



# WILL THE POOR ALWAYS BE WITH US?

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By **BRYANT MYERS**

**T**o excuse neglect of the poor, Christians sometimes remind us of Jesus' words, "The poor will always be with you" (Mt 26:11). Did Jesus say this? Yes. Does it mean what it appears to mean? Not really.

So what does this troubling phrase mean?

## **The Unforgettable Woman**

Jesus' statement appears in a story that has nothing to do with the poor. It is about a woman Jesus said we will always remember. Just before the Lord's supper and arrest, this woman poured a jar of expensive perfume on Jesus' head.

Jesus knew the woman was preparing him for burial. She understood before the disciples that Jesus was headed to the cross.

The disciples criticize this act of devotion: "Why this waste? ... The perfume could have been sold and given to the poor."

Jesus' reply is withering: "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me." He understood her act and considered it a wonderful gift.

It is at this point that Jesus quotes and extends Deuteronomy 15: "The poor will always be with you, but you will not always have me." Only He and the woman seemed to understand that Jesus would not always be with the disciples.

## **The Mistaken Activist**

There is an important lesson here for Christians

working among the poor. Too many justify ruining their health and destroying their families by their commitment to the poor.

This is not what Jesus asks us to do. Our devotion must be to Him, not the poor. While we are supposed to love our neighbor, especially our poor neighbor, we are to worship only Jesus. The woman understood this, and the disciples did not.

## **The Poor that Aren't Supposed to be There**

By now you can see that I am uncomfortable with the way Jesus' statement is sometimes taken out of context. My disappointment is increased because a little curiosity about the passage Jesus quoted could greatly increase our understanding of God, His people and the poor.

The portion of Deuteronomy from which Jesus quotes starts with a complete contradiction of what Jesus quotes. Dt 15:4 states, "There should be no poor among you..."

Really?

The rest of verse four explains why: "... because in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, He will richly bless you." There were to be no poor because there would be plenty.

And there would be more than enough. "For the Lord your God will bless you as He has promised, and you will lend to many nations, but have to borrow from none" (v. 6). There would be a surplus to trade with other nations.

I believe that the loving, caring God who created the world never intended a world of scarcity. I can

believe this before I can believe God intended the poor to always be with us.

But there was a condition. “He will richly bless you, only if you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.” The blessing and abundance of the Promised Land are dependent on the faithfulness of God’s people to God’s commands.

It is at this point that an apparent contradiction first enters the text as God commands: “If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend to him whatever he needs.”

How can this be? We were just told “there should be no poor among you,” and now we are given instructions about to what to do if there is a poor person. Did Moses get confused? Is this a contradiction?

I don’t think so.

### **The Ones who Failed**

God knows that there will be poor in Israel, not because God failed to provide, but because humans would not be faithful to God nor to each other. There had to be provision for the poor in the Promised Land because Israel would fail.

And so it is today, I suspect. There is enough agricultural production to feed every person on the planet. Yet people are dying of hunger and chronic malnutrition stunts the growth of children.

It is not that God’s planet cannot provide, but that we do not follow His commands. We neither love God nor love our neighbors.

### **What Jesus Really Meant**

So what did Jesus mean when He said, “the poor will always be with

you?” Did He mean poverty is something we should tolerate?

I don’t think so.

First, Jesus was making a point about worship. He only referred to the poor after the disciples proposed they were more worthy of this woman’s devotion.

Second, Jesus was being ironic. In quoting from this passage, Jesus was letting His disciples know there are only poor in God’s abundant creation because of human sin. “The poor will always be with you,” was a rebuke to His disciples.

JESUS WAS NOT CONDONING THE EXISTENCE OF THE POOR. HE WAS REMINDING US, WITH SOME CONSIDERABLE IRONY, THAT THE POOR ARE HERE BECAUSE WE HAVE FAILED TO KEEP GOD’S COMMANDS.

The passage in Deuteronomy closes with a command. After the verse, “There will always be poor people in the land,” we find this: “Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land” (v. 11).

God knew humankind would face this contradiction. His world is productive enough to meet everyone’s needs. And humans created in His image are creative enough to make it so.

Yet sin in the heart and a fallen creation result in God’s world not being all it was created to be. While God didn’t intend there to be any poor, He knew there would be poor as long as there are sinful people.

Jesus statement that the poor will always be with us is intended to shame us; to remind us that there are poor only because we have failed. He never intended to justify tolerance to the point of neglecting the poor.

### **The Message for Us**

What are we to conclude?

First, Jesus was not condoning

the existence of the poor. He was reminding us, with some considerable irony, that the poor are here because we have failed to keep God’s commands.

Second, unrighteousness—of those who are not poor and the poor themselves—is the cause of poverty. At the most fundamental level sin distorts our relationships with God, with each other and with our world. Our relationships do not work for our well-being and the result is poverty, racism and other expressions of injustice. Poverty was and is not part of God’s intention.

Third, to tolerate poverty by excusing it in Jesus’ name is an insult to our Lord, who so consistently extended Himself for those who were poor, sick and suffering. Tolerating poverty makes a mockery of Jesus statement of His mission in Luke 4:18.

Finally, our response to the poor is to be openhanded, and to enjoy sharing what God has given us. “Give generously to him (the poor) and do so without a grudging heart” (v 10). As a result the “Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your had to.” Caring for the poor is good for us!

As long as we live in a fallen world, we are to be openhanded and to lend freely. If loans are not repaid after seven years, we are to write them off. The goal is caring for our family, not running a business.

After all, if we were doing our job, there would be no poor. It’s our fault, not God’s.<sup>f</sup>