

Will the poor always be with us?

by Bryant Myers
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One sometimes hears Christians, tired with the news of poverty and exploitation around the world, try to deflect the news by reminding us that Jesus said, "The poor will always be with you." This is offered as a way to stop the conversation.

Did Jesus say this? Yes. Does it mean what it appears to mean? Not really.

So what does this troubling phrase mean?

The unforgettable woman

Jesus' statement comes in the context of a story that really has nothing to do with the poor directly. It does have to do with a woman whom Jesus said we would all remember as long as the gospel is proclaimed.

Late in Matthew's account of the life of Jesus, just before the Lord's Supper and his arrest, we are told that a woman, whose name we do not know, poured expensive perfume from a jar onto Jesus' head and worked the perfume reverently into Jesus' hair.

Jesus knew that the woman was honoring him by mimicking the preparation of the dead for burial. She understood before most of the rest of Jesus' followers that the cross is where Jesus was headed.

The disciples, full of self-righteousness, criticize this act of devotion. What a waste of money, they say. The perfume could have been sold and given to the poor.

Jesus' reply is withering: "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me."

Jesus understood the meaning of her act and considered it a wonderful gift. Perhaps we are to remember her because of her insight into the future sacrifice of Jesus and her costly sacrifice to her Lord.

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

The mistaken activist

There is an important lesson here for Christians who do relief and development work among the poor. Too many Christian activists are ruining their health and destroying their families while justifying the zeal because of their commitment to the poor.

In the name of the poor, activist workaholics suffer from poor health and burnout, and they damage their spouses and children.

This is not a gospel stance. This is not what Jesus asks us to do. Our devotion must be directed at Jesus, not the poor themselves.

While we certainly are supposed to love our neighbor, especially our poor neighbor, we are to worship only Jesus. The woman understood this and the disciples did not.

Getting your spirituality and worship right is key to sustaining one's service to God and the poor.

The unintended poor

By now you've probably figured out that I am not comfortable with the way some Christians take this statement of Jesus out of context.

But my disappointment is deepened by the fact that a little curiosity as to where Jesus came up with this statement reveals a rich and challenging understanding about God, his people, and the poor.

The section of Deuteronomy that Jesus refers to begins with a complete contradiction of the claim that the poor will always be with you. "There should be no poor among you," states the law in Deuteronomy 15:4.

Really?

This unambiguous claim is followed by the reason why this is so. "For in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you."

The land that God is going to give Israel has more than enough for everyone. There are to be no poor because there will be enough.

And more than enough. "For the Lord your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none" (Deuteronomy 15:6).

There will be a surplus, a surplus that can be traded with the nations of the world.

I can believe this, because I believe that the loving, caring God who created the world for humankind could never have intended a world of scarcity. The God whom I worship would never place humankind in a land that was unable to provide for life and life abundantly.

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

But there is a condition to the promise. "He will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today" (Deuteronomy 15:4–5).

The blessing and abundance of the Promised Land are dependent on the faithfulness of God's people to God's commands.

It is at this point that an apparent contradiction enters the text: "If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend to him whatever he needs" (Deuteronomy 15:7–8).

How can this be? We've just been told that "there should be no poor among you," and then we are given instructions as to what to do if there is a poor person. Did Moses get confused? Is this a contradiction?

I don't think so.

The ones who failed

There will be poor in Israel, not because God's Promised Land failed to provide, but because human beings were not faithful to God nor to each other. There has to be provision for the poor in the Promised Land, not because God failed or intended it, but because Israel failed.

And so it is today, I suspect. It is a fact that there is enough agricultural production today to feed every human being on the planet. Yet people are dying of hunger, and children are stunted because of chronic malnutrition.

It is not that God's planet cannot provide; it is that we do not follow God's commands. We neither love God nor love our neighbors.

What Jesus really meant

So what did Jesus mean when he said, "The poor you will always have with you"? Did he mean that poverty is something we should tolerate because it is just the way things are? Was Jesus asking us to tolerate poverty?

I don't think so.

First, Jesus was making a point about worship. The only reason Jesus brought the poor into the conversation was in response to the self-righteous misreading of the devotion of a woman we are never to forget.

Second, Jesus was being ironic. By referring to the passage from Deuteronomy, Jesus was reminding the disciples that the only reason there are poor in God's abundant creation is because of human sin and self-centeredness.

The disciples did not care about the poor as much as they did about trying to make points at the expense of the woman.

"The poor you will always have with you," was a rebuke to Jesus' disciples.

The passage in Deuteronomy closes with a command. After the verse, "There will always be poor people in the land," we find this: "Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land" (Deuteronomy 15:11).

I think God knew that God faced a profound contradiction. God's world is productive enough to meet the needs of all. Further, human beings created in the image of God are creative and productive enough to make it so.

Yet the sin in the human heart and the curse of a fallen creation means that God's world will not be what it was created to be.

Even though God never intended that there be any poor, he also knew that there would always be poor people as long as there are sinful people in the world.

Jesus' statement about the poor always being with us is intended to shame us, to remind us that this is a true statement only because we have failed. Jesus never intended to justify tolerance for the presence of poor people in the land.

The message for us

What can we conclude from all this?

First, Jesus was not excusing the presence of poor among us. He knew full well that his Father provides more than enough through his creation.

Jesus was reminding us, with some considerable irony, that the poor are here because we have failed to keep God's commands.

Second, the real lesson from Deuteronomy is that unrighteousness — of those who are not poor and of the poor themselves — is the cause of poverty. At the most fundamental level, sin distorts our relationships with God, with each other, and with our world.

Our relationships do not work for our well-being, and the result is poverty, racism, and other expressions of injustice. Poverty was and is not part of God's intention.

Third, to tolerate poverty by excusing it in Jesus' name is an insult to our Lord who so consistently extended his affection and touch to those who were poor, sick, and suffering.

It makes a mockery of Jesus' statement of his mission in Luke 4:18. God's commands in Deuteronomy regarding the response to the poor among us are clear.

Finally, our response to the poor is to be openhanded. Moreover, we are to enjoy sharing what God has given us. "Give generously to him (the poor) and do so without a grudging heart" (Deuteronomy 15:10).

The result of this attitude of sharing is that the "Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to." Caring for the poor is good for us!

As long as we live in a fallen world, we are to be openhanded, to lend freely, and to do it without grudging. If the loans are not repaid after seven years, we are to write them off. The goal is caring for our family, not running a business.

After all, if we were doing our job, there would be no poor. It's our fault, not God's.

Bryant L. Myers is an author and the vice president of international program strategy for World Vision International. This essay appeared in the May 2003 issue of World Vision Resources.