn't just bestow His love on those He considers to be deserving, does He? For isn't that the essence of the Gospel? In Jesus Christ, God came to be with us, sharing in our suffering and in our need. And He gave His life, not for those who were righteous, but for sinners, for those who despised and rejected and abandoned and denied Him.

And that's the way the Lord our God calls us to love others. Will we obey His law of love? Will we follow His example?