



Caring for the Needy in the New Testament

“I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat”

Mt. 25:31-46 (esp. 35).

INTRODUCTION:

1. In the great teaching on the judgment, Jesus shows that we will be judged on the basis of our treatment of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned.
2. Many of us tend to put great emphasis on doctrinal purity and certainty. It is right to do so. But, we tend to neglect to show human compassion. We should do the one, but not neglect the other (Mt. 23:23).

I. DISTINCTION BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL ACTION AND CHURCH ACTION.

The Bible sets forth a distinction between individual action and local church (congregational, collective, group) action. This is seen clearly in the difference between individual money and church money.

- A. Individual money is raised by honest labor (Eph. 4:28). Church money is raised by voluntary offering of the members (1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 9:6-7).
- B. The **individual** oversees his own funds (Acts 5:4). Church funds are overseen by the elders (God’s stewards, Tit. 1:7; Acts 11:30).
 1. A liberal contribution, given cheerfully (1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 9:7).
 2. Pay taxes (Rom. 13:7).
 3. Provide for family (1 Tim. 5:8,16).
 4. Maintain good works (1 Tim. 6:18; Gal. 6:10; Eph. 4:28; Jas. 1:27; 1 Jn. 3:17-18; Lk. 10:30-36).
Note the example of Paul at Ephesus (Acts 20:34-35).
- D. The **church** may use its money in the following ways:
 1. Preaching the gospel to edify saints and reach the lost (Phil. 4:15-16; 2 Cor. 11:8).
 2. Relieve needy saints (Acts 4:32-34, *et al.*).

II. NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON BENEVOLENT WORK.

- A. The individual disciple of Christ meets the needs of his fellow man.
 1. We should love all men, even those who choose to be our enemies. God sends good blessings (sunshine and rain) on the evil (Mt. 5:43-48). He provides rain and fruitful seasons even upon those who have rejected Him (Acts 14:17).
 2. Judgment will be on the basis of moral treatment of the needy, *etc.* (Mt. 25:35-40).
 3. Jesus commended the Samaritan who took care of the needs of the man who fell among robbers (Lk. 10:30-36).
 4. Barnabas sold a tract of land in order to assist the needy at Jerusalem (Acts 4:36-37).
 5. Dorcas abounded in “deeds of kindness and charity, which she continually did” (Acts 9:36, 39).
 6. Paul showed by example that Christians should work hard and help the weak. He quotes Jesus as saying “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:34-35).
 7. The household of Stephanas are commended because “they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints.” Others are urged to help in such work (1 Cor. 16:15-16).
 8. We are to do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith (Gal. 6:10).
 9. The Christian is to labor in order to be able to share with those who have need (Eph. 4:28).
 10. The Christian is to assist dependent widows (1 Tim. 5:16).
 11. We are to do good, be rich in good works, generous, ready to share (1 Tim. 6:18).

12. We should do good and share (Heb. 13:15-16).
 13. Pure religion includes visiting orphans and widows in their distress (Jas. 1:26-27).
 14. The faith is dead that fails to provide the needy with basic necessities (Jas. 2:15-18).
 15. We must love in deed and truth, being willing to assist those in need with this world's goods (1 Jn. 3:17-18).
- B. The local church cares for its own who become needy.
1. The earliest believers at Jerusalem sold property and possessions in order to share with those who had need (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-34). There was not a needy person among them (4:34).
 2. When widows had been neglected they made special efforts to correct the situation (Acts 6:1-6).
 3. The church is to care for widows indeed (1 Tim. 5:16). The "widow indeed" is one who has no one else to provide for her.
- C. Local churches helped other local churches.
1. During the reign of the Roman Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54), when a famine adversely affected the brethren in Judea, the disciples at Antioch determined to send a contribution for their relief (*diakonia*; Acts 11:27-30). They sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. This famine occurred about A.D. 46. Helena, Queen of Abiabene, came to Jerusalem during this famine. Josephus tells us that she bought great quantities of grain from Egypt and dried figs from Cyprus to help feed the people (*Ant.* 20:49-53).
 - a. We know that there were churches throughout Judea (Gal. 1:22; 1 Thess. 2:14), in addition to the church in Jerusalem.
 - b. The primary work of elders (overseers) is to tend the spiritual needs of the church (Acts 20:28-29; 1 Pet. 5:1-2). The elders would know which members of the congregation were needy.
 - c. Looking to the account of Acts 6, we conclude that deacons would assist in the distribution of the funds (Phil. 1:1).
 2. About 11 years later, during the reign of Nero (A.D. 54-68), the churches of Macedonia and Achaia sent a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1-2; Rom. 15:25-26; 2 Cor. 8-9). Each church made its own decision about how much to send and the messenger(s) who would carry the funds.
- D. There is no example in the New Testament of churches sending contributions to human benevolent organizations through which to do their work. And they did not send a contribution to a sponsoring church to enable it to take on a work larger than it could handle from its own resources.

CONCLUSION:

1. As we have opportunity, let us do good to all men.
2. Let us respect the limitations that God has placed on "church" (congregational) benevolence.
3. Let us recognize the sufficiency of the church to do the work that God has given it to do.