

MERCY MINISTRY I

- (1) One of the distinguishing marks of the Christian life is engagement with the poor.
You cannot call yourself a follower of Jesus Christ if you neglect the poor.**

1 John 3:17-18

¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

James 2:15-17

¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

- (2) The Bible gives us two reasons to love the poor: (1) Gospel reenactment and (2) justice.
To help the poor is a matter of justice, not only mercy.**

Deuteronomy 10:17-18

¹⁷ For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. ¹⁸ **He executes justice** for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.

Isaiah 1:16-17

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

Micah 6:6-8

⁶ With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? ⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

(3) The Bible has a nuanced and complex understanding of poverty.

(a) On the one hand, poverty is the result of laziness and immorality:

Proverbs 6:9-11

⁹ How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? ¹⁰ A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, ¹¹ and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.

Proverbs 23:20-21

²⁰ Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat, ²¹ for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags.

(b) But on the other hand, poverty is the result of calamity and injustice:

Proverbs 13:23

The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice.

Proverbs 10:15

A rich man's wealth is his strong city; the poverty of the poor is their ruin.

Proverbs 14:20

The poor is disliked even by his neighbor, but the rich has many friends.

(4) Therefore, helping the poor is not merely a matter of *mercy*, but a matter of *justice*.

Isaiah 58:6-8

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? ⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Zechariah 7:9-10

⁹ Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, ¹⁰ do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart."

Psalms 146:5-10

⁵ Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, ⁶ who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever; ⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; ⁸ the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. ⁹ The LORD watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. ¹⁰ The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, to all generations. Praise the LORD!

(1) One of the distinguishing marks of the Christian life is engagement with the poor.

You cannot call yourself a follower of Jesus Christ if you neglect the poor.

Engagement and love of the poor is not simply an ornament to the Christian life. It is central to the Christian life. There is nothing that is more emphasized or commanded in Scripture than to love the poor. God identifies with and loves the poor. To love God is to love the poor. God favors the poor. If we neglect the poor, we have rejected the gospel and we show we do not know God.

1 John 3:17-18. Sharing your material wealth with the poor is an expression of God's love abiding in you. If you understand God's love, you would share. If not, then your understanding is merely in "word or talk" but not in "truth and deed."

James 2:15-17. A faith that neglects and ignores the poor is a "dead faith."

(2) The Bible gives us two reasons to love the poor: (1) Gospel reenactment and (2) justice.

(1) Gospel reenactment is what we're more familiar with. It is extending the mercy that Christ has shown to us to others. This is what we typically understand as "mercy" ministries. **(2) But the second reason** is unfamiliar to us. We don't think of engagement with the poor as a justice issue, but that is exactly how the Bible frames it. It is a matter of rectifying injustice against the poor. It is an issue of right and wrong, morality, and fairness (equity). This is what is called "social justice" or "economic justice" in distinction to "criminal justice."

Deut. 10:17-18. One of the classic descriptions of God – his attributes. In verse 18, we expect it to say, "God has mercy on the fatherless and the widow and sojourner." But it doesn't. It says he "executes justice." When the Bible calls us to engage the poor, it is not merely a matter of showing mercy to them, but giving them justice. How do we do justice for the sojourner (the immigrant)? By "giving him food and clothing."

Now it says "loves the sojourner," not "executes justice" for the sojourner. True. But the way Hebrew literature works, the phrases are in parallel. It's not that God executes justice for the orphans and widows, but to the immigrants, he loves them. No, no. He loves them and executes justice for them. They are one and the same act.

Isaiah 1:16-17. We get a bit more of an understanding what the Bible means by "doing justice." The poor are victims of oppression. That's why it says, "do justice, correct oppression." We'll talk a little later what this oppression is.

Bring justice to the fatherless (orphans). What's the assumption here? In the ancient world, those whose father died were powerless in that society. They were easily trampled and oppressed because they did not have a father to protect them. They were poor. The Bible says – "that's oppression, that's injustice". To do justice, then, is to defend the cause of the orphans against those who would take advantage of them. It is to be a father to them. It is to provide them all the care and provision and support that a father would provide. Is that mercy? Yes. But it is also a matter of justice.

We know this is the right interpretation because in the next clause, it says, "plead the widow's cause." Again, in that society, if your husband died, you were defenseless and without a voice. Married women's concerns were addressed because they had a husband. But the widow did not have that benefit. To 'do justice' is to act as the widow's advocate, to give her financial, physical, legal support.

Micah 6:6-8. First, notice that God is not pleased with simply our religious activity – praying, reading the Bible – if we neglect engagement with the poor.

Second, doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly are not three completely separate things, but they are all expressions of the same thing. Therefore, mercy and ‘doing justice’ is really the same thing. We tend to think of them as opposite things – isn’t extending mercy to someone the opposite of justice (which is everyone should keep what’s theirs)?

This is radical. This challenges our understanding. But the Bible’s view is that to give aid and help to the poor is to give them (not merely mercy) but justice. To give them what is there due – what is fair and right.

This is a strange concept to us because we think of the poor as deserving their poverty. The rich deserve their wealth. But the biblical understanding is much more complex. In part, yes, many of the poor are poor because of their immorality and laziness. And many of the rich are rich because of hard work and merit. But that’s only part of the picture. The full picture is that most wealth inequity is unjust because the poor are poor due to injustice and the rich are rich because of advantages they don’t really deserve. (We’ll get into later how this is the case.) So, to ‘do justice’ is to lift the poor and give them what is their due.

This challenges our understanding of what justice is. The modern sense of “law abiding” means you simply don’t violate other people’s rights – but you do your business in a fair and honest way. There’s a kind of passiveness to this definition of justice; everyone minds their own business. But the biblical concept of justice is to fight for equity and fairness – to protect the weak against the strong.

(3) The Bible has a nuanced and complex understanding of poverty.

(a) On the one hand, poverty is the result of laziness and immorality:

(b) But on the other hand, poverty is the result of calamity and injustice:

Proverbs 13:23. What is this proverb saying? The farmlands of the poor would have produced wealth, but because of injustice, it does not. What is this event? It could be a natural disaster – like drought. Or perhaps war or oppressive taxation. But whatever the cause, it is not the fault of the poor farmer. It is an injustice.

Proverbs 10:15. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Why? Because wealth creates more wealth (think about investments) while the very poverty of the poor makes him poorer.

How does this happen? Let me give you some contemporary examples:

- **Crime:** Because the rich live in nice neighborhoods, they are protected. Whereas the poor are frequent victims of crime. Police response rates closely match socio-economic conditions. This is fundamentally unjust.
- **Education:** Again, the rich go to good schools; the poor endure bad schools. We all know that education is the key to the future. And so the rich perpetuate their wealth; the poor are stuck in a vicious cycle.
- **Health:** Only the rich can afford to eat health, fresh produce. The cheapest calories come from fast food. This is why poverty and obesity are closely linked. The poor are much more likely to smoke, be overweight, have poor exercise habits, etc.

Let’s compare two children. One is Judah. He has two parents who are educated, love him and will give him all the opportunities in life. The other is a child born to a single mother living in poverty in East Oakland. Will that child have the same privileges and advantages as Judah. No. And so Judah will be much more likely to grow up with a high paying profession and have financial wealth. The other kid in East Oakland will probably be poor. How is that fair? Simply because of the circumstances of their birth. Hard work will only get you so far. But the circumstances of life play a big role in who is rich and who is poor.

Proverbs 14:20. This is the same theme. The wealth of the rich affords him many friends. The poverty of the poor is a liability in society. The rich are rich in social capital; the poor have little.

(4) Therefore, helping the poor is not merely a matter of mercy, but a matter of justice.

Isaiah 58:6-8. To fight unrighteousness and injustice is to engage and help the poor. Again, helping the poor is not merely a matter of extending mercy, but justice. This is a foundational paradigm in the Bible. God commands us to help the poor because it is a matter of justice and fairness.

Zechariah 7:9-10. Notice how the Bible defines the poor into four categories: the poor, widows, orphans and immigrants. What do these four have in common? They are powerless and vulnerable in society. They cannot defend themselves against the predations of the strong. This is the way the Bible understands the poor. As those without power.

Psalms 146:5-10. Look closely at verse 7. God executes justice for the oppressed. How? By giving them food when they are hungry. The fact that the poor are hungry is not merely a tragic matter, but a justice matter. What's also interesting here is that the poor are contrasted (not with the rich) but with the wicked.

Just as there is a complex understanding of poverty (not just folly but also injustice), so also the Bible has a complex view of wealth. Wealth is not simply the result of hard work and smarts – but of injustice. Unless we see that great income inequality is tragic and unjust, we will not understand the worldview of the Bible and the heart of God.

Let's remember – God loves the poor. He lifts up those who are lowly. He is for the poor. We should be too.