

What About the Needy?

by O.S. Hawkins

This issue cannot be avoided by any local expression of the body of Christ. The church can no longer remain silent on the problem of the needy while hoping federal government programs will continue to relieve her guilt. Nearly every government welfare program is an indictment of the church's neglect to remember the needy. It is strange that, by and large, we have virtually ignored the very people with whom Jesus spent his ministry while we retreat within our stained-glass walls to sing our pious hymns about becoming "more like the Master." This is the day of the open door for the church which takes seriously the command of Jesus to care for the needy and support those among us who are less fortunate.

The Beatitudes of our Lord do not comprise a set of rules by which we are to live, but instead present a convincing picture of the life which each of His followers should lead. The pathway is plain. First, we are to recognize our poverty of spirit. We are nothing without Christ. Once this is accomplished, then we mourn over our spiritual neglect. This brings us to the place of meekness or surrender to our Master. Then, and only then, can we "hunger and thirst after righteousness" and be filled. And what is the result of being controlled by the Spirit of God? The first mark is that we will be "merciful." Show me a person being controlled by the Spirit of God, and I'll show you someone who shows mercy to others. On the other hand, show me someone who does not demonstrate mercy and you'll see someone who is not being controlled by the Spirit of God.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was saying to that self-righteous, selfish crowd, "what really matters is on the inside." The matter of showing mercy is a good barometer of what is on the inside. This is why our Lord is revealed in the Gospels as continually ministering to the needy.

We sing, "More Like the Master." If we really mean it and we are truly like Jesus, we will be about the business of seeking to minister to the needy.

Our denomination has a plan to help take care of some of the needy in our midst. GuideStone Financial Resources is the retirement and insurance agency for the Southern Baptist Convention. And, since its beginning in 1918, GuideStone has provided relief assistance to retired ministers and their widows who did not have an opportunity to set aside much, if anything, for retirement. Many of these served small, rural churches that paid little into a retirement plan. Now that they've retired, many struggle to pay for the basic necessities of life — like food, utilities and medicine. Through GuideStone's Mission:Dignity ministry, Southern Baptists can play a part in providing support for these precious servants of God.

In light of the Scriptures, the plight of the needy is a question that no body of believers can avoid. Jesus addressed this question in Matthew 5:7 by giving a *pronounced blessing* and a *promised benefit*.

A Pronounced Blessing

Blessed are the merciful

What does it mean to be merciful? It is not merely a humanistic idea that if we are good to others, they will be good to us. This simply is not true. Jesus was the most merciful man who ever lived. He reached out to the sick

and healed them, to the crippled and gave them new legs, to despised tax collectors, prostitutes, and outcasts and drew them into His circle of love. He called the lonely and made them feel loved.

What was the response of the “religious” people of the day? They scoffed, “Look who He’s always with. The scum, the despised, the riffraff of society.” I suppose those Pharisees will always be with us. They are certainly around today. Jesus was the most merciful man who ever lived, and yet they screamed for His blood.

What did our Lord mean when He said, *Blessed are the merciful*? I am convinced He was speaking of our relationship with one another — “Be merciful to others and God will be merciful to you.” Mercy is seeing a kid at school just wishing someone would speak to him, and showing that kid some attention. Mercy is seeing a person in need of real *agape* love and taking the time to give that love. Mercy is seeing a lonely person and sharing comfort. Mercy is sharing God’s blessings with those less fortunate. Mercy is meeting a need, not simply feeling it!

Why aren’t more of us who are followers of the Lord Jesus showing mercy to others? Is it because we are too good? Is it because we are too busy? Is it because we are too afraid? Or is it because we are too phony?

Jesus was the embodiment of mercy. Remember, we are supposed to be like Him. For 33 years the world saw a picture of what the body of Christ ought to be. Jesus walked, He talked, He lived among us, and shared His life with us. Today those of us who are believers make up the visible body of Christ on Planet Earth. I fear that in too many places we are giving the world a puny picture of our Lord Jesus. If we are to give the right picture of Jesus to the world, we need to be like Him.

Jesus Christ had a special relationship with the needy. He was born in the most impoverished circumstances imaginable. This King of kings, this Lord of lords, was not born in a palace, not a hospital, not a hotel, not even in the common decency of a clean room. He came into this world in the most destitute conditions imaginable — a cave filled with animals where sickness, disease, and death all were likely possibilities. We try to beautify the stable in Bethlehem, but the truth is: our Lord came into this world in the filth and the dung.

Yes, Jesus had a special relationship with the needy. When Mary and Joseph presented Him as a baby at His dedication in the Temple, they could afford only two turtledoves as a sacrifice. Thirty years later when Jesus stepped out of the carpenter shop, walked across the dusty street of Nazareth, and stood up to preach His first sermon in the synagogue, His first words were, *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor* (Luke 4:18 NKJV).

Another interesting insight into Jesus’ relationship with the needy occurred when John the Baptist was imprisoned. He sent his disciples to ask our Lord if He was really the Messiah or should they look for another. Do you remember Jesus’ reply? Jesus told the disciples of John to go back and tell John that *the poor have the gospel preached unto them*.

Jesus had a special relationship with the needy throughout His life. In fact, He died in poverty. He was buried in poverty. He did not even have a tomb in which to be placed and was buried in a borrowed tomb. Many of His earliest followers were needy. Do you remember the reply of Peter and John to the beggar at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple in Acts 3:6? They declared, *Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you*.

This relationship of Jesus to the needy continued after the ascension. Paul the apostle relates in Galatians 2 his journey to Jerusalem 17 years after the Damascus road experience. There he met with Peter and the other disciples. They concluded that Peter would stay in Jerusalem and carry the gospel to the Jews and that Paul and Barnabas would leave and share the gospel with the Gentile world. Then Paul makes an incredible statement, saying, *They desired only that we should remember the poor* (see v. 10). As he left Jerusalem to further the gospel to the world, the thought on the mind of all the apostles was to *remember the poor*.

Now, we say we are followers of Jesus. We go through our little worship rituals every week, singing about how much we love Him and how much we follow Him. The real question is: to whom have you shown mercy this week? It's no wonder so few of us are living abundant, happy lives. Jesus said, "Blessed (happy) are the merciful."

The truth is, the needy are not going to go away. Jesus said, *For you have the poor with you always* (Matt. 26:11, NKJV). The needy will always be with us. What are we, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, going to do about it? Are we going to take seriously this command of Jesus to "*remember the poor*" or are we going to hope that federal government programs will continue to come through so we will not look so bad in the eyes of our community?

If we are really like Jesus, we'll begin to show mercy to the needy. The world is full of people who are hurting, lonely, defeated, hungry, uneducated, needy. Isn't it strange how so many churches isolate themselves from the very people with whom Jesus spent most of His time?

The more we become like Jesus, the more we will show mercy to the needy. When Jesus went to Jerusalem, where did He go? He went to the pool of Bethesda. There a large group of impotent people were lying. He went to a man who had been lame for 38 years. When our Lord went to Jericho, where did He go? Did He make a beeline for the city hall to meet the mayor? No, He went to the wayside where the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, was rattling his tin cup. When our Lord went to Sychar, where did He go? Did He make a mad dash to meet the governor of Samaria? No, He went to an out-of-the-way place and had a conversation with a prostitute, and told her of living water.

Strange, isn't it, how so many churches today have isolated themselves from the very people with whom Jesus spent His whole ministry? He taught, *Blessed are the merciful*.

The words of Jesus should pierce our hearts. He said, *When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just* (Luke 14:12-14 NKJV).

Jesus said: *For I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and you did not take me in; naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. Then they will also answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into eternal life* (Matt. 25:42-46 NKJV). When a church serves those in need, she is actually ministering unto Jesus Himself. While the Matthew passage relates to a coming day, Jesus is, in a

sense, coming by every day in the face of an unshaven man, in the bent body of an old woman, in the anguished, dirty face of a little child. Yes, *Blessed are the merciful!*

The church that neglects the needy has robbed itself of a great blessing from God. If we are to be like Jesus, we will take care of the needy. I am convinced that this is the real key. There is a world of social ministries that have sprung up today which are solely humanistic. Too many people try to pacify their own feelings of not following in Jesus' footsteps by consoling themselves with the thought that humanistic social ministries will take care of the needy.

A good example of mercy is found in Tommie Walker, a widow who's been helped by the Mission:Dignity ministry since 2002. Even though her own income is quite low, she gives a small portion back to the Mission:Dignity program every month as her "gift to others." "God has been good to help me," she wrote. "I want to do something for others who need it."

Sometimes children are more prone to show mercy than adults. Jesus reminded us that, *...a little child shall lead them*. First Baptist Church of Comanche, a small town in Oklahoma, promoted Mission:Dignity during their Vacation Bible School. The teachers would ask, "What is our mission project?" The children replied, "Mission:Dignity." "And who does it help?" "Old people."

Throughout the week the children brought their offerings, and by the end of the week they had collected almost \$400 for Mission:Dignity. It was the largest VBS offering in the church's history.

The children prayed for and wrote cards to Mission:Dignity recipients Thom and Bev Duncan. With tears in their eyes, the Duncans read each of the 58 cards, with phrases like, "We're praying for you," "Thank you for your ministry," and "I hope our money helps you."

If we are going to love the world, we must begin by loving our own world. It is difficult to try and love your neighbor if you do not even know his name. Jesus said there was a pronounced blessing upon those who would take care of the needy — *Blessed are the merciful*.

A Promised Benefit

For they shall obtain mercy

Here is a beautiful idea. Do you see the cycle? God gives us mercy, and we are merciful, and God gives us more mercy. The one who has received mercy will be merciful. The one who has received forgiveness will be forgiving. The one who has received love will *be loving*. Many expose their own phoniness by not being merciful, forgiving, and loving.

The truth of the Scriptures is that we always reap what we sow. *Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap* (Gal. 6:7 NKJV). Jesus said it this way, *Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy*. What a promised benefit we have from our Lord Jesus. Did you know there are over four hundred promises in the Bible concerning those who minister to the needy?

Blessed is he who considers the poor; the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble. The Lord will preserve him and keep him alive, and he will be blessed on the earth; you will not deliver him to the will of his enemies. The

Lord will strengthen him on his bed of illness; you will sustain him on his sickbed (Ps. 41:1-3 NKJV). Here is the promise of protection, blessing, and healing for those who remember the needy.

For He shall stand at the right hand of the poor, to save him from those who condemn him. (Ps. 109:31 NKJV). Where is Jesus Christ? He is not only at the right hand of the Father, He is at the right hand of the poor!

He who despises his neighbor sins; but he who has mercy on the poor, happy is he (Prov. 14:21 NKJV). Happy! Have you ever done something for someone and found the joy and happiness it brings?

He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, but he who honors Him has mercy on the needy (Prov. 14:31 NKJV). Here is a solemn warning about being a reproach to God! When we show mercy to the needy, we are honoring God in the process.

He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and He will pay back what he has given (Prov. 19:17 NKJV). What a promise! God pays far better dividends than any bank.

Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard (Prov. 21:13 NKJV). Some of us wonder why our prayers have been unanswered. This may be the very reason!

Better is the poor who walks in his integrity, than one perverse in his ways, though he be rich. Whoever keeps the law is a discerning son, but a companion of gluttons shames his father. One who increases his possessions by usury and extortion gathers it for him who will pity the poor (Prov. 28:6-8 NKJV). Strong words. If you do not remember the needy, God will take it from you and give it to those who do!

He who gives to the poor will not lack, but he who hides his eyes will have many curses (Prov. 28:27 NKJV). It may be that the reason some of us are continually failing to make ends meet is because we have absolutely neglected the needy. Jesus said, *Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you* (Luke 6:38 NKJV).

The righteous considers the cause of the poor, but the wicked does not understand such knowledge (Prov. 29:7 NKJV). You cannot be right with God and have no concern for the needy. Does it bother you that there are thousands of former ministers or their widows who are living in need right now? These are real people who served our Baptist family, not concerned about salaries and benefits, but, as one pastor's wife noted, "we counted our blessings in people, not in dollars and cents."

One such pastor was Ed Enriquez. Ed and his wife, Ramona, served small churches and worked in the migrant ministry in New Mexico and Texas. Ed and Ramona ministered with open hearts and open hands — Ed even reached the point of giving away the very shoes on his feet!

One day in his early ministry, a migrant worker approached Ed and asked, "Pastor, next time you come, could you bring me a pair of shoes? I have never had a pair of shoes." Ed looked at him and asked, "What size are your feet?" But, he didn't know. Ed looked at the man, then took off his own shoes and said, "Here, try these on." The man slipped Ed's shoes on and a smile crossed his face. "They fit," he said. Ed told him, "They are yours. You didn't have shoes, but now you do."

How often would you give the clothes on your back to minister to the needy? Ed didn't earn much tromp-ing through those fields witnessing to the lost. He served churches that often paid him more in chickens and produce than in dollars and cents. Ed truly followed the Master's example. He was able to reach so many of those needy migrant workers because he knew what it was like to live payday to payday. He knew what it was like to be needy!

Ed's age and failing health finally kept him from earning extra income, making it difficult to take care of their daily needs — things like food and medicine. But there was a place Ed and Ramona could turn to for help.

GuideStone's Mission:Dignity ministry is helping approximately 2,000 of these aged ministers or their widows whose incomes are inadequate to meet their monthly expenses. Two-thirds of recipients are widows of pastors. One in four is a widow over age 85.

This year, the Mission:Dignity program will distribute more than \$7 million in relief assistance. All funding for the ministry comes from the direct gifts of individuals, Sunday school classes, groups and churches. Every dollar is used for relief payments with nothing taken out for administrative or operating expenses.

In 1 John 3:17, we are asked a penetrating question: *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?*

It seems we get so focused on our own desires and needs, that we forget the needs of others. We harden our hearts and close our hands. Ed and Ramona certainly didn't do that. They focused on God's will in their lives and trusted him to meet their needs.

The evidence of God's love in our lives is in how we treat others — especially those in need. An open heart cannot maintain a closed hand. A closed hand does not give anything. But, neither can it receive anything. In light of Scripture, the question must be faced by every one of us who are called by His name — What about the needy?

A retired pastor sent a note to GuideStone expressing gratitude for the monthly help from the Mission:Dignity program:

This is a note of thanks to someone very special to me. It is always a happy occasion to receive a gift from family or a dear friend. But to receive a gift from a stranger is most heart warming. It's like receiving a hug from the Savior and hearing a small voice say, "You are loved and not forgotten my son." Thank you again for your kindness and love for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our response today is not a matter of asking IF we should do something. All of us can do something. It's simply determining WHAT we should do.

Today in your bulletin is an insert that explains how you can be a part of the Mission:Dignity ministry. Join me on this Mission:Dignity Sunday in a renewed commitment to put God and his plans and purposes first in our lives. Then, let's get down on our knees and ask, "Lord, what would you have me do?" As Mary told the disciples, "Whatever He says to you, do it."

Let's allow God to use us in meeting their needs and reminding these faithful servants they are loved and not forgotten.