

Should We Ever Withhold Our Giving?

In my last article on mercy ministry I posed this question: “How can we 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?” I want to begin to answer that question in this article, but first, I’ll note that there are three basic causes of poverty that the scripture gives us which are listed in Dr. Timothy Keller’s book, “Ministries of Mercy.”

- Oppression or injustice: Unfair treatment in a society that directly contributes to the difficulty of escaping from long-term/generational poverty (Psalm 82:1-8; Prov. 14:31).
- Natural disaster or calamity: Scriptural examples include crop failures, disabling injury, victimized by criminals, floods, storms and fires (Gen. 47; Lev. 25:25, 39, 47).
- Personal sin: A life of laziness (Prov. 6:6-7) and problems of the lack self-discipline (Prov. 23:21) can bring about poverty. Another reason for poverty can be expensive tastes and seeking luxury (Prov. 21:17).

Last time we looked at the importance of the priority of covenant. We saw that our family is a ‘first priority’ covenant category that those in need should look to for help. In addition to family, I noted the covenantal priority of Christians helping other Christians, particularly within the local church. That being said, how can Christians help our non-believing neighbors in a biblically faithful way? Keller notes that there are two opposite approaches to mercy ministry that Christians will generally follow, whether ministering within our family, in the church or in showing mercy to the outsider, i.e., our non-believing neighbor.

One approach to mercy ministry, by those who may be termed ‘conservatives,’ is to establish conditions immediately, denying mercy to people who (for various reasons) they determine are undeserving of receiving help to meet their most basic needs. An opposite approach, by those who may be termed ‘liberals,’ is never to attach any conditions to their mercy toward anyone. They simply believe that if someone is homeless, hungry, needs a utility bill paid, etc., Christians are responsible to seek to meet the need without any expectation of responsibility on the part of the person in need. Neither of these approaches seems to be biblically faithful. Generally speaking, we should not place immediate conditions on our mercy when someone comes to us for help to meet a reasonable need. That being said, there may be reasons for conditions to be placed on those who never seem to be able to provide for themselves and their household, e.g., do they need help with budgeting, etc.? It’s extremely important that we know their situation so that we can seek to help them in a biblically faithful way. This being true, does the Bible place conditions on our mercy?

One important condition that scripture gives is that people are responsible to work to meet their own, their families, and even other’s needs. “Six days shall you work, but on the seventh day you shall rest.” (Ex. 34:21) In the New Testament we read, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (1 Thessalonians 3:10). Paul seems to be giving an admonition to allow a person who is known to be lazy to experience the consequences of his irresponsible behavior.

Of course Paul is not speaking of those who are physically unable to work either by illness or severe disability. In addition to this, there may be those who're searching for work, but temporarily unable to find a job. Paul is speaking, then, about anyone who is able to work in some capacity yet refuses to work, always expecting others to meet their needs. This brings us to two spiritual and scriptural principles that Keller notes in his book.

—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 so that they are able, by grace, to get back on their feet and possibly even be able to give to others in need.

Keller writes, "Serving the poor is a euphemism for destroying the poor unless it includes with it the intention of seeing the poor begin to serve others, and thereby validate the words of Jesus that it is better to give than to receive (Acts. 20:35)."

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