

Nearer Heaven in 2007
Daily Godly Living Series
Showing Mercy to My Neighbor

Intro: Each Sunday we are considering aspects of our lives as disciples in this series, “Daily Godly Living”. Already we have seen that daily godly living includes cultivating intimacy with my God and glorifying God in my work. It also includes “showing mercy to my neighbor”. I’ve taken that expression from Luke 10.

Almost everyone knows the story of the Good Samaritan who came to the rescue of the man who was attacked by thieves. It was Jesus’ attempt to turn the spotlight upon a legalistic lawyer who sought to justify his neglect of others by the seeming lack of clarity about who is worthy of help. He asked, “And who is my neighbor?”

At the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus asks the lawyer a revealing question, “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” (Luke 10:36) **And the lawyer could not miss the point of that question; the answer was obvious!** And he said, “The one who showed mercy toward him.” (Luke 10:37)

Everyone knows we need to show mercy to our neighbor. The question I want to raise today is, “How is it possible for disciples, even those who may have little of this world’s goods, to find the motivation to do that—to be merciful to those around them?”

It is easy to rationalize that we don’t have time or money to give or that those who need help really don’t deserve it or that someone wealthier ought to do it.

But the real answer to our question can be found in the example of the Macedonians recorded in 2 Cor. 8 where Paul’s teaching could be subtitled—“When the poor helped the poorer” (2 Cor. 8:1-8).

When the poor helped the poorer

To appreciate what Paul is describing we must know something about:

The poverty of the Jerusalem saints

The composition of the church apparently from the beginning was made up of many widows and other needy people (Cf. Ac. 2:45; 6:1-6).

In the early days of the church the resources of the wealthier Judean saints were liquidated to take care of urgent needs (Ac. 4:34-35).

It became necessary for God to send a prophet to Antioch to help avoid a disaster for the church in the famine of AD 44 (Ac. 11:27-30).

Clearly the needs of the Jerusalem church were ongoing and great.

Apostles like John and James urged the apostle Paul “to remember the poor” (Gal. 2:10); and remember Paul did!

Paul encourage the Gentile churches who had been so blessed by the preachers the Jewish churches had sent out to show their appreciation by sending a generous gift to help their poor Jewish brethren. The churches of Galatia, Asia, and Macedonia, Achaia, and Greece (including Corinth) were urged to collect money at each first day assembly in order to raise a gift for the needy in Jerusalem. This part of Paul's letter to the Corinthians is designed to encourage them to follow through on a previous pledge to participate in this effort and to raise a generous sum for the needy in Jerusalem. A part of Paul's approach was to tell them about the response of the Macedonian saints.

The response of the Macedonian saints

What Paul makes abundantly clear is that the Macedonians were poor people too; yet in spite of their poverty they gave generously for the poor in Jerusalem—the poor contributing to the poorer.

The Macedonians were suffering greatly

They were “*in a great ordeal of affliction*”

They were experiencing “*deep poverty*”

Their poverty had caused the apostle Paul to have no expectations of generosity on their part! “*...and this not as we had expected...*”

Yet they showed amazing generosity

Paul expressions are oxymoronic: Their cup of poverty was so full that it overflowed...in generosity!

They gave “*not only according to their ability but beyond their ability*” and *that of “their own accord”*

They “*begged with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints*”. “Do us a favor! Let us give!”

What motivated the poor to help the poorer?

They gave themselves first to the Lord and to the apostles by the will of God

When a person gives himself first to God and to those who are His spokesmen, then what he has will also belong to God to be used according to His will.

They were being motivated by the grace of God

Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, (2 Corinthians 8:1)

Behind this self-giving of the Macedonians was God's gift to the Macedonians:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

These poor people had come to see themselves as recipients of tremendous riches from God; and even though their salvation had been accompanied by “great affliction”, God's grace was producing in them

a magnificent heart of love and generosity toward their brethren everywhere.

Through the years I've learned that some of the most generous givers in the Lord's church are not necessarily those who have the most money, but often those who are much lower on the income scale.

Maybe because of their limited means, they've had to trust God more; and so it is not so hard for them to give, trusting God to provide in the future what they have given away in the present.

Maybe they've come to understand the struggles of the poor and what it's like to have hard times; and they can more easily relate to material desperation and respond to it.

But the underlying motivation of all mercy to our neighbors has to be rooted in this fact. All of us were spiritually bankrupt; yet we have by God's grace been made fabulously wealthy! And in appreciation of that fact, we recognize that we ourselves are God's and that all we have also belongs to Him to be used to His glory!

What Can I give?

What people with little means can give

It is abundantly clear that the Macedonians could not have ultimately given that much. They simply didn't have the resources; but they gave generously out of their limited supply. And so can those with little means do today.

It would be easy for a poor person to say, "I just don't have anything to give".

Jesus taught that what we do with a little is a test case for what we would do with a lot!

Many times in my life I've heard people say, "If I had a million dollars I would give to this or that". What are you doing with what you have?

But in addition, there are other things that we can give to show mercy:

Give your time and effort to help meet the need

Give a sympathetic and understanding ear

Give a source of hope in the Lord

Give a prayer in their behalf to God

What people with greater means can give

If poor people can be generous with the little they have with the right motivation, how much more could the well-to-do give if they have the merciful heart of the Macedonians! Those with greater wealth have greater responsibility to give more, but for the same reason as the poor!

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for

themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed. (1 Timothy 6:17-19)

Do you see that generosity is not the product of how much you have, but how much you love!

A large gift given without love in the heart is meaningless. The world may call us “philanthropists” but God would simply call us people who use wealth to buy influence. Or, to use Paul’s description, “*I am nothing*” (1 Cor. 13:1-2)

In contrast, any gift given from a generous heart (whether large or small) is already blessed with the favor of God!

Conclusion: Every day we are confronted with the challenge of need in various forms. Daily godly living is the commitment to see the need and to do what we can to respond to it with love and generosity because this is the way the Lord has treated us! Do this and you’ll be “nearer heaven in 2007”.