

# COVENANTAL GIVING

*A Biblical Perspective on Mercy  
in the Third World*



**By Kelly Dehnert**

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# COVENANTAL GIVING

*By Kelly Dehnert*

Luke 6:36

*"Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful."*

In the fall of 2003 I took a Sabbatical from college teaching in Wyoming, USA. My family and I moved to Malawi, Africa for a year where I taught at the African Bible College. Upon arrival we were instructed by a missionary family to refrain from giving handouts as we would be constantly approached by beggars. We were told to hold our money for a few months until we had worked through how to show mercy financially to the many needy individuals in what is the fifth poorest country in the world. We followed these instructions, but always struggled to understand how to be generous Christians, as Scripture constantly exhorts, while not being taken advantage of at the same time. What was missing in our thinking was a clearly formulated theological basis for our action, or inaction as it were.

A friend working with Wycliffe in Tanzania told us she once was sitting on a curb on the Kenya border as a "beggar" came asking for money. She had become used to simply saying "no" as the mission agency told her that the Anglican church provided services to the destitute and wanted people to send those in need to them. So, she immediately said "no". The beggar walked away and approached two Muslim men as they walked out of the border office. They immediately took money out of their pockets and gave to him. She struggled with the idea that she, as a Christian, had rejected the man and Muslims had not!

A missionary tells the story of a destitute family in Slovakia. Through the generosity of the missionary's family the poor couple had become dependent on the missionary and apparently lacked any real interest in working to provide for their family. The father had lost his job and the missionary sought to care for the family as they moved from apartment to lesser and lesser housing, failing to find jobs in the ravaged economy of Slovakia. By providing utility bill and insurance money to the family, the missionary finally became convinced that his giving was the reason these Slovakian gypsies did not take advantage of their garden plot. Planting this garden could have made a significant improvement in their ability to feed their family, yet the family appeared to have no motivation for such labor.

In time, the missionary cut the “apron strings” and this poor Slovakian family has become a success story of independence, sowing in their garden and providing for their family and five foster children. The missionary’s lesson is summed up in his mission newsletter: *“When you mix institutional failures with human sinfulness, most problems can’t be solved by handing out money.”*

So, in a world of extreme need what guidance has God given us to ethically deal with being a wealthy Christian in an impoverished world begging for our goods? These anecdotal evidences can put a face to the difficulty, but do they truly represent God-given directives in giving? In this paper, my intent is to develop a theological ethic of giving to the destitute.

It is not the purview of this paper to discuss specifically governmental or organizational giving. It is assumed in this paper that wealth is not bad,<sup>1</sup> that we have not been called to give away every penny we earn, that all the resources we have are from God of which we are stewards,<sup>2</sup> and that we are not called to be dependent financially on others unnecessarily.<sup>3</sup>

In the pages that follow, the theological framework for the ethics of giving in a destitute economy will be explored in the hopes that we will be better prepared for the outstretched hands upon our return as long-term missionaries in the fall of 2006.

## THE MERCY WE SHOW

*For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. <sup>17</sup> But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy (eleos) and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. James 3:16-17*

Verse 17 is set against the one preceding which notes the evil of “self-seeking”, looking out for self at the expense of other’s needs. This squares with Paul’s admonition: *“Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”<sup>4</sup>* This *eleos* and *good fruit* is said to be *“wisdom that is from above”*. It begins with God. Its origination is not in man, but is “wisdom” from God

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<sup>1</sup> Though wealth is not bad in and of itself, God calls His children to mercy and justice in the *attainment* and *use* of that wealth. Isaiah 5:7 says, “Ah you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!” Even the developing of monopolies (the principle at work here) is spoken of in scripture! Clearly the hoarding of wealth is unscriptural though it may have been attained morally.

<sup>2</sup> John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 89-92.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 5:8 - *But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 2:4

and has its expression in *mercy* and *good fruits*. It is imperative that we recognize the formation of mercy as being in the mind and heart of God for both the motivation for and practice of mercy to the glory of God. Otherwise, our reliance would be upon our own righteousness and the glory would be given to our goodness.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, Scripture makes it clear that our spiritual health is exemplified in *our* action or inaction of mercy.<sup>6</sup> Micah 6:8 says, “*He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?*” What does God require of you? “*To love mercy.*” Man is not just to *act* mercifully, but to *love* mercy. Mercy is to come all the way from within reminding us of Romans 12:8 where Paul exhorts his readers to show (by word or deed) mercy “*with cheerfulness*”. Heart and mind, desire and intention are expressed here. Mercy is not a simple outward action of lawful living but outward expression of inner grace, or “*wisdom from above*”.

Mercy, in one of its forms, is expressed in *giving*. Within the context of speaking to the victim of unjust actions, Jesus notes that we are to, “*Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.*”<sup>7</sup> Let him (or her) slap you silly, let him take your back-up Columbia jacket, and walk the distance with him. This is “open-handed” mercy, giving freely to one who is even an enemy by man’s estimation. Giving is a normal, expected, faith displaying event in the Christian life.

*What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? <sup>17</sup> Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. James 2:14-17*

Despite James’ clear biblical imperative, putting mercy into practice in real life is quite often very complicated. Upon arriving in Malawi, Brenda and Perry Jansen (SIM missionaries) immediately began

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<sup>5</sup> Paul makes it clear in Ephesians 2:10 that our good works are even prepared beforehand by God with verse 9 explaining that we have no reason to “boast”.

<sup>6</sup> James 2:13 – “*For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*” In addition, if mercy is related to love, 1 John expresses this concept throughout even more clearly. 1 John 3:14-17 says, “*We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?*” (NKJ)

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:42

to give generously to the impoverished who appeared before them at every corner. Within a very short time, their coffers were empty and they had precious little to get through the month.

Malawian workers in the United States Embassy were asked by the Embassy Economist what they did with their pay each month. His curiosity was piqued when he noticed the workers were short on cash at the end of the month and yet they were paid much better than the average Malawian worker. The workers responded that when they arrived at home with their pay, relatives began showing up asking for help in purchasing ufa (maize flour) for their families. These workers would give freely and by the end of the month were “begging” from family members to supply their own meals.

When do you stop giving? And how do you choose to whom you give? When you are surrounded by the needy how do you go about the task of determining how much to give? C.S. Lewis said,

*“I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small.”<sup>8</sup>*

Can the believer be any more specific than this? Though Lewis gives some “sage advice”, does this really help pinpoint how much and to whom we give as it lacks any clear scriptural model for giving? James says that the mercy we are to show comes from God, from *above*. It is God’s mercy we show...so what is that mercy like? *“Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.”<sup>9</sup>* If we are to be wise in merciful giving, we need to follow God’s example in giving.

## THE MERCIFUL GIVING OF GOD

### God’s merciful giving is unmerited:

Is anyone deserving of God’s mercy? Scripture says that God *“sends rain on the just and on the unjust”*.<sup>10</sup> God’s merciful giving is shown by His willingness to provide for those who follow him (just) and even those who reject Him (unjust). We see God’s merciful giving in everything from eternal

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<sup>8</sup> C.S. Lewis, “Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in Western Austria,” <http://vi06n140.members.eunet.at/ugcc/poor.html>

<sup>9</sup> Luke 6:36

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 5:45

life to the daily provision of physical needs. For example, in Hosea, God has made these kinds of provisions for the nation Israel though she was a “harlot”.

*“For their mother has played the harlot; she who conceived them has behaved shamefully. For she said, ‘I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink...’<sup>8</sup> For she did not know that I gave her grain, new wine, and oil, and multiplied her silver and gold-- which they prepared for Baal. Hosea 2:5, 8*

She (Israel) loved the supposed provider of her bread and water, wool and linen, oil and drink who is another god...yet it was Yahweh Who gave her all these provisions. And, what did she do? She turned around and “*prepared it for Baal*”, probably meaning Israel used these gifts from God as sacrificial offerings to this false god. The entire book of Hosea in fact is a metaphor of God’s love for the underserving.<sup>11</sup> In Romans, Paul defines this undeserving kindness of God:

*“And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace...” Romans 11:6a*

*“For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.’<sup>16</sup> So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.” Romans 9:15-16*

Paul says that God’s giving to us in the form of salvation is unmerited.<sup>12</sup> There isn’t a thing we have done to deserve His gifts to us. The mercy of God is found completely in the mind and heart of God, not in the actions or goodness of man. He gave freely of His Son for our benefit while we were yet sinners, even while we rejected Him as the provider of the very rain that falls on our fields.<sup>13</sup> As receivers of His mercy, we receive open-handedly, having failed miserably in giving Him reason to give to us!

### **God’s merciful giving is substantial:**

God’s giving to His creation commonly is beyond the basics. It is important to note that any giving to man by a holy and righteous God is *substantial* in that we are so undeserving of even the air

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<sup>11</sup> From the start of the book of Hosea God builds a case for bringing judgment upon Israel due to her unfaithfulness to the Lord (Who has been faithful) leading up to the covenantal mercies He has established with them and will fulfill despite their wickedness: Hosea 14:4-5 - *“I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for My anger has turned away from him. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall grow like the lily, and lengthen his roots like Lebanon.”*

<sup>12</sup> Ephesians 2:8-10 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” This passage provides the whole range of God’s unmerited gift of salvation and process of sanctification (“good works”).

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 5:45

we breathe, standing before God culpable of all kinds of evil. But, even in consideration of this, God gives so abundantly to His world. Matthew says in his gospel, “*If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!*”<sup>14</sup>

According to Paul we can be content with having only food and clothing<sup>15</sup>...though in Wyoming we could use a little shelter as well in the winter. These are the basics. How often are we even in a position where we are challenged to be content with only food and clothing? God’s provision for an enormous majority of people on earth is well beyond, substantially beyond, these basic needs!

### **God’s merciful giving has a covenantal character:**

Having noted that the merciful giving of God is unmerited and substantial, beyond our basic needs, we still need to consider if God ever draws the line. This is not often discussed. We may see this in an *Armenian* treatment of Scripture. Within this worldview man shows faithfulness to God, then God’s gives gifts to man – man does good, God gives gift.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, because man is so lacking in mercy in his fallen nature, it is our tendency in exhortation to focus on challenging him to give more like God does – open-handedly! We will tend to focus on the book of James and God’s unmerited giving rather than suggest there is a biblical reason to *stop giving*. But, does God always “dig down deep”? Does He always give? And does He always give beyond the basic needs?

In the context of saving grace or mercy we must account for the fact that He doesn’t give eternal life to all. God’s salvation is not *universal* in its scope.<sup>17</sup> In the context of daily provisions He doesn’t always give even the basics. There are starving people. They even die having not received their most basic needs. Is there a particular context in which God is merciful to man? Is this hidden from our view? Is it based on His knowledge of how man will respond to His gifts? If it is hidden, we cannot

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew 7:11

<sup>15</sup> 1 Timothy 6:8

<sup>16</sup> Passages such as Psalm 84:11 and 2 Corinthians 9:7 when taken out of context may be used to give the idea that *because* of man’s good works God will give us health, wealth and prosperity. This fails to recognize God as the *first cause* in all giving and detracts from His glory.

<sup>17</sup> John 5:24. In addition, Paul discusses the entire flow of God’s electing grace for *some* beginning in Romans 8:28. His discussion continues through chapter 9 of Romans explaining that God will “*have mercy on whomever I will have mercy...so then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God Who shows mercy,*” in verses 15 and 16.

understand how to mimic God's mercy though we are called to this by Jesus in Luke 6. If it is based on man's response the concept of merciful giving as unmerited is contradictory.

God gives mercy to the regenerate and to the unregenerate. To the regenerate man He gives mercy in the form of salvation and "works all things together" for our good. Consider the covenantal promises God gives to His covenantal people, specifically:

*Great deliverance He gives to His king, and shows mercy to His anointed, to David and his descendants forevermore. Psalm 18:50*

*The LORD will give strength to His people; the LORD will bless His people with peace. Psalm 29:11*

*Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness. <sup>4</sup> Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart. Psalm 37:3-4*

*Behold, He struck the rock, so that the waters gushed out, and the streams overflowed. Can He give bread also? Can He provide meat for His people?" Psalm 78:20*

*These all wait for You, that You may give them their food in due season. <sup>28</sup> What You give them they gather in; you open Your hand, they are filled with good. Psalm 104:27-28*

Within the covenantal relationship God has established with His people, he provides. He gives abundant mercy to His own. The Psalmists use language such as "desires of your heart", "streams overflowed", and "water gushed out". These aren't terms for mere basics but abundant physical, emotional and spiritual provision within the loving covenant between God and His chosen people. Even though we know through experience some of God's children face death from physical needs, the death of a saint only ushers in their heavenly body, home and provision. Therefore, in their death they have even greater provision.<sup>18</sup>

Though there appears in these verses a direct kind of provision to God's people by the very hand of God, nonetheless, ordinarily, He uses man in passing on these blessings of bread, water, meat, etc. But, the intended result of giving is *thanksgiving to God*. In other words, the giving points to a gracious God though it may come through the hands of man. Paul begins the ninth chapter of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians with praise for their generosity to the saints. Note verses 10 and 11: "*Now may He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food, supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness, while you are enriched in everything for all liberality, which*

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<sup>18</sup> Philippians 1:21 - For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. (NKJ)

*causes thanksgiving through us to God.*” The result is thanksgiving to God because God is the one that “*enriched*” them “*in everything for all liberality*”. This mercy comes within a *covenantal relationship* – both between God and man and man and man. Both God and man are involved and God gets the glory.

How does this providing for their needs compare to His mercy to the unregenerate? The unregenerate receive gifts as well. In this same chapter of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians Paul notes in verse 13 that they were sharing “*liberally*” with the saints and “*all men*”. They gave not only to believers, but apparently to unbelievers as well.

Again, noting Matthew 5:45: God provides basic needs to believer and unbeliever alike, the “*just and the unjust*”. He gives daily provision to us all. What is to be the result of His mercy? There is no saving covenantal relationship between God and the unbeliever. Paul says in Romans 2:4, “*Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?*”

The Christian responds to generosity with praise to the Giver of all good gifts. That is how the unbeliever is supposed to respond as well. It isn’t by God judging him that the believer turns from his sins (repentance), but by the *riches of His goodness*. The “repentance” of the unbeliever is an expression or result of his righted relationship with the Giver of all good gifts. By giving to men in “His goodness” God brings the former unregenerate into community with Himself. Where there was only strife and hatred in the heart of this man, there is now embrace and love of his Father in heaven.

But does the rebellious man always respond to God’s kindness by repenting and believing? No, but in fact this verse is an exhortation that he *should* respond that way. Obviously, that is not always the case. So do the gifts of God continue to rain upon him? Does he continue to be a receiver though there is no covenant there, no response (repentance), no community with and no acknowledgement of the Giver?

Proverbs speaks of the end of the unresponsive recipient of God’s rebukes and gifts:

*“Because I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded,<sup>25</sup> Because you disdained all my counsel, and would have none of my rebuke,<sup>26</sup> I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your terror comes,<sup>27</sup> When your terror comes like a storm, and your destruction comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you.<sup>28</sup> ”Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but they will not find me.*

<sup>29</sup> *Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD,* <sup>30</sup> *They would have none of my counsel and despised my every rebuke.* <sup>31</sup> *Therefore they shall eat the fruit of their own way, and be filled to the full with their own fancies.* <sup>32</sup> *For the turning away of the simple will slay them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them.”* Proverbs 1:24-32

Note the broken community, or relationship, with God in this passage. There is hope in this passage prior to and after these verses, but the warnings in verses 24 to 32 are strong and unequivocal. The one who refuses to hear God’s rebukes or receive God’s gifts in thankfulness (2 Corinthians) will possibly call out to God but He will not answer and they may seek for His aid but will not “*find*” Him. It is a very harsh reality that the wise teacher gives in Proverbs. God brings judgment. God punishes. God refuses to hear. There is no community between the recipient and God.

But, how do we understand this within the context of God’s unmerited mercy and grace? How can we put these verses side by side and gain wisdom when the concepts seem to contradict? If God gives unmerited mercy then why or when does He draw a line when there is no “meritorious” response? Within the context of salvation, God’s mercy is irresistible.<sup>19</sup> Within covenant, a “bond in blood sovereignly administered”, He gives unmerited favor.<sup>20</sup> But in the context of mercy offered and given to the unregenerate who are not the “elect” there is a different purpose, though still covenantal in character. That purpose is explained by Paul to the Romans following his exposition of God’s unmerited mercy and grace in salvation. Romans 9:22-24 says,

*“What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,<sup>23</sup> and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory,<sup>24</sup> even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?”*

He is making known His mercy to those *who can recognize it!* Unbelievers, though recipients of grace, do not glorify (*make very apparent*<sup>21</sup>) God for His gifts. But, believers do because their eyes are open to discern the works of God. The “*vessels of mercy*”, or believers, recognize the riches of God’s glory as they see God’s mercy extended to unbelievers. God is confirming His covenantal relationship with His people.

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<sup>19</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:10 says, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.” God’s grace is “not in vain”. It has its intended results and they are achieved.

<sup>20</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Strong, James. *The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), s.v. “glory”.

But God draws the line. Because we are all sinners, believer and unbeliever alike, God's mercy is always unmerited. And, when God shows mercy, it is normally well beyond the basics and therefore substantial. But there will come a time that God's mercy will end for the unbeliever in judgment because he remains in his sin having no atonement for it.<sup>22</sup>

## MIMICKING HIS MERCY

How do we put this into practice as those called to mimic God's merciful giving? If this is how God frames His giving to the believer and the unbeliever, are we not called to do the same? We must recognize that God is omniscient and we are not. He knows man's frame, He gives irresistible grace, and He knows exactly what we need. On the other hand, we don't!

But, we can use the three principles of God's giving to think through our giving to the poor with their hand outstretched: Give to all freely (unmerited), give to all substantially (beyond basic needs), and give with a covenantal understanding (in and for relationship). The first two principles are treated extensively in books, articles, and sermons and so I will not deal with these points at great length.

### **Give to All Freely (Unmerited)**

God gives in two primary ways: within the covenant (salvation) and outside the covenant (physical needs). He saves *some* by His irresistible grace and gives to *all* physical needs for the praise of His glory. Man is unable to mimic God in saving grace! In God we put our trust for salvation. There is none other who has the keys to eternal life.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the mimicking of God's mercy by man is exemplified in the first form by sharing the good news of salvation with all men if perchance God may bring them to repentance<sup>24</sup> and in the second form by providing for physical needs.

This kind of giving is mercy that is unmerited by all men. They may be believers in the Giver of all good gifts or they may not. There are two priorities stated in scripture in regards to those in and out

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<sup>22</sup> 2 Peter 2:9 – "...then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment..." In addition, much of the book of Revelation provides vivid imagery of God's judgment on those who do not name the name of Christ. For a brief display of God's judgment read chapter 9 of Revelation.

<sup>23</sup> John 6:66-69

<sup>24</sup> 2 Timothy 2:24-26

of the covenant: provide for family and give priority to those in the covenant community of faith.<sup>25</sup> But, this is clearly not to the exclusion of those who do not believe in Christ or are part of the giver's family.

## **Give Substantially**

Again, the amount of writing about mercy ministry is extensive and the call to give openly, generously and from a heart affected by God's grace is clear in God's Word.<sup>26</sup> One point bears mentioning. God's normal giving is *beyond the basics*. We need to be careful to not only consider basic needs when determining who to give to and when to stop. The one who lives in a mud hut, has a cot, blanket, a chicken and good water has more than he needs, but barely! The American standard of living is not necessarily God's standard of giving but just enough to eat, protection from the elements and one set of clothes is not the standard either!

Psalm 81:16 says, "*He would have fed them also with the finest of wheat; and with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you.*" This is a description of God's giving beyond the basics. He didn't offer just the basics but the "finest wheat" and "honey". Are we prepared to give beyond the basics, mimicking God's substantial gifts?

Scripture does not give absolute specifics on the amount we are to give to those it has not specified are "needy". We are to diligently search and apply the principles of giving in scripture but be careful that we not treat our own conscience as absolute for every man, culture and time.

## **Give With a Covenantal Understanding**

We are all undeserving of God's mercy, nonetheless He has given us guidance in His Word regarding mercy ministry that has a certain *result* in mind. Paul says to the Thessalonians, "*For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread.*"<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Galatians 6:10 – "*Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.*" Paul writes this within the context of physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. 1 Timothy 5:8 says, "*But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*"

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 5:42, Matthew 19:21, Luke 6:30, Acts 20:35, Ephesians 4:28.

<sup>27</sup> II Thessalonians 3:10-12

It is clear that those who are destitute or lacking basic essentials because they are unwilling to work (though able) are to be left to the consequences. Their basic needs will not be met and we must refrain from taking care of those needs through mercy ministry.

How can we understand this when exhorted to give without strings attached? Remember that God's mercy ends when He brings judgment upon those unresponsive to His good gifts. His patience is longsuffering as Paul says in Romans 9:22, but there comes a time when He shows His wrath to those unresponsive. Because we do not know the heart of man truly, we are not given authority to make final judgments regarding the end of man. However, we can indeed mimic God in making merciful giving judgments. How does this look?

The missionary in Slovakia discovered how this looks when they saw the results of their giving to a family in Slovakia. The gypsy family was not responding to the missionary's giving by doing what was intended by the mercy, namely "get back on their feet" and be responsible to work to "make ends meet".

We can look deeper theologically if we consider mercy giving as mimicking God in how He approaches sanctification. Though the "gift of God is eternal life",<sup>28</sup> with man having no part in the *ordo salutis* through the point of *adoption*, yet the process of sanctification is defined by John Murray in the following manner:

*While we are constantly dependent upon the supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit, we must also take account of the fact that sanctification is a process that draws within its scope the conscious life of the believer. The sanctified are not passive or quiescent in this process...Neither is the relation strictly one of co-operation as if God did his part and we did ours so that the conjunction or coordination of both produced the required result. God works in us and we also work. But, the relation is that because God works we work.*<sup>29</sup>

This work we do is in response to the Holy Spirit's work as described in Galatians 3:3, "Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" The sanctifying work of the Spirit is primary, but we do understand biblically that God "works in us to will and to do His

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<sup>28</sup> Romans 3:23.

<sup>29</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), pages 148,149.

good pleasure.<sup>30</sup> We join God by responding to His Holy Spirit's leading and giving to us because God gave us a new "will" to follow Him.

Mercy ministry can be seen similarly as giving for the purpose of bringing destitute individuals into community as fellow image-bearers. Ronald Sider gives careful attention to the foundational elements of mercy and justice in his writings: *"Until Eve arrived, Adam was restless, God created them to discover mutual fulfillment as they became one flesh. This communal nature is grounded in the nature of God. Since we are created in the very image of the triune personal God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, being a person means being united to other persons in mutual love."*<sup>31</sup>

Does this relate biblically to our merciful giving? Leviticus 25:35-38 gives direction to the Israelite in caring for a brother who has "fallen" into poverty.

*'If one of your brethren becomes poor, and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you. <sup>36</sup> Take no usury or interest from him; but fear your God, that your brother may live with you. <sup>37</sup> You shall not lend him your money for usury, nor lend him your food at a profit. <sup>38</sup> I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.'*

This merciful giving was a "hand up", but it also was intended to provide a means to be reunited with the community so that the recipient could make their own way long term. *"That means restoring their productive capability. Therefore, restoration of the land, the basic productive resource in ancient Israel, is the way that Leviticus 25 commands the people to fulfill the call to 'make them strong again' so 'they may live with you' in the land."*<sup>32</sup> Verse 36 says, *"that your brother may live with you."* The final result is a restoration of "community". Remember God's merciful giving is intended to bring about community with Himself, a renewed fellowship between God and His creation, man.

But, the line is drawn when this individual does not respond and refuses the purpose of the aid they are receiving. Ultimately, their relationship with God is in view, but this is not given in scripture as a necessary end result of our mercy. However, when they refuse to come into community by using the gifts they have been given, then they may possibly be forfeiting the opportunity to receive and we mimic God by standing back and leaving them to their own end.

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<sup>30</sup> Philippians 2:13

<sup>31</sup> Ronald J. Sider, *Justice, Human Rights, and Government: Toward an Evangelical Perspective*, eds. Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), page 167.

<sup>32</sup> Ronald J. Sider, *Just Generosity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), page 60.

If the poor show no sign of receptivity to the mercy given to them, there will come a point that we may biblically reject giving mercy aid to them. Could this principle imply that our giving should be within community? I do not mean to suggest that only those in the “household of faith” should receive our gifts, but does it suggest that maybe the scattering of wealth like seed among pigeons with no real connection to those on the receiving end might be discouraged?

God knows every man’s frame.<sup>33</sup> He is omniscient. But, because we do not know man fully, we must rely upon the outward actions as proof of the inward. If we are not involved in the lives of the people we are serving through our finances, do we really know that those gifts are having their intended results? There is “direct” accountability when we know the individual to whom we are giving. Dorothy Day of the *Catholic Worker* movement said, “*We live with the poor, we are of the poor. We know their virtues and their vices. We know their generousities and their extravagances.*”<sup>34</sup> This is accountability at work, when we actually involve our whole selves in the process of helping someone out of poverty and into community once again. Though her perspective on poverty is not a biblical view as exemplified in a statement in this same article, “*We must keep on talking about voluntary poverty, and holy poverty, because it is only if we can consent to strip ourselves that we can put on Christ. It is only if we love poverty that we are going to have the means to help others*”<sup>35</sup> nonetheless, she has a pertinent point on giving with a covenantal view.

We live in a shrinking world and so the ability to be “connected” to the poor, to be in community, even across the ocean, is more possible. This principle of direct accountability cannot be taken too far as we have the opportunity to support ministries that have that kind of connection with the poor in foreign lands and we are able to trust their wise stewardship of our funds. These organizations have people “on the ground” in community with those to whom they are serving. They act on our behalf in

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<sup>33</sup> Psalm 139

<sup>34</sup> Dorothy Day, “More About Holy Poverty. Which Is Voluntary Poverty”, February 1945, <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/> (15 February 2006).

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* Ms. Day teaches that we should take a “vow of poverty” to really deal with poverty. This view begs the question of what level of poverty is correct? In a third-world country, there is the whole range of poverty to riches and the completely impoverished sleep on dirt floors, eat an imbalanced diet and have unsanitary conditions that adversely affect health – is that included in a “vow of poverty”. One particular missionary was told by a Tanzanian that he thought it hypocritical that a Westerner would live like the impoverished when he knew that the missionary had enough wealth to do otherwise.

determining whether our resources are bringing the poor into community or whether the impoverished are rejecting its (covenantal giving) intended results.

In an impoverished country, handing out money here and there to the faceless masses does not necessarily solve their problems. It might temporarily help an ongoing need and periodically result in a changed life, but it certainly is questionable stewardship of God's wealth if we take into consideration the covenantal relationship into which God seeks to draw the recipients of His gifts.

## **APPLYING COVENANTAL GIVING**

These theological theories must have practical outworking. How do we go about practicing this concept of *giving within covenant*? Every one of us either lives among the poor or is constantly called upon to give to this or that charity...so many that are worthy of our investments. Though I believe these principles can be applied by the middle-class American from the comfort of his own home, my foremost concern is the application of these principles as one "sent" out, living in a country like Malawi, Africa.

What better application of this principle of giving within covenant is the employment of the impoverished? If they will work, they are clearly brought into community and the results of the giving (payment of wages) can be clearly measured. Upon arrival in most third world countries, Westerners generally find the cultural norm of hiring household employees as rather distasteful and "colonial".

One particular organization built its "compound" without housing for the nationals working the grounds and homes. It was too "colonial". However when the building was done and workers employed they found that the organization had failed in this very concept of bringing into community. What more basic way to bring the poor into community than to live as neighbors! But, the cultural norm has made up for this failure with the expectation that an employer will provide the cost of housing in addition to wages.

Must the impoverished always work for food? When an individual is faced with giving to someone who is destitute, is it necessary to *employ* them that you might hold them accountable? Covenantal giving cannot create an imbalance of *open-handedness* and accountability. There are many times in which simply providing for the basic needs of an individual is called for...they may be unable to work (physically) or already work very hard for someone else. But, the results are still

evaluated. There is still the intent of bringing that individual into community. There must be accountability.

## CONCLUSION

Jesus told His disciples that they were to mimic God's mercy. *"Be merciful as your Father also is merciful,"* he said. God's mercy is unmerited, substantial, and given with results in mind. So often we rush to preach the first two elements of His mercy, but fail to see that all three go hand in hand if we are to have a real impact on the lives of those in need. It takes much greater work, more thinking, and a heart that really is affected by God's mercy to mimic Him.

An American lady once met a young worker in a grocery store in Africa. This young man served the lady by pushing her cart and carrying her groceries to the car. The lady periodically "hired" the grocery store worker to pick up items at an outdoor market. His honesty and real attempt to help gain the best "deals" for the American impressed her. In time the young man was hired for much better wages to work as a gardener for the "wealthy" American.<sup>36</sup> He was not used to the more strenuous labor, yet continued to work hard for the family. Impressed by his commitment despite the difficulties he faced, the family agreed to pay most of the costs of the young African's business school tuition. Soon after the family returned to America, the young man finished several business classes, and the African was hired by a clinic as a business office accountant. His current wages are more than ten times his original salary at the grocery store. He has moved from poverty to middle class in that society and is able to help his own family financially.

This is giving with a covenantal understanding, mimicking God's merciful giving.

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<sup>36</sup> It is important to understand that a Westerner in a *Third World* country is extremely wealthy. The cost of traveling to the Third World is so far beyond a national's normal annual income that simply being in the country means the Westerner is exceptionally wealthy. As of this writing, the average annual income of Malawi, Africa is \$200. The average cost of a plane ticket from the United States is \$1900.

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