

THE WEAK AND LOWLY

One of the things that makes me so proud to be an American is that my country is the most kind, compassionate, and generous of all the nations of the world. We eagerly respond to help other nations that have suffered some kind of disaster more than any other nation. We help the poor and the afflicted among us more than any other nation. We are the most kind and generous toward the foreigners among us than any other nation.

I remember hearing the words of a Japanese physician who emerged from a cave on Iwo Jima after its surrender during WWII. He said there were two things that he remembered most: how much destruction the island had suffered, and the kindness of the Americans. It is our Christian heritage that has made us the most kind, compassionate, and generous people of the world. And that must continue to be America, God's way. Only this time it must be applied with more wisdom and justice.

The Poor in Ancient Israel

Moses the servant of God told the people they would always have the poor: **“For the poor will never cease out of the land”** (Deuteronomy 15:11). Yet he said a few words earlier, **“However there shall be no poor with thee (for Jehovah will surely bless thee in the land which Jehovah thy God gives thee for an inheritance to possess it), if only thou diligently hearken to the voice of Jehovah thy God, to observe to do all this commandment which I command thee this day”** (Deuteronomy 15:4-5).

Moses was not contradicting himself. In the second passage above he was apparently referring to the poor in an absolute sense, meaning those dressed in rags, eating poorly, dwelling in the streets or in shacks. There would be none of them if they obeyed the voice of Jehovah. However, they would always have the poor in a relative sense. Meaning those at the lowest economic level, with the least possessions.

Wages of the poor

The law that God gave to his people, the sons of Israel, commanded them not to oppress a hired servant who was poor and needy, whether he was a brother Israelite or a sojourner in their land. They were not to withhold their wages, but were to pay them each day. The text says, **“... he is poor, and sets his heart upon it, lest he cry against thee to Jehovah, and it be sin to thee”** (Deuteronomy 24:15). Notice the compassion in that command of God.

He gave another a law commanding them to show kindness to the poor and needy, whether a citizen or a foreigner. Those who are very poor live, as a popular expression says, from hand to mouth. They must spend what little they have as soon as they get it. Such poor are rare in modern America. Therefore, wages are rarely paid daily, except for single-day jobs. The very poor with little or nothing, who are more numerous in some other countries, should indeed be paid frequently. For they have no excess to draw upon when needed. There are, however, irresponsible men even in Amer-

ica earning good wages who squander it as soon as they are paid. God does not expect us to accommodate for such men.

Leave some crops at harvest

In God's country ancient Israel, farmers were not to reap the harvest of their crops entirely. They were to leave the crop at the edges of their fields. Neither were they to gather the gleanings of their harvest, nor of the fallen fruit of their vineyards. Jehovah said, "**Thou shall leave them for the poor man and for the sojourner. I am Jehovah your God**" (Leviticus 19:10). Notice the compassion in that command.

That was another provision for the poor and the visitors of their land. It was a form of welfare that is much superior to the social systems of modern times. For it required the recipient to go out and work in harvesting as well. Moreover, they could not harvest or gather the normal crops, except for what immediate food that travelers might need. For the law says, "**When thou come into thy neighbor's standing grain, then thou may pluck the ears with thy hand, but thou shall not move a sickle to thy neighbor's standing grain**" (Deuteronomy 23:25).

The poor among them were given what remained of a harvest. In contrast, our welfare state simply hands out money, and requires no labor. That has encouraged permanent indolence and dependency among a large segment of the population. That is just one more example of the superiority of God's ways.

Notice there was no command about how much the farmer was to leave for the poor and the foreigner. Apparently he could leave a narrow strip along the border of his field, or a wide strip. And he could gather slowly and completely, or he could leave more behind. The farmer was free to decide how much to harvest and how much to leave. That is an important liberty, because there are always various circumstances that would determine how much a farmer could afford to give. A rich farmer could leave much more without suffering from any deprivation.

Jehovah accounts for the ability to give when he considers our generosity. For Jesus taught his disciples about the relativity of giving: "**And having sat down opposite the treasury, Jesus watched how the multitude cast money into the treasury, and many rich men cast in much. And one poor widow having come, she cast in two mites, which are a quadrans. And having summoned his disciples, he says to them, Truly I say to you, that this poor widow cast in more than all those who are casting into the treasury. For they all cast in from that which is abundant to them, but she from her need cast in all, as many things she had, her whole living**" (Mark 12:41-44).

Of course that does not mean we should all give our whole living. Our generosity is like everything else; it should be done wisely and discretely according to varying circumstances. If a farmer gave away all of his harvest, what would he have for the next planting? It is foolish to be so generous as

to make ourselves poor, even to help others. For then others would need to help us.

Jehovah also commanded, **“When thou reap thy harvest in thy field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, thou shall not go again to fetch it. It shall be for the sojourner, for the fatherless, and for the widow, that Jehovah thy God may bless thee in all the work of thy hands. When thou beat thine olive tree, thou shall not go over the boughs again. It shall be for the sojourner, for the fatherless, and for the widow.**

“When thou gather of thy vineyard, thou shall not glean it behind thee. It shall be for the sojourner, for the fatherless, and for the widow. And thou shall remember that thou were a bondman in the land of Egypt. Therefore I command thee to do this thing” (Deuteronomy 24:19-22).

The sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow were commonly the ones who had the least opportunities to support themselves, and that was one way God wanted them able to have food. It was like a tax on the farmers, because the residue of their crops were required to be available for the needy. God even included the sheaf they might have inadvertently left behind. That still meant, however, that the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow were required to go and harvest that residue. And God again commanded them to remember how they had been bondmen in Egypt.

One thing I must mention about gleaning. They were apparently required to ask permission of the farmer before they could glean. For that was the case of the widow Ruth when she came to Bethlehem with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi, and she wanted to glean in the field of Boaz.

For the Bible says, **“Then Boaz said to his servant who was set over the reapers, Whose damsel is this? And the servant who was set over the reapers answered and said, It is the Moabite damsel who came back with Naomi out of the country of Moab. And she said, Let me glean, I pray you, and gather behind the reapers among the sheaves. So she came, and has continued even from the morning until now, except that she tarried a little in the house”** (Ruth 2:5-7).

A possible modern application

Many times various branches of our government, various professions, various businesses and industries, and various families and individuals have need of some kind of temporary work done. America, God’s way could establish a kind of work-pool (carefully regulated and overseen), so that anyone who was needy could have a way to earn money (from a fair wage) to help support himself that way. Such a thing would substitute for the inefficient and potentially destructive welfare handouts that are now given.

The third-year tithe

The law says, **“At the end of every three years thou shall bring forth all the tithe of thine increase in the same year, and shall lay it up within thy gates. And the Levite, because he has no portion nor inheritance**

with thee, and the sojourner, and the fatherless, and the widow, who are within thy gates, shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied, that Jehovah thy God may bless thee in all the work of thy hand which thou do” (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

That tithe was like an emergency fund to be exclusively for (1) the Levites because they did not have a tribal land of their own to support them, (2) the foreigners who were visiting them, (3) those who were fatherless, and (4) the widows among them. All of those people were needy souls (through no fault of their own) within their nation. And God wanted such souls to have access to food when they needed it.

A modern example is the food stamps that are issued to the poor and needy in America.

Other Needy Souls

Jehovah is kind and compassionate, and he condemns cruelty, especially toward the weak and lowly. Here is one warning he gave about widows and orphans: **“Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them at all, and they cry at all to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath shall grow hot, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall be widows, and your sons fatherless”** (Exodus 22:22-24).

He also condemns the mistreatment of the handicapped, as the following command shows: **“Thou shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but thou shall fear thy God. I am Jehovah”** (Leviticus 19:14). However, he was not so unreasonable as to command his people to give them all the privileges of healthy men. For example, he would not allow any man of the sons of Aaron who was handicapped or had a blemish to serve at the altar or enter into the tabernacle. Nevertheless, they were to be given the right to eat of the offerings with the other priests. Moreover, as the above passage says, neither would he allow his people to mistreat them.

One of the fine things about modern America is our concern for the handicapped. Laws have been passed, and special provisions have been made to aid them. However, modern reliance upon the force of law has made many of those provisions yokes upon employers, because they take away their right to make judgments. And without being able to choose wisely among the handicapped, hiring them now entails much risk.

The Sojourner

Travelers and foreigners are always in a weaker position and more vulnerable than native citizens. They lack the knowledge and the social relationships that can be used to protect and defend themselves. Therefore, Jehovah classified them with widows and orphans. He said, **“Thou shall not distort the justice due to the sojourner, or to the fatherless, nor take the widow’s raiment to pledge, but thou shall remember that thou were a bondman in Egypt, and Jehovah thy God redeemed thee from**

there. Therefore I command thee to do this thing” (Deuteronomy 24:17-18).

In several places Jehovah warned not to oppress foreigners in their land. He said, **“And thou shall not wrong a sojourner, neither shall thou oppress him, for ye were sojourners in the land of Egypt”** (Exodus 22:21). In another passage he said, **“And thou shall not oppress a sojourner, for ye know the heart of a sojourner, since ye were sojourners in the land of Egypt”** (Exodus 23:9).

He even commanded them to love foreigners. He said, **“Love ye therefore the sojourner, for ye were sojourners in the land of Egypt”** (Deuteronomy 10:19). And again he said, **“And if a stranger sojourns with thee in your land, ye shall not do him wrong. The stranger that sojourns with you shall be to you as the home-born among you, and thou shall love him as thyself, for ye were sojourners in the land of Egypt. I am Jehovah your God”** (Leviticus 19:33-34).

Another fine thing about America is how our people love foreigners in our midst. There are few if any other nations that are so generous and open toward peoples of other lands. And that is what Jehovah wanted for his people.

Christians and Generosity

As you can see, Jehovah wanted his people to be generous to the weak and the lowly. Jesus also commanded his disciples to be generous. However, he also expects us to be wise, and use good judgment in all that we do, including our generosity. For example, Jesus’ command, **“Give to him who asks thee, and turn thou not away from him who wants to borrow from thee”** (Matthew 5:42), should not be taken as a rigid legalism, but rather as a principle of compassion to be used with good judgment.

God wants us to use good judgment in all that we do. And it is foolish to interpret such commands as, **“Give to him who asks thee”** in an absolute literal sense. God moderates his compassion with good judgment when answering requests, and he expects us to do the same. Indeed, after teaching us to ask, seek, and knock, Jesus gave an illustration of how a father gives to his sons, saying, **“Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?”** (Matthew 7:9-10). And every wise father knows that it is foolish and harmful to give his children everything they ask for.

Thus, I think we can confidently conclude that God, our heavenly Father, considers our needs and our fitness, and then uses his judgment about what would be best for us, answering in his own time and way. Moreover, his answer may even be to give us nothing. For there were times when Jesus refused a request. Here are three examples:

Then some of the scholars and Pharisees answered, saying, Teacher, we want to see a sign from thee. But having answered, he said to them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet (Matthew 12:38-39).

Now when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceedingly glad, for he was wanting of a considerable time to see him, because of hearing many things about him, and he hoped to see some sign happening by him. And he interrogated him in considerable words, but he answered him nothing (Luke 23:8-9).

Indeed therefore having come together, they [his disciples] questioned him, saying, Lord, do thou restore the kingdom to Israel at this time? And he said to them, It is not for you to know times or seasons, which the Father established in his own authority (Acts 1:6-7).

There are other commands that are relevant to our giving to make it more judicious. For example, when wandering idlers ask us for food or money, does Jesus' command, **"Give to him who asks thee"** require that we give to them? No, because another command forbids giving to such men. Paul, who taught the will of Jesus, said, **"For even when we were with you we commanded you this, that if any man will not work, neither let him eat. For we hear of some who walk among you disorderly, not working at all, but being busybodies. Now to such men we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that, working with quietness, they should eat their own bread"** (Second Thessalonians 3:10-12).

Jesus also warned against giving to certain kinds of men, saying, **"Do not give what is holy to the dogs, nor cast your pearls before the swine, lest they trample them by their feet, and having turned back may lacerate you"** (Matthew 7:6). Our Lord was certainly not referring to literal dogs and pigs. When Jesus warned against giving to dogs and swine he was talking about some kinds of men.

There are other scriptures referring to certain sinful men as dogs: **"Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workmen, beware of the excision"** (Philippians 3:2) and, **"Outside are the dogs, and the sorcerers, and the fornicators, and the murderers, and the idolaters, and every man who loves and makes a lie"** (Revelation 22:15). Indeed, the righteous man Job, during the time of his affliction, spoke of how he was persecuted by men who were worse than dogs: **"But now those who are younger than I have me in derision, whose fathers I disdained to set with the dogs of my flock"** (Job 30:1).

Certainly, we should normally try to aid an innocent man whose life is in danger, as the good Samaritan did (see Luke 10:33). And every innocent man should be treated courteously and decently. But men who live like dogs and pigs are not worthy of our treasures. When did Jesus ever give to

such kind? He would not even answer King Herod when he questioned him.

Which reminds me of a time when the prophet Elisha was approached by the kings of Judah and Israel. He said to Jehoram, the evil king of Israel, **“As Jehovah of hosts lives, before whom I stand, surely, were it not that I regard the presence of Jehoshaphat the king of Judah, I would not look toward thee, nor see thee”** (Second Kings 3:14).

Of course, men can repent and change their lives. Then we can respond to them, but cautiously and judiciously, testing them first, because men can be diabolically crafty and hypocritical. And like our giving, forgiving should also be done judiciously.