

Seeking Biblical Balance in Giving to Those in Need

I've found in my experience that a number of differing views are held among compassionate Christians pertaining to our giving to those in need. In seeking to determine how we can best serve our neighbors, a number of questions will arise including, but not limited to, "Is the church responsible to meet the needs of anyone and everyone she's able to meet no matter the situation or are there biblical qualifiers on our mercy? How are we to strike a biblical balance between our desire to help those in need and the possibility of doing genuine harm by enabling long-term spiritually unhealthy and unbiblical lifestyles?" It's important for us to note that ministering to the needs of others is not, first of all, our idea—it's God's idea. This being true, the Bible does give us clear teaching on how we can serve others for their good and God's glory. Christian pastor and author, Timothy Keller wrote his doctorate on the relevant scriptural passages in both the Old and New Testaments and provides an informative look at them in his book entitled "Ministries of Mercy." I acknowledge my indebtedness to Keller's book, for much of what follows.

What are the parameters that the Bible places on our mercy to others and is there a structure that can help us to discern our responsibility in ministering to the poor? To help our understanding of mercy ministry, Keller would draw our focus to a biblical truth that's often overlooked, i.e., the priority of Covenant. Furthermore Keller, from scripture, points to the social institutions of family and church to help us to structure our responsibility for giving. —Family: The Bible indicates that the first responsibility for a poor man lies with those in the very closest covenant relationship with him. For example, the poor Israelite was first of all to be helped by his nearest relative (Leviticus 25:25). When we come to the New Testament the apostle Paul writes, "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8). All people—and certainly Christians—have a direct responsibility to minister to the needs of their families.

—Church: In addition to the priority of family, how is the Church—the body of Christ—to think about helping the needy? The people of God are repeatedly told to care for their needy members. Biblical passages that teach this truth include: Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 15:7-8; Matthew 25:35ff; Acts 6:1-7; Romans 15:23-28; James 2:15-17; 1 John 3:17. It's important to note that each of these passages address the Christian's priority to other Christians in need. As we look at these two social institutions, the family and the church, we can see from a number of texts of scripture that the closer the covenantal connection, the greater the responsibility for mercy.

In addition to the family and the church it's certainly appropriate for the State to care for its most needy citizens (Genesis 41:53-57; Daniel 4:26-27) although the Bible says very little about the government's role in caring for the needy. Christians, then, have a primary responsibility for mercy to their families as well as a ministry to their brothers and sisters in the

local church, i.e., to those with whom he or she is in closest covenant. We should also note that our mercy is to be generous. “Be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs....give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart.” (Deuteronomy 15:8, 10)

We’ve seen the responsibility of mercy within families and within the local church but what does the Bible teach us about mercy ministry specifically to non-Christians? Keller writes, “As a priority, we should give to needy Christians both intensively and extensively, until their need is gone. But we must also give generously to non-believers as part of our witness to the world.” In addition to what we’ve already seen, does the Bible help us in knowing how to serve the various needs of non-Christians in our community who are neither part of our families nor part of our local churches? We’ll look at this area of biblical mercy ministry in my next article. Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.