

# “Providing Food for the Poor”

A Sermon Preached in Chapel  
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## *Introduction*

Are you not troubled by the great inequities in our world? On the one hand so many of us have so much, but on the other hand so many have almost nothing. I am not talking here about conveniences, gadgets, luxury items. I am talking about food, water, clothing, and shelter.

But this is not only true in the remote parts of the world, which seems so far away and beyond our abilities. It is also true in large sections of our cities, where people may appear better off than those starving in desolate regions of the world, but in actual fact may not have enough to eat, or enough to eat regularly. In this state of Alabama, for example, 17% of the people live below the poverty line—almost one in five people! (You would find similar statistics in any state). Research shows that in many places in the country the only decent meal a lot of children get is in the school lunchroom; they hardly have enough to eat at home at night or on the weekends. How can this be when you can go into the grocery stores and see such abundance of food, or drive down the roads and see the expensive homes and cars everywhere? And isn't it disturbing to note that contrary to the problem of poverty we also have a problem with obesity? Something is not adding up here.

But let's talk more specifically about what our churches are doing about it. Are the churches so poor that they cannot help? Not at all. You do not have to drive far to find mega-churches with their huge complexes of facilities for the interests and needs of the whole family. Please understand, I am not saying there is anything wrong with churches having such facilities or the money to develop them; but I am simply asking what gets left undone when so much is spent on the facilities. It does not take long to calculate that these churches could certainly feed the poor people in the city regularly. Perhaps the affluence of the churches has weakened their influence in the community.

Thomas Aquinas once went into the office of the Pope, and the Pope was sitting at a table counting money and stacking it in various denominations. He said to Aquinas, “Look, Thomas, the Church can no longer say, ‘Silver and gold have I none’.” Thomas replied, “Neither can it say, ‘Take up your bed and walk’.”

Oh, we are very good at rationalizing the disparity. Sometimes we may take the practical approach, what we call conventional wisdom. I am sure you have heard it: “The poor are poor because they are lazy”—as if it is their hungry children's fault. Or, “Don't give money to the poor who may be begging; it will only encourage them to be lazy”—assuming they do not want a

decent job and a respectable home-life. Or, “It is the government’s responsibility to give them food stamps”—as if the government had ever solved the problem. So with all such rationalization the churches miss a terrific opportunity to minister.

Sometimes our rationalization takes the form of theological argument. I am sure you have heard it said somewhere that “The church is here to save souls; only liberal churches get into social gospel.” They might even be so bold to say, “Why feed the poor if they are only going to hell? Or some might even quote Jesus and say, “The poor you always have with you,” as if he meant that we should therefore do nothing about it. But the most popular argument today comes from the “prosperity” or “blessing” teaching that fills the airwaves. It runs something like this: “If you have faith, then God will bless you, because you do not have to be poor. But he cannot open his hand to bless you until you by faith command a blessing from him, or until you sow the seed of money by giving to this ministry.” This is Aaron’s spiritual nonsense—remember how he tried to tell Moses he threw the gold in the fire and out came this idol of a golden calf.

All of these are merely excuses to avoid responsibility. But God did command that his people take the responsibility in providing for the poor. So in this sermon I want to look at three laws in ancient Israel’s law code to discover the principles that must operate in God’s economy. From these laws I shall articulate the principles, and show how the New Testament confirms each one of them.

## ***I. The Corners of the Field***

### ***A. The Biblical Instruction***

In Leviticus 19 God instructed Israel that when they harvested their fields or vineyards or orchards, they were not to harvest the corners, but leave them for the poor people to glean. Deuteronomy adds that if in the process of harvesting they miss some, or they drop some accidentally, they must not go back and get it, but leave it for the poor to pick up for themselves. There are several things we need to say about this law.

1. This was not a free handout. The poor people had to come into the field and glean for themselves. They probably worked almost as hard as some of the harvesters who were gathering the grain or the fruit.

2. This was not the tithe. The one who owned the field also had to pay tithes on what he harvested, and he did this three times a year when he went to Jerusalem. This was above and beyond the tithe. But here we have to be clear because some folks assume this came out of the tithe. In ancient Israel, the tithing laws were a little complex. If you study all the passages you will see they had to pay first the priest’s due (perhaps 2% up front), then the regular tithe (10%), but then a second tithe (10% again) to be spent in Jerusalem when the people went to pay their regular tithes. This was for the needs of Jerusalem. If they could not go to the festival, they had to send this extra 10% anyway. Then, in the third and sixth years of the cycle there was 10%

that was the poor tithe, money that went to help the poor. So, yes, out of the tithes a portion went to the poor, but Israel's tithing system was closer to 30% per year. And remember, every seventh year was a sabbath year, and no one worked. The entire land, all its fields, crops, orchards and vineyards were to become one huge common for all to use. So a portion of the tithes every couple of years went to the poor.

3. Leaving the corners for the poor to glean was above and beyond the tithing system, because it met a daily need. Now the problem is that Scripture nowhere says how large the corner was. In the Jewish literature there is a section, a tractate, on this, called "Peah," "Corner." There it is estimated it should be about one-sixtieth of the field. But there was no set amount because it was connected to the spirituality of the one who owned the field. A Boaz probably made his corners very large, because there were many happy gleaners there. He was spiritual. Others might simply hang out a sign, "No Gleaners Allowed." After all, we can all attest that just because the Bible tells us to do something does not guarantee we will do it.

### ***B. The Timeless Principle***

So this law required that the one who had an income from farms or orchards provide earned goods for the poor. The righteous would go out of their way to make sure there was enough for some of the poor in the region.

Now here is where we have to draw a principle from the law, for the law of Moses cannot today be followed in these points. You cannot go into the grocery store and clean among the shelves; you will be arrested. I had an uncle who used to work in a hardware store and would take things home; his appeal was, "You shall not muzzle the ox while it is threshing." Well, it didn't work then; it won't work today. God gave the law to a specific culture at a certain time in history. The external form of the law, the regulation, may not be applicable literally; but the revelation, the timeless truth that the law embodied, certainly is applicable—and binding. And the principle is God wants people who have sufficient income to make a portion of that income available to the poor.

We have a classic example of this in the New Testament. Paul spend a good deal of time raising money to help the poor who were having a hard time in Jerusalem. He told the Corinthians to lay aside some money on the first day of the week for this purpose (1 Cor. 16:1); and then he wrote to appeal to them to finish what they had started (2 Cor. 8, 9). This gift was above and beyond their normal giving to the church; it was to help poor people in Jerusalem survive. Paul then uses examples for the Corinthians. The first was the churches in Macedonia, who even though not well off themselves, gave abundantly and enthusiastically. And the second was Jesus Christ, who although rich became poor so that we might become rich. This is the self-sacrificing love that we are to follow.

So the application is clear: ***make a portion of your income available to the poor.*** Your church should have a program to do this. If it does not, then give to one that does, or give directly to those in need. This is not your normal giving; and it is not something to be done only

at Thanksgiving or Christmas—they need to eat at other times too. This should be an ongoing program. For example, there is a church in Lancaster Pennsylvania that feeds 135 people every day. The people in the church, and in some other churches, have just gotten behind it and made it successful. It is time for us to ask ourselves what we are doing to meet the needs of the hungry—what have we ever done? Set aside a portion of your income for this purpose.

So the law of the corners was designed to meet the needs of the poor. But you may have already discerned, there is a limitation here. The season of harvests was from March through September. Other provisions were also necessary.

## *II. The Sacrifice of Praise*

### *A. The Biblical Instruction*

The “sacrifice of praise” was a peace offering that was offered as a praise or thank offering to the Lord; it is legislated in Leviticus 3 and 7. In the array of sacrifices that people offered, the peace offering was the climax, the center of worship. When worshipers came to the sanctuary, they would have to bring their sin offerings and whole burnt offerings to be accepted into the presence of the Lord. Once in his presence, they would offer the peace offering, not to make peace with God, but to celebrate the fact that they were now at peace with God. And if the occasion for the worship was praise for the Lord, then the ritual would take a distinct form. This particular animal would not be burnt up, but would be cooked for a communal meal. While it was on the altar, the worshiper would stand beside the altar and give praise to the Lord for whatever blessings he had received. Many of the psalms that we have were first delivered in this setting. Once the praise was delivered, then those present would eat—the worshiper and his family and friends, the priests and Levites present, and the poor. And this was no mean meal; it was beef or lamb from the holy altar. It was a feast! But they all would know that they were feasting because God had done something in the life of the one who brought the sacrifice.

The cycle is clarified in Psalm 50:14, 15. The psalm says, “Offer to God the sacrifice of praise, and pay your vows [offer the praise] to the Most Higher. You will call upon me in the day of trouble, I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” Thus, the call to praise was a call to enjoy God’s benefits; and the evidence of gratitude for God’s benefits was generosity. But the point is that people would eat whenever others offered praise in the sanctuary. If there was no praise, there was no food. But if people were praising God in the prescribed way, even the poor would eat and be satisfied (Ps. 22:26). This is why David can say that he never saw the righteous begging (Ps. 37:25). You might think that this is another case where the king in his palace did not know how the poor were living. But that is not the case. In his experience with the worship being carried out properly with the sacrifices, the poor did not need to beg. They could come to the temple and receive a meal anytime. Later in Israel’s history when worship became corrupt and people brought either diseased and scrawny animals (Mal. 1) or no animals at all, then many people were reduced to begging, even priests and Levites.

## **B. *The Timeless Principle***

Worship has changed, of course, because of the death of Christ. The requirement to offer animals as sacrificial thank offerings to God has been done away with in the New Testament—but not the principle of the sacrifice of praise. In fact Hebrews 13:15 instructs us to offer the sacrifice of praise to the Lord continually, that is, the fruit of our lips that acknowledge him; but it adds the warning not to neglect doing good, or sharing what we have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. The animal sacrifice is no longer required, but the praise is. And the praise must have a sacrificial nature to it, it must include some provision for people in need. So the Old Testament emphasis in providing a feast for people when praising the Lord has not been done away with.

The understanding is the same as in the Old Testament: those who are the most grateful will be the most generous. How different this is from much of modern Christian practice. Churches no longer make room for public praise in their services. But if some individual praise is given, it all too often focuses only on how God has blessed the one giving the testimony, with little thought of sharing the bounty with people in need. A number of years ago a colleague and I went to Africa for a symposium. There was a British man there, Richard, who had hitched rides from Kenya to Tanzania for the conference. He had no money; and we generally covered his coffee and snacks and the like. When it was time to return home, my friend and I took stock and realized we had some money left over that we did not spend. We decided to give it to him because he had absolutely nothing. (Do not think too highly of us—it was seminary money!). The man was terribly moved by it; and he said, “I know just the person who needs this.”

The point from this biblical teaching is clear: ***Make your gratitude beneficial to the poor.***

We have to ask ourselves how much we praise the Lord—I know deep down inside we are thankful for what we have, but when do we say it in the congregation, and how do we show it in our sharing our blessing with others? To apply the principle from this section will require some changes in the way the church works. We shall have to rework the praise of God in the church. It has been deleted and replaced with music alone. We shall have to teach people what it means to praise the Lord. And then we shall have to make sharing with the poor the natural outcome of the praise. Then, and only then, can we talk about genuine praise, true spirituality, and authentic community.

## **III. *The Year of Jubilee***

### **A. *The Biblical Instruction***

For the instructions concerning the Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee, we first must read Leviticus 25, and then add some information from Deuteronomy 15. In short, the law said that every seventh year was to be a Sabbath Year, meaning that there was to be no sowing, planting, reaping, winnowing, or grinding into flour—no work. The entire land was to become

one huge common for all to glean. But then the law also said that every seventh Sabbath Year was to be followed by the Year of Jubilee, in which all debts were to be cancelled, all lands acquired were to be restored to their original owners, all burdens lifted from the backs of people, and all people set free (people often sold themselves into service to pay off debts). The point was that even though God allowed people to make a profit, to buy lands, and to become wealthy, he did not allow the rich to keep the poor in debt and dependant on them. Every 49 years the whole system was to be set back for a fresh start in the land. When the Jubilee was proclaimed, it was “good news” indeed! It was the year of the Lord’s favor. It gave the people **hope**.

That was every 49 years. But in the meantime the needs of the people could not be ignored. If people were living in anticipation of the Jubilee, they would allow the spirit of the Jubilee to instruct them in their current dealings. And so we have these rulings: (1) The law said that if a poor person in debt sold himself as a slave to a rich person, he was not to be treated as a slave, but as a worker, a hired hand. (2) If a poor person needed money, a rich person could lend him money, but he could not charge him interest. No one could make money off the poor, for that only added to their poverty. (3) Moreover, if a poor person was buying food, the rich person could sell him food, but at cost, not at profit. All these rulings would preserve the **dignity** of the poor and assist them in getting out of their poverty. If people believed in the Lord and knew what the Lord intended to do with the Jubilee, they would not live contrary to it, making all the money off the poor while the picking was good. No, they would live out the spirit of the coming Jubilee.

### ***B. The Timeless Principle***

The idea of the Jubilee was wonderful. It gave everyone hope for a new start, freedom from debt and poverty, and relief from living in constant need. It announced that help was on the way, that there is a way out of poverty, that the cycle would be broken. But in the meantime, those believers who were well-to-do, or at least comfortable, would live in harmony with what they knew God wanted done and would do. They would know that sooner or later they would have to give back the lands they acquired, but for now could benefit from them. But in the meantime they would treat the poor with kindness and generosity, preserving their dignity and giving them hope. The principle that may be derived from this legislation is clear: ***The righteous make their financial planning harmonize with God’s plan for the poor.***

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, there is no evidence in the Bible that Israel ever kept the Year of Jubilee. They apparently refused to do it—it cost them too much. We know this from the writings of the prophets; the prophetic rebukes indicate that most of the wealthy became self-indulgent—they were oppressing the poor, refusing to provide for the poor or seek justice for them, all the while accumulating lands, great wealth, and power; they slept on beds that were inlaid with ivory, they drank wine by the bowl-fulls, they took fields that belonged to other people, and they lived a life of affluence that was indifferent to God. And so God ran them out of the land. He sent them into exile in Babylon for 70 years, so that the land could enjoy its missed sabbath years. Because the people chose to live they way they did, God did not allow them to keep what they had taken.

But with the prophetic rebuke and announcement of judgment came the proclamation or a great renewal. Isaiah worded it in the form of the proclamation of the Jubilee. He declared that the LORD God had anointed him to proclaim “good news” to the poor, the destitute, the broken hearted, to declare that the year of the Lord’s favor was at hand (Isa. 61:1-3). And while that passage applied to the prophet’s ministry to the exiles who would be set free, it ultimately would be fulfilled in Christ Jesus, who read the passage in the synagogue and announced that it was fulfilled in their hearing (Luke 4). The three verses that he said were fulfilled are all the proclamation: He, Jesus, had been anointed to proclaim “good news” to the poor. The rest of the passage, which he did not read in the synagogue, concerns the fulfillment of these promises. Thus, when he comes again he will fulfill the proclamation.

So the “good news” is that there is a great “Jubilee” coming when all things will be set right, when Christ will reign with righteousness and peace and equity, and all of creation will be made new. That was proclaimed at the first coming of the Lord (with enough miracles to authenticate the message); it will be fulfilled at the second coming.

So the application for us is very much like it was for ancient Israel. We live in the hope of the great Jubilee to come (the real Jubilee), when all things will be made right. But we do not simply tell the poor people to wait until the Lord comes and he will help them. No, in the meantime we are to help them as we wait for the year of the Lord’s favor to come. So the lesson for us today is, ***Make your financial planning harmonize with God’s plan for the poor.*** As you figure out your budget, you must calculate how you will make life easier for people who are scrimping by for their food. If you do not, then you are not living in the expectation of the coming of the Lord.

Therefore, we should find ways to give people **hope**. It is not enough to tell people to hope for the second coming when Christ will make all things well. We must live in the light of that hope, making all our choices and priorities harmonize with the will of God. If you really believe that you are in Christ’s kingdom, then you must live like it.

And we must find ways to **help** people while we are looking for the coming of the Lord. The early Church did this by having all things in common—that was a result of the filling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 4). Here we may have to rethink our priorities so that we find ways to help people get out of debt, find work to break the cycle of poverty, or train them in skills with reachable goals, but certainly not add to or perpetuate their problem. The churches should be leading the way in this, certainly for other believers, but for the community as well. There are no doubt people in the church who could hire and train people who need work. They may say they do not need more workers, or that it would cut into their profits. So? What is the problem with that? I am sure the Israelites who refused to obey God said very similar things.

But we must do this in a way that preserves their **honor**. People who are going through a difficult time must not be made to feel that they are your project, your mission. You do not look down on them. And you certainly do not make them feel obligated to you or indebted to

you. Paul reminded the Corinthians that the people of Macedonia knew the money they gave came from God, to meet the needs of the people of God, and therefore to God would go all the praise.

### *Conclusion*

The sum of the matter should be very clear by now: The truly righteous person, that is, the one trying to be obedient to God's word, the one who praises God for his bounty, the one who lives in the light of the coming of the Lord, will find ways to share what they have with the poor. In these three passages from Leviticus we have gleaned three clear principles:

Make a portion of your income available to help the poor.

Make your gratitude to God beneficial to the poor.

Make your financial planning harmonize with God's plans for the poor.

All of us must confess that we have left undone what we ought to have done. We do very little to help the poor, and we can easily explain why we do not do more. Yet throughout the Bible there is this constant theme that cannot be disregarded. To oppress the poor is to insult to God, his Maker (Proverbs 14:31), to ignore the cries of the poor will mean that your cries will not be answered (Proverbs 21:13), and to disregard the needs of the poor nullifies worship (Proverbs 19:17, and passages like Isaiah 1:16-18).

So we know what needs to be done; we just have to make a start. First, pray and ask God to open up this area of service for you. Second, set aside a portion of your income, no matter how small or great, for this purpose. Third, find out who has needs, in your church, your area of activity, or your community. And fourth, begin by meeting a need now, either through your church or some other organization. It may not seem like you are making a difference, but by God's assessment you will be. And the grace working in and through you will lead to their praise to God for the provision.

The ideal But it is here that we have a problem.