

December 10, 2018
By Austin Pryor

Compassion For 'The Least Of These'

With Christmas fast approaching, churches and Christian relief organizations are encouraging us to have a charitable and giving spirit toward the poor. This is good. But may I suggest that care should be taken so the breadth of our compassion is neither too broad on the one hand nor too narrow on the other?

How can it be too broad? Many Christians use Jesus' parable in Matthew 25 as the basis for exhorting the church to care for society's downtrodden. Yet, picking up the text in verse 37, we read (emphasis added): "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of **these brothers of mine**, you did for me.'"

Interpreting this parable to refer to all of the world's poor, both Christians and non-Christians alike, is to inappropriately broaden it far beyond its scope. Throughout the New Testament, the primary usage of the word "brothers" is in reference to Christians. The secondary use is to refer to fellow Jews. Nowhere can I find it ever used to refer to humankind in general. Also consider:

- Matthew had earlier taught who the "brothers" of Jesus were. *"Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.' He replied to him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. **For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother**'"*(Matthew 12:47-50).

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- The apostle Paul had a similar view about God's children and Jesus' brothers: *"Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship.... For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that **he might be the firstborn among many brothers**" (Romans 8:14-29).*
- There are many verses that specifically tell us to give highest priority to the needs of believers in Christ versus those of society in general. Among others, they include: *"Be devoted to one another in **brotherly love.... Share with God's people who are in need**" (Romans 12:10-13). "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 2:15-17).*

Am I saying that we are not to assist the poor who do not share our faith? Of course not. In fact, I would argue for demonstrating greater compassion for them, not less. However, while our benevolence should include material needs, it should lovingly be paired with the gospel message. Should we not provide people who don't know Jesus Christ with food for their souls, which are eternal, as well as for their earthly bodies which are, after all, only temporal?

"Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry.... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever'"(John 6:35).

Austin Pryor has 39 years of experience advising investors, and is the founder of Sound Mind Investing newsletter and website. He's the author of The Sound Mind Investing Handbook, which enjoys the endorsements of respected Christian teachers with more than 100,000 copies sold. Pryor lives in Louisville, Kentucky, with Susie, his wife of 53 years.

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Reflection/Discussion Question

1. Does the Christmas season cause you to be more considerate of the needs of those around you - and around the world - who have significant needs? If so, how do you typically respond to those needs?
2. What do you think of Mr. Pryor's admonition that in responding to requests for charitable giving, that we should give neither too broadly or narrowly? How do you think that would look like in a practical sense?
3. When you read terms in the Bible such as "brother and sister," how do you interpret what they mean?
4. Why do you think it is important to respond to people outside the family of God with the Good News of Jesus Christ, as well as seeking to address their physical needs? Do you agree with taking that approach?

NOTE:

If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

Proverbs 3:27-28, 11:24-25, John 4:10-13; 2 Corinthians 9:6-14; Hebrews 2:10-11

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