

Mercy Ministry: Going All the Way

This is the third in a series of articles on Christian mercy ministry. The intent of these articles is not to try to provide answers to every question that may arise about the role of churches and Christians in their ministry to those in need but rather to propose that we may have much more responsibility than merely providing for them materially. In other words, what responsibility, if any, do we have to address the spiritual needs along with the material/physical needs of those whom we seek to help?

In a previous article I noted that Christians have a spiritual responsibility toward others in, at least, the following ways:

—Our mercy must not make it easier for someone to disobey God.

—Our mercy to the poor must be such as to make the poor merciful themselves. We must serve them with such wisdom and love that they are able, by grace, to get back on their feet and possibly even be able to give to others in need (Acts 20:35). This wisdom will include helping the poor to see that there are often very negative root causes that may be contributing to the difficulties they are facing. How can we help those in need to discover their deepest need in Jesus Christ? The following draws largely on Dr. Timothy Keller's book, 'Ministries of Mercy.' Keller seeks to help Christians to be more biblically faithful in showing mercy to the poor.

God's mercy comes to us first 'unconditionally.' That is to say that God does not say to us in effect, 'clean up your life and then I will save you.' But rather, God shows mercy to undeserving sinners who turn to Christ by faith. God's mercy comes to us without conditions; however, it does not proceed without conditions. God loves his children too much to leave us in the state in which he found us. He therefore commands grace-driven cooperation with mercy. We must give ourselves to Bible study, to the gathered worship of the saints, to sitting under the preaching of the word and to obedience, by God's grace. In an analogous way, we don't want to leave people in a state of perpetual need but we must seek to do the hard work of seeking to point them to the need that we all have for Jesus Christ.

In principle, then, Christians should, in the short term, show mercy to anyone in need as we have opportunity and resources. And yet, we ought not give naively and we should be on the lookout for fraud. In our giving, our real purpose must be to restore the poor person. We should seek to help them materially as well as seeking to help them to see their ultimate need of a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. We should expect their cooperation in receiving both material and spiritual help. Biblically, the ministry of word and deed are distinct but never separate. That being true, what should our response be to those who only want their ongoing material needs met while refusing our help to address their spiritual needs?

Dr. Keller has written that a biblical principle to follow is 'let mercy limit mercy.' He writes, "Sometimes we may have to say: 'Friend, we are not withdrawing our mercy, just changing its form. We will continue to pray for you and visit you, and the minute you are willing to cooperate with us and make the changes that we believe are needed, we will resume our

aid. Please realize that it is only out of love that we are doing this!” The scriptures are clear that we must make an appropriate distinction between the government (state) and the church. The government has an important role to play in the well-being of its citizens (Romans 13:1-7). But, the church is responsible to point people to their spiritual need in Jesus Christ. Jesus, himself, taught that it is only his disciples that are ‘salt and light’ in this world (Matthew 5:13-16).

As we close, I would like to propose a question: “If the church will not minister mercy to the spiritual needs of the poor, who will?” We must take our responsibility seriously. It’s a lot more difficult and often messy to minister mercy in this way, but genuine biblical love should desire to make the sacrifices needed.

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