

THE CHARACTER OF THE GODLY: JOB

Job 29 explicitly describes the attributes God desires for us to exhibit, as godly people, in response to the needy. Job is placed before us as an example of how we are to live, how we are to conduct ourselves as we go through daily life. Job is a marvelous character sketch exhibiting the traits God would have His people to possess.

Three times Job is described as blameless, the Hebrew literally meaning “complete” with the connotation of being pious, perfect, and undefiled. Also, Job is described as upright. The Hebrew literally meaning “straight” with the connotation of being just and righteous. We would do well to evaluate the life of a man referred to in such broad, glowing terms by God himself to ascertain the particulars of such a praiseworthy walk.

God was highly pleased with Job and commended His faithful servant in the presence of the most unfaithful servant — Satan. A reading of chapters one and two reveals that Job’s faithfulness to God is summarily tested. Job, a very prosperous man and a man of great pious disposition, was speedily reduced to abject poverty with an accompanying abhorrent physical state. We learn of his financial demise in chapter one. Much of his livestock was rustled by the Sabeans and, in the process, Job’s servants were killed (verses 14,15). Job’s sheep and more of his servants

were inexplicably and suddenly destroyed by fire (verse 16). More livestock, namely camels, was rustled and servants were killed by the dastardly Chaldeans (verse 17). To conclude the list of tragedies that befell Job's property and the people of his household, Job received the report that his sons and daughters were suddenly killed by a violent wind that destroyed the house in which all of them had gathered for a meal (verses 18, 19)- Job was, in essence, reduced to poverty.

In chapter two we learn of Job's physical demise. Job was infected with loathsome "painful boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (verse 7). Some writers have suggested that Job may have contracted something akin to leprosy.

Job proved himself unerringly faithful to God in the midst of personal catastrophe. Job was unshaken in his faith and refused to speak against God (2:9,10) for the numerous maladies which had unexpectedly assaulted him. Instead of cursing God, Job worshipped God (1:20).

Soon three "friends" of Job — Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar appeared on the scene to visit and talk with the suffering saint. Job's appearance is so deformed by the physical affliction which had overwhelmed his body, that the three do not immediately recognize him (2:12) and are anguished by his awful appearance.

In the succeeding chapters of the book we have recorded the details of their extended conversation. When we reach chapter 29, the four are in the midst of their conversational exchange. Job fondly recounts his past good fortunes. This is the chapter on which we will focus our attention as we seek to discover the

characteristics which caused God to refer to Job as “a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil.” It is indeed a telling and instructional passage.

Job longs for things to be as they once were, before catastrophe came. He is beginning a wistful reminiscing about the lifestyle he enjoyed before he fell into poverty and ill health. Job attributes his past good fortune to God’s care and protection on his behalf.

The gist of Job’s comments continues to be an acknowledgment of past successes and prosperity being a blessing from God. He attributes his past good fortunes to the favor of God. God has guided Job as a light (or candle) piercing the darkness, and given him wise advise, as a close friend would, to steer Job from error. Job gladly accepted God’s counsel (God’s ways) and was able to avoid the pitfalls of life. The result was prosperity. Certainly God had been both Job’s friend and the master of his household. Job avoids credit for himself, but gives credit for his success to the unfailing leadership of God in his life.

To Job, the events and experiences of the past are testimony of the presence of God in his life. Due to his recent traumatic reversal, Job feels abandoned by the All Powerful One. The loss of his ten children is also significant to Job since children are a sign of God’s blessings. Add to this the loss of his servants, Job feels forsaken and alone. Also, his present physical appearance made him repulsive to look upon, probably resulting in few real companions of the past wanting to be in his presence. In Hebrew culture he would have been considered unclean, so no one would have come

in contact with him or even with any of his belongings. He would have had to keep his distance from everyone. The sincerity of Job's three "friends" is questionable as revealed by their conversation with Job.

Job poetically, metaphorically considers his past abundance and wealth. His livestock produced milk (probably, according to the Hebrew, butter instead of cream) in such great quantities that he had to wade through it or could even bathe in it if he chose. He was able to produce so much olive oil that it seemed to pour forth even from the rocks. A magnificent picture of plenty, a portrayal of God's rich blessings upon His faithful servant are presented for our consideration.

Job was a city official. He had achieved a place of prominence among the people, Job was in fact a judge who had the authority to rule on cases which were brought before him. Near the city gate he had a special place where he positioned himself. This was the normal site for civil deliberations. Not only was Job a man of wealth, he was a man of prominence in the community.

Not only was Job wealthy, not only was Job prominent, but Job was well respected. Job was highly esteemed as is evidenced by the behavior of the people with whom he came into contact. The young men revered Job so highly that they did not feel worthy to be in his presence. The older men held Job in such a state of veneration that they stood when he approached. Even the rulers of the people-the princes and nobles, held their tongues in Job's presence. They wished to hear what he had to say; their speech was suddenly unimportant. Men recognized that Job had a special

quality, an extra measure of wisdom, and ability superior to their own. The actions of the young, the old, the princes, and the nobles testified to their high regard for Job. What was heard from Job's lips, in company with his actions, was worthy of their approval and was a testimony to the blessing of God which was upon him.

Why was Job so greatly respected by his peers? What had he done to earn such awe? What was it about Job's character that caused the blessings of God to fall upon him, for Job to become so prosperous and prominent in the community? Certainly he humbled himself before God; certainly he did not fail to worship and adore God; certainly he was obedient to the leading of God. A reading of the book of "Job" clearly presents the character of Job as being that of a humble, repentant, dependent servant of God. But there is another quality which Job possessed that caused him to receive honor from both man and God. Take note dear reader of chapter 29.

12 Because I delivered the poor who cried out, the fatherless and the one who had no helper.

We are told that Job earned the mantle of leadership because ... Job won accolades from the people because ... Job received an extra measure of grace and wisdom because ... he helped the needy. As a judge he was impartial, not esteeming the cause of the wealthy and powerful over the indigent unable to wield influence on their own behalf. This impartial justice was deliverance for the poor. Job, as a

magistrate, was afforded the opportunity to treat the poor fairly and he did.

13 The blessing of a perishing man came upon me, And I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.

The result of Job's fairness and attentiveness to the plight of the needy from his post was rewarded by the prayers of the afflicted. Happiness came to the widow who had no defender and the one who was in danger of losing his life unjustly. Notice that the most powerless in society are used as examples of objects for Job's attention — the fatherless (orphan) and the widow. These are the ones who had no defender, no helper.

14 I put on righteousness and it clothed me; My justice was like a robe and a turban.

Job's judgements were good. His bold integrity was never cast aside but was continually worn, or wielded, for all to see without compromise.

15 I was eyes to the blind, and I was feet to the lame.

16 I was father to the poor, and I searched out the case that I did not know.

17 I broke the fangs of the wicked, and plucked the victim from his teeth.

Job's compassion for his fellow man is evident. He guided the ignorant, the weak; he cautioned and

counseled those who needed to be led in the right way; he was as a father caring for his children, in regard to the poor. Job's wisdom is also in evidence. He was not afraid, not uncertain of his abilities, to tackle the most difficult cases of which he became aware. As a champion of the needy, of the oppressed, he was successful in effecting restoration in their lives.

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Job had himself now fallen into poverty and into poor health. Job had become as one of those whom he described as being objects of his past care and protection. Job was now as the orphan and widow in need of a helper. Just as Job had befriended the needy, God befriended Job in his hour of need. Job was tested and found faithful so God honored him. Psalm 37:25-29 promises that those such as Job, the righteous, shall not be forsaken by God, nor left in a state of begging for their bread.

In chapter 42, the closing chapter to the book of "Job", we find Job in conversation (prayer) with God. Job reveals himself, again, to be a humble, repentant, dependent servant before God. Ah, Job has unlocked the door which will allow him to make good his escape from the destitute and deplorable condition in which he currently resides. In the concluding verses

we read of the blessing which God bestowed upon faithful Job. He was given twice as much as he had before (verse 10), old acquaintances of importance were restored, thus dispelling his ostracism (verse 11), he was richly blessed with ten more children in the succeeding years (verse 12), and he enjoyed a long life (verse 16).

Job's life is such an outstanding case study because he, at once, presents for us the proper stance those are to take who are able to aid the needy and he displays for us the proper attitude those are to exhibit who are in need. Job knew both prosperity and poverty. He lived at both ends of the spectrum, moving from abundant wealth and caring for the needy to being needy and seeking after God for deliverance. Paul must have been familiar with the suffering of Job and found the same source of godly patience when he wrote that he was content in whatever state he found himself, "both to abound and to suffer need" (Philippians 4:11-13). There are many valuable lessons to be gleaned from Job's holy life. We are to recognize that our prosperity is not of our own doing, but is a result of God's good favor. We must understand that the godly are not exempt from hardship, even poverty, for God may use poverty, especially temporary poverty, as a means of testing and teaching. We learn from this account of Job that godly people are to be characterized by, but not limited to, the pious acts of prayer, worship and "assistance to the needy." Also we see that Job's deliverance from poverty came as a result of his desire to maintain a godly attitude and lifestyle in the face of great temptation. Many today could avoid poverty, or be delivered from it, by

emulating Job's godliness and following God's ways instead of cursing God with their lives.

A key feature of Job's life, as distilled from the twenty-ninth chapter of "Job", is that from the office he held as judge he grasped the opportunity to reach out to others with special needs. This is a significant, important trait which God considers of personal merit in Job's favor. Job did have a unique position of authority as a magistrate. We may not all be civil officials but we do all have positions of power and responsibility over which we are able to exercise control. As we go to work each day, as we interact with others in our family, as we serve on church boards, as we go about our daily activities we will be afforded opportunities to assist the needy among us. I firmly believe that one of the reasons Christ reminds us, "For you have the poor with you always" (Matthew 16:11) is to test our character. The poor among us are there to test us, to observe how we as Christians will respond to their needs. Be assured God is watching and a lost world is watching. Job was tested by God long before Satan was allowed to financially and physically ruin him. Job was tested in his everyday life by the poor, the fatherless, and the widow who came before him in need of justice. Is it any wonder that God became Job's helper when Job became needy?

We would do well to copy the lifestyle of compassion and wisdom exhibited by Job if we are to seek God's favor for our own lives and nation.

THE COMPASSION OF SCRIPTURE

GUIDELINES

Biblical charity is the marriage of God's laws and the compassion of Christ, administered by Christians under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to provide for the needy in our society. Making provisions for the needy by applying principles found in the Bible should be implemented today. To minister to persons both within and without the Church, who have material needs, requires a balanced approach, utilizing both wisdom and compassion. The following basic guidelines are found in Scripture:

1) Biblical charity is performed in the name of Jesus Christ. (I Cor. 10:31; Col.3:17)

This is a critical point. Much of the assistance given to the needy is not being done by Christians or by Christian organizations. For Christians to assist the needy for reasons, no matter how noble, other than service to and for Jesus Christ is wrong, since those actions are not done to bring honor and glory to Christ.¹

2) Biblical charity is founded on the principle of work. (Prov. 11:11,24; 24:30-34; Ruth 2:5-7; II Thess. 3:10-14)

There are numerous passages throughout the Bible stressing the importance of working to earn your bread and prosperity, as well as references to those who are

slothful and sluggardly. Free handouts requiring nothing in return are unscriptural, fostering laziness and dependence while destroying dignity. Work is the cornerstone of Biblical charity.

3) Biblical charity is discerning (Prov. 14:31; 19:15; 21:25-26; Isaiah 58:6-7)

The Bible, over and over again, makes a distinction between the oppressed poor and the slothful or lazy poor. We, as Christians, should do the same. The deserving poor should be assisted by providing them with opportunities to better themselves while the undeserving, who refuse to cooperate and work, should be allowed to languish as they have themselves chosen to do.

4) Biblical charity emphasises personal, individual relationships. (Ruth 2:8-14; Luke 10:25-37)

The recipient assisted has the comfort of knowing someone does care for him while the Christian has the opportunities through personal involvement to accomplish several things. The Christian cannot shirk

¹A comprehensive explanation of the nature of good works and the meaning of acting “in the name of Christ” is found in the Westminster Confession of Faith (16:2): *These good works, done in obedience to Cod’s commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith (James 2:18, 22): and by them believers manifest their thankfulness (Ps. 116:11,13; 1 Pet. 2:9), strengthen their assurance (1John 2:3,5; 2 Pet. 1:5-10), edify their brethren (2 Cor. 9:2; Matt.5:16), adorn the profession of the Gospel (Tit. 2:5,9,10,11,12; 1 Tim. 6:1), stop the mouths of the adversaries (1 Pet. 2:15), and glorify God (1 Pet. 2:12; Phil. 1:11; John 15:8), whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto (Eph. 2:10); that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end eternal life (Eph. 6:22).*

his duty by letting someone else provide services as he supplies the money. The Christian can readily evangelize, shepherd, teach, and determine the worthiness or lack of worthiness of the unfortunate.

5) Biblical charity is supported and implemented on a voluntary basis. (II Cor. 9:7; Gal. j;i4; James 2:6-8)

Voluntary contributions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit by individuals is proper and acceptable. This allows the supporter to choose which causes are worthy and which are not and gives him the opportunity to act freely in love. Further, you cannot force a person to love his neighbor, he must choose to do so.

6) Biblical charity employs cleaning as a Biblical pattern. (Deut. 24:19-22; Lev. 19:9-10; 23.-22)

To translate this into today's culture as wise stewards is fairly simple and readily applied. Salvaging damaged foods and over-produced quantities of commodities is presently done by food banks and other charitable endeavors across the country. To take this concept a step further would include clothes closets where used apparel is collected for the needy and vacant apartments where the homeless are housed in return for work on the property.

7) Biblical charity employs interest-free loans. (Exodus 22:25; Lev. 25;35-37; Deut. 15:7-8)

Just as the poor are required to work for provisions, money is not simply handed to the poor. The pattern remains the same. Money is loaned to the poor but with compassion, excluding the needy from paying interest. This is yet another way of coming to the aid of the poor without loss of their dignity. The poor must work, they should repay, they must shoulder responsibility

APPLICATIONS

The seven general guidelines above, drawn from Scripture, give us an outline of the approach Christians and churches should take in working with the needy. In light of this brief summary of the Biblical approach to relieving poverty, it is clear that most of the Christian community needs to re-think their means of dealing with requests for material assistance. We cannot simply fill requests for services when someone comes knocking at our door and feel that we have fulfilled our responsibility to “love our neighbor.” God calls us to a higher standard than that.

Unemployed people who are able-bodied can easily be given physical work to do in return for assistance. It is understood that they are looking for a job since they are not gainfully employed at the time. If they refuse to work when given the opportunity, they should simply not be helped. To aid the obviously slothful is a clear violation of Scripture and a complete disservice to the poor. Such a situation is usually easy to evaluate because the individual refuses to cooperate or does not show up for work. In other cases it is not

as clear. Sickness, physical infirmity, working poor, etc. may cloud the circumstances of the person's availability and ability to do physical work. This is why we are to not only be compassionate, but also wise.

Each person or household, asking for help, should be evaluated to distinguish "wants" (what the person is asking for) from "needs" (what the person actually requires). For example, a person who has trouble paying his rent month after month wants you to help him pay the bill. The man has a job, but received low pay. You are concerned and take a personal interest in him and his family. In the process of interviewing him, to ascertain his situation, you discover he cannot read. Since you desire to help the man, it is obvious that the opportunity for him to get a higher paying job will be difficult due to illiteracy. To give the man what he needs you agree to help with the rent in return for him enrolling in a literacy class. As long as he continues in the class and shows improvement your church will be available to continue assisting the family. If the man refuses to enroll in the class or drops out at some point in the future, he is no longer performing the task (his work) that was agreed upon and is no longer eligible for assistance from you. Another example, an elderly widow who has had a history of physical problems has a difficult time buying groceries each month. She runs out of money before the end of each month since she is on a fixed income and has no more earning power. She cannot work and she has no husband, she explains. In the process of interviewing her, to ascertain the complete picture, it may be to her advantage and yours to ask her to submit to a financial

counseling session by a person trained in this area. If she is willing to meet with someone who will help her evaluate her financial options, then she will be given groceries. This will also be helpful to the church in determining what long-range help should be given, if any.²

This process of lovingly evaluating the circumstances of both Christians and non-Christians to discover what their true needs are should be consistently followed. When this is done we are taking a personal interest in people, we are seeking to be discerning, and we are applying the right “work” for each situation.

THE THREE LINES OF DEFENSE AGAINST POVERTY

God, in His wisdom and love, has given instruction through His Word to help us avoid poverty. In fact He has established three lines of defense to guard us against the trauma of poverty and want. The three lines of defense are: (1) prudent, godly behavior, (2) the family, and (3) the Church. Personal responsibility on the part of the individual, coupled with the institutions of the family and church should go far in protecting one from destitution. Let the reader consider this carefully.

Prudent Behavior

The book of Proverbs is a rich source of wisdom

²*Of the hundreds of people interviewed for assistance at the Christian Food Mission, many are illiterate, financially irresponsible, slothful, unmotivated, and lacking in life skills.*

which, when heeded, will serve to help keep one out of poverty. The character that God would have us exhibit in our daily lives, that will help insure financial stability, include: (a) being a diligent worker needing a minimum of supervision (Prov. 6:6-11), (b) being the kind of person who does not procrastinate (Prov. 6:6-11), (c) being a person who maintains his possessions (Prov. 24:30-34), (d) being one who lives a disciplined life of self-control (Prov. 23:21, 20:13), (e) being a person who is enthusiastic over his work (Prov. 14:23), (f) being someone who welcomes correction and instruction (Prov. 13:18), (g) being a careful and wise planner before acting (Prov. 21:5), and (h) being a person who has built up a good reputation and is compassionate to others (Prov. 11:24-28).

As you pass by the dwelling of the poor, observe the paper in the yard, and the unrepaired broken screen door, and the loose step. Consider it well and receive instruction. Poverty often stems from a lack of character more than lack of opportunity.

The Family

Whose responsibility is it to care for the needy in society? All through the Bible the importance and responsibility of the family is displayed in story after story. Refusal to care for relations, refusal to shoulder responsibility for your family is serious business to God (See Gen. 38:1-11). God, in His law to Israel encouraged and assisted healthy, thriving families (See Lev. 25:23-28). In the story of Ruth, the touching circumstances of familial care toward extended family

members in need is highlighted (See the Book of Ruth). In the story of Hannah, a desire for children and a commitment to raise and provide for godly offspring is forcefully described (See I Sam. 1:8-20). Even in times of national calamity, God wished for His people to work toward restoration of strong, successful families (See Jer. 29:4-6). To rebuild Jerusalem following the Babylonian destruction the people are encouraged to work at this task as families and to fight for their families (See Neh. 4:6-14). It is clearly stated that it is the responsibility of the family, before the church, to care for the needy (See I Tim. 5: 3-16). The church is commanded to nurture families and help assist family order and develop godly homes (See Tit. 2:1-5).

It is certainly clear from Scripture that the original institution for caring for the poor and elderly has been the family. Modern-day Christians showing love to family members when age robs health or poverty strikes, are to be examples to fellow believers (and unbelievers).

The Church

It is clear from wording found in the New Testament that believers are adopted sons of God (Gal. 4:5-6; Eph. 1:5-6; II Cor. 6:18; John 1:12-13; others). As adopted sons and daughters, we become “brothers and sisters” in Christ. The body of believers must be viewed as a spiritual family. This means that the Christian community should act like a family. Sharing, loving, counseling, sacrificing, and yes, even living together if need be, that is what a truly loving family

does. A Christian community modeled on the New Testament pattern is supposed to be a powerful force for good.

Throughout history the Christian Church has been characterized by its singular compassion — compassion never before seen in the world. In the Roman Empire the early Christians had a habit of retrieving babies from the wild which had been ‘thrown away’ by parents. Husbands who desired sons but fathered girls often discarded the girl babies. Deformed and handicapped babies were also discarded by the pagan Romans and left for the wild animals. It became a common practice for Christians to rescue such unfortunates and raise them in their own homes. As the Church grew and spread around the world great ministries of compassion sprang up. Orphanages, hospitals, and voluntary poverty relief efforts of every kind were established. The Church today needs to continue this legacy. We begin by caring for the needy within the Church, taking the example of the early Christians (See Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-37).

When ministering to the needy who are seeking assistance, these three areas should be considered. What type of lifestyle is the person or family living? What family assistance, either immediate or extended, is available to the ones seeking help? What about church membership or attendance in a local congregation?

A CONSIDERATION OF HUMAN NATURE

The “charity” practiced by governments and

secular organizations tends to violate the seven Biblical guidelines listed at the outset. For example, governmental social programs do not permit charity to be supported on a voluntary basis since the money for such aid is collected through taxation (which violates principle no. 5) and secular organizations do not perform good deeds in the name of Jesus Christ (which violates principle no. 1). Also, such agencies overlook an even more fundamental concern which hampers the effectiveness of their work with the needy—the spiritual dimension of poverty. Christians in earlier times were very sensitive to this area and addressed it as they administered their good deeds.

Cotton Mather, the brilliant Puritan, gave this commentary on human nature in 1702:

Instead of exhorting you to augment your charity, I will rather utter an exhortation, or at least a supplication, that you may not abuse your charity by misapplying of it. I remember I have read, that an inhabitant of the city of Pisa being asked why their town so went, as it did then, unto decay? He fetched a deep sigh, and said, ‘Our young men are too prodigal, our old men are too affectionate, and we have no punishment for those that spend their years in idleness.’ Ah! the last stroak of that complaint in the town exceedingly; idleness, of which there never came any goodness! idleness which is a ‘reproach to any people’ We work hard all summer, and the drones count themselves wronged if they have it not in the winter divided among them. The poor

that can't work, are objects for your liberality. But the poor that can work and won't, the best liberality to them is to make them. I beseech you sirs, find out a method quickly, that the idle persons in the town may earn their bread: it were the best piece of charity that can be shown to them, and equity unto us all. Our beggars do shamefully grow upon us, and such beggars, too, as our Lord Jesus Christ himself hath expressly forbidden us to countenance.³

Jacob Abbott, a Puritan of a later period known for his piety, wrote of Christian charity:

Sin is the source of nearly all the temporal sufferings of mankind, and there can be no permanent relief from suffering but by turning from sin. Go for instance to the house of a lazy and foolish man, and when you see the wretched condition of his desolate and suffering family, make a kind and vigorous effort to relieve them. Kindle up a blazing fire upon the dying embers over which you found them shivering. Cover them with comfortable clothing, and replenish, with a bountiful hand, their exhausted stores. After a few weeks, return and visit them again. You will find that the fire has long since burned away, and the miserable cabin is as cold as before. The children are again in rags, and the mother is

³ Cotton Mather, *The Great Works of Christ in America, Vol I* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), p. 276.

again vainly striving to bar her door against the devourer, hunger.

Suppose, again that, dissatisfied with so partial and temporary a relief, you make a second effort of a different nature. You seek, and by the blessing of God, you reform the man. Return after a few months, and an industrious and frugal hand will be extended to you at the door, to welcome you to a happy family, and to a permanently comfortable home; and you may now even take provisions from his store, and fuel from his pile, and carry relief to others that are miserable.

This is a very simple case, but it illustrates a universal principle which lies at the foundation of all wise and effectual benevolence. Bring men back to God and to duty, and their happiness is safe. Leave them in sin, and you can provide them with very little permanent relief from their miseries. It seems as though God, in His providence, pursues to a degree, to which human feeling is hardly prepared to follow, the plan of leaving the miseries of sin to cut their own dreadful way—expending all his energies in removing their cause. His benevolence is most conspicuous in His plans for spreading the dominion of holiness throughout His empire.⁴

⁴Jacob Abbott, *The The Principle of Biblical Charity* (Arlington Heights, IL: Christian Liberty Press, 1989). pp. 37-39.

By 1900 woodyards next to homeless shelters, where able-bodied men were required to work for aid, and sewing rooms for poor women were common across the country. Such diverse groups as the Salvation Army and the St. Vincent de Paul Society required work and accountability in return for their services. Evangelism was always a high priority as there was an emphasis on not just [God's love, but also God's holiness] in the lives of the poor. Good deeds today, toward the needy, should be tempered with the same understanding of human nature and the sinful state of man.

DISASTERS AS CASES OF EXCEPTION

A word should be said about unusual calamities which disrupt otherwise normal lives that had typically been free from want. In cases such as a fire destroying home and property, disaster from storms and hurricanes, serious illness, etc., exceptions may be made, at least for a short time, to the practice of requiring "work" in return for assistance.⁵

The best example in Scripture of an exception to the work rule is that of the Good Samaritan. A man was beaten, robbed, and left senseless on the side of the road. This was certainly an unforeseen calamity which called for mercy in assisting the unfortunate man. The Samaritan evaluated the situation and determined to care for the man with nothing being

⁵ Several years ago the Christian Food Mission was heavily involved in disaster relief following a devastating tornado which affected our area. Many homes and much property was destroyed overnight, leaving numerous working people in dire straits.

asked in return. Another example of a calamity, which called for a special collection from the early churches to relieve want, involved the people of Judea. Relief was sent to these Christians due to famine. Again, this was an unusual occurrence which waived the work rule established in Scripture.

CONCLUSION AND A CALL TO ACTION

The Church and Christians have a mandate from Scripture to care for the needy as evidenced from numerous passages (See Isaiah 58:1-12; Eph. 4:28 for examples); it is not an option. Not only are we to lovingly help the poor, but we are to wisely help them. Each church would do well to train and establish some small group of people within their congregation to receive individuals seeking material assistance from their church. Preferably this would be a group drawn from the deacons or overseen by the deacons (See Acts 6:1-6).

Beyond the establishment of food pantries and clothes closets, there are other opportunities for ministry. To lead productive, prosperous lives, the poor must be educated, freed from the bondage of alcohol, drugs, and immoral sex. They must be assisted in finding employment and obtaining job skills. They must be aided and encouraged in taking responsibility, in making decisions, in being accountable for their actions, and in setting goals. In short, they must be expected to function as mature, ever-growing adults; not treated as little children. The Church must minister

to the body and soul of the needy!⁶

THE CHARACTER OF THE UNGODLY: SODOM

Care has been taken to discuss the proper, i.e., biblical pattern, of responsibility in providing for the needy. First of all, to avoid poverty, God expects individuals to shun deviant, i.e., unbiblical, behavior. In addition, God has established the institutions of the family and the Church as safe guards against the ravages of poverty. Man in his cleverness, not his wisdom, has decided upon another course to alleviate poverty by shifting the responsibility to civil governments. The shift from a Christian society to that of a nation manifesting an increasingly ungodly character is now considered. We will discuss the process by which this shift takes place.

A lack of voluntary compassionate response to the needy by a people is the beginning of a headlong moral decline which will lead to the collapse, and ultimate complete ruin, of a society. The reader is probably now thinking “Whew, what a statement!” I can prove what I say by the story of Sodom.

The story of the events leading up to and the ultimate destruction of the city of Sodom is recorded in Genesis 19. This should be a very familiar story to

⁶ Great debt is owed to two excellent books which were of immense value in helping me develop the proper understanding of charity. Dr. George Grant wrote *Bringing In The Sheaves* (1985) to present a biblical model for implementing acts of compassion, and Dr. Marvin Olasky wrote *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (1992) to present a historical model of serving the needy.

all Christians except the newest converts unschooled in the Bible. It is a story of paramount significance with epic implications. We will recount the basic facts of this timely story and then, using Scripture to interpret Scripture, we will trace a line of thought which runs progressively through several books of the Bible. Let us turn now to Genesis 19.

Two strangers, really angels, visited the city of Sodom one evening and were met by Lot at the gate to the city. The angels, in the guise of ordinary men, had just come from a visit with Lot's uncle, Abraham. Lot may have been an official or person in authority to have had a position at the gate. The two strangers in town are greeted by Lot and invited by him to spend the night at his house. Soon they are found enjoying dinner together. Lot exhibited what has almost become a lost art in America — hospitality.

In short order the house is surrounded by men both young and old, from all parts of the city who call for the strangers to be brought out. It is plain that their intention is to enter into disgusting homosexual relations with the two strangers. Genesis 13:13 says, "But the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the Lord." Lot went outside to quiet the crowd, calling them brothers in his attempt to turn them from this evil.

The story continues with the men refusing to listen. They personally challenge Lot and seek to forcefully gain entrance into his house. The angels intervene by pulling Lot back inside and striking the crowd of men with blindness (See verses 8-11 for details).

12 Then the men said to Lot, “Have you anyone else here? Son-in-law, your sons, your daughters, and whomever you have in the city - take them out of this place!

13 For we will destroy this place, because the outcry against them has grown great before the face of the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it.

The two angels now reveal themselves to Lot. They have come to destroy the city and tell Lot to prepare his family for a hasty departure to safety.

Lot begins to make preparations. He approaches his sons-in-law but they do not believe this remarkable tale. The next morning the angels lead Lot, his wife, and their two daughters out of the city. The angels advised Lot not to stop until the family is completely out of the plain and into the nearby mountains. We learn from a reading of chapter 14 that Sodom was located in a flat valley called the Valley of Siddum. Genesis 14:10 says, “Now the Valley of Siddum was full of asphalt pits and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled; some fell there, and the remainder fled to the mountains.” Lot and his family were leaving the Valley of Siddum and traveling toward the mountains to escape the impending destruction from God.

24 Then the Lord rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the Lord out of the heavens.

25 So he overthrew those cities, all the plain,
all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew
on the ground.

With Lot and family safely tucked away at Zoar, God sends awful destruction upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. There is fire, the awful stench of sulfur (brimstone), thick smoke, and great devastation; all the people are killed and the vegetation of the ground is destroyed. The cities are obliterated from the face of the earth.

The destruction must have been awful indeed because it included two other cities in the Valley of Siddum. Genesis 14:2 names five cities in the valley during a time of war by listing “Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is Zoar).” In Deuteronomy 29:23 we learn, “The whole land is brimstone, salt, and burning; it is not sown, not does it bear, nor does any grass grow there, like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the Lord overthrew in his anger and wrath.” Of the five cities it would appear only Zoar was spared from destruction.

Abraham observes the horrendous display of God’s wrath. undoubtedly from a vantage point in the mountains,

27 And Abraham went early in the morning to
the place where he had stood before the Lord.

28 Then he looked toward Sodom and
Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain;

and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land which went up like the smoke of a furnace.

No trace can be found of these cities today but scholars believe they were located in the area south of the Dead Sea or maybe they are now covered by the Dead Sea. Geologically that region has a history, from the occurrence of basalt and other igneous deposits, of much past volcanic activity. Large accumulations of sulfur and salt are found in the valley which itself is transcurrent fault zone believed to have exhibited strong earthquake activity in the past.

Why is this story included in the Bible? What are we to learn from the account of the destruction of Sodom? Many would say that the story teaches us of God's hatred for the depravity of homosexuality. This is His judgement on that sin which infested Sodom. But there is more, much more involved here. There are many references in other books of the Bible to Sodom.

Isaiah 3:8-9 reads, "For Jerusalem stumbled, and Judah is fallen, because their tongue and their doings are against the Lord, to provoke the eyes of His glory. The look on their countenance witnesses against them, and they declare their sin as Sodom; they do not hide it. Woe to their soul! For they have brought evil upon themselves." A comparison is here being made between the sin of Judah and of Sodom. We learn that the people of Sodom had no shame, they did not even try to hide their sinfulness.

In Jeremiah 23:14 we read, "Also I have seen a horrible thing in the prophets of Jerusalem: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they also strengthen

the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns back from his wickedness. All of them are like Sodom to Me, and their inhabitants like Gomorrah.” Here a comparison is being made between the city of Jerusalem and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. We learn that the people of Sodom were adulterers, liars, and not only did they fail to speak against evil, but created an environment where evil grew and was rewarded.

In Ezekiel 16:48-50 we find, “As I live, says the Lord God, neither your sister Sodom nor her daughters have done as you and your daughters have done. Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I took them away as I saw fit.” Once more we have a comparison being made between Jerusalem and Sodom. We learn that the people of Sodom had grown prideful, were fat, lazy, and had become so selfish they did not help the poor and needy. Ultimately they became so abominable that God destroyed them.

This collection of passages from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel give revealing commentary on what actually happened in Sodom which led to its subsequent downfall. It appears to be a progressive series of sin. The people of Sodom lived in a rich, fertile valley and became prosperous. Referring to the Valley of Siddum, Genesis 13:10 reports, “And Lot lifted his eyes and saw all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere (before the Lord

destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah) like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt as you go toward Zoar.” The people of Sodom became lazy and arrogant. They began to look upon the poor and needy with disdain. They were selfish, lovers of self. Each individual, looking out for his own interests, was not above lying and deceit to get what he wanted. The sin progressed until the populace lost any concept of shame or morality. Adultery and, finally, homosexuality became commonplace.

This is, I believe, exactly what has happened in America today as homosexuals march openly in the streets demanding their rights. Genesis 19 helps explain how and why we have reached the point of depravity that we currently have on display in this country.

We read in 2 Peter 2:6, “and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly:” We are told clearly why this story is recounted in Genesis 19. We are told clearly why this story is referred to by other writers in the Bible, We are told clearly why this story is of such grave significance to us. It is an example in history to be taught to all future generations in order to keep them from sin and destruction.

We must guard ourselves that we do not become lazy and selfish to the point of forgetting the needy. We must guard ourselves that we do not become arrogant and prideful to the point that we have no love for the poor. When we become so “holy” that we neglect the destitute (when we feel they are inferior

to us and not deserving of our time, love, and effort) we are in grave danger. It is only a short step before we will become so obsessed with our own contentment (peace and security) that we will lie and practice dishonesty. Next we will be seekers after our own pleasure. We may turn to such sins as adultery and drunkenness. Now we have moved so far from God, we have no standards of conduct. The door is wide open to embrace perversions as homosexuality and abortion.

As Christians we must care for the poor and elderly, sacrificially and sincerely. May God give the people a renewed commitment before destruction does overtake us. Commitment must begin in the Church, with His people, first.

APPENDIX: A HISTORICAL FOOTNOTE

The United States had serious problems facing the larger cities in the early 1800s which were recognized and reported on by visitors. One visitor, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote of a situation which endangered the very security and stability of the young country in his classic *Democracy In America*, published in 1835. He stated:

The lower orders which inhabit these (U.S.) cities constitute a rabble even more formidable than the populace of European towns. They consist of freed blacks in the first place, who are condemned by the laws and by public opinion, to an hereditary state of misery and degradation. They also contain a multitude of Europeans who have been driven to the shores of the New World by their misfortunes or their misconduct; and these men inoculate the United States with all our vices, without bringing with them any of those interests which counteract their baneful influence. As inhabitants of a country where they have no civil rights, they are ready to turn all the passions which agitate the community to their own advantage; thus, within the last few months serious riots have broken out in Philadelphia and in New York. Disturbances of this kind are unknown in the rest of the country, which is nowise alarmed by them, because the population of the cities has

hitherto exercised neither power nor influence over the rural districts. Nevertheless, I look upon the size of certain American cities, and especially on the nature of their population, as a real danger which threatens the future security of the democratic republics of the New World: and I venture to predict that they will perish from this circumstance, unless the government succeed in creating an armed force, which, while it remains under the control of the majority of the nation, will be independent of the town population, and able to repress its excess.⁷

The practice of emptying European prisons, shipping the convicts to the United States, and leaving them to inhabit the larger cities, made for the creation of slum areas worse than anything known in Europe. De Tocqueville was certain a federal army would be needed to keep the “rabble” of these U S cities in check or they would succeed in destroying the entire country. An army was employed to resolve this problem, but not an army as envisioned by de Tocqueville. Christian foot soldiers ministering to the poor in the slums saw large numbers converted to Christ. Not only was the Gospel shared, but job training, literacy instruction, home-making classes, and anything needful for them to function successfully in society was offered. These forced immigrants became both useful citizens and saints of the Lord.

⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville: *Democracy in America*: vol I, p 289-290. New York, NY: 1945

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