

The Scriptural Imperative For Serving The Least And Last

As Eugene Peterson has noted concerning Richard Stearns' *The Hole in Our Gospel*, "*justice is a serious gospel/prophetic mandate*" – one which our churches can not ignore if they are to serve our risen Lord. Micah 6:8 tells us that God has shown us what is good, what He requires of us.... So, we must ask ourselves the question: Is the American Church "*doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with its God*" when it funds internal programs aimed at serving its membership to the near exclusion of ministries which serve the world's least and last? Nationwide, our churches (by far the wealthiest in the world) devote, on average, less than 2% of their operating budgets to helping the overseas poor. It would appear that Lazarus is indeed lying at our gate, and we the Church are passing him by.

We can no longer plead geography, the miles that separate us from the world's poorest people, as an excuse. Blessed with an abundance of resources in a hurting world, our awareness of, access to, and ability to help the world's least and last have never been greater.* In his book *Radical Together*, David Platt asks the simple question: "Amid all the good things we are doing and planning, *are there better ways* to align with God's Word, mobilize God's people, and marshal God's resources for God's glory in a world where millions of people are starving and more than a billion have never even heard of Jesus?"

Much is at stake, for the poor, and for the Church: for the poor, release from the hopelessness and suffering of extreme poverty; for the Church, our witness to a watching world. At present, our witness can only be described (2%...) as indifference. To a world watching Christians to see if they "walk their talk," this is a profoundly negative witness. As Mark Labberton writes in *The Dangerous Act of Worship*, "Meanwhile our suffering world waits for signs of God on earth... *God's plan is that we, the church, are to be the primary evidence of God's presence.*" How tragic it would be if the poor, and our watching world, were to ***equate our indifference with God's!*** The Church's reputation, its relevance to the next generation of believers, and Christ's name among the nations, hangs in the balance – waiting upon our obedience to God's word.

We do not suggest that our churches should act in the place of individual believers; clearly, both have a responsibility before God (Rev 3:14-21). Rather, the point is that our churches are not somehow exempted from Christ's command to emulate Him in intentional sacrifice, in laying self interest aside and picking up our collective cross to follow Him (Mark 8:34-35). Consider the following scriptures:

- Ezekiel 16:49 – the sin of Sodom
- Isaiah 1:10-17 – God's displeasure with Israel's separation of worship and justice
- Isaiah 58:5-12 – God's chosen fast and the result
- Luke 3:7-11 – an ax and fruit in keeping with repentance
- James 1:27 – religion acceptable to God
- James 2:15-17 – the hypocrisy of faith without deeds
- 1 John 3:16-18 – the love of God in us
- Luke 10:30-37 – a stranger shows the way
- Matthew 25:31-46 – Christ's identification with the least and last

God's heart for the poor and oppressed, and His people's part in His plans for them, is evident throughout the whole of scripture, culminating in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission – which, when we join together in compassionately serving the world's least and last in the name of Christ, are wedded into a unified, singular expression of Christ's love, a light shining in the darkness.

Scripture References (NIV):

Micah 6:8... He has shown you, O Man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Revelation 3:14-21... “To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Mark 8:34-35... Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Ezekiel 16:49... “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.”

Isaiah 1:10-17... Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah! “The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?” says the LORD. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood! Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.

Isaiah 58:5-12... Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. “If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

Luke 3:7-11... John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” “What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”

James 1:27... Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James 2:15-17... Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

1 John 3:16-18... This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

Luke 10:30-37... In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Matthew 25:31-40... “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

* Global media has brought awareness of the problems of extreme poverty as close as our front door – our computers, our mailboxes, our televisions – if we wish to notice. Modern transportation has made access to the farthest reaches of the globe more practical and efficient than ever. Our ability to help those living in extreme poverty is unprecedented, due in large part to the research and experience of the many Christian humanitarian organizations that have effectively served the poor for over half a century. Blessed with an abundance of resources in a hurting world, our awareness of, access to, and ability to help the world’s least and last have never been greater.