

## **Friend of the Poor**

### **By David Feddes**

God is a friend of the poor. If you're poor, you can't find a better friend than God; but if you harm poor people or refuse to help them, you can't find a fiercer enemy than God.

In the Bible, God befriended poor Israelite slaves and punished their rich Egyptian oppressors. When "the Israelites groaned in their slavery, God heard their groaning and was concerned about them" (Exodus 2:24-25). He sent ten terrible plagues on their oppressors and drowned Egypt's army in the Red Sea. He rescued the Israelites from bondage and poverty, provided for their needs during their travels, and gave them a land of their own. That great rescue, the Exodus, became the defining event for Israel.

When the Israelites sang of God in their worship, they sang of him as a friend of the poor. One such song, Psalm 146, says,

He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked (v. 7-9).

Any Israelite who knew the nation's history knew God was committed to be a friend of the poor, to help the refugee, the hungry, the homeless, the imprisoned, the accused with no defender, the woman with no husband, the child with no parents.

### **Taking It Personally**

The Old Testament says that the Lord not only cares about the poor and helps them, but he actually identifies with them. God takes personally how the poor are treated. "He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker," says the Bible, "but whoever is kind to the needy honors the Lord." "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done" (Proverbs 14:31, 19:17).

God made this clear already in Old Testament times, and he made it even clearer when he came to earth in the person of Jesus. Jesus was born into a poor family. His first cradle was a manger. For several years, Jesus and his parents were refugees in a strange land, fleeing from a murderous politician named Herod. Later, they settled in Galilee, the least wealthy area of a poor country occupied by a foreign army. As an adult, Jesus had no fixed address. As he put it, "the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). Jesus lived on earth as one of the poor, and today he still identifies with poor people. Jesus says that at the final judgment he will tell friends of the poor,

"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... 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:34-40).

That's how closely the Lord identifies with those in need. What we do for them, we do for him. And if we neglect them, we neglect him. Jesus will banish to hell those who ignore his needy brothers, saying, "Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me" (Matthew 25:45).

### **Faith in Action**

God is a friend of the poor, and any friend of God will also be a friend of the poor. This doesn't mean that being kind to the poor is the only thing that matters. It doesn't mean that as long as we try to help people in need, we don't need forgiveness or faith. The Bible constantly reminds us that we're saved by Jesus, not our own goodness. We're saved by faith, not works. But faith isn't really faith if it doesn't produce good works. The Bible says,

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead (James 2:14-17).

If you have a living faith, if you know God is a friend of the poor and identifies himself with them, if you know how much Jesus sacrificed for you to meet *your* desperate needs, then you can't possibly turn your back on those in need. The Bible says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Since Jesus did this for us, Christians with more than enough should share with those who don't have enough (2 Cor. 8:13-14).

### **Giving Money**

John Wesley, a Christian leader from an earlier time, had a simple, three-part approach to money. First, get all you can. Second, save all you can. Third, give all you can. In other words, make as much money as you honestly can. Then, instead of spending it on all sorts of things, save as much as possible. And finally, once you've met your own needs, give the rest away.

Wesley practiced what he preached. When he had an income of 30 pounds, he spent 28 on himself and gave away two for missions and aid to the poor. When his income rose to 60 pounds, what did he do? He spent 28 on himself and gave away *thirty-two*. When his income was 120 pounds, he still lived on 28 and gave away *ninety-two*. Get all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.

You and I will never be friends of the poor; we'll never give all we can, until we tell ourselves "Enough!" That's not easy. It's more common to assume that if your income goes up, so should your spending and your standard of living. As soon as you can afford a nicer house than the one you're in, you should buy it. As soon as you can afford a fancier car than the one you have, you ought to get it. As soon as you can afford more expensive clothes than what you're wearing, you should improve your wardrobe. But does every increase in income call for an upgrade of lifestyle? Why not use the additional money to help someone else? That's why God gave you that extra money! Get all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.

## **Giving Yourself**

If you're a friend of the poor, one way to help is with money. But don't just give money. Give yourself. People often need a friend even more than they need cash. Single mothers sometimes need an adult to talk with or a few hours of relief from child care. A jobless person may need encouragement or advice. People struggling with addictions need a friend they can call any time, any place when temptation is getting too strong. People in prison need friends to visit or write them and encourage them to walk with God. They need godly mentors to help them start over when they're released from prison.

Being a friend of the poor sometimes involves money, but it also involves time and effort and personal involvement. This personal dimension is so precious and so important. In some cases, you'll be building friendships with brothers and sisters in need who are already Christians. You will increase their joy, and they will increase your joy.

In other cases, needy people may not yet know Jesus, and by helping them, you can show them Jesus' love in action. You can tell them about Christ and his salvation and invite them to your church. When you do that, you're sharing the greatest treasure of all. Nothing is more valuable than being a child of God, a part of his family, and living forever in his joy.

## **Faith-Based Compassion**

When you share your faith and lead people into fellowship with Jesus, you are giving them a chance to share in benefits that last forever, and you're also sharing a key that opens up new possibilities right now. In the poor areas of our cities, the best single predictor of whether families stay together and get above the poverty line is whether the man of the house goes to church. For prison inmates, the best way to avoid crime and stay out of prison after they are released is a living faith in Jesus. And for people with addictions, a spiritual fellowship is crucial to staying sober. To help people with problems, don't just give them money or food. Give them time and love. Be their friend, and introduce them to Jesus and to Christian fellowship.

This is crucial for helping people you know, and it's also an important principle to keep in mind when you support various organizations. Today, there are many agencies that reach needy people in areas you can't reach personally, and by giving money to such agencies, you're able to help people you've never met. These organizations are best when they are rooted in Christ.

In the hands of a church-sponsored mission, your gift has a greater probability of actually helping the people it's intended to help. It's a sad fact that government efforts at poverty relief and foreign aid often enrich cheaters or bureaucrats. Also, some secular charities are headed by lavishly paid executives, and a large percentage of the donations go to overhead costs and advertising, rather than to helping the needy. Christian organizations are usually more careful with money, thanks to more spiritual integrity and accountability. But an even more important reason for supporting Christian organizations is the fact that the best thing we can share with the poor is the gospel of Jesus Christ. In seeking to address physical needs, we shouldn't neglect spiritual needs. Life in Christ is the gift that lasts forever.

## **Getting at Root Causes**

What's more, sometimes the only way to deal with material poverty is to strike at the roots of spiritual poverty. Faith in Christ gives people hope. Without hope, there is no incentive or ambition, and without incentive or ambition, there is no escape from poverty. When a bleak situation tempts people to give up, faith in Christ gives them hope, and hope has enormous power.

The gospel attacks physical poverty by helping people to reject false beliefs that keep them down. For example, if people believe in karma and reincarnation and the caste system, they may simply resign themselves to poverty and oppression as punishment for a previous life. The gospel shows inequality and injustice for what it is and opens up new possibilities.

God loves justice, and God's people seek justice. Justice means treating people fairly, and it means taking a stand for those who lack the influence to be heard. The Bible says, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8-9). Wherever possible, we need to use our influence to change unjust structures and oppressive policies. In seeking justice for the powerless, we do what we can on behalf of the helpless unborn, the uninsured, the elderly, those with disabilities. We work for safer streets, better schools, a fairer court system, and more job opportunities in impoverished communities. Justice means helping immigrants and refugees instead of despising them.

Still another way the gospel helps deal with poverty is that it calls people to take responsibility for themselves. Some poverty is due to injustice or lack of opportunity, but some poverty is due to sexual sin and decaying families, to drinking and drugs, to laziness at work and school, or to buying on whims rather than having the self-control to save for future needs. The Bible helps people face these problems and overcome them.

These are just some of the reasons we can't address poverty fully without telling people about Jesus. The gospel Word and loving deeds belong together. This is all part of walking with Jesus, the friend of the poor. The Bible says,

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. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:16-18).

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