

TIMOTHY KELLER

Ministries  
*of* MERCY

THE CALL OF THE JERICHO ROAD

THIRD EDITION



Ministries  
*of*  
MERCY



Ministries  
*of* **MERCY**

THE CALL OF THE JERICO ROAD

THIRD EDITION

TIMOTHY KELLER

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 1989, 1997, 2015 by Timothy Keller  
Third edition 2015

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked (RSV) are from the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, © 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are from the King James Version.

ISBN: 978-1-59638-955-7 (pbk)  
ISBN: 978-1-59638-956-4 (ePub)  
ISBN: 978-1-59638-957-1 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Keller, Timothy J., 1950-  
Ministries of mercy : the call of the Jericho road / Timothy Keller. -- Third Edition.  
pages cm  
Includes bibliographical references.  
ISBN 978-1-59638-955-7 (pbk.)  
1. Corporal works of mercy. 2. Church and social problems. I. Title.  
BV4647.M4K45 2015  
253--dc23

2014047917

To Kathy,  
who had a social conscience first



# Contents

Editor's Note	9
Prologue: The One Who Showed Mercy	11
Introduction: Who Is My Neighbor?	17
<b>PART 1: PRINCIPLES</b>	
1. The Call to Mercy	35
2. The Character of Mercy	45
3. The Motivation for Mercy	61
4. Giving and Keeping: A Balanced Lifestyle	71
5. Church and World: A Balanced Focus	85
6. Conditional and Unconditional: A Balanced Judgment	99
7. Word and Deed: A Balanced Testimony	113
<b>PART 2: PRACTICE</b>	
8. Getting Started	131
9. Preparing the Church	143
10. Mobilizing the Church	167
11. Expanding Your Vision	189
12. Managing Your Ministry	211
13. Mercy Ministry and Church Growth	225
14. Meeting Needs	245
Recommended Reading	255



## Editor's Note

*Ministries of Mercy* was written in 1988 as part of a research project for the Presbyterian Church in America. Many of the statistics have changed since that time, but the underlying principles—and needs—remain. Our desire is that this book and the principles of mercy ministry it discusses will aid you in the service of your church and city.

Some excellent resources have become available since this book's original publication. Several of these are listed under Recommended Reading at the back of this new edition.



## PROLOGUE

### The One Who Showed Mercy

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

He answered: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:25–37)

## THE DANGEROUS ROAD

The road to Jericho is steep and dangerous. So dangerous, in fact, that people called it “the bloody way.” Jerusalem rests at 3000 feet above sea level, while Jericho, only seventeen miles away, sits on land 1000 feet *below* the level of the Mediterranean. The road between the towns descends sharply through mountainous territory full of crags and caves, allowing thieves to hide, strike, and escape with great ease. Traveling the Jericho road in those days was very much like walking through a dark alley in the worst part of a modern city, except that it was many miles to the nearest streetlight.

In this “dark alley” a man fell victim to a social problem—crime. “He fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead” (v. 30).

## THE TWO WHO WALKED BY

A priest and a Levite soon came along in turn, and each passed by on the far side of the road, not wishing to become involved in the man’s needs.

We should not be too quick to scorn these men, or we may discover we are convicting ourselves. Consider how you might react if you were anxiously taking a shortcut through a dark alley. Imagine that you see a groaning man on the ground, conclusive evidence that a marauding band of thugs is watching you around the corner! Surely the wisest thing to do is to hurry on to safety and send some official to look after the poor victim. So you run.

There may have been another, very “religious” reason for the priest and Levite to avoid the man. Levitical law declared that anyone touching a dead body was ceremonially “unclean” (Num. 19:11–16), excluding him from worship ceremonies for seven days. What if this man were already dead, or about to die anyway? How easy it would have been for these religious professionals to think, “This will get in the way of my discharging a higher calling!”

So they walked by the man. In the process, however, they also passed by the clear teaching of Scripture—to have mercy on even strangers in need (Lev. 19:34). The irony of this verse is that the priests and Levites

were the very officers of God's people who were charged with helping the needy. The priests were public health officials, along with their other duties; the Levites were distributors of alms to the poor. This was a priestly calling, and yet these two pit their *schedule* (full of ceremonies and other valid religious duties) against their *purpose*. Clearly they neglected the principle that to obey is better than sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22).

## THE ONE WHO SHOWED MERCY

Finally a traveling Samaritan arrived, a sworn enemy of the Jewish man lying in his blood. The Samaritan faced the same danger that the priest and Levite had faced. In addition, all of his training and experience should have led him to simply step *on* the victim, not just over him! Samaritans and Jews were the bitterest enemies. (When the Jews were furious with Jesus, they called him a "Samaritan" [John 8:48], because they could not think of a worse name!) Nevertheless, in opposition to all these forces, the Samaritan had "compassion" (v. 33). This compassion was full-bodied, leading him to meet a variety of needs. This compassion provided friendship and advocacy, emergency medical treatment, transportation, a hefty financial subsidy, and even a follow-up visit.

The phrase "ministry of mercy," which we will use throughout this book, comes from verse 37, where Jesus commands us to provide shelter, finances, medical care, and friendship to people who lack them. We have nothing less than an order from our Lord in the most categorical of terms. "Go and do likewise!" Our paradigm is the Samaritan, who risked his safety, destroyed his schedule, and became dirty and bloody through personal involvement with a needy person of another race and social class. Are we as Christians obeying this command *personally*? Are we as a church obeying this command *corporately*?

## QUESTIONS RAISED

The parable of the Good Samaritan is nothing if not provocative. To begin with, it is a reverse trap. A law expert sought to trap Jesus into saying something derogatory about the Law, but Jesus showed him that the Jewish leaders are the ones who do not really keep the Law at all. Our Lord attacks the complacency of comfortably religious people who

protect themselves from the needs of others. The points he makes are no less shattering to us today, and his teaching instantly raises many questions.

First, there is the question of the *necessity* of mercy to our very existence as Christians. We must not miss the fact that this parable is an answer to the question “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responds by pointing the law expert to the example of the Good Samaritan, who cared for the physical and economic needs of the man in the road. Bear in mind that Jesus was posed the very same question in Mark 10:17 by the rich young ruler. There, too, Jesus concludes by saying, “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor” (v. 21). It appears that Jesus sees care for the poor as part of the *essence* of being a Christian.

How can this be? In Matthew 25:31ff. we see Jesus judging people on the basis of their ministry to the hungry, naked, homeless, sick, and imprisoned. Does he mean that only the social workers are going to heaven? Aren’t we saved by faith in Christ alone? Then why does the ministry of mercy appear to be so central to the very definition of a Christian?

Second, there is the question of the *scope* and dimension of the ministry of mercy. Remember that the law expert did not deny the requirement to care for those in need. Virtually no one in the world does! But still he asked, “Who *is* my neighbor?” We can see him as the typical Westerner, saying:

“Oh come on, now, Lord, let’s be reasonable. We know we are to help out the unfortunate, but just how far do we have to go?”

“You don’t mean we should pour ourselves out for anyone! Doesn’t charity begin at home?”

“You don’t mean every Christian must get deeply involved with hurting and needy people. I am not very good in that kind of work; it’s not my gift.”

“I have a busy schedule and I am extremely active in my evangelical church. Isn’t this sort of thing the government’s job, anyway?”

“I barely have enough money for myself!”

“Aren’t many of the poor simply irresponsible?”

When he shows us the indifferent priest and Levite, Jesus unmasks the many false limits that religious people put on the command to “love your neighbor.” In the Samaritan himself, Jesus shows us that the neighbor to whom we must render aid is *anyone* at all in need, even an enemy. Any person reading this parable begins to feel trapped by its logic. But isn’t it unrealistic? Aren’t the needs of the world’s poor too overwhelming? Is Jesus saying that we must all assume a life of voluntary poverty and move in with the downtrodden? Are we ready to make no distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving poor?

Third, there is the question of the *motive* or dynamic of the ministry of mercy. Israel had God’s Law, which clearly demanded mercy to one’s neighbor, but Jesus shows that the experts in the Law had interpreted it in a way that frustrated its basic purposes. *It is not enough to simply know one’s duty.* The priest and the Levite had all the biblical knowledge, all the ethical principles, and all the ethnic affinity with the man in the road. It was not enough. The Samaritan had none of these things, but he had *compassion*. It was enough! What will really make the church merciful? It will not be enough to manipulate American Christians to feel guilty because they are so “rich.” Then what *will* make the church powerful to heal the deep hurts, fill the deep needs, and transform the surrounding society?

For decades, evangelicals have avoided the radical nature of the teaching of the parable of the Good Samaritan. At most, we have heard it telling us to prepare a fruit basket for the needy each Christmas, or to give money to relief agencies when there is a famine or earthquake in a distant nation. But it is time to listen more closely, because the world, which never *was* “safe” to live in, is becoming even less so. We are finally beginning to wonder why there are suddenly hundreds of thousands “stripped and lying half dead” in the streets of our own cities.

Only a small number of people in the history of the world have lived in relatively “safe” conditions. War, injustice, oppression, famine,

natural disaster, family breakdown, disease, mental illness, physical disability, racism, crime, scarcity of resources, class struggle—these “social problems” are the results of our alienation from God. They bring deep misery and violence to the lives of most of humanity. The majority of people who read this book, however, probably belong to the relatively small group of folk who, through God’s kindness, lead an existence generally free from these forces.

This comparative comfort can isolate us in a fictitious world where suffering is difficult to find. But this isolation is fragile, for suffering surrounds us—even in the suburbs! We need an accurate view of the world in which we live. Perhaps we need to see that, instead of living on islands of ease, we are all living on the Jericho Road.

## INTRODUCTION

# Who Is My Neighbor?

Someone once said that a “World Christian” needs to read the newspaper along with the Bible. In a sense, this parable of Jesus *directs* us to do so. Though the law expert sought to limit the concept of “neighbor,” Jesus expands the concept by showing that *anyone* in need is our neighbor. The priest and the Levite who pass to the other side of the man in the road represent those of us who avoid any close examination of the person in need. Here, our Lord is teaching us to recognize our neighbors lying in the road. Do we middle-class Americans recognize and know our needy neighbors?

Consider Angela, a homeless woman. In the height of the homeless crisis in the mid 1980s, one idealistic seminarian once tried to reach out to Angela; in so doing, he was surprised by what he discovered. His poignant description of their encounter follows:

A once beautiful woman, Angela, is withering away in front of the library on our urban campus. She wears many layers of clothes. They are plastered on her brittle body like clashing layers of peeling paint. She doesn't have socks on, but it's cold and the weather is growing hostile. I offered her food once, but she rudely rejected it. She turns away abruptly when I try to talk to her. Stung with bitterness I recoil. But then I gradually begin understanding how prejudiced we are with expectations of the poor. My arrogant anticipation of gratitude kills the goodness of the deed. She is hungry, exposed and sick; yet I resist reaching out, because she might not welcome me. Which one

of us is truly sick? Angela, you're a mirror thrust before us, but can we bear the sight?<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever had an experience with someone like Angela? Most likely you have, especially since the poor have become more and more visible throughout the United States in the past few decades. Their presence forces most of us to realize that we do not know or understand the poor at all. Nearly all the hard, cold facts about people in poverty surprise the average middle-class believer.

But Jesus calls us to look, listen, and learn. Let's do that by looking at a "cross section" of needy people. Though we will wade through lots of numbers and statistics in the process, our goal is to look our neighbors in the faces, rather than walking in a wide circle around them.

## THE GROWTH OF POVERTY

Kathi was a Jewish homemaker living a normal middle class life. When her son was killed in an accident, her husband took to drinking and withdrew from her. He divorced her and she was left alone at age 43 with no job skills, no job history, and no alimony (her state had a no fault divorce law). Her husband recovered from his alcoholism, remarried and was soon making \$65,000 a year. She began working as a waitress for \$900 a month. She could not pay the rent on her one bedroom apartment and still eat. She began drinking and sought a psychiatrist, who did little more than prescribe tranquilizers. She began living in welfare hotels, and now is in a rehabilitation center for indigent women.<sup>2</sup>

Kathi is one example of the growing number of those we call "poor." One out of every seven North Americans is poor. Nearly 42 percent of American children grow up in low-income families, and almost one child in four—about 23 percent—grows up in poverty.<sup>3</sup> If we provided no other figures in this chapter, these alone should weigh on a Christian's heart.

1. Mev Puleo, *Christian Century* (24 April 1985): 408.

2. George Grant, *The Dispossessed: Homelessness in America* (Fort Worth: Dominion Press, 1986), 71–72.

3. Colin Greer, "Something Is Robbing Our Children of Their Future," *Parade Magazine*, 4 March 1995, 4.

During the prosperous years of 1950 until the mid 1970s, the percentage of the American population that lived in poverty fell from 30 percent to just over 11 percent. But between 1970 and 1995, the number of poor people in the United States increased from 25.4 million to 36.4 million—nearly 14 percent of the population.<sup>4</sup> (The federal government considers a family of four to be in poverty if its total annual income is \$14,800 or less. If the same family earns \$27,380, it is considered low-income.)<sup>5</sup>

In addition, (as the song says) the poor really *are* getting poorer. According to the Census Bureau, the real median income in 1995 was 3.8 percent below its 1989 level, this despite the fact that the top 5 percent of all wage earners own a greater and greater proportion of all society's wealth. Thus, for increasing numbers of North Americans, work provided no relief from poverty.<sup>6</sup> And many experts project that the 1996 Welfare Reform Act will remove aid from 2.6 million people, who will need nongovernment agencies to provide relief, job training, and other services. Technically, the bill would increase the "poverty gap" for families with children by more than \$4 billion, or 20 percent. Families in which the parents are unemployed (or underemployed) and receive government assistance typically have incomes already below the poverty level. The bill will most likely make these families' needs more acute.<sup>7</sup>

Though the mid-nineties saw a few victories in the "war on poverty," a closer look reveals to us many ominous subtrends that foretell a bleak future. Let's look at those trends.

## THE HOMELESS

George is twenty-eight (some surveys find the average homeless person to be thirty-four.) He is a former high school basketball star who once was a construction worker. After losing his job a year ago, his wife

4. Paul Koegel et al. "The Causes of Homelessness" in *Homelessness in America* (Washington DC: Oryx Press, 1996).

5. Greer, "Something Is Robbing Our Children," 4.

6. *Why Are People Homeless? NCH Fact Sheet #1*. (Washington DC: National Coalition for the Homeless, 1997), 1.

7. David A. Super, Sharon Parrott, Susan Steinmetz, and Cindy Mann, *The New Welfare Law—Summary* (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 1996), 3.

asked him to leave. He lived on couches of friends until the friendships wore thin. Since then he has been on the street. He rarely drinks alcohol and keeps his light brown corduroy pants and red-checked shirt meticulously clean. Last fall he held a job for six weeks at a pizza joint; no one knew he was homeless. He often worked without sleep and with no alarm clock to wake him from the subways or abandoned tenements, he missed several days and was finally fired. “You can’t get a job without a home, and you can’t get a home without a job.”

Experts agree that it is close to impossible to get an accurate count of just how many people are homeless in the United States. Some believe it is well over a half million; others project it is less. They do know that homelessness has increased considerably in the last decade owing primarily to two trends: a growing shortage of affordable rental housing and a simultaneous increase in poverty.<sup>8</sup> And two factors account for the increasing poverty: decreasing labor-market opportunities for large segments of the work force, and the declining value and availability of public benefits.<sup>9</sup> In other words, George’s sentiments—“You can’t get a job without a home, and you can’t get a home without a job”—are often the case for most of our homeless neighbors.

Who are the homeless? Most of us think of old men with drinking problems, or mental patients forced out of overcrowded institutions because of budget cuts. While these kinds of people did indeed make up the majority of the homeless in the 1980s, that is now changing. An increasing number are the “new poor,” former working-class people currently jobless because of the massive loss of manufacturing/industrial jobs and the demand for high-tech (translate: high-skilled) jobs. Even more disturbing is that many more are whole families with children, displaced by the “gentrification” of inner cities, the conversion of cheap housing into expensive housing for professionals. The number of homeless families has increased significantly in the past decade; families with children are currently the fastest growing group of the homeless population, approximately 40 percent.<sup>10</sup> Thirty-five percent of homeless women

8. *Why Are People Homeless?*, 1.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 2.

and children are fleeing abuse, 25 percent of the single adult homeless population suffer from some form of manageable mental illness, and 22 percent of the general homeless population likely suffer from a substance abuse disorder.<sup>11</sup>

These statistics and others suggest that the “new” average homeless person is an unemployed parent in his or her mid thirties looking for work, battling personal challenges as well as those of an entire system that seems to be working against him or her.

Most of the folks we deal with day in and day out are from the fringe of the middle class. Many owned homes before the big lay-offs. None had ever known real want before. What we’re seeing is a change in the structure of American society so fundamental that no one will remain unaffected.<sup>12</sup>—A shelter operator in New Orleans

Who will hire a twenty year old woman with no high school education and four kids? What are we as a society doing to prepare the kind of work ethic (for these people) to support their children? I have never encountered a client who did not want to work; most just don’t have the opportunities or the confidence to pursue change.—Lorraine Minor, director of counseling at City Union Mission in Kansas City, Missouri

## THE WORKING POOR

Many of us believe that most of the poor are poor simply because they will not work. But the facts contradict this myth. A significant decline in wages, jobs, and public benefits along with the transformation of the industrialized labor market into a global computerized one all have contributed to increasingly difficult conditions for the working poor. Between 1973 and 1993, the percentage of workers earning wages below the poverty line increased from 23.9 percent to 26.9 percent, while those earning less than 75 percent of the poverty line doubled. Families need to earn at least twice the minimum wage in full-time jobs just to afford a two-bedroom apartment at fair market rent. A look across the country in any number of homeless shelters will show the link between

11. Ibid.

12. Grant, *The Dispossessed*, 34.

impoverished workers and homelessness; most house significant numbers of full-time (minimum) wage earners. In fact, a 1996 survey revealed that one out of five homeless persons is employed in full- or part-time jobs.<sup>13</sup>

Though details differ, the poor in America break down roughly this way: Approximately one-third of the poor are children. Another third are adults who are working, but not making a wage that lifts them out of poverty. A sixth consist of the elderly and the mentally or physically disabled. Only the final sixth consist of the “controversial” people—single parents home with children, and persons who are able-bodied but not working. It is not fair to simply consider all these people “lazy.” A great number of them suffer with debilitating social and emotional problems. But even if we did count many in this group as the “shiftless” poor of the popular imagination, we see that it is only a fraction of the massive group of needy North Americans.

## THE CHILDREN OF POVERTY

The statistics on poor children in our country reveal a nightmare: Between 1979 and 1994 the number of children under the age of 6 who were living in poverty in the United States grew from 3.5 million to 6.1 million.<sup>14</sup> A study by the National Center for Children in Poverty at the Columbia School of Public Health revealed that the rate of poverty for children under 6 also grew drastically—from 18 percent to 25 percent. The Columbia study, titled *One in Four*, begins as follows: “In the United States, distinguished by its extraordinary wealth, there are six million poor individuals known to few others but their own families. They cannot vote, they cannot work, most do not even go to school. They are America’s youngest poor—children under age six.”

While African American and Latino children, especially in big cities, are disproportionately poor, the poverty rate for young children grew twice as fast among whites as among blacks during the period studied. The Columbia study also revealed that the poverty rate for young white children in the United States “is substantially higher

13. *Why Are People Homeless?*, 1.

14. Bob Herbert, “One in Four in America,” *New York Times*, 16 December 1996.

than that for children in other Western democracies.” Most of these children—62 percent—live in working families. Less than a third live in families that rely exclusively on public assistance; 36 percent live in urban areas, 17 percent in suburban areas, 27 percent in rural areas.<sup>15</sup>

As statistics for children in poverty increase, the cohesion of the family has deteriorated. This has led to a major increase in the number of disadvantaged, neglected and abused children. One study revealed a 105 percent increase in the number of neglected and abused children between 1986 and 1993. Those children who were seriously injured quadrupled from 143,000 to more than 572,000.<sup>16</sup>

In 1996, the U.S. Conference of Mayors survey of homelessness in 29 major cities found that children under 18 accounted for 27 percent of the homeless population. Families with children are the fastest growing group in the homeless population.<sup>17</sup> This means they are trudging the streets, waiting in line at welfare agencies (for benefits that have likely been cut) with jobless parents, playing under bridges and on railroad tracks. Nightmares, bedwetting, sleepwalking, violent mood swings, and severe depression—all are commonplace for homeless children. Most of them go to school sporadically, if at all.

[Homeless children] are either desperate for attention, wildly aggressive or totally withdrawn. They will bite and kick and then hug you, or they won't talk at all. Unless kids like this can be reassured the world is safe, they are likely to be criminals by 12. By 14, they may kill.<sup>18</sup>—A pediatrician who tends homeless families

## THE YOUTHFUL POOR

One half of the poverty population consists of the elderly and children.<sup>19</sup> While 35 percent of all elderly people were poor in 1959,

15. Ibid.

16. *New Child Abuse Findings* (Child Welfare League of America, 440 First St., NW, Suite 310, Washington DC, 31 July 1996).

17. *Why Are People Homeless?*, 1.

18. Thomas Ferrick and Stephen Shames, “The Invisible Homeless,” *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, 13 December 1987, 16.

19. Bernadette D. Proctor, “Poverty,” *Population Profile of the United States, 1995*, U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 43.

just 11.7 percent were in 1994.<sup>20</sup> However, with government assistance being rolled back under the new welfare law, the elderly, low income disabled children, and working poor families will be adversely affected.<sup>21</sup> When welfare recipients start looking for jobs to replace their shrinking welfare benefits, they will most likely be competing with the working poor, who are barely surviving on what they make now. And since more than 35 percent of all families in poverty are run by young single mothers, the future does not appear bright. Why the huge growth in single-female-headed families?

The divorce revolution continues. Reports consistently show that one in two marriages ends in divorce. At least one million households a year will be added to U.S. society each year between now and the year 2000, yet only three of every ten of these new households will consist of a married couple.<sup>22</sup> There are also many more children under 18 living with just one parent than there were a generation ago. In 1970, 12 percent of all children lived with one parent; by 1995, 27 percent did. The Census Bureau cited rising divorce rates and a growing tendency to have children first, then marry. And of the single parents in 1995, 35 percent had never married, 38 percent were divorced, 23 percent were separated, and 4 percent were widowed. Twenty-one percent of white children lived with one parent, 33 percent of Hispanic children did, and 56 percent of black children did, up substantially from 1970, when 8.7 percent of white children lived with one parent and 31.8 percent of black children did. (Such figures for Hispanic children were not kept until 1980, when 20.5 percent lived with one parent.)<sup>23</sup>

Though it was written over ten years ago, I believe Leonore J. Weitzman's book *The Divorce Revolution* still offers a helpful look at the effects of no-fault divorce laws. She began her study assuming no-fault divorce was a breakthrough for women, but she concluded that it had devastating effects. Perhaps her most explosive finding was that men's standard of

20. U.S. Bureau of Census, 1995.

21. Super et al., *The New Welfare Law*, 1.

22. Thomas Exeter, "The Census Bureau's Household Projections," *American Demographics* (October 1986), 46.

23. Katharine Q. Seelye, "The New U.S.: Grayer and More Hispanic," *New York Times*, 27 March 1997.

living went up 42 percent in the year following divorce, while women's living standard declined 73 percent, even counting alimony and child support payments.

Sophia is a black single mother with two children, living on \$187 per month in addition to her food stamps. She can only afford to live in federally funded housing called the Projects in South Philadelphia. (She is lucky. The average housing project in the U.S. has a 5-year waiting list.) Drug-related violence is common in the Projects. When her son's friend stole her food stamps, she had to get help from a local church. When her 8-year-old daughter wanted to invite friends to celebrate her birthday, Sophia had to borrow money from a friend to buy a cake mix. She spends hours each month walking in and out of businesses looking for a job. No jobs are available, because Sophia cannot read well enough nor add in her head fast enough.<sup>24</sup>

In light of congressional cuts in basic assistance programs, it is likely that these young poor will not be helped as the elderly were. Some experts indicate that between 2.5 million and 3.5 million children could be affected by the bill's five-year time limit when it is fully implemented, even after a 20 percent hardship exemption is taken into account.<sup>25</sup> Unlike the older poor, the new poor are younger, with far more children, and are likely to produce a permanent, hard-core underclass of young people, subjected to crime and addiction with little education.

## THE NEW ETHNICS

Many North Americans suffer from two misconceptions about race and social problems.

"Most of the poor are black," many think. In fact, 25.3 million of the poor are white, 10.1 million are black, 8.4 million are Hispanic.<sup>26</sup> Also, many of the new immigrants pouring into the country are falling swiftly into poverty. A new report by the Census Bureau, "The Demographic

24. "Poverty: One View," *ACTS Newsletter* (Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, April 1987).

25. Super et al., *The New Welfare Law*, 2.

26. U.S. Bureau of Census, 1995.

State of the Nation,” documents explosive growth in the nation’s Hispanic population and projects that by the year 2005, Hispanic Americans will surpass blacks as the nation’s largest minority. Starting in the year 2020, the report says, more Hispanic Americans will be added to the population each year than blacks, Asian Americans, and American Indians combined. And starting in 2019, the Hispanic American population, relatively youthful, will have the nation’s lowest death rate.<sup>27</sup>

“North Americans are typically white” is another common belief. But while that is still true, our demographics are changing much faster than most of the country realizes. In 1995, 46 percent of the 23 million foreign-born people in the United States were of Hispanic origin; nearly 7 million had emigrated from Mexico, the country that exported the largest number of people to America. (The Philippines was second.) About 800,000 people immigrate legally every year.<sup>28</sup>

Although some of the immigrants have good incomes, many of the new ethnics have serious economic problems. The growing ethnic population spells greatly increased demands for assistance, from either the government or the religious community.

## THE BLUE-COLLAR POOR

With manufacturing industries declining in the 1980s and corporate downsizing in the 1990s, many of the new poor in the United States are blue collar, that is, the former worker who could once make \$25,000+ a year with a high school diploma in a manufacturing job. But the technological revolution has led to the severe shrinkage of these jobs. New industry is high-tech—either oriented to information or service. Such industry has either high-paying jobs for highly skilled technicians or low-paying jobs. The “working class” job, which could once support a family comfortably, is disappearing.

More than 3 million high-paying U.S. manufacturing jobs were shipped abroad between 1979 and 1994 where labor was cheaper.<sup>29</sup> The

27. Seelye, “The New U.S.: Grayer and More Hispanic.”

28. Ibid.

29. Gerald Celente, *Trends 2000: How to Prepare for and Profit from the Changes of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Warner, 1997), 159.

economy has been dropping for more than two decades for low-skilled workers and evidence suggests that most working poor either cannot or will not lift themselves out.<sup>30</sup> And almost a half million workers have been laid off in the past few years, many from the banking and telecommunications industries.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, future jobs will be primarily in the service sector: for example, retail sales clerks, nurses, cashiers, truck drivers, waiters/waitresses, and janitors. All these will see a significant increase.<sup>31</sup> But the salaries in these fields are hardly the rewards of ever more expensive college educations, or even enough to support a family as the cost of living continually increases. Meanwhile, the income gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen. The average income among the wealthiest one-fifth of U.S. households rose 45 percent from 1967 to 1995. By comparison, in the poorest households income only increased by 19 percent.<sup>32</sup> In short, there is no such thing as “job security” anymore for the average worker.

## GRAY AMERICA

The proportion of elderly Americans has been growing steadily for decades. The Census Bureau’s report, “Demographic State of the Nation,” forecasts that people over 85 will become the fastest growing segment of the population by the middle of the next century, carrying sweeping implications for the health care industry and Social Security. In 1995, about 4 million people were over 85 and made up 1.4 percent of the population. By 2050, the report says, there will be 18 million people over 85, who will account for 4.6 percent of the population. By then, people over 65 will be 20 percent of the population.<sup>33</sup>

We have seen that, at the present, the elderly are a “success story” in our culture, most having escaped the low income and poor living conditions that very recently were the lot of many. But the enormous

30. Jason DeParle, “The New Contract with America’s Poor,” *New York Times*, 28 July, 1996.

31. Celente, *Trends 2000*, 166.

32. “The Working Poor,” *Congressional Quarterly Researcher* (5 November 1995), 980.

33. Seelye, “The New U.S.: Grayer and More Hispanic.”

increase in the elderly during the next thirty years will make all current social support systems obsolete. Many, many authorities suspect Social Security to collapse or become ineffective. The cost of supporting the enormous elderly population may cause a rebellion and a deadly economic combat with the next generation.

## **THE SICK**

The proportions of the epidemic of AIDS (Acquired Immunological Deficiency Syndrome) have seized the attention of (and frightened) the American public. Claims and projections differ wildly, yet the disease is no longer confined to the homosexual community. Now, AIDS is a disease of the young, the poor, and heterosexuals as well. Whatever the demographic, all agree that the medical cost of treating AIDS sufferers has become massive and devastating.

Even without the specter of AIDS, health care for the needy is at a crisis point. The nonprofit hospital that cares for all, regardless of resources, is quickly disappearing. There are far fewer government dollars for such work, while medical costs and insurance rates keep skyrocketing. Hospitals are having to rely more and more on marketing research and “bottom-line” (profitability) decision making. The hospitals of tomorrow will no longer be social service institutions. Who or what will fill this new gap?

## **THE PRISONERS**

The 1990s has seen a steady increase in crime rates, and many law-abiding citizens do not feel safe as a result. With an increasing negativity of public sentiment (“lock ‘em up and throw away the key”) and deteriorating government assistance, the poor often find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Some will turn to crime out of desperation. Then, if they are imprisoned for nonviolent crimes (as the public is demanding), they will soon learn a more violent way of life from inside the prison system. Charles Colson tells of Carl, a young inmate he met in a federal prison in Alabama.

He had been convicted of theft and sentenced to 18 months in prison. The judge wisely put the young first-offender on probation instead of sending him to jail. Carl was a model offender on probation. He

checked in with his probation officer every week, held a job, and kept out of trouble. Then he made a mistake. He left the state without permission—something people on probation are not supposed to do. He thought he had a good reason to travel; he was getting married. But when the judge discovered what Carl had done, he ordered him into prison to serve the full 18 months of his sentence. And there he “sat at the feet” of some tough teachers and learned a lot of tricks of the criminals’ trade. . . . Pain and resentment radiated from his eyes. He looked at me and snarled, “I’ve got only one thing going. I’m going to get even. . . . When I get out of here, they’re not going to catch me.”<sup>34</sup>

In this one example, it can be seen that prisons are often not part of the solution for crime and poverty, but part of the problem. The number of men and women in the nation’s prisons and jails climbed to nearly 1.6 million in 1995, culminating a decade in which the United States’ rate of incarceration nearly doubled. Apart from inmates, there were also 4 million people on parole or probation.<sup>35</sup> The United States spent \$31 billion on prisons in 1992, an 800 percent increase from 1975.<sup>36</sup> Many experts believe that “the percentage of Americans going in and out of jails is phenomenal . . . as you go down the socioeconomic scale, the percentage gets much higher.”<sup>37</sup>

In essence, crime rates (and the prison industry) have produced a crushing financial burden.

## CONCLUSIONS

This panoramic view is overwhelming, yet it is this view that Christ advocates when he says that anyone in need is our neighbor. How can we process this? What conclusions can we draw?

1. *We do indeed live on the Jericho Road.* The data show that there are many people in need, their needs are deepening, and the needy are a diverse group. All this is more than most evangelicals are used to seeing.

34. Charles Colson, *America’s Prison Crisis* (Washington: Prison Fellowship Ministries, 1987).

35. Celente, *Trends 2000*, 287.

36. *Ibid.*, 290.

37. *Ibid.*, 289.

Our nation is becoming a mosaic of different groups, each with a unique complex of needs. Most churches are surrounded by growing numbers of the unemployed and underemployed, new immigrant populations, singles, divorced persons, unwed mothers, the elderly, prisoners, the dying, sick, and disabled. Poverty is on the rise, the percentage of the elderly in our society is exploding, ethnics are pouring into our country by the millions, and federal money for helping agencies, hospitals, and other such institutions is drying up. Do we want to reach these new neighbors with the gospel? Then we must give our faith active expression through deeds of compassion coupled with evangelism and discipleship.

North American evangelicals once perceived the ministry of mercy as an optional kind of work. But the times are changing, demanding us to respond.

*2. The church of Jesus Christ must squarely face its responsibility for the neighbors lying in the road.*

Just the explosion of the elderly population alone could spell a breakdown of the present welfare system. But add the possibility of an AIDS holocaust, the impoverishing of the working class, and the growth of low-income immigrants and female single-parent homes, and we have a virtual certainty that current government programs will be completely inadequate. No institution in society will escape the impact of heavy new social problems, especially with the new welfare reform. Regardless of our political views, it is indisputable that millions of people who once looked to the government will now need service and aid from churches and other agencies. The church will be forced by demographics to see what the Bible has always said. Love cannot be only expressed through talk, but through word *and* deed (1 John 3:17).

While accomplishing that task, Francis Schaeffer said, Christians may be at times, “cobelligerents” with the Left or the Right, but never allies. “If there is social injustice, say there is social injustice. If we need order, say we need order. . . . But do not align yourself as though you are in either of these camps: You are an ally of neither.

The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is different from either—totally different.”<sup>38</sup>

The ideology of the Left believes big government and social reform will solve social ills, while the Right believes big business and economic growth will do it. The Left expects a citizen to be held legally accountable for the use of his wealth, but totally autonomous in other areas, such as sexual morality. The Right expects a citizen to be held legally accountable in areas of personal morality, but totally autonomous in the use of wealth. The North American “idol”—radical individualism—lies beneath both ideologies. A Christian sees either “solution” as fundamentally humanistic and simplistic.

The causes of our worsening social problems are far more complex than either the secularists of the Right or Left understand. We wrestle not with flesh and blood, but with powers and principalities! We have seen there is great social injustice—racial prejudice, greed, avarice—by those with the greatest wealth in the country (and sadly, within the evangelical church itself). At the same time, there is a general breakdown of order—of the family and the morals of the nation. There is more premarital sex (and thus there are more unwed mothers), more divorce, child neglect and abuse, more crime. Neither a simple redistribution of wealth nor simple economic growth and prosperity can mend broken families; nor can they turn low-skilled mothers into engineers or technicians.

3. *Only the ministry of the church of Jesus Christ, and the millions of “mini-churches” (Christian homes) throughout the country can attack the roots of social problems.* Only the church can minister to the whole person. Only the gospel understands that sin has ruined us both individually and socially. We cannot be viewed individualistically (as the capitalists do) or collectivistically (as the Communists do) but as related to God. Only Christians, armed with the Word and Spirit, planning and working to spread the kingdom and righteousness of Christ, can transform a nation as well as a neighborhood as well as a broken heart. That is what the rest of this book is about.

38. Francis Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 37.

**FOR DISCUSSION**

1. The statistics on poverty may have been new to you. What aspect(s) was/were the most surprising? How has your view of poverty in the United States changed after reading the facts?
2. The seminarian's experience with Angela, the homeless woman, speaks of some of the complexities of dealing with the poor. Identify some of these complexities, based on that example.
3. Can you identify a "pocket" of poverty in your community that you or your church might be able to help? Explain.

*Part 1*

---

# PRINCIPLES



# The Call to Mercy

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29)

OVERVIEW: Mercy to the full range of human needs is such an essential mark of being a Christian that it can be used as a test of true faith. Mercy is not optional or an addition to being a Christian. Rather, a life poured out in deeds of mercy is the inevitable sign of true faith.

## THE ESSENCE OF LOVE

The expert in the law came “to test” Jesus—to trap him (Luke 10:25). He was probably trying to get Jesus to say something negative about the law or to minimize its role in salvation. Jesus, on the other hand, is laying his own trap for the man, but his trap is a trap of love.

Our Lord asked the man for a summary of the Law, and he replied by articulating what many Jewish scribes and teachers believed, that all the rules of the Law hung on two principles. First, the Law requires a heart and mind totally submitted to and absorbed in God alone (Deut. 6:5). Second, it requires that we must meet the needs of others, with all the speed, the eagerness, the energy, and the *joy* with which we meet our own (Lev. 19:18). How staggering these principles are! They reflect both the holiness of God and the fundamental debt we owe the one who gave us everything. Since he gave us all we have, we must give him all we are.

When the law expert provided this summary of perfect love and righteousness, Jesus replied: “Do this and you will live.” What was Jesus’ strategy? Why did he not say, “Receive me as your personal Savior” or something to that effect? Was he suggesting to the man that the way of salvation was by the performance of good deeds? No, not at all.

Instead, he had turned the tables on the law expert. When we look at the regulations of the Old Testament individually, we see many that are possible to keep. But if we look at the principles beneath the particulars and at the kind of life that the law is really *after*, then we see how we fail utterly to reach it. Jesus is pointing him to the perfect righteousness the Law demanded so that he could see he is powerless to fulfill it. He was seeking to convict the law expert of sin. Jesus says in effect:

My friend, I *do* take the law seriously, even more seriously than you do. Yes, you can be accepted by God if you obey the law perfectly, but *look* at the law! See what it is really after. If you can do that, you will live. But if you see clearly, you will realize that the righteous requirement of the Law must be fulfilled in some other way.

Jesus had the same purpose in his confrontation with the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17–22). He was seeking conviction of sin, even as he “looked at him and loved him.”

“You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”

“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. (Mark 10:19–22)

The rich young ruler claimed to have been obedient to the Law, until Jesus called him to give up all his riches and follow him. That was nothing more than an exposition of the first commandment. Jesus was

asking: “Are you willing to lose *everything* if it is necessary to gain my fellowship? Will you truly have ‘no other gods before me?’” The rich young ruler left in sorrow. Was Jesus being heavy-handed, unnecessarily demanding? No, not at all. The gospel is the gospel of the *kingdom*, and unless we give our hearts to Jesus as king, we have not given them at all. The ministry of mercy is expensive, and our willingness to carry it out is a critical sign of our submission to the lordship of Christ.

## THE RICHES AND POVERTY OF GOD

So here too, in Luke 10, we see Jesus is seeking to bring the law expert to despair of any salvation through his own personal efforts. This time, however, he expounds the second great commandment, rather than the first. Why does Jesus find it necessary to do this? Because, to receive the mercy of God, we must all come first to the place where we despair of our own moral efforts. Nathan Cole, a Connecticut farmer converted in the 1740s, put it clearly when describing what happened to him under the preaching of George Whitefield: “My hearing him preach gave me a heart wound. By God’s blessing, my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me.”<sup>1</sup>

The law expert should have responded in the same way. If he had said, “I see! How then can anyone be righteous before God?” then Jesus could have replied, “Only through the mercy of God.” And the mercy of God is simply this. We must see that all of us are spiritually poor and bankrupt before God (Matt. 5:3), and even when we put on our best moral efforts for God, we appear as beggars clothed in filthy rags (Isa. 64:6). Yet in Jesus Christ, God provided a righteousness for us (Rom. 3:21–22), a wealth straight from the account of the Son of God, who impoverished himself through suffering and death that we might receive it (2 Cor. 8:9).

No one understood this more clearly than John Bunyan, who described his conversion in these terms:

But one day . . . this sentence fell upon my soul, “Thy righteousness is in heaven”; and methought withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul, Jesus Christ at God’s right hand; there, I say, as my righteousness; so that wherever I

1. Nathan Cole, “Spiritual Travels,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 7 (1950): 591.

was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say to me “He wants my righteousness,” for that was just before him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse; for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, “the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. . . . Oh! methought, Christ! Christ! there was nothing but Christ that was before my eyes. . . . Now I could look from myself to him, and would reckon that all those graces of God that now were green on me, were yet but like those cracked groats and four-pence-half-pennies that rich men carry in their purses, when their gold is in their trunks at home: Oh! I saw my gold was in my trunk at home! In Christ my Lord and Saviour. Now Christ was all; all my righteousness, all my sanctification, and all my redemption.<sup>2</sup>

But the law expert resisted our Lord. He did not want to acknowledge that he was poor, spiritually bankrupt. It is clear that he felt the pressure of Jesus’ argument, for soon we see him attempting “to justify himself” by asking, “who is my neighbor?”

What was he trying to do? He wanted Jesus to define the second commandment in such a way as to make its requirements reachable. Jesus responds with a parable that expounds the second great commandment. He shows us the extent and the essence of the love God requires.

We must remember this entire context of the parable of the Good Samaritan, or we can fall easily into the trap of moralism. Jesus is not telling us that we can be *saved* by imitating the Good Samaritan, even though he is clearly charging us to follow his pattern. Rather, Jesus is seeking to humble us with the love God *requires*, so we will be willing to receive the love God *offers*.

## MERCY IS NOT OPTIONAL

The parable describes a Samaritan who came upon a Jew who had been beaten and robbed. The Samaritan provided physical protection (from a new attack), medical help, transportation, and a financial subsidy. In short, he met his full range of physical and economic needs. The law expert called all of this activity the work of “mercy” (v. 37). This story

2. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. John P. Gulliver (London: Bradley, 1871), 59.

can only have its fullest impact if we remember its purpose. Jesus' parable has been saved for a description of Christian love to our neighbor. Jesus' reply is to show us a man performing what many today call "social work."

Evangelical Christians today are by no means against helping the needy and hurting. Yet "social relief work" is generally looked at as a secondary duty. It is something we get to if there is time and money in the budget, after we are satisfied with our educational and evangelistic ministries.

This parable shatters that set of priorities. *Jesus uses the work of mercy to show us the essence of the righteousness God requires in our relationships.* By no means is this an isolated example. In James 2:15–16 and 1 John 3:17–18 Christians are charged to meet physical and economic needs among the brethren. This is not optional. If a professing Christian does not do so, "how can the love of God be in him?" The striking truth is that the work of mercy is fundamental to being a Christian.

## MERCY IS A TEST

Both James and John also use the ministry of mercy as a test. The apostle John writes his first epistle to set forth the test by which a genuine Christian can be known. One of the tests of Christian love is the ministry of mercy. Christian fellowship must be characterized by the meeting of physical needs.

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? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.  
(1 John 3:17–18)

Real love is expressed in deed as well as in word.

James concludes that a profession of faith unaccompanied by deeds of mercy shows that faith to be "dead," not genuine at all.

Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his

physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:13–17)

In Proverbs 14:31 and 19:17 we are told that to ignore the needs of a poor man is to sin against the Lord. So the poor and needy are a test. Our response to them tests the genuineness of our faith toward God.

No passage is clearer at this point than Matthew 25:31–46. This describes Jesus' examination of mankind on Judgment Day. He distinguishes those who have true faith from those who do not by examining their fruit, namely, their concern for the poor, homeless, sick, and prisoners. How can this be? Jesus, when he says, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me," is merely expanding on Proverbs 19:17 ("He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD"). He is also agreeing with James, John, and Isaiah (cf. Isa. 1:10–17) in saying that a sensitive social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of mercy to the needy is the inevitable outcome and sign of true faith. By such deeds God can judge true love from lip service.

Imagine a wealthy older woman who has no heirs except a nephew who is always kind to her. But how can she know if his kindness is just a façade? How can she know what his heart is really like? Imagine that she dresses up as a homeless street person and sits on the steps of her nephew's townhouse, and when he comes out he curses and threatens her. Now she knows his true character! So too, God is angry when we have one face for him and another for the needy. "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you. . . . Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (Isa. 1:15, 17). So too, Jesus can say in effect, "I am the homeless person on your steps—how you treat her tells me what you are really like." A great preacher, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, commented on Matthew 25 to his congregation nearly 150 years ago:

I fear there are some Christians among you to whom Christ can say no such thing ["Come thou blessed . . . inherit the kingdom" in Matt. 25:34]. Your haughty dwelling rises in the midst of thousands who have scarce a fire to warm themselves at, and have but little clothing to keep out the biting frost; and yet you never darkened their door. You heave a sigh, perhaps, at a distance; but you do not visit

them. Ah! my dear friend! I am concerned for the poor but more for you. I know not what Christ will say to you in the great day. . . . I fear there are many hearing me who may know [now] well that they are not Christians, because they do not love to give. To give largely and liberally, not grudging at all, requires a new heart; an old heart would rather part with its life-blood than its money. Oh my friends! enjoy your money; make the most of it; give none away; enjoy it quickly for I can tell you, you will be beggars throughout eternity.<sup>3</sup>

### MERCY IS NOT NEW

The Bible's teaching on the ministry of mercy does not begin with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Man's first "mission" was to subdue and have dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28). Genesis 2:15 restates this commission in terms of "tending and keeping" the garden of God. The concept of man as a gardener is highly suggestive: a gardener does not destroy nature, nor leave it as it is. He cultivates and develops it, enhancing its beauty, usefulness, and fruitfulness. So God expects his servants to bring all creation under his lordship. Science, engineering, art, education, government are all part of this responsibility. We are to bring every dimension of life, both spiritual and material, under the rule and law of God.

Obviously, there was no "ministry of mercy" *per se* before the fall of man, since there was no human suffering or need. But it is clear that God's servants at that time were as concerned with the material-physical world as with the spiritual.

After the fall, the effects of sin immediately caused the fragmentation of man's relationships. Man becomes alienated from God (Gen. 3:10). As a result his relationship with other human beings is shattered (vv. 12–13), and so is his relationship with nature itself (vv. 17–18). Now sickness, hunger, natural disaster, social injustice, and death dominate.

The first act of mercy ministry immediately follows the fall: God clothes Adam and Eve with animal skins (Gen. 3:21). Many have pointed out that this action represents the covering of our sins by the work of Christ, but that is surely not the only reason for God's action. Man now

3. *Sermons of M'Cheyne* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1848), 482.

needs protection from a hostile environment. By God's action, Derek Kidner says, "Social action could not have had an earlier or more exalted inauguration."<sup>4</sup>

Even before the giving of the law to Moses, God made his will known concerning the ministry of mercy. Job, who lived in an early pre-Mosaic age, knew that the righteousness God requires includes providing food, shelter, and clothing to the needy (Job 24:1–21; 31:16–23). In fact, Job tells us that he did more than simple social service. "I was a father to the needy; I took up the cause of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth" (29:16–17).

When God gave the law to Moses, he was constructing a believing community in which social righteousness was as required as personal righteousness and morality. Individual Israelites were forbidden to harvest all their produce, so the poor could glean from the fields for free (Ex. 23:10–11). Israelites were told to give to the poor until his need was gone (Deut. 15:8, 10), especially if the poor man was a kinsman or a neighbor (Lev. 25:25, 35–38). The priests gave to the poor out of the tithes to God (Deut. 14:28–29).

God's law required that the poor be given more than just a "hand-out." When a slave was freed from debt and servitude, he was not to leave empty-handed, but had to be given grain or livestock so that he could become economically self-sufficient (Deut. 15:12–15).

These laws given to Moses were the basis for the thundering of the later prophets, who denounced Israel's insensitivity to the poor as breaking covenant with God. They taught that materialism and the ignoring of the poor's plight are sins as repugnant as idolatry and adultery (Amos 2:6–7). Mercy to the poor is an evidence of true heart commitment to God (Isa. 1:10–17; 58:6–7; Amos 4:1–6; 5:21–24). Finally, the prophets predicted that the Messiah, when he came, would be characterized by mercy to the poor (Isa. 11:1–4; 61:1–2).

## THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR

Jesus chose Isaiah 61 as the text for his first sermon. To prove he is the Messiah, he points out that he preaches to the poor (Matt. 11:1–6). Our Lord, in becoming a human, literally "moved in" with the poor

4. Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 161.

(2 Cor. 8:9). He was born into a family that at his circumcision offered pigeons (Luke 2:24; Lev. 12:8), the offering prescribed for the poorest families. Jesus lived with, ate with, and associated with lepers and outcasts, the lowest classes of society. He taught that all humans are spiritually bankrupt (Matt. 5:3) and are spiritually in rags before God (Isa. 64:6). Because he gives his salvation riches to the spiritually poor, so we should do good to the wicked and the ungrateful, even to our enemies.

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:35–36)

We see the words of Jesus and the prophets reflected in the teaching and practice of the early church. Christians are to open their hands to their brother as far as there is need (cf. 1 John 3:16–17 with Deut. 15:7–8). In the church, wealth is to be shared so generously that much of the economic distance between rich and poor diminishes (cf. 2 Cor. 8:13–15 with Lev. 25). James (2:1–23) follows the prophets and the Lord in teaching that true faith will inevitably show itself through deeds of mercy (Isa. 1:10–17).

Christians are charged to remember the poor (Gal. 2:10) and widows and orphans (James 1:27), to practice hospitality to strangers (Heb. 13:2), and to denounce materialism (1 Tim. 6:17–19). Although believers are to give their first and greatest aid to the needy within the church, mercy must also be shown to all people (Gal. 6:10). All of these teachings are direct echoes of the Old Testament revelation.

Not only do all believers have these responsibilities, but a special class of officers—deacons—is established to coordinate the church's ministry of mercy. This shows that mercy is a mandated work of the church, just as are the ministry of the Word and discipline (cf. Rom. 15:23–29).

## **CHRIST, OUR MODEL**

How can we draw into sharp focus all the teaching of the Bible concerning the ministry of mercy? By looking at Jesus Christ! First, he is the true Adam (Rom. 5:14–21) who is subduing all creation to God (Heb. 2:5–8; Eph. 1:10).

Second, he is the true High Priest (Heb. 4:14–16) who can give mercy to all in need. Third, he is the great Deacon (Rom. 15:8) who identifies with the poor (2 Cor. 8:9) and pours himself out in costly service (Mark 10:45).

Because we are united to Christ, every believer is a deacon, who is to wash the feet of others in humble service (Matt. 20:26–28; Gal. 6:10). Every believer is also a royal priest, whose sacrifices to God include deeds of mercy (Heb. 13:13–16). Christians are also now a “new Adam,” seeking to bring all creation into subjection to the Lord (Matt. 28:18–20; 2 Cor. 10:5).

## CONCLUSION

During the past two decades, Christians have been exposed more and more to the biblical teaching that every believer is a minister. Although most Christians are not polished preachers and apologists, yet every Christian is to be a witness. Although most Christians are not skilled psychologists and counselors, yet every Christian is to be a people-helper. Sermons, seminars, and books have been pounding these concepts into our consciousness for years.

However, in at least one realm, the ministry of mercy, laypeople are still consigning ministry to the “experts.” In fact, the church herself has almost completely conceded this work to secular agencies and authorities. Many Christians cannot clearly define this duty, though they may have good understandings of the ministries of evangelism, education, worship, teaching, and fellowship.

Most of us have not come to grips with the clear directive of Scripture that *all* Christians must have their own ministry of mercy. We must each be actively engaged in it ourselves.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what ways does our mercy to the needy reflect the love of Christ?
2. Before we are able to give mercy, what needs to happen in our lives? Do you see where change in your own life is needed? Describe that.
3. On what scriptural bases (Old or New Testament) is the necessity of mercy established?
4. Why is it that we tend to think of mercy as an option?
5. In what ways is Christ our model for mercy?

Why would someone risk his safety, upend his schedule, deplete his bank balance, and become dirty and bloody to help a person of another race and social class?

And why would Jesus tell us, “Go and do likewise”?

The Good Samaritan didn't ignore the battered man on the Jericho road. Like him, we're aware of people in need around us—the widow next door, the family strapped with medical bills, the homeless man outside our church. God calls us to help them, whether they need shelter, assistance, medical care, or just friendship.

Tim Keller shows that caring for these people is the job of every believer, as fundamental to Christian living as evangelism, discipleship, and worship. But he doesn't stop there. He shows *how* we can carry out this vital ministry as individuals, families, and churches.

Join Keller as he explores the biblical way to participate in compassion ministries. In this retypeset edition, he deals perceptively with thorny issues, such as balancing the cost of meeting needs with the limits of time and resources, giving material aid versus teaching responsibility, meeting needs within the church versus outside the church, and more.

“There was a point in my pastoral ministry when I looked for a steady hand on mine as I tried to navigate the swirling waters of mercy ministries in an urban setting while remaining deeply committed to heralding God's Word through the exposition of Scripture. Not surprisingly, I found it in Tim Keller's *Ministries of Mercy*.”

—**JOHN PIPER**, *Founder and Teacher, www.desiringGod.org; Chancellor, Bethlehem College and Seminary*

**TIMOTHY KELLER** (MDiv, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; DMin, Westminster Theological Seminary) is senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan and *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Reason for God*, *The Prodigal God*, and *Prayer*.