

***Question: Didn't Jesus say, "You will always have the poor among you"? If so, why should we be so greatly concerned about the plight of the needy?***

In Deuteronomy 15:4-5 Moses explained to Israel that "there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today." By properly using God's generous and rich blessings, his people would always have a way to meet the needs of any who face impoverishing situations in life; but they must obey the Lord's command to "not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs" (Deut. 15:7-8).

However, the statement that there "should be no poor among you" (Deut. 15:4), did not eliminate the problems that create poverty. Thus, a few verses later Moses said, "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land" (Deut. 15:11).

Moreover the issue was raised by one of the disciples of Jesus. When a woman anointed the head of Jesus with an expensive perfume, some of his disciples criticized her saying: "Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor" (Mark 14:4-5). In response, Jesus quoted the above statement from Deuteronomy and said: "The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me" (Mark 14:6-7).

Unfortunately, some people have taken this statement from Jesus as an excuse for indifference toward the poor.

A survey of the Bible demonstrates that nothing is of greater importance to God than compassion for the poor, the alien, widows and orphans. Numerous provisions were made in God's law to protect the needy. For example, fields were not to be thoroughly harvested so that the poor could glean the leftovers (Leviticus 19:9-10). Also, a poor man should be paid his wages before sunset (Deut. 24:14-15). Repeatedly, the Proverbs give warnings like the following: "He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind

to the needy honors God” (Proverbs 14:31). The prophets loudly called for justice toward people who are poor, weak and powerless. When Jesus began his ministry, he quoted from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed” (Luke 4:18; cf. Isaiah 61:1). The writer of the book of James added that “religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27).

Anyone who is not deeply concerned about the plight of the poor does not understand the heart of God. The apostle John said: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” (1 John 3:17) Since God has generously offered his grace to all of us, may we freely receive and freely give grace and compassion to others.

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