

- **\*READ John 12:1-8\*** It is just days before the betrayal and crucifixion of our Lord, and He finds himself in the town of Bethany where some of His best friends live. He is in the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus when Mary takes a large quantity of perfume and anoints the feet of our Lord. She even goes so far as to wipe the feet of Jesus with her own hair. Surely those present would've recognized and appreciated this great act of humility and service on the part of Mary. Unfortunately, there was one man present who failed to appreciate this gesture. Judas Iscariot, who would betray Jesus, scoffs at this action by complaining that this perfume was wasted on Jesus when it could have been sold and the proceeds distributed to the poor. While there was nothing wrong with contributing to the poor, John is very clear in letting us know that Judas's motivations were impure. He was a greedy man who was guilty of pilfering money from the money-bag when he had the opportunity.
- At this rebuke towards Mary, Jesus speaks up and chastises Judas by stating that the actions of Mary were right and honorable because Jesus would soon be gone and there would not be such opportunities to serve Him in this way. Jesus even goes so far as to quote from the Old Testament text of **Deuteronomy 15:11** to remind Judas and those present that the poor would always exist among them. There was nothing wrong with helping the needy, but Jesus's main point is to hint at His impending departure. However, there is a strong secondary lesson that can be learned from Jesus's quotation of **Deuteronomy 15:7-11**.
- In this Old Testament text, we are reminded of the fact that God has always expected for His people to be a people of great charity and compassion for those around them, especially those who are poor and needy. There is no doubt from a reading of this text that God is concerned with how His people treat those among them who are needy. They were commanded to not to *"be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Instead, you are to open your hand to him and freely loan him enough for whatever need he has."* From this point on there are continual commands and admonitions for God's people to not have stingy hearts. There would always be those who are needy and God commands them to *"Open your hand willingly to your poor and needy brother in your land."*
- And friends... the poor continue to be present all around us today in various shapes and forms. There are those who we might see begging on the side of the road. There are orphans who live without parents. There are the needy elderly all around. What is going to be our response to these people? I would suggest that the attitude and action that God commanded for His Israelite people to have is the same attitude and action that He demands of us as His people, today. God's thoughts on the issue of how His people are to approach the needy, the poor, or the least of these have not changed. I say this based upon the simple teaching of the inspired writer James that we are all to follow the royal command of us loving our neighbor as ourselves. (**James 2:8**)
- This morning we are going to look at how we ought to approach the loving and serving of the least of these who are among us in this world. A simple evaluation of the world around us shows that there are many different entities that focus much of their time and efforts towards the caring of those who are needy. There are many governmental, public, and private organizations that work towards aiding the needy, and there are also churches that see this as a vital part of their work as local churches and denominations. As with anything that we do within our faiths, we must be sure that we are doing things in a way that is by the will of God. If we claim to be New Testament churches made up of New Testament Christians then we must be willing to do things commanded by God according to the New Testament pattern that is laid out for us. I would think that **Colossians 3:17** makes this abundantly clear.
- I would think and hope that this conversation would be quite simple, but anyone who knows the history of our fellowship and tradition knows this simply isn't the case. Half a century ago there were huge debates and clashes among brethren as to how this work ought to be carried out. There were

brethren on both sides of this issue who stood up and pounded their Bibles and their chests to show that they had the Bible on their side. And yet, division persisted and continues on even to this day. **Brothers and sisters, this ought not be so!** There should be **unity** among God's people as to how we go about this divinely given good work of helping the least of these who are among us, and I am confident that there can be unity when we approach this issue from a balanced perspective that is free of the negative emotions that have plagued our brothers and sisters for decades.

- Right this moment, I want for all of us to **check our emotions at the door**. We must put our emotions aside, grab a Bible, open it up, and let's simply see what the Word of God has to say. To aide us in these considerations, let's take our minds back to the lesson we had a couple weeks ago when we thought upon the idea of what it means to balance law and love in an appropriate manner. This is necessary because each side of this issue will go to the Bible and make the strong claim that it supports what they do. The "law" side will hold firmly that there is a pattern to be followed, and the "love" side will hold firmly to the idea that God's desire for us to help the needy frees us to do so by any means necessary even if that means supporting human institutions from the church's collected funds to fulfill this work. I am not concerned with being on any side of this contention than on the side of being faithful to the Biblical text and what it reveals to me. I don't want to stand upon the wisdom of any man, but I simply want to listen to the wisdom of God revealed in His Word. I hope that we can all agree to that because I believe that is the only way that there can be unity on what has been such a hotly contested issue.
- My suggestion is that there is a Biblically consistent middle ground that can be achieved when we seek to balance the law side and the love side together into a position where God's will concerning our care for the needy is not only accomplished but that it is done so according to the pattern that is laid out for us within the New Testament. Again, if we claim to be the New Testament church of today then we ought to do just as the churches of the New Testament did. If we don't care for being that New Testament church then we can do as we please, but I know that this church desires to be nothing more and nothing less than the church that we read about in the New Testament. Therefore, we must be willing to surrender to Jesus's will in all things and in all ways.
- Additionally, this church that we belong to is not our church. We did not purchase it with our own blood, and therefore we must respect the wishes of our King and not only do His will but do His will His way. We must be concerned with what Jesus has either stated, given an example of, or given evidence that leads us to a proper conclusion through His inspired writers of the New Testament. With these considerations in mind, let's approach this lesson by simply comparing the Biblical foundations of both sides, finding the proper Biblical balance, and then realizing the importance of us surrendering our will to the will of Jesus on this issue just like every other issue we face.

## I. New Testament Pattern For Local Church Benevolence

### A. The local church is only seen using its funds for the purpose of helping needy saints.

1. As we read about the workings of the church of the New Testament, we don't see them using their collected funds for the purpose of solving the world-wide problem of poverty. Instead, we see the collective church using its collective funds to aide the needy saints who were among them and even in other places. This is seen time and time again consistently in the New Testament recordings of the church in its earliest years.
  - a) There were some among the very first disciples who had needs, and those who had such needs were quickly aided by the collected funds of those who were well off. ***"Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need."* (Acts 2:44,45)**
  - b) As the church continued on, the disciples were willing to sell what they had and bring the proceeds to the Apostles so that they might hand out what was needed by those among them. ***"For there was not a needy person among them because all those who owned lands***

or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet. This was then distributed to **each person as any had need.**" (Acts 4:35,35)

- c) The issue in **Acts 6:1-6** concerning the neglect of the Hellenistic Jewish widows in the daily distribution implies that there was continual care within the church for those among them who were in need. "**Seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom**" were appointed to be set over this duty so the Apostle could focus on their ministry to the Word.
  - d) There arose a severe famine throughout the Roman world and the church in Antioch used of her means to send relief to the disciples in Judea. "**Each of the disciples, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers and sisters who lived in Judea. They did this, sending it to the elders by means of Barnabas and Saul.**" (Acts 11:29,30)
  - e) As Paul is writing to the brethren in Rome, he speaks of his current mission of traveling to Jerusalem so that he might deliver to the poor in that church the funds of relief that were sent by the disciples who were in Macedonia and Achaia. "**Right now I am traveling to Jerusalem to serve the saints, because Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Yes, they were pleased, and indeed are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual benefits, then they are obligated to minister to them in material needs.**" (Romans 15:25-27)
  - f) Paul writes to the Corinthians concerning their collection on the first day of the week, and part of the purpose of this collection was in order to aid needy saints. "**Now about the collection for the saints: Do the same as I instructed the Galatian churches. On the first day of the week, each of you is to set something aside and save in keeping with how he is prospering, so that no collections will need to be made when I come.**" (I Corinthians 16:1,2)
  - g) Paul shares with the Corinthians the great example of love on the part of the saints of Macedonia. They had a strong desire to be able to participate in the relief given to needy saints. "**I can testify that, according to their ability and even beyond their ability, of their own accord, they begged us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints...**" (II Corinthians 8:3,4)
  - h) Just a chapter later, Paul writes to encourage these Corinthian brethren to be ready themselves to participate in this ministry to the saints. "**For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the proof provided by this ministry, they will glorify God for your obedient confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone.**" (II Corinthians 9:12,13)
  - i) Lastly, in **I Timothy 5:1-10** we read of the church's responsibility towards the widows among them who are "**genuinely in need.**" We can accurately conclude that these would have been widowed disciples since it is written concerning them, "**The widow who is truly in need and left all alone has put her hope in God and continues night and day in her petitions and prayers.**" (I Timothy 5:5)
2. If we are striving to do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus by His command and given example then we must come to the conclusion that the evidence leads us to. Based upon these texts and consistent pattern therein, we are forced to recognize that the church was designed to care for the needy saints that were among them.
- B. We only have examples of the aid being sent directly to those who are in need.
1. That care for the needy saints was consistently sent directly to those who were in need. We see this in a number of the examples that are seen on the list we just considered.
    - a) **They did this, sending it to the elders by means of Barnabas and Saul.**" (Acts 11:29,30)
    - b) "**Right now I am traveling to Jerusalem to serve the saints, because Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.** (Romans 15:25,26)
    - c) "**...so that no collections will need to be made when I come.**" (I Corinthians 16:2)

2. In sending their funds directly to those who had the need, they maintained complete control of where their money was going and how it would be used. Surely God's wisdom is seen in this approach.

Yet this is only one side of the discussion because while this side is busy establishing the New Testament pattern for how the local church is to use its collected funds, the other side is jumping up and down, screaming, and waving their hands concerning the fact that the actual issue at hand hasn't been addressed at all...and that side is exactly right! Because while there is a need to establish a pattern that reveals what God authorizes, there is also a need to fulfill the desires of God concerning His people's care for those who are the least of these. This first side is making a Biblical case, but so is this other side that we want to consider because it clearly is able to show that it is a New Testament command for disciples of Jesus to love their neighbors, especially those who are poor and needy.

## II. New Testament Commands To Show Love To Neighbor

### A. Jesus teaches us to show love & care for the needy people of this world.

1. Jesus Himself was very compassionate and caring towards the least among the people of Israel. He was very busy throughout His ministry healing the sick and caring for the downtrodden and neglected. He cared for the children and showed love towards the widowed. He also took time to teach the need for His followers to have this same type of care and love for others.
  - a) During His famous sermon on the mount, Jesus clearly states that the citizens of this great kingdom are to be generous and compassionate people. **"Give to the one who asks you, and don't turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."** (Matthew 5:42)
  - b) This was mentioned earlier, but Jesus strongly asserts that the only command that comes before loving one's neighbor is to love the Lord your God. **"The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."** (Matthew 22:39)
  - c) Jesus shared the parable of the good Samaritan to show that all people are our neighbors and deserving of love, compassion, and service when we have opportunity and ability. **"But a Samaritan on his journey came up to him, and when he saw the man, he had compassion. He went over to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on olive oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him. When I come back I'll reimburse you for whatever extra you spend.'" (Luke 10:34,35)**
  - d) Luke's version of the sermon on the mount includes Jesus's commands for His people to have a willingness to sacrifice of themselves in order to aide the poor. **"Sell your possessions and give to the poor."** (Luke 12:33)
  - e) Jesus would later teach the need for us to be willing to give to those of whom we don't expect anything in return. "He also said to the one who had invited him, **"When you give a lunch or a dinner, don't invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors, because they might invite you back, and you would be repaid. On the contrary, when you host a banquet, invite those who are poor, maimed, lame, or blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."** (Luke 14:12-14)
  - f) Jesus specifically told the rich young ruler that he needed to possess a heart that allowed for him to sell his possessions in order to give to the poor. **"When Jesus heard this, he told him, 'You still lack one thing: Sell all you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'**" (Luke 18:22)
2. There can be no argument that it is absolutely the desire of Jesus for His followers to be people who are concerned for those around them who are in need. Yet it isn't just concern that is demanded, but He also desires for action to be taken to aid those of our neighbors that we can aid in their times of distress. This is clearly seen in Jesus's ministry, and it continues to be something that is written about in the New Testament letters.

## B. This benevolent attitude continues to be emphasized in the New Testament Letters.

1. Some might be tempted to think that all we have either as an example or command within the New Testament is Christians helping over Christians, but that isn't what we see at all. Instead, we find the inspired writers Paul and James commanding Christians to be willing to help anyone around them who was in need.
  - a) This can clearly be seen in **Galatians 6:10**. Though we have a special responsibility to our brethren in the faith, we also have a responsibility towards anyone that we have the opportunity to do good towards. *"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, especially for those who belong to the household of faith."*
  - b) Paul goes on in **I Timothy 6:17-19** to instruct the rich through Timothy to *"do what is good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and willing to share..."*
  - c) If those writings aren't enough to convince us of our need to help the least among us then certainly the straightforward words of James in **James 1:27** will impress these truths upon our hearts. *"Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained from the world."*
2. It is without a shadow of a doubt that God's people are to be the people who are first up when it comes to aiding the least of these who are out there in the world. There is clear Biblical teaching to establish and support this claim, and yet we are still left with the question concerning who is responsible for the caring of such people. Let's draw some applications from this chart and the Scriptures that are found within it.

## III. What We Conclude From This Chart:

### A. There is a difference between the church's collective money and the individual's money.

1. Notice that there is difference between the subjects that are taking action or should take action within these two sides of this chart. On the left side we have the collective action of the church with its money while the right side seems to indicate teaching from Jesus, Paul, and James concerning individual action and his/her money. Now, some would say that there is no difference between the individual and the church, and therefore there is no difference what the church does with its money and what the individual Christian does with his or her money. However, I don't believe this to be the case at all based upon a few texts and the principles they lay forth.
  - a) Firstly, we can see this difference in **Matthew 18:15-17**. This situation that begins as an individual situation between brothers is handled individually. However, as the situation unfolds, it transitions to being something that is individually known and addressed into something where the whole church is included.
  - b) Secondly, we find Peter stating plainly in **Acts 5:4** that Ananias had complete control over his own money when it was still his own money. He could do whatever he pleased with it because it was his money and under only his control, besides glorifying God with his money.
  - c) Thirdly, the distinction between the church's money and the money of individual Christians is seen in **I Timothy 5:16** concerning the care for widows who had family that could aid her in her need. *"If any believing woman has widows in her family, let her help them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it can help widows in genuine need."* If the church's money is the same as the individual's money then why would this distinction need to be made by Paul?
2. I am convinced that these text along with a little common sense clearly show us that the church cannot use its money in just any way as the individual can. An individual can use his or her money to start a business or invest in the stock market, but surely we would understand that this isn't what the church is to be engaged in. If any distinction can be made between the two then there must be an understanding of what the two kinds of funds can be used for, but that is not where the differences stop. They continue into answering our question concerning responsibility for the poor of the world.

- B. The responsibilities are different for the church's collected funds and the individuals funds.
1. The pattern of responsibility seems to clearly show that the church is responsible for caring for the needy within the church while the individual Christian is responsible for using their own private funds to assist those of the world who are in need. The church is inwardly focused when it comes to benevolence while the Christian is to be outwardly focused. I believe this is where the wisdom of God shines through because there is no way that a local church can be successful in caring for the needs of the entire world around them if Paul says that needy widows would be a burden. This leads me to be reminded that the church's mission isn't to cure world poverty, but it is to share that which it has unlimited supply of...the Gospel!
  2. However, that does not excuse us from failing to fulfill the individual responsibilities laid upon us by the New Testament to be a people who are rich in good works, generous, and willing to share! We must be people who are not only helping those who we come across, but we ought to be people who are looking for ways to help the needy! Though the church isn't to use its collected funds to help organizations, we as individuals sure can! And might I even go so far as to saying that we ought to help those that we believe are doing good work! Additionally, doing this on an individual level allows for us to help whoever we want to help because the money is in our control. Once it is given to the church then it is no longer our money under our control, but the shepherds of the church now have oversight. I might not like this one particular organization, but you might and vice versa. Therefore, we can both individually be busy helping the needy in the best ways that we see fit, and we could also come together to serve others in a way that we both like and want to participate in.
  3. The bottom line being this...both sides of this chart are to be busy doing good work with the money at their disposal according to the pattern and instructions given by Jesus and others. This also means that simply guarding against doing good work the wrong way isn't enough to fulfill the charge that has been given to us by God. Though we might not be violating the pattern, are we making sure that we are individually sacrificing to help those around us who are in need? On the other side, just because people are being helped doesn't mean that the ends justify the means. We must be concerned with doing things according to the will of God! This is where the balancing comes into place! We must respect the law with that heart full of love. We should love our neighbors while also loving Jesus by respecting His wishes. If we will all be busy fulfilling the commands to love one another and especially the needy among us then there shouldn't be any opportunity for anyone to have a true complaint against us.

I know that this is a lot to take in during one sitting, but I do hope that it has been clear and as concise as it can be. I want us to conclude these thoughts by considering the serious warnings that are given by Jesus on two separate occasions. The first will warn that the law and pattern are to be respected while the second reminds us that we will be judged for how we treat the least of these who are among us. May God convict our hearts to truly care for those who are in need and do so according to His wisdom.

**Matthew 7:21-23 (CSB)** "...Not every who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven...'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?...**Depart from me, you lawbreakers!**"

**Matthew 25:31-46 (CSB)** "Then he will also say to those on the left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels! For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger and you didn't take me in; I was naked and you didn't clothe me, sick and in prison and you didn't take care of me.' "Then they too will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or without clothes, or sick, or in prison, and not help you?' "Then he will answer them, '**Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.**'"