

Are We Not All Beggars?

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Rich or poor, we are to “do what we can” when others are in need.

What a wonderful new element introduced into our general conference format. Bien hecho, Eduardo.

In what would be the most startling moment of His early ministry, Jesus stood up in His home synagogue in Nazareth and read these words prophesied by Isaiah and recorded in the Gospel of Luke: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and ... set at liberty them that are bruised.”¹

Thus the Savior made the first public announcement of His messianic ministry. But this verse also made clear that on the way to His ultimate atoning sacrifice and Resurrection, Jesus’s first and foremost messianic duty would be to bless the poor, including the poor in spirit.

From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus loved the impoverished and the disadvantaged in an extraordinary way. He was born into the home of two of them and grew up among many more of them. We don’t know all the details of His temporal life, but He once said, “Foxes have holes, and ... birds ... have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.”² Apparently the Creator of heaven and earth “and all things that in them are”³ was, at least in His adult life, homeless.

Down through history, poverty has been one of humankind’s greatest and most widespread challenges. Its obvious toll is usually physical, but the spiritual and emotional damage it can bring may be even more debilitating. In any case, the great Redeemer has issued no more persistent call than for us to join Him in lifting this burden from the people. As Jehovah, He said He would judge the house of Israel harshly because “the spoil of the [needy] is in your houses.”

“What mean ye,” He cried, “that ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor?”⁴

The writer of Proverbs would make the matter piercingly clear: “He that oppresseth the poor reproacheth his Maker,” and “whoso stoppeth his ears at the cry of the poor ... shall [also] cry himself, but shall not be heard.”⁵

In our day, the restored Church of Jesus Christ had not yet seen its first anniversary when the Lord commanded the members to “look to the poor and ... needy, and administer to their relief that they shall not suffer.”⁶ Note the imperative tone of that passage—“they *shall* not suffer.” That is language God uses when He means business.

Given the monumental challenge of addressing inequity in the world, what can one man or woman do? The Master

Himself offered an answer. When, prior to His betrayal and Crucifixion, Mary anointed Jesus's head with an expensive burial ointment, Judas Iscariot protested this extravagance and "murmured against her."⁷

Jesus said:

"Why trouble ye her? she hath wrought a good work. ...

*"She hath done what she could."*⁸

"She hath done what she could"! What a succinct formula! A journalist once questioned Mother Teresa of Calcutta about her hopeless task of rescuing the destitute in that city. He said that, statistically speaking, she was accomplishing absolutely nothing. This remarkable little woman shot back that her work was about love, not statistics. Notwithstanding the staggering number *beyond* her reach, she said she could keep the commandment to love God and her neighbor by serving those *within* her reach with whatever resources she had. "What we do is nothing but a drop in the ocean," she would say on another occasion. "But if we didn't do it, the ocean would be one drop less [than it is]."⁹ Soberly, the journalist concluded that Christianity is obviously *not* a statistical endeavor. He reasoned that if there would be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the ninety and nine who need no repentance, then apparently God is not overly preoccupied with percentages.¹⁰

So how might we "do what we can"?

For one thing, we can, as King Benjamin taught, cease withholding our means because we see the poor as having brought their misery upon themselves. Perhaps some *have* created their own difficulties, but don't the rest of us do exactly the same thing? Isn't that why this compassionate ruler asks, "Are we not all beggars?"¹¹ Don't we all cry out for help and hope and answers to prayers? Don't we all beg for forgiveness for mistakes we have made and troubles we have caused? Don't we all implore that grace will compensate for our weaknesses, that mercy will triumph over justice at least in our case? Little wonder that King Benjamin says we *obtain* a remission of our sins by pleading to God, who compassionately responds, but we *retain* a remission of our sins by compassionately responding to the poor who plead to us.¹²

In addition to taking merciful action in their behalf, we should also pray for those in need. A group of Zoramites, considered by their fellow congregants to be "filthiness" and "dross"—those are scriptural words—were turned out of their houses of prayer "because of the coarseness of their [wearing] apparel." They were, Mormon says, "poor as to things of the world; and also ... poor in heart"¹³—two conditions that almost always go together. Missionary companions Alma and Amulek counter that reprehensible rejection of the shabbily dressed by telling them that whatever privileges others may deny them, they can always pray—in their fields and in their houses, in their families and in their hearts.¹⁴

But then, to this very group who had themselves been turned away, Amulek says, "After [you] have [prayed], if [you] turn away the needy, and the naked, and visit not the sick and afflicted, and impart of your substance, *if [you] have [it]*, to those who stand in need—I say unto you, ... your prayer is vain, and availeth you nothing, and [you] are as hypocrites who do deny the faith."¹⁵ What a stunning reminder that rich *or* poor, we are to "do what we can" when others are in need.

Now, lest I be accused of proposing quixotic global social programs or of endorsing panhandling as a growth industry, I reassure you that my reverence for principles of industry, thrift, self-reliance, and ambition is as strong as that of

any man or woman alive. We are always expected to help ourselves before we seek help from others. Furthermore, I don't know exactly how each of you should fulfill your obligation to those who do not or cannot always help themselves. But I know that God knows, and He will help you and guide you in compassionate acts of discipleship if you are conscientiously wanting and praying and looking for ways to keep a commandment He has given us again and again.

You will recognize that I speak here of difficult societal needs that go well beyond members of the Church. Fortunately the Lord's way of assisting our own is easier: all who are physically able are to observe the law of the fast. Isaiah wrote:

"Is not this the fast that I have chosen? ...

"Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him ... ? [that thou] undo the heavy burdens, and ... let the oppressed go free ... ?"¹⁶

I bear witness of the miracles, both spiritual and temporal, that come to those who live the law of the fast. I bear witness of the miracles that have come to me. Truly, as Isaiah recorded, I have cried out in the fast more than once, and truly God has responded, "Here I am."¹⁷ Cherish that sacred privilege at least monthly, and be as generous as circumstances permit in your fast offering and other humanitarian, educational, and missionary contributions. I promise that God will be generous to you, and those who find relief at your hand will call your name blessed forever. More than three-quarters of a million members of the Church were helped last year through fast offerings administered by devoted bishops and Relief Society presidents. That is a lot of grateful Latter-day Saints.

Brothers and sisters, such a sermon demands that I openly acknowledge the unearned, undeserved, unending blessings in my life, both temporal and spiritual. Like you, I have had to worry about finances on occasion, but I have never been poor, nor do I even know how the poor feel. Furthermore, I do not know all the reasons why the circumstances of birth, health, education, and economic opportunities vary so widely here in mortality, but when I see the want among so many, I do know that "there but for the grace of God go I."¹⁸ I also know that although I may not be my brother's keeper, I am my brother's brother, and "because I have been given much, I too must give."¹⁹

In that regard, I pay a personal tribute to President Thomas Spencer Monson. I have been blessed by an association with this man for 47 years now, and the image of him I will cherish until I die is of him flying home from then-economically devastated East Germany in his house slippers because he had given away not only his second suit and his extra shirts but the very shoes from off his feet. "How beautiful upon the mountains [and shuffling through an airline terminal] are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace."²⁰ More than any man I know, President Monson has "done all he could" for the widow and the fatherless, the poor and the oppressed.

In an 1831 revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord said the poor would one day see the kingdom of God coming to deliver them "in power and great glory."²¹ May we help fulfill that prophecy by coming in the power and glory of our membership in the true Church of Jesus Christ to do what we can to deliver any we can from the poverty that holds them captive and destroys so many of their dreams, I pray in the merciful name of Jesus Christ, amen.

2. Matthew 8:20.

3. 2 Nephi 2:14; 3 Nephi 9:15.

4. Isaiah 3:14–15.

5. Proverbs 14:31; 21:13.

6. Doctrine and Covenants 38:35.

7. See Mark 14:3–5; see also Matthew 26:6–9; John 12:3–5.

8. Mark 14:6, 8; emphasis added.

9. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *My Life for the Poor*, ed. José Luis González-Balado and Janet N. Playfoot (1985), 20.

10. See Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God* (1986), 28–29, 118–19; see also Luke 15:7.

11. Mosiah 4:19.

12. See Mosiah 4:11–12, 20, 26.

13. Alma 32:2–3.

14. See Alma 34:17–27.

15. Alma 34:28; emphasis added.

16. Isaiah 58:6–7.

17. Isaiah 58:9.

18. Attributed to John Bradford; see *The Writings of John Bradford*, ed. Aubrey Townsend (1853), xliii.

19. “Because I Have Been Given Much,” *Hymns*, no. 219. © Harper San Francisco.

20. Isaiah 52:7.

21. Doctrine and Covenants 56:18; see also verse 19.