

## **The Poor Will Never Cease From the Land – by Thailer Jimerson**

While driving home from a Bible study for young Christians one night, Amber and I both felt encouraged (as we always do at studies). These studies are a recurring thing and any chance we're able to attend, we reap the benefits. Granted, it's hard with our toddler and infant, but it's so worth it. Young Christians need to be active in small groups and frequent Bible studies with many people of differing opinions – it's healthy and it's one of the many ways to grow. And yet, as we were driving home, we felt just as concerned as we did encouraged. The study was aimed at answering the questions of those who are non-believers. As we went through each question, helping each other learn how to ease the qualms of opponents to the Christian faith (not to mention settling the questions and answers in our own hearts), we arrived at question number three: *“How does a church justify spending millions on buildings, while letting people starve?”*

As I sat and listened to how the majority of those around me would answer the non-believer's question, I increasingly began to feel, how do you say... 'grieved'? I was taken aback. So was Amber. Now don't get me wrong – I love these people. They're my brethren. But I had major concerns with the answers I was hearing. Here are some.

### **“If you throw money at a problem, it won't fix it.”**

This is true in a sense. But it's much easier to throw this out as an answer when you're on the side of the church that 'throws money' at their gigantic, ornate sanctuaries. It's harder for these words to pass your lips when your child is dying of starvation or disease. If only someone would 'throw money,' just a couple dollars, to you. One brother made a good observation when he pointed out that, in the New Testament, we see many examples of the church selling their possessions to aid the poor (**Acts 4:32-37**) but we never read of the church building any kind of 'worship center' for themselves. (*Now, that's not to say it's wrong to have a building – please don't misunderstand.* But the question is “Is there a proper balance between how much the church spends on its own comforts and how much they sacrifice, individually, for the good of the people?”) And I don't think that individuals, who do want to help by 'throwing money' to the poor out of the kindness of their hearts, would think to do *only* that – certainly, a lot of prayer and intercession will be made for the needy as well. And it's just as important. But prayer without the accompaniment of faith-driven acts of love, by the empowerment and grace of God, will *not* go very far. “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body – *what good is that?*” (**James 2:15-16**).

### **“Well Jesus said ‘the poor you have with you always.’”**

Yes, he did. But let's allow Jesus to finish his sentence: *“...and whenever you want, you can do good for them”* (**Mark 14:7**). I understand this objection because I often made it myself – but what do we mean by quoting this in the face of the hungry and the needy? That Jesus is saying it's a 'lost cause'? Does this logic come from a man who preached, loved, touched, healed, fed, and cared for the poor – who was poor himself? What's interesting is that Jesus' words are oddly parallel to a passage found in **Deuteronomy 15:11** where the Lord says, “For there will never cease to be poor in the land.” However, did that mean God thought it was a lost cause and the rich can just keep to themselves? The very next sentence says: “Therefore I command you, ‘You

shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.” In fact, Deuteronomy 15 continues to speak about the provisions that God would make for the poor; everything from freeing slaves every seventh year to even redistribution of wealth (fairly acquired) every 49<sup>th</sup> year, the year of Jubilee (**Deuteronomy 15:1-8; Leviticus 25:8-55**).

**“If you follow this reasoning to its logical end, where does the giving stop? If you have two shirts, will you give the other away?”** The argument that we will always have something extra to give should not be used to defeat the purpose of giving to begin with. These answers are defensive and the heart is all wrong. And honestly, how often has giving to the needy resulted in them taking us for all we have? It’s not realistic. And the logic of “If you give an inch, they can take a mile” doesn’t hold here, nor should it be allowed to keep us from the godly duty of sacrificial charity. Also, when that moment comes, how *will we* answer to that question? Will we be prepared to live according to the words of our Lord who said, “If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well” (**Matthew 5:40**)? And will we judge Jesus and his teaching by our own faulty logic? Can Jesus not ask that we give it all away like he did the rich young ruler? “You lack one thing; go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (**Mark 10:21**). Is this so hard to believe, coming from the God-man who left it all (and much more) for us? (**2 Corinthians 8:9**).

**“There will always be poor people. You can’t solve world hunger.”**

Does that mean we can’t try? Does that mean we’re content to go on our way as faulty stewards of God’s blessings? You know, there’s a story Jesus told in **Mark 12:41-44** of a poor widow who throws two small copper coins into the offering. Though there were many who threw a lot of money out of their abundance, Jesus praised her *instead*, because she gave out of her poverty everything she possessed, ‘all that she had to live on.’ Now this widow gave so little that she might as well have kept it. She didn’t solve world hunger; she didn’t alleviate any problems by her gift. But that’s not what mattered. She gave from the heart a sacrificial offering to God and *that’s* what mattered. It made all the difference. And when our hearts prod us to give sacrificially to those in need, Jesus assures us with these words: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, *you did it to me*” (**Matthew 25:40**).

When I came to question number three on the worksheet (“How do Christians justify spending millions on a worship building while letting people starve?”), my answer was: **“You don’t.”** That’s the problem. We’re *trying* to justify it. Quite honestly, most of the problems non-believers have with Christianity is not the faith itself but *our poor rendering of it* in our individual lives. But I would make this point (that I learned from Tim Keller) to the non-believer: We don’t justify the church spending millions on buildings while there are starving people around the world. It’s unjust. And when Martin Luther King, Jr. dealt with the gross injustices of segregation and racism, even (and perhaps mainly) among the white, middle-class, conservative believers, he never said the problem was with Christianity itself; that we needed to depart from the teachings of the Bible in order to have justice. Instead, he said:

**“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).**

He didn't call people away from Christianity but to a truer form of it. And maybe, just maybe, we'd have less antagonistic questions proposed if we just learn to follow the actual teachings of our Lord, not only in word but also in deed. Let's get our priorities straight and mirror our Lord. Emulate altruism. Give generously. And teach our people its importance.