

# bible studies

for kinship groups

by  
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*bible studies for small group leaders on Vineyard distinctives*

Kingdom of God, Worship, Healing, Relationships and  
Ministry to the Poor

# Kinship Bible Studies

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# Introduction

## BIBLE STUDIES For Small Groups

Dear Small Group Leader,

Leading a small group can be both rewarding and exhausting. It can be rewarding because you are involved in the care and spiritual growth of other people. There is tremendous satisfaction in knowing that God is using you! But leading a small group can at the same time be exhausting. It's usually up to the leader to make sure that everything is planned for the meeting, that a teaching is prepared and that members are ministered to and have their needs met. So often, however, small group leaders find that at the end of a busy day at work and responsibilities at home, they have no energy or creativity left to put into their small group. It's no wonder Christian leaders experience what has commonly been referred to as "burn-out"!

These Bible studies have been created for small group leaders in Vineyard for two reasons. One is to assist leaders with task of preparing for their group, hopefully avoiding potential "burn-outs". Each study is complete as is and does not require extensive preparation time. The other reason is to ensure that the members of Vineyard are biblically literate and well instructed in key theological and doctrinal truths. While small group leaders have the freedom to study just about anything they'd like in their groups, it is important for group members to understand what Vineyard believes as a church and why biblically Vineyard is committed to these truths.

The desire of the pastors and staff at Vineyard is to encourage and help leaders however possible. These studies are just one way we are trying to make your responsibilities as a small group leader more manageable and more enjoyable.

Marlene Nathan

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### Why use Bible Study discussions?

The goal of small groups in Vineyard is to encourage spiritual growth and provide care for people. One aspect of spiritual growth is the study of God's Word. It's been proven that the more involved a person is in the learning process, the more they will learn and retain. Bible study discussion involves group members in a way bible teaching or lecturing does not. People will learn more by actively participating in the discussions and making their own discoveries in the scripture. And doing this in the group can show members how they can begin to study the bible in depth on their own at home. Bible study discussions also help form bonds of friendship between group members. When people are given the opportunity to share their personal thoughts and feelings, relationships just naturally develop. This in turn can provide people with a network of supportive relationships in a day when many are isolated and alone.

### How to use these bible studies in your group.

These studies were written to be used by you in preparation for your small group and were not designed to be copied and handed out to your group. The *process* of learning the scripture is as valuable as arriving at all the correct answers. Providing your group with the questions and the answers will defeat this purpose. The idea is to get people to think and dig into the bible themselves. You also want to encourage group interaction and handing out a bible study to read may distract people from participating in group discussion.

The only things you will need to prepare for the group discussions are your bible and the bible study. Each study is divided into several different sections. They begin with a couple quotes that are designed to introduce the topic. Next is a clear statement of the purpose of the study, followed by a key bible verse. The next few paragraphs, under the heading "openers", might give you some ideas of how to begin discussing the topic with your group. Motivation for study is important and you want to show your group why the topic being studied is relevant for them. This is followed by one or two opening questions that are designed to help you discover the extent of your group's understanding about the topic.

At this point, the passage is cited and the actual study begins. Depending on the topic and passage, there may be some comments that are there to help you understand the context or background of the passage being used. Sometimes you may want to share these comments with the group, depending how helpful they may be to your discussion. The questions are designed to make people first observe closely what the scripture says, then move to what the scripture means and finally apply the scripture personally to their lives. Most questions are followed by some comments which are there to provide additional background information, interpret difficult verses and clarify the meaning of particular words or phrases. In essence, they are there so that you will have an adequate grasp of the passage and will be ready to lead discussion and answer questions. Finally at the end there is a small section called "wrapping it up" which summarizes in a simple and concise way what significant truths were addressed during the study.

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### Here are a few additional hints:

1. **Be Flexible!** Each study contains a lot of material but not all of it must be used. A lot depends on the make-up of your group, how much of the bible they already know and how talkative they are. Sometimes, you will have to present an interesting introduction and ask a lot of questions to get a good discussion going. Other times one question is all that is needed to get people talking about the passage and hitting the issues that need to be discussed. These studies can become very long if your particular group likes to talk. You may want to take two meetings for each study. (Some even cover two separate passages, so dividing the material in half should be no problem.) Remember that bible study is only one part of kinship. Be sure to keep discussion time to 30 or 40 minutes so that there will be enough time left in your group for worship and ministry.
2. **Be Creative.** Keep in mind that these bible studies were written to help you and not restrict you to a particular style of group discussion. Perhaps you will only use part of the study, but by reading it, you get ideas for other passages and other questions that can be used. However these studies can help you as a leader is how you ought to use them.
3. **Be Sure to Hit the Mark!** Although you are free to be flexible and are encouraged to be creative, make sure the stated purpose of each study is accomplished! Again, while we want to help you as a leader, we also want the members of Vineyard to become biblically literate in important doctrinal truths.
4. **Be Prepared.** The comments and information in each study have been obtained from theological books and commentaries. This was done to save you as the leader the time involved to do the research yourself. So it is important that in preparing for your group that you read through the study ahead of time and look up all the cross references mentioned. This way you will know what you are talking about! It is often during group discussions that questions will be asked of you about the passage. Hopefully the information in the study will help you be prepared to answer people's honest questions. Also, you cannot just assume that all the people in your group have a good working knowledge of the bible. What may seem basic and elementary to you may be what the people in your group still need to learn. For others, the information in each study will be very familiar to your group and much too basic. Perhaps you will want to do more study because that is what your group needs. That's great! (see #1 and #2)

### How to lead a group discussion.

Leading a group discussion is truly more of an art than a technique. It is best learned by practice and experience than from a book. So much depends on the personality of the leader and the make-up of the group that specific methods are usually unhelpful. There are a few guidelines though that can help a group discussion work better:

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1. **Be the leader!** Many people don't like group discussions because no one seems to be in charge and the discussions wander aimlessly and pointlessly till the meeting is over. When that happens, it is because the leader is not leading! It is up to you as the leader to direct and guide discussions. You need to keep an eye on where the discussion is going and when it gets too far off course, you need to interject comments and direct people back to the topic. People won't be interested if they feel it is a waste of time, so as the leader make sure the discussions are on track and heading somewhere. At first, you may have to take a more dominant role, and get people "stirred up" until they get use to participating. But as people get more comfortable with the format, they should enter into the discussion quite easily and begin responding to each other and not just to you.
2. **Be a good listener.** People will want to share when they feel they'll be heard. Make sure you use common courtesy and listen to what is being said! Give eye contact and lots of affirmation for sharing. Respond to what was said so people know you really are listening (and are not just thinking about what you are going to say next). When appropriate, refer back to what someone said earlier so people know what they say is important enough to remember. All of these things will encourage good discussion.
3. **Be sensitive.** For many people, talking in a group is a big risk! They will watch how you as the leader respond to them and to others when they contribute to the discussion. They want to know it is "safe". They don't want to be judged or ignored or be told they are wrong in front of others. Be gentle and affirming. Make it clear to your group that it is safe to share thoughts and ideas, that no one will be reprimanded for a "wrong" answer, and that everyone is learning together.
4. **Be on time.** People will quickly tire of group discussions if they take over the entire group, leaving no time for anything else. And this is so easy to happen! So watch the clock and be sure to limit discussion, no matter how good it is getting. Better to have them go away hungry because then they'll come back for more!
5. **Be aware of potential problems.** Many people dislike group discussions because of all the problems that are possible. It is helpful to be aware of the pitfalls ahead of time and have some idea how to handle them when they pop up.
  - a. *The problem of rabbit trails.* There is a delicate balance between keeping the discussion on track and allowing people the freedom to share. It's up to you to determine where that balance is and to gently but firmly bring the discussion back to the topic at hand. Some rabbit trails are worth exploring and people will appreciate the consideration you give them by addressing some of these trails from time to time. But an entire meeting of them can feel like a waste of time. So be alert!

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- b. *The problem of the filibuster.* Invariably, each group has one: someone who just plain talks too much! (By the way, make sure that it isn't you!) It will help if once you know who they are, to sit next to them in the room rather than across from them. This will cut down on eye contact and may discourage a lot of talking. Also, without being rude, you need pass the discussion on to another group member with some deliberation. "Why don't we hear from someone else now. What do you think about what we've been discussing, Sue?" Remember, that when one person is too dominating in the group, other members will lose interest.
- c. *The problem of the shrinking violet.* There are usually more than one of these in a group, but these are the folks who are very shy and very afraid of speaking in front of others. They need lots of encouragement and much affirmation. If you have a lot of these in your group, cut down on any joking around, as shrinking violets may fear being teased in front of others. (Some joking, however, can have the effect of lightening any tension in the room, so here again, discernment is key.) Whatever you do, you want your group to feel extremely safe. Talk with these folks before the meeting. Ask them to read passages out loud. Without being intimidating or putting them on the spot, ask them a question directly. Make it your goal to get your shrinking violets fully participating in group discussions.
- d. *The problem of the difference of opinion.* Not everyone is going to agree about everything all the time in your group. Disagreements are inevitable but in a group, little disagreements can become full-blown arguments without the people involved intending for that to happen. And arguments "in public" are embarrassing and sometimes hard to recover from. On this issue, men and women relate very differently. Men will not usually avoid a disagreement and often they enjoy a good, lively debate. In fact, some men may wish to debate just for the sheer enjoyment of it. Women on the other hand, value harmony and for the sake of harmony will avoid a disagreement at all costs. What is often sacrificed in the process of all this is the truth. Here is where it is important for you to be both well prepared and extremely tactful. Try to understand what the issues in the passage are ahead of time and anticipate potential disagreements. Gently but firmly maintain what you believe to be truth while at the same time make allowances for gray areas where there is legitimate room for disagreement. And when you're not really sure, admit it and agree to find out some answers for the next meeting.
- e. *The problem of too personal/impersonal sharing.* Here again is an area where people differ on what they prefer. Some people will feel that group discussion is not successful unless the sharing gets to an intensely intimate level and people are sharing personal secrets and everyone is crying. Others will feel very uncomfortable with sharing at this level and instead prefer the discussion to remain at a very theoretical and impersonal level. In general, women prefer personal sharing and men prefer impersonal. Both extremes will be unhelpful for your group. There are things that really are too personal for group discussion and bringing them

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up is just plain inappropriate. When this happens, show compassion, but indicate that you would like to talk with the person some more about it after the meeting alone. (Of course, if your group has been together a long time and know each other intimately already, then this doesn't apply!) The other extreme is not good either, because small groups are where we care for each other. There's got to be some measure of personal disclosure for care to happen and relationships to grow. There are personal type questions in each study in order to give people the permission to share personally in the group. Be patient with those who are resistant to personal disclosure but set an example yourself. Often the tone for sharing in a group is set out by the leader. If the leader can be personal, then the rest of the group can be personal as well.

6. **Have Fun!** Group discussions can be a lot more fun for the leader because all the pressure is off to "perform" and make it happen. You can actually enjoy yourself. And, you might learn something in the process. God's word is so rich that you will no doubt learn something new each week from what someone else shares. So have a good time!

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## MINISTRY TO THE POOR The Role Ministry to the Poor Had in the Mission of Jesus

“The essence of the Gospel is not concern for the poor, but it certainly provokes that concern. In fact, without that concern, the essence of the Gospel surely has not been grasped.”

*John Chrysostom (347-407)*

“If you preach the Gospel in all aspects with the exception of the issues which deal specifically with your time you are not preaching the Gospel at all.”

*Martin Luther*

“It is exceedingly strange that any followers of Jesus Christ should ever have needed to ask whether social involvement was their concern, and that controversy should have shown up over the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility. For it is evident that in his public ministry Jesus both ‘went about...teaching...and preaching’ (Mt. 4:23; 9:35) and ‘went about doing good and healing’ (Acts 19:38). In consequence, evangelism and social concern have been intimately related to one another throughout the history of the Church...Christian people have often engaged in both activities quite unselfconsciously, without feeling any need to define what they were doing or why.”

John Stott

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## *Issues Facing Christians Today*

### AIM OF STUDY:

To discover the role ministry to the poor had in Jesus' life and in His overall mission and therefore determine what role it should have for us today.

### KEY VERSE:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." Luke 4:18

### OPENERS:

How important is ministry to the poor? As Christians, isn't our primary commitment to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Shouldn't we spend our time, energy and resources on reaching the lost with the message of salvation? Isn't getting people into heaven for all eternity of greater value than helping those who are down and out in this life?

Those who call themselves Christians today are not in agreement over this issue of what to do about the poor. Some see ministry to the poor as a distraction away from the church's real mission: evangelism. Others believe ministry to the poor *is* the essence of the gospel. They have abandoned preaching the message for a "social gospel" of soup kitchens and homeless shelters. Still others feel it's the government's responsibility to care for the poor. After all, the government has declared war on poverty! The government is now the expert on the poor. It has spent years studying the causes and effects of poverty. The government has come up with an array of programs to address the various needs of the poor. And, with an unlimited supply of tax dollars, the government is best equipped to truly help the poor.

The place where we as Christians often find ourselves today regarding the poor is complete inertia: we do absolutely nothing! Either we're not sure ministry to the poor is what we're really called to or we believe the government can do it better than we can!

This is however not what the bible teaches us. Caring for the poor and the oppressed is found everywhere in the pages of scripture and it is impossible to ignore. Let's begin this series on ministry to the poor by examining what Jesus had to say about it.

1. At this point in your life, what are your thoughts about the poor? Who do you believe should be in the forefront of helping the poor and why?

**STUDY THE PASSAGE:** Luke 4:14-30

**Background to the Gospel of Luke**

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Luke is one of the three synoptic gospels, along with Matthew and Mark. (“Syn” means similar or together and “optic” means viewpoint.) These three gospels present a very similar picture of Jesus, at times using the exact same words and phrases. Luke’s gospel is the companion book to Acts, both of which were written to a Roman official named Theophilus (see Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2). Although the author of either work is never specifically mentioned, scholars believe it is Luke, “the beloved physician” and traveling companion to Paul (see Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16 for the “we” passages). Since neither work mentions events that would have had great significance for the Christian church, (the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the deaths of the apostles Peter and Paul around 67 AD) the time of the writing of Luke could be early, somewhere between 59 and 63 AD. Luke has several distinctive themes and characteristics that make it different from the other synoptic gospels. These include 1) the universality of the gospel (includes gentiles); 2) the wideness of God’s mercy illustrated in Jesus’ special concern for women and for the poor; 3) the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ ministry and 4) a more historical and chronological approach to the telling of Jesus’ life story.

### Background to the Passage

The first three and a half chapters of Luke have covered Jesus’ birth, John the Baptist’s birth, Jesus’ genealogy, Jesus’ baptism and Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. We are beginning here with the very start of Jesus’ public ministry in the region of Galilee.

- 2. How does Luke describe Jesus in v.14? What do you think “in the power of the Spirit” means (see 4:1)?**

Luke has noted the Spirit’s activity in Jesus’ life three times already: at His conception (1:35), at His baptism (3:22) and at His temptation (4:1). He specifically mentions “power” when Jesus heals the sick (see 5:17; 6:19; 8:46).

- 3. What do you think was the cause of Jesus’ fame? Why do you think He was praised for teaching in the synagogues (v.15)? How would you sum up people’s initial reaction to Jesus’ ministry?**

It is very probable that Jesus’ fame was the result of demonstrations of the power of the Spirit through healing (see Mt. 4:23-25). His teaching was also remarkable. The gospel writers regularly noted that Jesus taught with unique authority (see Mt. 7:29; Mk. 1:22,27; Lk. 4:32). Jesus’ teaching was further validated by His miracles. He was the “Word-Worker”. What Luke is describing here is Jesus at the height of popularity.

- 4. Where does Jesus go next (v.16)? What do the people there think about Jesus (see 2:51-52)?**

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Luke places this Nazareth incident right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry not because this is exactly when it occurs (see Mk.6:1-6 and Mt.13:53-58) but because the event is key in defining Jesus' ministry. It seems that Jesus was well-respected by the people in His hometown yet as He begins His ministry, this changes. In fact, this Nazareth incident is a sharp contrast with the warm reception Jesus had apparently received in other parts of Galilee (v.14-15).

5. **What is His custom and what does that tell you about Jesus? Reports of Him have no doubt reached Nazareth and so on the Sabbath, what is Jesus permitted to do? What do you imagine the people's expectations are at this point?**

Throughout the gospels, Jesus consistently submitted to the essentials of Jewish law. He did not, however, follow traditions that were man-made in origin. It was not uncommon in Jesus' day for a visiting Rabbi to be permitted to read the scripture and/or teach in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Jesus stood, to indicate that He wanted to read. (Later He sat down, which was customary if one wanted to teach.) He was handed a book from the prophets perhaps because a passage from the Law (five books of Moses) had already been read. (Moses was always read first.) While Jesus did not choose Isaiah, it seems He did choose which chapter and verses to read.

6. **As the people listen to Jesus read from the scroll, who might they think the prophecy is talking about?**

This passage from Isaiah has traditionally been seen as Messianic, so the people may have interpreted it as referring to the Messiah. They may also have thought it was referring to the prophet Isaiah, since prophets frequently made reference to the Spirit coming upon them so that they could deliver a message from God. It is unlikely they thought it was referring to Jesus.

7. **According to the prophecy, which groups of people will experience benefit? What do "the poor", "the prisoners", "the blind" and "the oppressed" have in common? Why do you think these kinds of people are mentioned and other groups are not?**

The different groups mentioned were all the unfortunates of the world, those without hope and utterly dependent. When people are in need, they are usually extremely receptive to the grace of God.

It is debatable whether the passage here is referring to the financially poor or to the "spiritually" poor (as in the beatitudes, "poor in spirit"). Either way, the message of the prophecy applies. Jesus preached good news to those who were lowly in spirit, humble, contrite and broken. But He also had a lot to say to the financially well-off and to the financially destitute. He spoke more about money than about heaven or hell and what He did say, turned the value system of the day (and the value of our

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system today) on its head! (will be covered in later studies)

### NOTE:

If you compare Luke 4:18-19 with Isaiah 61:1-2, you will find that the passages differ slightly. This is true about other passages in the New Testament where the writers quote from the Old Testament. There are a number of explanations for these apparent discrepancies.

1. New Testament writers did not have a copy of the Old Testament handy. Much of their knowledge of scripture was from memory.
2. The texts of the Old Testament that were available to the New Testament writers (the ones they memorized) may have differed from the texts we have available to us today and that scholars have used to translate the bible for us.
3. New Testament writers may have been using the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament done between the third and second centuries BC) rather than a Hebrew translation, which is what is used today for our bibles.
4. Interpretation of an Old Testament passage was just as important to the New Testament writers as precision in the wording of that passage. This explains why in the light of the coming of Christ, His death and His resurrection, certain Old Testament passages took on whole new meaning.
5. As Christians, we believe that the New Testament is scripture, writing that is inspired by the Holy Spirit. We can therefore have confidence that despite apparent discrepancies at certain places, that what we read in the bible is what the Spirit of God has authored.

### **8. When Jesus is done reading, what happens in the synagogue? What does He say next? What did He mean? What kind of impact do you think His words had on the people who heard them?**

After reading, Jesus sat down, which was an indication to everyone that He was now going to teach. The Greek word translated “fastened on” in verse 20 is used elsewhere by Luke in situations of intense emotion, implying that the people were “on the edge of their seats”. It’s not yet clear however, whether the intensity of the situation was negative or positive. The only thing Luke records is Jesus’ words, “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus probably said more. In fact He may have given an entire sermon. But Luke chooses only this sentence, which for him says it all:

- The Holy Spirit was on Jesus. (Lk.4:14)
- The Holy Spirit empowered Jesus to do what He did. (John 10:37-8)
- God sent Jesus. He did not come on His own. (John 3:17)
- Jesus preached the good news of the Kingdom of God. (Mk.1:15)
- Jesus set captives free. (Luke 13:10-16)
- Jesus gave sight to the blind. (John 9:1-7)
- Jesus brought release to those who were “bruised” or “broken by calamity” (the meaning of the Greek word translated oppressed).
- Jesus ushers in a new “era”: the year of the Lord’s favor

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NOTE: The “year of the Lord’s favor” is not referring to a calendar year but rather to an “age” or “era”. The coming of Jesus meant the end of one era, the period of the Old Covenant and the beginning of a new era, the New Covenant. Another way of saying this is that Jesus’ coming ushered in the Kingdom of God (see Luke 11:20). This new era is characterized by acceptance by grace, the exact meaning of the phrase “the Lord’s favor” (see also Luke 4:24; Acts 10:35; 2Cor.6:2 Phil.4:18). This phrase (“the year of the Lord’s favor”) is also reminiscent of the Year of Jubilee (see Lev.25). The Year of Jubilee was a year of liberation. It was held every fifty years, at which time fields lay fallow, property returned to its original owner, debts were canceled and slaves were set free. The faithful practice of the Year of Jubilee was a safeguard against excessive accumulation of wealth for some and financial loss, destitution and poverty for others. It is also important to note that Luke omits the last phrase of Isaiah 61:2, “and the day of vengeance of our God.” Rabbis had taught that the Kingdom of God was both the establishment of God’s rule on earth (and the accompanying blessings) and the execution of God’s judgment on His enemies (as seen in Dan.2:27-45). While Jesus’ first coming did usher in the kingdom, final judgment will not occur until His second coming.

9. **According to Jesus, what place does ministry to the poor have in His agenda? In what ways did Jesus go on to specifically fulfill the words of this prophecy? What aspects of Jesus’ ministry have you experienced in your life?**

It is extremely significant that Luke chooses to introduce the public ministry of Jesus by having Him quote this passage from Isaiah. It is clear that ministry to the poor and down trodden of the world will play a big part of what Jesus does. Jesus was regularly ministering to the poor (blind, beggars, cripples, lepers, widows), people who were outcasts in Israelite society, with no way to make a living. As Christians, the implication is also clear. We are to be followers or “imitators” of Christ, therefore ministry to the poor ought to play a big part in what we do.

10. **How do the people respond to Jesus’ statement?**

The NIV translation here is unhelpful for understanding the text. The phrase “all spoke well of him” is the translation for the Greek word *martureo*, “to bear witness to”. “To bear witness to” is used elsewhere in the New Testament both positively (to praise, see Acts 13:22) and negatively (to condemn, see John 7:7). Also, the Greek word translated “amazed” can express both admiration (Luke 7:9) and opposition (Luke 11:38). In this context, it seems to flow better with the following verses to say that the people bore witness *against* Jesus and that they were “*shocked*” at His words, since after all, He was only the son of a local carpenter! Jesus’ words were gracious because He did not read about the day of God’s vengeance. While the people’s response may not seem harsh to our ears, it must have been for Jesus to give such a strong reply.

11. **Why does the fact that Jesus is Joseph’s son present a problem to them? Is there something**

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**about Jesus' priorities or ministry that presents a problem to you?**

Jesus was just a local boy to them, someone they had known since childhood and were familiar with. Who was He to come to them with such high-sounding talk about being a prophet from God?! They *thought* they knew Him, so they had no faith to hear what He was now saying. We may struggle with an aspect of Jesus' ministry for the same reason. We think we know what He is all about. When we discover there is more to Him than what we understand, we are shaken (e.g. discovering that Jesus is still healing the sick today, only now He is doing it through His church).

**12. How does Jesus respond to this hometown crowd? What heart attitude does He perceive in them that is wrong?**

The proverb Jesus predicts the people will recite back to Him is not biblical, but there are several other possible sources for it. There were popular proverbs of the day, such as "Physician, heal your own limp" and "A doctor who cures other people and is himself ill". This one in Luke could be a paraphrase of one of them. Jesus' point seems to be to reveal the cynicism lurking in the hearts of the people of Nazareth. Jesus is well-known to them all and now He comes with such bold teaching about Himself and rumors of miraculous powers. "Prove it!" they imply. "Share the blessings with us, your old friends! Do a sign to support your bold claims!"

**13. What two stories from the Old Testament does Jesus refer to? What is significant about each one? How are they similar? What is it about these stories that anger the people?**

Jesus gets right to the point in verse 24, beginning with the solemn introduction, "I tell you the truth." (Whenever Jesus uses this phrase in the gospels, what follows is of great importance and is said with much authority.) Jesus will never be received by Nazareth because their familiarity with Him prevents them from seeing Him as He really is, a prophet from God (*the* prophet from God, Deut. 18:15, 18-19). And to illustrate His point, Jesus tells two stories of God's grace extending to those outside the nation of Israel through prophets (1 Kings 17:1-15; 2 Kings 5:1-14). Both stories involve great prophets from the Old Testament, both involve the miraculous and both involve gentiles.

There are obvious conclusions that can be drawn from these stories:

1. Nazareth doesn't have any exclusive claim on Jesus, a hometown boy, just like Israel didn't have any exclusive claim on their prophets.
2. Because Nazareth rejects Jesus, He will go elsewhere, like Elijah. (See John 1:11-12)
3. Although Nazareth rejects Jesus, He has been accepted elsewhere (e.g. Capernaum), just like Elijah and Elisha were accepted outside of Israel.

**14. How do the people respond to Jesus' words? How do you think they interpreted their**

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meaning?

Gentiles were not considered acceptable by the Jews in Jesus' day and they were not included at all in God's economy. For Jesus to imply that He would be going to *them* and giving *them* blessings was highly offensive to these Nazarenes. This kind of hateful reaction to the inclusion of gentiles is found elsewhere in the New Testament (see Acts 13:42-50; 22:21-22).

### 15. If Jesus walked into one of our churches today, what might He say to us that would make us furious?

We may not be able to identify with the Jewish/Gentile controversy that was so prevalent in Jesus' day, but we have our own "outcasts". For example, we may find it extremely uncomfortable to relate with or minister to the poor, the homeless, the crippled, the elderly, someone with AIDS, etc. Our culture creates ways for us to remain insulated from these people. Many of us have absolutely no contact with people who are different from ourselves. Jesus may be saying to us who are comfortable and protected and insulated to *go*, to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind and release for the oppressed. After all, Jesus is our example!

*"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."* John 13:15-17

### WRAPPING IT UP:

In this opening study we have seen that Jesus places a high priority on ministering to the poor. He makes it clear right from the start that this is what He was sent for and why He was anointed and filled with the Holy Spirit. It's easy to take offense at Jesus and who He chooses to include in His Kingdom. Although we may not like it and we may be more comfortable sticking with people who are more like us, that is not God's way. Let the Word of God speak to your heart, revealing any "unacceptable" attitudes and commit yourself to following after Jesus, doing the things that are important to Him.



# 21

## MINISTRY TO THE POOR God's Heart for the Poor Found in the Law of Moses

“God’s concern for the poor is astonishing and boundless. At the pivotal points of revelation history, Yahweh was at work liberating the oppressed. We can only begin to fathom the depth of his identification with the poor disclosed in the Incarnation...His passion for justice compels him to obliterate rich societies and individuals that oppress the poor and neglect the needy. Consequently, God’s people - if they are indeed his people - follow in the footsteps of the God of the poor.”

Ron Sider

*Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*

## Kinship Bible Studies

### AIM OF STUDY:

To discover God's heart for the poor as it is revealed in His Law.

### KEY VERSE:

"If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs." Deuteronomy 15:7-8

### OPENERS:

As Christians, we tend to have very little appreciation for God's Law that is found in the first five books of the Old Testament. We read verses in the New Testament, such as: "... *through the law we become conscious of sin.*" Romans 3:20; "...*the law brings wrath.*" Romans 4:15; "*The law was added so that the trespass might increase.*" Romans 5:20; "...*the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death.*" Romans 7:5; "*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.*" 1 Cor. 15:56; "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law...*" Gal. 3:13 and we conclude that the law is not really helpful for us today.

But the New Testament also teaches us that the law is good (Rom. 7:12; 1 Tim. 1:8), that it is perfect (James 1:25), that it can give us freedom (James 2:12). It tells us that love, the highest calling of a Christian, is clearly defined in the doing of the law (Rom. 13:10; Gal 5:14; James 2:8). James warns us not to speak against the law (James 4:11-12). Jesus Himself warns us not to think that His coming does away with the law (Mt. 5:17-18). In fact, we are told by Jesus to obey the commandments and to teach others to do the same (Mt. 5:19-20). So while it is true that the law cannot save us, it can be of tremendous help to us as Christians.

One way the law is helpful for us is that it tells us the will of God. The law is an expression of what God wants done, what is "right and good in His sight" (Deut. 6:18). The law not only reveals God's will, it also reveals His character. The law is good and so is God. The law is holy and so is God. As we examine God's commandments concerning the poor, we can discover not only His will (what He wants done about the poor) but also His heart (how He thinks and feels about the poor). Understanding God's heart for the poor is key for us, God's people, to be able to effectively minister to their needs.

### STUDY THE PASSAGE:

Deuteronomy 14:28-15:11

### Background to Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy means "repetition of the law". Its name arose from a mistranslation of Dt. 17:18 which really means "copy of this law". This mistake is not serious, however, since Deuteronomy is in a sense

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a repetition of laws already laid out in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Internal evidence points to Moses being the author (1:5; 31:9,22,24) as well as other Old Testament books (1 Kings 2:3; 8:53; 2 Kings 14:6; 18:12) and Jesus Himself (Mt.19:7-8; Mk.10:3-5; Jn.5:46-47). This excludes of course the account of Moses' death in ch.34. The book was probably written around 1406 BC, near the end of the Israelites' 40 years of wandering in the wilderness (1446-1406 BC), when they were in the territory of Moab, where the Jordan flows into the Dead Sea (1:5). Moses speaks more from his heart in this book, which is in contrast to his matter-of-fact style in Leviticus and Numbers. The key theme in Deuteronomy is total commitment to the Lord and obedience to all His commands. This is set against the backdrop of God's love relationship with His people. Deuteronomy is essentially a covenant renewal document, urging the people back to the covenant God initiated with them at Sinai. It is actually structured like the suzerain-vassal (or "king to conquered people") treaties that were popular at the time. The passage to be studied is found in the section of stipulations of the covenant (4:44-26:19): *"This is the law Moses set before the Israelites. These are the stipulations, decrees and laws Moses gave them when they came out of Egypt..."*

1. **What are the people commanded to do in Deut. 14:28-29? What do you think is significant about this command?**

Tithes were to be a regular part of the life of an Israelite. Tithe means "a tenth" and that is what it is: a tenth of what a person produced, whether in livestock or grain or fruit. Tithes were to be given annually, at the "end of the year", meaning the end of harvest time, or in the fall. Tithes went to three different places: 1) To the Levites and the priests, who served the Lord in the temple, did not own land and so had no means of supporting themselves (Lev. 18:21-28); 2) To Jerusalem, for a communal meal, to be shared by all in celebration of the Lord's presence with them ("dwelling for his Name", see 14:23); 3) To the poor (aliens, fatherless and widows). The Levites were to tithe from the tithe they received, and the tithe to the poor was performed every third year. *God had built in to the routine of life and the yearly calendar of His people a way of providing for those who may not have what they needed to live!* Perhaps He knew that if it was just left up to people's own inclinations, the poor would not get cared for. All told, people may have been asked to give 28% of their income through the three tithes.

2. **What was commanded in verses 1-3? How often are they to do this? Why do you think this command would only apply to fellow Israelites and not to foreigners?**

It appears from the context that this command is for the cancellation of debt and not just the postponement of the collection. The idea of it simply being a postponement is connected to the commands in Ex.23:10-11, where farmers were told to leave their fields dormant every seven years, making it impossible for *them* to be able to repay a debt. The ultimate cancellation of debts every seven years has a much more profound economic affect on Israelite society. This would explain verses 4-5. The way to make sure there would be no poor among them was to make it possible for people to get out from under a load of debt.

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Israel was to have a very unique type of society all because of its covenant relationship with God. They were to reflect the Lord to the world (see Dt. 4:20; 14:2; 28:9-14; Is. 43:10; 20-21; Mal. 3:17-18). Peter uses this same idea and applies it to the church in the New Testament (see 1 Peter 2:9-12). Outsiders were not expected to obey the Jewish laws, and neither were the Israelites bound to apply all their laws to their dealings with outsiders. This same idea applies to Christians. There were particular commandments that applied exclusively to those within the family of God (see Matt. 18:15ff: "If your *brother* sins against you..."). Hopefully, the church accurately reflects God to the world, or as Jesus put it, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

3. Read Exodus 23:10-11 and Lev. 25:1-7. What else were the people commanded to do every seven years? What is significant about "seven"? What principle for living can we learn from these commands? How can we apply this principle today in our culture?

Seven is significant because every seven days there is a Sabbath. Sabbath means "to cease" or "to desist". It originated in creation with God ceasing His creative activity and resting on the seventh day. God "rested" not because He was tired and needed a break. He simply did not work on the seventh day. God's people are to reflect this same pattern in honor of Him. Israel was to cease from working on the Sabbath. It became known as a day for the Lord, a time of rest (unlike God, man *did* get tired). It was not a day for man's enjoyment or monetary gain. Observing the Sabbath was essential to Jewish life and an absolute command. Violating the Sabbath was punishable by death (see Ex. 31:13-17; 34:21; 35:2-3; Lv. 19:3,30; 23:3,38). By Jesus' day, regulations concerning the Sabbath had taken on grand proportions. It was on this very issue that Jesus often conflicted with the Pharisees due to their misunderstanding of the Sabbath (see Mt. 12:1-14; Mk. 2:23-28; Lk. 6:1-11).

The number seven is significant in scripture mainly because of creation and the institution of the Sabbath. It is, however, also associated with the notion of completion, fulfillment and perfection. There are *numerous* references to seven in the bible (e.g. feasts lasted 7 days, the Day of Atonement was in the 7th month, Joshua marched around Jericho 7 times, Daniel's famous prophecy in chapter 9 is about 70 "sevens", there are 7 churches, 7 seals, 7 trumpets and 7 bowls in the book of Revelation, God is said to have a 7-fold Spirit (Rev. 4:5)). While all of this is very interesting, *the significance of 7 to our study is its connection with the Sabbath.*

Sabbath was key for the Jewish people who were covenanted with God through the law given at Sinai. As Christians, we are also covenanted with God but through grace, extended to us at the cross of Christ. The significance of Sabbath for us is that we have entered a special "rest" because of God's grace. We no longer work for our salvation, but instead trust (or rest) in what Christ has accomplished for us (Heb. 4:1-11).

Certain principles of covenant life remain unchanged. One principle was that of stewardship.

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*Everything the Israelites had was given to them by God, including their land* (see Lev.25:23). They were not free to do with it as they pleased, make as much profit from it as they could, hoard as much grain for themselves as possible. Out of fear of the Lord, they needed to follow His command and redistribute some of what He had given them to others. As Christians, we must view that which we “own” as really belonging to the Lord. Although we don’t have “*The Law*” telling us how and when and to whom to give to, we ought to follow Old Testament principles and *regularly, deliberately* and even perhaps *systematically* give to those in our society who cannot provide for their own needs. In fact, it could be said that as New Testament believers, our giving and care for the poor ought to be well beyond what was expected of Old Testament believers and certainly beyond that of non-believers.

4. **What would be the effect of canceling debts every seven years (v.4-6)? What are some reasons why the people might be reluctant to obey this command? Why might you not want to obey it? What promises does God make to motivate obedience from the people?**

This system of canceling debts every 7 years would prevent some in Israel from accumulating a lot of wealth and others from falling into desperate poverty. If you had a series of “bad” years, and could not pay your debt, eventually it would be forgiven and you could start over and regain some financial stability. In the same way, those who were doing quite well could not take advantage of debts owed them by their “brothers”. While this system did not totally redistribute wealth (like socialism) and make everyone the same, it did eliminate extreme wealth and extreme poverty.

God promised blessing and prosperity if the people would obey. Israel would be in a position of economic strength, loaning to nations yet borrowing from none. (NOTE: Poverty is not a glorified condition in the bible. Economic prosperity is a sign of God’s blessing. The wealthy, however, were to be like God with their money, generously giving to those in need.)

Reluctance to obey these commands would stem from greed on the one hand and fear on the other. Some would want more for themselves and so would require all debts be repaid to them. Others may be fearful that if they obey, God will not provide for them as He promised. So they must take care of themselves, so to speak, and collect all the debts they can.

5. **What are the people commanded to do when they encounter a poor brother (v.7-11)? What does it mean to be hardhearted? Tightfisted? Openhanded? Why is the thought expressed in verse 9 so wicked? What does it mean to give “without a grudging heart”? What does God promise to those who give generously?**

To be hardhearted in scripture is to be unfeeling or unmoved by another’s trouble and pain, like a rock. The classic example is found in 1 John 3:17: “*If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?*” To be tightfisted means to be reluctant to part with material possessions or money. To be openhanded is the opposite of that.

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What makes verses 9 so wicked is that it shows immoral or evil thinking. It reveals calculating selfishness. The person realizes that in just a short time, all debts will be canceled and so they will never see their money again. It's immoral to figure out ways to avoid obedience or get around the laws of God. Such behavior in the bible is characteristic of "the wicked".

A grudging heart is an unwilling heart that must be forced into obedience. It's possible to give and it's even possible to give a lot, yet not do it willingly. This idea is found in the New Testament, when Paul talks about being a "cheerful giver" (2 Cor.9:7). As always, God looks beyond our actions to see our heart.

God promises to bless the work of the generous. The clear implication here is that the generous will prosper materially. Some teach prosperity is guaranteed to those who give and that a valid motivation for giving is that in the end, you'll be more prosperous if you give. While we are promised blessing when we give, this should never be our motivation. God, of course, is interested in not just what we do, but also the condition of our hearts. He is always weighing our motives to see if they are pure. According to Jesus, we are to give, expecting nothing in return (see Lk.14:12-14)!

6. **Why do you think our attitudes are as important to God as our actions? What are your attitudes towards the poor? From this passage, how would you describe God's attitude toward the poor? How do you think a person changes from being hardhearted, tightfisted and begrudging into openhanded and generous?**

There is a principle in scripture of authenticity and integrity. Our actions should match our hearts. Jesus was frequently teaching on this issue (it's not enough that you don't murder, you shouldn't hate; it's not enough that you don't commit adultery, you shouldn't lust in your heart; only a good tree will produce good fruit; the mouth speaks out of the overflow of what's in the heart, etc.). This was His condemnation of the Pharisees: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence." (Mt.23:25) The reason our attitudes are so important to God is that *there is no way our attitudes will not affect our actions*. So if we make our attitudes right (and not just focus on our actions) then we will be sure to please God ("Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean." Mt.5:26).

### WRAPPING IT UP:

The ending for this section has unfortunately been a fact of life throughout history: "There will always be poor people in the land." Jesus said the same thing in the New Testament: "The poor you will always have with you.." (Mark 14:7). No where on earth is there a society that has completely eliminated poverty. But this is not God's intention for people. His will is found earlier in verse 4: "However, there should be no poor among you..." The ending to this passage is not a resignation to the inevitable, or an excuse for

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complacency. It is actually a call to generosity and compassion. If there is to be one place where poverty doesn't exist, it should be in and around the community of believers, God's people. This is what happened with the believers in Jerusalem following the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. Luke writes: "Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need... There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostle's feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need." (Acts 2:45; 4:34-35)\* God's Word is quite a challenge to us in the 20th century, who are "affluent" by the world's standards and who value individualism and privacy! Prayerfully consider how the Lord would have you personally respond to His Word.

\*It is clear from the incident with Ananias and Sapphira that giving to the Apostles in Acts was *voluntary*. Their sin was not that they hadn't given up everything, but that they had *lied*. (see Acts 5:3-4)

### ADDENDUM:

The Law of Moses is filled with specific laws that relate to the treatment of the poor. They involve such things as feeding the poor (or alien or widow) in your home free of charge, lending money to someone in need without interest, paying workers' wages promptly, not harvesting to the very edge of the field (or leaving some olives on the tree, etc.) so some was left there for the poor to gather, not to pick up fallen fruit or dropped sheaves, so that the poor could retrieve them. For further study in this area, see: Ex.22:25-27; 23:10-11; Lev.19:9-10,13; 25:1-55; Deut.24:10-15,19-22; 26:12-15. The Old Testament in general commends those who are generous and give freely and warns those who "shut their eyes and close their ears to the poor". For further study in this area, see: Job 31:16-23; Prov.14:20-21; 17:5; 19:7,17; 21:13; Ezek.16:49.



# 22

## MINISTRY TO THE POOR Lessons from the Prophets

“The Old Testament prophets were as much forthtellers of God’s message for their own times as they were foretellers of the future. Their mission as forthtellers, preachers of the Word of the living God with its continuing claim upon us all, is an enduring one. Those who center their attention chiefly upon the predictive aspect of prophecy are therefore shutting their eyes to some of Scripture’s most searching teaching. A major element in the minor prophets is the lode of godly social concern that runs through their pages and gives them such vivid pertinence to our day.”

Frank E. Gaebelien  
*Four Minor Prophets: Their Message for Today*

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### AIM OF STUDY:

To further discover God's heart and agenda for the poor by examining the messages of the prophets.

### KEY VERSE:

"But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" Amos 5:24

### OPENERS:

The Old Testament has much to say to us about the poor. And a lot of what it does say is more straight forward, reasonable and practical than anything else that is being said today. One thing that the Old Testament scriptures assert is that poverty just doesn't happen. It is not a normal condition but is instead the result of something that has gone wrong. We can see this when we examine the kind of language used by the Old Testament writers to describe the poor.

The Old Testament is very precise in its definition of poverty. Those who study Hebrew have identified six main Hebrew root words that are used for the word "poverty" in the Old Testament. These words occur over 200 times throughout the scripture and can be classified into three basic groupings.

One grouping is the indigent poor or those who are economically deprived and lack the basic necessities of life. Old Testament writers repeatedly note that this condition is often the result of sin, both personal and national. Proverbs warns that laziness, extravagance, gluttony and drunkenness can lead to poverty (see Prov. 6:6-11; 10:4; 19:15; 20:13; 21:17; 23:20-21; 24:30-34; 28:19). National sin as well can lead to poverty since God promised to bless His people's land, crops and herds when they were obedient but would curse them with bareness when they were rebellious (see Deut. 28).

The second grouping is the powerless poor, or those who are socially and politically oppressed. This poverty is the result of the sin of others or social injustice. (It usually leads to economic poverty.) God is the champion of the powerless poor, defending their rights, meeting their needs and bringing about justice (see Ps. 107:9; 109:31; 140:12) The entire Old Testament exhorts God's people not to pervert justice and to likewise, defend the powerless poor (the widow, the orphan, the fatherless) (see Ex. 23:6; Lev. 19:15; Deut. 24:17; Ps. 82:1-3; Prov. 31:8-9; 22:22-23; 29:7, 14).

The third grouping is the humble poor, or those who are spiritually meek and dependent upon God (see Mt. 5:3). Often they were in this condition because they were also powerless and indigent! These are folks who are lonely, afflicted, helpless and in trouble. They are seen throughout psalms crying out to the Lord for mercy and grace (see Ps. 22, 25, 37, 40, 69, 74, 149). They are also heard from testifying to God's faithfulness (see Ps. 34:1-6, 15-18).

The most bold and out spoken about the poor in the Old Testament were the prophets. Prophets were men who were called by God to speak forth His Word (see Ex. 3:1-4:17; Is. 6; Jer. 1:4-19;

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Ezek. 1-3; Hos. 1:2; Amos 7:14-15; Jonah 1:1). Calling was crucial, and those who took the office of prophet upon themselves were considered false prophets. Prophets in Israel both proclaimed the Word of God and predicted future events. Their ministry involved forthtelling and foretelling. They were God's "mouthpiece"; His way of revealing Himself, His will and His plan to His people.

There are different types of prophets throughout the Old Testament. For example, Moses was a prophet (mouthpiece for God), who was also a leader. He spoke primarily to the people and provided national and spiritual guidance. Elijah was a prophet (mouthpiece for God), who was primarily an advisor to the King, giving military advice and pronouncing blessings or rebukes. What we commonly think of as "prophets" were the writing prophets of the Old Testament. These prophets were mouthpieces for God, but were also social and spiritual commentators. They spoke primarily to the people and their messages were filled with rebukes, warnings and calls for repentance.

The messages of these writing prophets could be broken down into four major categories. One category is messages of indictment or descriptions of sin. A second category is messages of judgment or the coming punishment for that sin. A third category is messages of instruction or how the hearers were suppose to live. And a fourth category is messages of hope or developments after judgment, such as deliverance and restoration. The most common indictments leveled at God's people by the prophets were idolatry, ritualism and social injustice.

Let's examine a couple messages from these writing prophets of the Old Testament and see what God might have to say through them to us in the 90's about the poor.

### PART ONE: JEREMIAH

#### Background to Jeremiah

Jeremiah began his prophetic ministry during the reign of King Josiah (626 BC) and continued through the reigns of Josiah's three sons and one grandson. While King Josiah was righteous and began instituting much needed reform in Judah, his sons and grandson were not. They were the last four rulers of Judah and presided over the collapse of the nation. Internationally, things were tumultuous. Assyria, which had dominated the ancient Near East for over two centuries, disintegrated quickly (just over 30 years) after the death of its last great king, Ashurbanipal. Babylon and Egypt, freed from Assyrian control, began to assert themselves. The Babylonians eventually destroyed Jerusalem, the temple and led the people off into captivity (586 BC).

Jeremiah is the longest book in the bible (the most words), longer, in fact, than all twelve of the minor prophets combined. It also provides more information about the prophet's personal life and struggles than any of the other prophetic books. Jeremiah was a priest who may have been descended from Abiathar (1 Kings 2:26), a priest during the reign of King Solomon. He is consider the "prophet of

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doom” or the “weeping prophet”. He had few friends, except for his faithful scribe, Baruch, who wrote down Jeremiah’s prophecies. Timid by nature, Jeremiah was continually encouraged that the Lord would make him strong and courageous (Jer. 1:6,17-19). He was commanded by the Lord to not marry or raise children because of the great suffering that was to come upon Judah (Jer. 16:1-4). Tradition teaches that Jeremiah was stoned to death in Egypt (see Heb. 11:37). The book could be outlined as follows:

- I. The Call of Jeremiah (ch.1)
- II. Book 1: The Oracles of Jeremiah - Indictments and Judgments (ch.2-25)
- III. Biographical Interlude 1 (ch.26-29)
- IV. Book 2: The Book of Consolation (ch.30-31)
- V. Biographical Interlude 2 (ch.32-45)
- VI. Book 3: Oracles Against the Nations (ch.46-51)
- VII. Historical Appendix: The Fall of Jerusalem (ch.52)

### STUDY THE PASSAGE: Jeremiah 21:1-22:17

#### Background to the Passage

These chapters are part of a larger section of Jeremiah that deals with the reigns of Jehoiakim to Zedekiah, kings of Judah (21:1-39:18). Jeremiah often organizes his prophecies thematically and not chronologically, which is probably the case in these chapters. The national calamity that was about to befall Judah was the result of her leaders, both national (kings) and spiritual (false prophets). Josiah’s three sons, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin, and his grandson Zedekiah were all said to have “done evil in the eyes of the Lord” (see 2 Kings 23:31-25:7).

1. **What crisis prompted King Zedekiah to send messengers to Jeremiah (21:1-2)? According to the messengers, what does the king want from the Lord? How would you describe the king’s attitude? Under what circumstances are you tempted to “return to or rely on Egypt”? What happens when you do?**

King Zedekiah had unwisely allied himself with Egypt and, trusting in this alliance, had rebelled against Babylon. Now Babylon was getting the upper hand. Jeremiah’s earlier warnings ring true at this point: “Now why go to Egypt to drink water from the Shihor...You will be disappointed by Egypt as you were by Assyria. You will also leave that place with your hands on your head, for the Lord has rejected those you trust; you will not be helped by them” (Jer. 2:18,36-37; see also Is. 30:1-5; 7; 31:1-3).

Babylon is closing in on Jerusalem and in a state of desperation, King Zedekiah turns back to the Lord

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(and Jeremiah, the Lord's prophet) for help.

Egypt has since the time of the early church been considered a typology for "the old life" or "the world that we leave behind once we turn to Christ". (A typology is not exactly the same thing as an allegory because it is more of a historical pattern that is found throughout all of scripture.) We see in Israel's history that when things got difficult, their natural inclination was not to turn to the Lord but to instead desire to return to Egypt, where they imagined they had it better (see Num. 14:1-4, for an example). Paul tells us that we are to learn from their example; that we are to apply the truths from their lessons to our lives as Christians (1 Cor. 10:11; Rom. 15:4).

King Zedekiah's message to Jeremiah reveals no acknowledgment of wrongdoing, repentance from sin, remorse over his sin nor any desire to change his ways and obey God. He was only interested in the Lord's help because he was in big trouble. Contrast this with King Hezekiah's message to Isaiah in 2 Kings 19:2ff & Is. 37:1ff.

- 2. What "bad news" does Jeremiah have for King Zedekiah (v.3-7)? How is it possible for the king to have gotten it so wrong?! (How could he have thought the Lord might intervene on his behalf with miracles when instead the Lord was about to level judgment?) Has there been a time in your life when you were totally blind about your own sin? Discuss.**

Jeremiah gives three "oracles" in response to the messengers from King Zedekiah. The first one, here in verses 3-7, is directed to the king. The other two are directed to the people and to the royal house of David.

Not only is God not going to help the king, He is actually fighting against the king, using the Babylonians as His instruments of judgment. The Lord uses the same wording ("out stretched hand and mighty arm" Deut. 4:34) that He once used to describe His work of deliverance on behalf of His people to now describe His work against His people. For the specific fulfillments of this prophecy, see Jer. 52:1-11; 2 Kings 24:18-25:7.

2 Chron. 36:13 says that King Zedekiah was "stiff-necked and hardened his heart and would not turn to the Lord, the God of Israel." In such a condition, it is impossible to see things clearly or to be able to discern spiritual matters. Jesus linked together a good heart (one that is willing to obey God) with the ability to discern truth (see John 7:17). Jesus repeatedly accused the Pharisees of being "blind". He did not mean they were physically blind, but rather spiritually blind, the result of the condition of their hearts (see Mt. 23).

NOTE: It is interesting that King Zedekiah was made physically blind by the king of Babylon (2 Kings 25:7).

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3. **What choice does the Lord offer the people (v.8-10)? Compare with Deut.30:15-18. Why do you think the Lord often gives us a choice? What kind of choices have you been presented with as a Christian?**

Jeremiah is advising those who want to live to desert Jerusalem and surrender to Babylon. What he is suggesting here is treason, a punishable offense (see Jer.37:11-15). But because he was God's prophet, he had the authority to give such a word. Although Jeremiah was himself accused of deserting to Babylon, in the end, he stayed in Jerusalem (see Jer.40:1-6).

The choice in Deut.30 was between a life of obedience (with God and under His blessing) or a life of disobedience (without God and under His curse). The choice was obvious. Here in Jeremiah, neither choice is truly good. The only promise is that one will "escape with his life".

God is continually giving his people choices. Perhaps this is because God wants us to freely obey Him rather than have no choice but to obey Him. The troubling thing for us about choices, however, is that God doesn't give us enough! It's usually just two: "He who is not with me is against me and he who does not gather with me, scatters" (Lk.11:23); "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal is God, follow him" (1Kings 18:21); "You cannot serve both God and money" (Mt.6:24).

4. **Read Deut.17:14-20. What high standards did God establish for kings? What did God think about the kings of Judah (v.21:11-22:7)? What specifically is fueling God's wrath?**

God's ideal was for Israel to not have kings because He could foresee all the trouble this would bring. But if they were to have kings, the standards set for them would be high. According to this passage in Deut., a king needed to be an Israelite, be not be too wealthy, not have too many wives and not desire to return to Egypt. But most of all, a king needed to read God's Word every day of his life and to know the commandments of the Lord.

Much of God's law dealt with the administration of justice (what is right, what is wrong, what is righteous), which was the unique job of the king. No one else in all of Israel had the kind of power the king did to execute justice. Josiah's descendants failed miserably in this responsibility. Their failure was probably due to the fact that they did not in the least meet the requirements for kings outlined by Moses in Deut.

God was angry not just for their failure to execute justice, but also their complacency. They had false confidence, being in Jerusalem (a geographically protected city, v.13) and because judgment had not yet come. Sometimes we can feel false confidence because God doesn't immediately lower the boom on us when we disobey. (We must remember that God is patient, slow to anger, and desiring of people to turn and repent of their sin.) We can falsely assume that He is approving of our behavior just because nothing has yet happened to us!

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The kings were also pampered, living in the lap of luxury. Instead of using their position to execute justice on behalf of the people, they used it improve their standard of living. In the end, God would destroy their luxuries by fire (21:14; 22:6-7).

God does give them a “chance” to escape judgment (v.4), but the seriousness of the charges are evident in v. 5. “I swear by myself...” shows the absolute certainty of these things coming to pass (see Heb.6:13-18).

NOTE: “Forest” was used elsewhere to refer to the expensive wood used by the kings to build their palaces (see 1 Kings 7:2; 10:21).

5. **What types of people is God particularly mindful of (21:12; 22:3)? What types of people do think He is particularly mindful of today? Why do you think injustice and oppression of these people infuriates the Lord? What infuriates you? What is your typical reaction to the oppression of the weak and powerless?**

The kind of people God was and always is mindful of, is the powerless. In Jeremiah’s day, it would have been the widow, the fatherless, the alien, victims of crime or injustice. In our day today, we might add to that list the uneducated (who have no power and are at the mercy of those who “know”), the poor (who are rarely treated the same dignity and respect as the rich are by doctors, lawyers, businesses or other institutions in our society), the unattractive (who lack the greatest value of our society: beauty), single mothers (who are particularly vulnerable and needy), the elderly (who are no longer respected for their age but are seen today as useless, “out-of-touch” and burdens), and the unborn (who have absolutely no rights and whose “innocent blood” is shed daily around the world, v.3).

Scripture teaches that God is gracious to the humble or lowly and opposed to the proud (see Ps.10:17-18; 22:26; 25:9; 37:11; 138:6; 147:6; Prov.3:34; Is.29:19; Mt.18:4; 20:26; 23:12; Luke 1:52; 1 Peter 5:5-6). His preference for those who are meek and lowly (often those who are also impoverished and oppressed) is clear. And the root of this preference is God’s character. God is Holy (morally perfect and completely righteous) and cannot be anything but perfectly loving and perfectly just.

We are told by Jesus that we are to be like God: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” While literal perfection is not possible for us in this life, it does seem that Jesus expects His followers to be aiming at that goal.

6. **What kind of activities do you think were involved in the “administration of justice” (21:12)? In what situations do you have opportunity to “administer justice” to someone (or**

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“do what is just and right”)?

For some biblical ideas, see Jer. 5:23; 22:16; 1 Kings 3:16-28; Lam. 3:59. For the king, this would include things like settling disputes and equitably enforcing God’s law. The administration of justice was part of his job. For us, we need to actively get involved by protecting someone who is being taken advantage of or standing up for someone who has been wronged.

6. **What rhetorical question is asked in verse 8? What is the obvious answer (v.9)? How would you define “idolatry”? What do you think the “other gods” or idols are of our time?**

Idolatry is best defined by Paul in Romans 1:25. It is simply the worship of the creation rather than the Creator. It is giving something other than God supreme place in your life. Today there are numerous idols competing for our devotion: money, success, fame, beauty, power, youth, popularity, pleasure, sports, entertainment, leisure, etc.

It is interesting that the people of other nations were able to recognize that it was the Lord behind the judgment and what the judgment was for. Very often, we are completely blind to our own faults and sins while others can see them quite plainly!

7. **What is the connection between idolatry and oppression of the poor? Why do you think Israel was usually guilty of both sins? How do you see this principle lived out in our society today?**

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul links all “wickedness, evil, greed and depravity” with the rejection of God and the worship of idols (or the creation). The beginning of the downward spiral of human sin was simply the exchange of the true God for false gods. The oppression of the poor and general injustice towards others is just part of the whole ugly picture.

There are, of course, problems with the idols themselves. According to the scriptures, idols are worthless, of no benefit to those who have them, they make those who worship them worthless, they cannot save, they cannot satisfy (see Jer. 2:5, 13, 27-28; Ps. 115:2-8; Is. 44:6-20). When people are preoccupied with themselves and their own unmet needs and appetites, they will rarely think of others or consider their plight. Only the Lord can satisfy completely, meeting all our needs and giving to us so that we can in turn, give to others (see Ps. 16).

Idols also shape what we value, what we believe is important. And what we believe will in the end, determine how we act. For example, if we have made an idol out of money, then the job we take, where we live, who we associate with, etc. will all be determined by the high value we put on making money. When the Lord is truly God in our lives, then our perspectives and value systems will be shaped by Him. Only Christianity gives worth and value to people because people are created in the

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image of God. Therefore every person, whether powerful or weak, rich or poor, popular or unpopular, is deserving of respect and justice.

(It is possible, of course, to have the Lord as your God yet not have any evidence of this in your life. The Old Testament prophets regularly rebuked the people for empty ritualism (Is.58). The New Testament writers also warn us about this error; see James 2:14-26; 1 John 3:16-18; 1 Timothy 5:4,8).

It is interesting to note the organization of the ten commandments. The first four deal with our relationship God and His claim of exclusive worship. The next six deal with our relationships with others and the justice that is to govern these relationships. Perhaps it is essential to have the first four commandments in place before it's possible to obey the last six. Perhaps this is why Israel usually oppressed and neglected the poor once they had adopted false gods.

### **8. According to Jeremiah, the king who died (Josiah) is better off than the king who was exiled (Jehoahaz) (v.10). Why is this true (v.11-12)? What was Jehoiakim's sin (v.13-17)? What did he think led to greatness? Who was really great and why?**

Josiah was a godly king and had been killed in battle at Megiddo in 609 BC (2 Kings 23:29-35). The exiled king was Josiah's son Jehoahaz (referred to as Shallum in v.11). He was the first ruler of Judah to die in exile. Jehoahaz was deposed after just a reign of three months by Pharaoh Neco and was taken off to Egypt, where he died. His older brother, Jehoiakim was chosen by the Pharaoh to replace him.

Jehoiakim's sin was gross opulence and social injustice and Jeremiah's words are some of the stinging in his entire book. Extravagant building projects were characteristic of Oriental monarchs, but Jehoiakim had built his palace with the forced, unpaid labor of his own people (a violation of the law, see Lev.19:13 & Deut.24:14-15). He also paid great sums of money to the Pharaoh, which he extracted from his people (see 2 Kings 23:34-35).

Jehoiakim's father, King Josiah, was truly great. He did not make ostentation his goal. He was content with the normal comforts of life. He performed the duties of a righteous, godly man, and enjoyed a sound relationship with the Lord. In contrast, Josiah's son excelled in the exact opposite things. He went so far as to slay the righteous (shed innocent blood, see Jer.26:20-23)

Proverbs warns continually that wealth and possessions do not make a person great, but rather righteousness and the fear of the Lord (Prov.10:2; 11:4,28; 15:16-17; 16:8; 28:20).

### **9. If the Lord were to speak to you through a prophet, what might some of His "indictments" be? What can you begin to do that will "defend the cause of the poor" today?**

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### PART TWO: AMOS

#### Background to Amos

Amos was from a small town in Judah, six miles south of Bethlehem and 11 miles from Jerusalem. He was a shepherd (1:1) who also tended sycamore trees (7:14). As a result, Amos spent a lot of time outdoors and this is reflected in his writings. The date of his prophecy is somewhere between 760 and 750 BC (over 100 years before Jeremiah), during the reigns of King Uzziah in southern kingdom (Judah) and King Jeroboam II in the northern kingdom (Israel). Both kingdoms were experiencing a time of economic prosperity and international influence (see 2 Kings 14:23-15:7). There was a rapid rise in the standard of living for the wealthy. But while these two nations were at ease and feeling secure externally, there was serious moral decay internally. God sent Amos to the northern kingdom to prophesy against them. His words were strong and straightforward. He denounced six heathen nations for their sins, then Judah and finally Israel. His key themes were God's justice and righteousness (see 5:24) and he warned that performing the rites of worship was not enough for them to escape judgment for their sin. As a result, Amos was very unpopular and was openly opposed by the priest in Israel, Amaziah (see 7:10-17). It is believed by many that his time of ministry was short, perhaps less than a year. It is not known what happened to Amos.

The book of Amos could be outlined as follows:

- I. Introduction (1:1-2)
- II. Judgment Against the Surrounding Nations (1:3-2:16)
- III. Judgment Against Israel (3:1-6:14)
- IV. God's plan for Israel (7:1-9:15)

#### Background to the Passage

Amos begins his prophecy by indicting Israel's neighbors, beginning with the most distant one, the city of Damascus, and then like a hawk circling its prey, moves in one by one, until he ends with Israel. Israel may have rejoiced at the indictments leveled at their neighbors and brothers in Judah, but Amos saved his most extensive condemnations for them! The repeated numerical motif: "for three sins...even four" was common in Semitic literature and is found in the bible in the books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

#### STUDY THE PASSAGE: Amos 2:6-16

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1. **What four specific sins does the Lord through Amos accuse Israel of (v.6-8)? Describe each sin. What are some current examples of these same types of sin?**

To “sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals” are connected ideas. The righteous here does not mean blameless, but rather those who are in the right, or those who have a just cause. In that way, the needy and the righteous are synonymous. The same word in the Hebrew is translated “innocent” in Ex.23:7. Amos is not referring here to the practice of debt-slavery, where those in debt sell themselves as slaves to pay off the debt (see Lev.25:39-55). The sin is injustice, falsely accusing and convicting the innocent for monetary gain.

The translation and meaning of verse 7 is difficult. The best rendering is “...who pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor.” The meaning is that the wealthy and powerful were so greedy, they even coveted the dust the poor put on their heads in mourning (see 2 Sam.1:2).

Included in with social injustice was sexual sin, in particular incest, which was forbidden in every form by the law (see Lev.18:6-18; 20:17-21).

Finally, there was the sin of religious hypocrisy. Garments, which were considered valid collateral, were to be returned to their owners at the end of each day (Ex.22:26-27). Here we see blatant violation of God’s standards following acts of worship. Their religion was merely external ritualism, for they did not live out God’s commands. (It is also implied here, by “every altar” and “the house of their god”, that the people were practicing idolatry.)

2. **What things does the Lord remind Israel of (v.9-11)? What things does the Lord personally remind you of?**

Amos recounts for the people God’s gracious, saving acts from their past. The “Amorite” is one way of referring to the population of Canaan (see Gen.15:16). The Canaanites were destroyed, despite their intimidating size (see Num.13:28,31-33). Nazarite means “separate”. This group took special vows to abstain from fermented drink, to not cut their hair and to not touch a dead body (Numb.6:1-12). Their vows lasted for a period of time when they were wholly consecrated to the Lord. Both the Nazarites and the prophets were given to the people by the Lord to look after their spiritual welfare. So Amos summarized all that God had done for Israel. He had delivered them from bondage in Egypt. He had led them through the wilderness, to the promised land. He had given them that land by defeating their enemies. And He had provided for their spiritual needs.

3. **How did Israel respond to God’s acts of grace (v.12)? How do you find yourself responding to God’s personal reminders? How will God now respond to their rebellion and rejection**

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### of Him (v.13-16)?

Israel didn't simply oppose these two religious groups. They were in essence rejecting the God behind the Nazirites and the prophets, and rebelling against His rule over them.

The Hebrew in verse 13 is again difficult to translate, but the picture is clear. A cart loaded up with grain is heavy, and will press down or crush anything in its way. So will Israel be crushed. The picture could also be that of a heavy cart that grooves out tracks in the ground. So will Israel's future be grooved out for her. Judgment was certain. No one, despite their abilities and strengths, will escape it (v. 14-16).

4. **How would you define “rebellion”? What do you think is the connection between rebellion against God and Israel's other sins, specifically the oppression of the poor? Do you see a connection in your life between rebellion and sin?**

The complexity of sin can be seen in the number of different Hebrew words used to describe it. One that is used by Amos (4:4) is “pasha” and it means “rebel”. Rebellion is simply opposition to the one in authority. It involves a breach in a relationship and the casting off of allegiance, as in a political rebellion.

Rebellion is in the heart of every man and at the heart of all sin. Man has been in rebellion to God from the beginning. Israel was continually in rebellion to God, His covenant with them and His right to rule them. Human beings just do not want to be told what to do by anyone, even God Himself! The natural outcome of rebellion is sin, human beings going their own way.

Oppression and neglect of the poor is really no different from any other sin. It is unlikely that anyone who is willful and intent on going their own way would stop to consider the needs of others or their responsibility to meet those needs.

### STUDY THE PASSAGE: Amos 3:13-4:4

5. **What does the Lord say He will do to punish Israel for her sins (v.14-15)? How do these punishments correspond to two major aspects of Israel's disobedience?**

The Lord is about to judge the two major aspects of Israel's sin: false religion and the misuse of wealth and power. The “altars of Bethel” were the locale of much corruption in Israel's history, and so they must be destroyed (1 Kings 12:32; 13:2; 2 Kings 23:15-16). The horns on the altar were considered a place of refuge (see 1 Kings 1:50, 2:28 & Ex.21:12-14). Israel would not be able to seek protection or help in religious exercises. Also, their expensive homes would be taken from them. Ivory was a

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sign of great wealth and archaeologists have discovered some of the ivory remains from these Samaritan homes.

NOTE: The northern kingdom, Israel, had Samaria as its capital. Eventually the term came to refer to the entire northern region. During the exile, foreigners moved into the area and intermarried with the small remnant of Jews still living there. They also corrupted the religion with idolatry and pagan practices. By Jesus' day, Samaritans were hated by Jews for being half-breeds and unfaithful to Judaism. For a more complete discussion on this, see page 61 of the Kinship Bible Studies (#8, WORSHIP: The Kind of Worshipers the Father Seeks).

**6. To what does Amos sarcastically compare the women of Samaria (v.1)? What is their offense? What will be their fate (v.2)?**

The region of Bashan was known for its rich pasture land and well-fed cattle (see Ps.22:12). Women in Israelite society had little if any real power and so it was unlikely any women were directly involved in oppressing the poor. Yet these women are rebuked by the Lord for demanding luxuries from their husbands, which lead to greater and greater injustices against the poor. (In contrast, the godly woman of Proverbs 21 "opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.")

The Hebrew words for "hooks" and "fishhooks" in verses 2-3 make it somewhat difficult to understand. While it is not clear what will be used, it is clear that these women will somehow be led in humiliation out through the wall of the city and away from their homes. (It is not known what "Harmon" is.)

The fact that the Lord again made an oath (v.2) indicates the seriousness of the offense and the certainty of judgment. At other times, the Lord swears by His Name, meaning His reputation, which He will not allow to be smeared by failure to keep His Word. Here He is swearing by His holiness, which is the sum total of His moral perfection. Again, judgment is sure because God cannot and will not ever lie!

**7. What is ironic about what the Lord tells all the people to do (v.4-5)? How do the people feel about their religious activities? How do you think the Lord feels about these activities? Why?**

The Lord is telling them to go worship and thus, sin. The irony is that they believe they are doing what would please God but in reality, they are displeasing Him. They think they are involved in sacred acts of worship but they are really involved in sin.

The people are proud of their religiosity ("brag" and "boast") and they love to engage in these activities. "Religion" has a way of soothing the guilty conscience and making everything seem right.

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In fact, a person can feel quite good about themselves when they've taken time to be "religious". It can give the false sense that everything is all right between us and God.

God always looks on the inside, at the heart. It is clear from the behavior of these people (oppression of the poor, crushing the needy, denying justice to the oppressed, etc.) that their religion is meaningless. It's all for show. None of it's real and so God hates it (See Is.1:10-17). In the New Testament, Jesus came down hard on the Pharisees for the same reason (see Mt.23).

NOTE: The sin of Israel also included false worship, which the Lord detested as well.

8. **How has affluence affected your spiritual condition? In what ways do you use "religion" to feel good about yourself? What can you do to make your relationship with God more real?**

### STUDY THE PASSAGE: Amos 5:1-15

9. **What is to become of Israel (v.1-3)? What invitation does the Lord nonetheless extend to the people (v.4-6)? What does it mean? What does this invitation tell you about God?**

A lament was a song or poem mourning the dead. Amos sees Israel's fate as hopeless. According to the Lord, only a remnant would remain. The northern kingdom never did rise again. Israel was never again established as a nation after the exile.

With God, there is always an opportunity for turning and repentance, even when it is doubtful the opportunity will be taken. The word "seek" means to turn to and trust or put confidence in. God is calling them to trust Him and not their religious practices, not their religious places, not even religious pilgrimages to Judah (Beersheba). The seeking is a matter of life and death. If Israel wants to live as a nation, she must seek the Lord.

The bible teaches that the invitation from God is always there for us, showing us that God is merciful and patient, wanting none to perish but all to come to Him for salvation (2 Peter 3:9). But the bible also warns us that if we fail to respond quickly ("today") to God's invitation, our hearts will be hardened and it will one day be impossible to respond (see Heb.3:7-19).

### NOTE:

"The house of Joseph" is simply another way to refer to the northern kingdom. It reflects the origins of Israel's largest tribe, Ephraim.

10. **What further indictments does Amos level at Israel (v.7,10-12)? How do people "turn**

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justice into bitterness” or “trample on the poor” or “oppress the righteous” or “deprive the poor of justice” today?

The Hebrew word for bitterness literally is “wormwood”, one of the bitterest plants. What Amos means here is that the people were perverting justice until it became a bitter experience. Those who suffered the injustice were becoming deeply bitter. The people were also guilty of hating those who tell the truth (v.10), exploiting the poor for gain (v.11), denying the poor justice in the courts (again for monetary gain, v.12), doing whatever they could to keep the poor down (v.7).

**11. What two realms is the Lord sovereign over (v.8-9)? Why do you think Amos inserts this into his message against Israel?**

The Lord is sovereign over all of creation and over the affairs of men (v.9). Amos inserts this little “doxology” here to arouse his listeners out of their complacency. All of them knew God was creator and in control of the heavens and the earth. They needed to be reminded that He is also sovereignty watching over them. If He said judgment will come, then judgment will come!

We can become complacent in our sin if we feel God is not interested or doesn’t care what we do. The fact is, He is watching us more closely than we would like Him to

**12. What additional options are Israel given (v.14-15)? What connection and progression do you see in verses 4-6 and verses 14-15?**

Amos exhorts them to turn from the evil they are involved in (injustices and mistreatment of the poor) and pursue what’s good instead.

There seems to be a progression from an act of the will (“seek me”, “seek the Lord”, “seek good”) to an attitude of the heart (“hate evil, love good”). This is often the process by which we experience change in an area of life. We can’t wait until we “feel like doing it” on the inside. Usually we must first choose to do something, and eventually our attitudes and feelings will follow.

There is also a connection between the vertical relationship with God (“seek the Lord”) and the horizontal relationship with others (“seek good, not evil”). Having things right with God is the foundation for being able to have things right with others. And it is impossible to have things right in our relationship with God and not “fix” the things that are wrong in our relationships with others. These two great commandments are inseparable: love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. And loving the Lord (in other words, responding to His love for us) is a clear prerequisite for really loving our neighbor. (see 1 John 4:7-12, 19-21)

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13. What practical ways can you “hate evil, love good and maintain justice..”?

### WRAPPING IT UP:

As Christians today, we have many of the same problems and struggles as the people of God did in the Old Testament. We are surrounded by “idolaters” and are often swept in to the worship of the idols of our day. We also are living in a time of relative affluence and security. We perform our “religious duties” and feel that we’ve done enough, that God is satisfied. The stinging messages of the prophets have tremendous relevance for us. Theirs is a message for us! Take time to evaluate your own life. Where, when and how could you begin to alleviate the oppression of the poor and the injustices of the needy?!



# 23

## MINISTRY TO THE POOR

### What Jesus Taught about Wealth, Poverty and Social Responsibility

“Jesus taught that we are to take regeneration in one hand and a cup of cold water in the other. Christians, above all others, should be concerned with social problems and social injustices.”

Billy Graham  
Peace with God

“The compassion of Jesus was shown in tangible, not merely “spiritual” ways. We who follow His example also ought to engage in tangible works of mercy and love.”

David O. Moberg  
Inasmuch: Christian Social Responsibility in  
the Twentieth Century

“I used to think, when I was a child, that Christ might have been exaggerating when He warned about the dangers of wealth. Today I know better. I know how very hard it is to be rich and still keep the milk of human kindness. Money has a dangerous way of putting scales on one’s eyes, a dangerous way of freezing people’s hand, eyes, lips and hearts.”

Dom Helder Camara  
Revolution Through Peace

**AIM OF STUDY:** To take a close look at what Jesus taught on the subject of wealth, poverty and our responsibility to the poor as his followers.

**KEY VERSE:** Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”  
(Mt.19:21)

**OPENERS:** Jesus was someone who always practiced what He preached. He never asked His disciples to do anything that He hadn’t first already done. Consider the topic of money and possessions, a subject some believe Jesus taught on more than any other single subject in the gospels. When He first called the twelve, the clear implication was, “Leave your livelihood and the only means of supporting yourself and your family, and follow me!” His advice to the rich young ruler was to sell all that he owned, give the money to the poor and then follow Him.

Jesus raised the bar quite high for these early disciples. He asked a lot of them, but He never asked of them more than what He had done. Jesus had left all the wealth and glory of heaven in order to come to earth as the Savior. (Many of us won’t even consider leaving the comforts of home for a few weeks of mission work in a third world nation!) Even by worldly standards, Jesus was not very well-off. He was born in a barn to poor, teenage parents. He was a skilled laborer (a carpenter) like Joseph and knew the meaning of hard work. He never really own anything. He admitted He didn’t even have a place to call His own (“lay His head”). He had to borrow a donkey to ride, borrow a boat to teach in, borrow a room for Passover, even borrow a tomb to be buried in. So when Jesus said some “hard” things about wealth and poverty, we must recognize He was speaking from where He was living.

Today, we often “spiritualize” what Jesus said about wealth, in order to take the sharp edge off His words. Surely He didn’t mean for us to take Him literally. Does He really expect us to sell all of our possessions just to be Christians!? Let’s examine some passages in the gospels where Jesus teaches specifically about wealth, poverty and our responsibility to determine what some of these “hard sayings” really mean.

### **STUDY THE PASSAGE: Mark 10:17-31**

In Mark 10, Jesus is once again teaching the crowds, after having directed His ministry exclusively towards His disciples (8:27-9:50). He is also moving from the area of Galilee towards Judea and ultimately to Jerusalem, where the final scenes of salvation history will be played out. He has just finished fielding questions on divorce (v.1-12) and blessing the children (v.13-16) when a man approaches.

- 1. Who comes up to Jesus, what is he like and what does he want to know? Jesus’ initial response seems off the subject and somewhat abrupt. Why do you think He said this?**

The composite picture of this man is that he is young (Mt.19:20), a ruler (Lk.18:18) and rich (Mt. Mk. & Lk.). Despite his social position, he recognizes Jesus' status and comes to Him on his knees. If this man had been in the crowd listening to Jesus teach, though, he had obviously missed it. Jesus had just said that to enter the Kingdom, one must receive it "like a child" (see vv. 14-15) This man is young, rich and in charge. He must have had a strong "can-do" mentality and so seems to believe that he can actually *do* something that would earn him eternal life! (Entering the kingdom and inheriting eternal life are expressing the same thing.)

Jesus seems to be trying to get the man to stop and think. Perhaps since he is a ruler and young (not a great combination) he isn't used to listening to anyone. The young man seems shallow and superficial, which is evident by his later comments. Jesus here is not denying His goodness or His deity, but just pointing out the implications of the truth of what was said. If Jesus *is* good and therefore *is* God, then He should be obeyed.

## **2. Why do you think Jesus goes on to summarize the second table of the law?**

The particular commandments Jesus cites are from the second half of the ten commandments, those that deal exclusively with our relationships with others. Jesus may have omitted the first four because it wasn't necessary to mention them. If we fail to do the last six, we certainly have failed to do the first four (see 1 John 4:20).

Jesus is using the law to bring about "the knowledge of sin" (see Romans 3:20). For Him, the law is more than external behavior. It's internal heart attitudes as well (see Mt.5:21-48).

The phrase "do not defraud" is probably a substitute for the 10th commandment about coveting, which is the only one not mentioned. (The accounts in Matthew or Luke make no reference to coveting either). The word in the Greek (apostereo) literally means to rob or deprive. He who covets what is another's has in his heart already deprived them of it.

## **3. What does the young man's response reveal about him?**

The man answers Jesus quite confidently that yes, indeed, he has obeyed, and ever since he was a boy (perhaps referring to his Bar Mitzvah, when Jewish boys reached the age of religious responsibility). His obedience, however, is most likely superficial and therefore cannot give him internal peace and assurance that he will in fact inherit eternal life. He would like to believe that all is well with his soul, but the truth is, he's insecure about his "salvation". Despite all his efforts, he is still a sinner with a sin nature. The apostle Paul went through the same struggle (see Romans 7:14-23).

**4. What is Jesus' attitude toward this young man? According to Jesus, what is the one thing does the young man still lacks? What root issue is Jesus getting at in verse 21?**

Greek has several different words that are all translated "love". The word used here is agape, which in the New Testament, is the word used to describe God's love; love that is unconditional and self-sacrificing. So Jesus is not just feeling some affection or friendship for this young man (phileo) but He is expressing the highest form of love, divine love.

Jesus' agape love for this young man could have been stirred by admiration for his seemingly earnest and sincere desire for eternal life as well as deep pity for the true state of his soul.

The account in Matthew 19 has the young man asking "what do I still lack?" He's convinced that all he needs to inherit eternal life is to add something to his "to-do" list .

Jesus, however, is not talking about "addition" but "substitution". This young man needs to substitute one treasure for another; his wealth for eternal life. Jesus is basically calling the young man to what He calls everyone to: faith. It'll take faith for this rich young ruler to sell all that he has, give to the poor and then follow Christ. He's depended upon his riches all his life. Selling his possessions will leave him needy and will require that that he trust Jesus (or have faith in Him). It's interesting to note that some Rabbinic laws prohibited the selling of all one's possessions because it would reduce a man to poverty. According to Jesus, this is precisely the condition we must be in before we can be saved! The New Testament is consistent also in its message that faith (or trust) in Christ is what saves us and gives us eternal life.

It is worth noting that Jesus does not tell him to just get rid of his wealth. He is to give to the poor. This was the responsibility of every good Jew according to the laws of Moses. Remembering the poor was to characterize anyone who claimed to be a follower of God.

An obvious question that arises from this passage is whether or not this is a command for all followers of Christ for all time. Does every Christian need to sell his or her possessions in order to inherit eternal life? Most scholars feel the answer is no. In the gospels, Jesus did not tell everyone that they had to sell their possessions, just this young man. There have been wealthy people throughout the bible who have followed the Lord and kept their wealth, such as Abraham (Gen.13:2) and Joseph of Arimathea (Mt.27:57). Even Zacchaeus, the wealthy tax collector, gave away only half of his belongings to the poor, paid back his "victims" four times what he had cheated them and presumably, kept the rest for

himself, and Jesus declared that salvation had come to him that day (Luke 19:1-10). Scriptures like Luke 14:33 (*In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple*) must be interpreted the same way we interpret verses that tell us to hate our fathers and mothers (Luke 14:26). Jesus is not being literal, but He is exhorting us to put Him above and before everything else in our lives. We must also keep in mind that giving away all that we have does not merit us anything with God. The consistent message of scripture is there is *nothing* we can *do* to merit or earn eternal life!

**5. How does the young man respond to Jesus' demand? Jesus' command was clear, simple and straightforward. Why do you think he's so sad?**

As He's done many times before, Jesus zeros in on the core issue with this young man. It was his wealth that was interfering with him inheriting eternal life because it was holding him back from total surrender to Christ. While there is nothing we can do to earn eternal life, it does cost us our lives. The gate is narrow that leads to eternal life (Mt.7:13-14). To go through that gate, we must deny ourselves, pick up a cross and follow Him, being willing to even give up our very lives (Mk.8:34-36). This young man wanted Jesus, but he wanted his wealth, too. He was not willing to surrender it all, because for him, Jesus was not yet "the pearl of great price" (Mt.13:45-46).

**6. If Jesus were to look at you and love you, what might He say is the one thing you lack right now in your life? Imagine the young man's internal struggle. Have you ever experienced a similar struggle as a Christian?**

**7. When the young man leaves, Jesus uses the opportunity to teach His disciples. What does He want them to understand? Why is it especially hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God? What, though, is Jesus' main point? Do the disciples "get it"?**

Jesus wants them to understand that inheriting eternal life (or entering the Kingdom) is hard. It is especially hard for the rich, but not exclusively just for them. It's hard for everyone. The accounts of this story in Matthew and Luke have Jesus commenting only about the rich.<sup>1</sup> While some feel Jesus is talking exclusively about the rich, many scholars feel He is making a more general statement. Basically, it is hard for everyone to enter the Kingdom (see Mt.7:13-14 & Mk.8:34-36 again).

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<sup>1</sup>Some manuscripts of Mark have added the phrase "for those who trust in riches" in verse 24, after ... "how hard it is". Some scholars feel that this addition was not in the original autograph and that a later scribe added the phrase in an attempt to agree with the other synoptics or make Jesus' words more palatable.

It is uniquely hard for the rich, though, not just because of what they must give up but also because of the nature of wealth itself. All disciples must give up everything to follow Christ. The rich just have more they must give up. But Jesus also warned in the Sermon on the Mount that money is like a master (Mt.6:24). This truth is evident everywhere. People will do anything for money. They will change jobs, move to new cities, work long hours, destroy their marriages and sacrifice their families for money. Money has this kind of power because it is similar to God. It promises the same things that God promises, things like happiness, protection, good health, long life. Money is in every way a false or counterfeit god, promising “the good life” but really not able to deliver. Those who have money today are some of the most miserable people on earth. So, according to Jesus, it is impossible to serve both money and God, since both demand complete devotion.<sup>2</sup>

To illustrate exactly how difficult it is to get into the kingdom, Jesus uses a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle. Many scholars have tried to explain this illustration by suggesting the camel is really a “cable” or that the eye of a needle was a well-known gateway in the city of Jerusalem which was quite low and narrow, forcing camels to kneel down in order to pass through. But there is little evidence for either explanation.

The disciples were not at all confused by what Jesus was talking about. They understood wealth as a sign of God’s blessing and poverty as a sign of His discipline and disapproval. If anyone was acceptable to God, they believed it was the rich. What Jesus was saying was radically contrary to what they believed. They “get it” because they come up with the most logical question: “Who then can be saved?!” If the rich, who experience God’s favor will have a hard time, what about the rest of us?!

#### **8. How does Jesus answer their concern and how is what He says reassuring?**

Salvation is a work of God from start to finish. It is a gift that is accepted by faith. So while it is distressing that it is so hard to enter the kingdom, it is reassuring because it does not depend upon us to get in but upon God. And with God, all things are possible! Of course, while God has done everything necessary to get us into the kingdom, the one thing He cannot do for us is make us totally surrender. We must do that ourselves.

#### **9. What does Peter bring up in verse 28 and why do you think he asks Jesus about this?**

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<sup>2</sup>Paul also notes the unique power of money when he tells Timothy that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” (1 Timothy 6:10)

There is a note of injustice in Peter's question here. Speaking for the others (as he often did) he points out that they had in fact left everything to follow Him. They have actually done what was demanded of the rich young ruler. Where, then, is the promised treasure? When will they see the great rewards? It is apparent that Peter and the disciples are still listening to Jesus with "material" (worldly) ears and not spiritual (heavenly) ears.

**10. How does Jesus answer Peter's sense of "unfairness"? What fundamental kingdom truths does Jesus lay out for the disciples?**

Jesus begins with the solemn phrase "I tell you the truth" which means, "What I am about to say is extremely important!" He then seems to make two basic points in verses 29-31.

One is that there are two ages, this present age and the age to come. Some of the benefits of following Jesus are reserved for the age to come. In that age, things will be turned on their heads. Those who had been on top, with the most success, the most power, the most wealth, will then be on the bottom. And those who were on the bottom in this present age will at that time, be on the top. In other words, there will be perfect fairness and justice in God's economy. It just might not be all in the here and now.

And two, no matter how much you have sacrificed for Jesus, you will be "reimbursed" many times more. In verse 29, Jesus says to anyone who has left home *or* mother *or* father etc. will, in verse 30, receive homes *and* brothers *and* sisters, etc. No one has ever out-given the Lord. We can expect to receive much more than we gave up. This applies to this present age as well as the age to come. The only difference is that in this present age we can also expect persecutions.

**11. How do these fundamental kingdom truths help make you more willing to surrender all that you have to Jesus? In what ways have you already "received a hundred times as much" as you have given up for the Lord?**

**12. In light of this passage, what do you think the Lord might want you to do differently with your wealth and possessions? What, if anything, is holding you back from obeying?**

**WRAPPING IT UP:** In the parable of the sower, Jesus states that wealth can be deceitful (Mk.4:19). It can trick us and fool us. We can be deceived into thinking our wealth will bring us security and happiness. We can be blinded by our wealth to our true spiritual condition (Lk.12:16-21). If we're not careful, wealth can choke the spiritual life

right out of us. As Christians, we need to be on our guard about the power of money and the deceitfulness of riches.

At the same time, we must cultivate a habit of giving. Those who gave of what they had, whether a lot or just a little, were always commended by Jesus (Luke 19:1-10; 21:1-4; Mt.26:6-13). He did this because giving is what characterizes the Father. He is kind, even to the ungrateful and the wicked (Lk.6:35). As His children, we are to reflect this quality of giving to the world.



# 24

## MINISTRY TO THE POOR

### The Example of the Early Church

“I believe that there is a divine bias to the disadvantaged and that the church needs to be much more faithful in reflecting it.”

David Sheppard  
Bias to the Poor

“The blood boils with impotent rage at the sight of these enormities [poverty, unemployment, homelessness, hunger, exploited labor, drunkenness, disease, slums, slavery, prostitution] callously afflicted, and silently borne by these miserable victims. What is the use of preaching the gospel to people whose whole attention is concentrated upon a mad, desperate struggle to keep themselves alive? In providing for the relief of temporary misery, I reckon that I am only making it easy where it is now difficult, and possible where it is now all but impossible, for men and women to find their way to the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

General William Booth  
Salvation Army  
In Darkest England and the Way Out, 1890

“The Christian will therefore approach social problems in a significantly different way than the person who is not a believer. As a member of the church of Jesus Christ, he will strive to be not conformed to the world (Rom.12:1-2). He will play a leading role in pointing out features of society which seem contrary to God’s will. He will identify stumbling blocks to faith in Christ, sources of human suffering, abuses of natural resources, and violations of the dignity of men created in the image of God. Just as Jesus went about doing good, the Christian will go about doing good.”

David Moberg  
Inasmuch: Christian Social Responsibility in  
20th Century American

**AIM OF STUDY:** To examine what the early church both taught and did regarding the poor and needy.

**KEY VERSE:** Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. (Acts 2:45)

**OPENERS:** The Christian church in America has not left a very good impression on the average person today. Newspapers, magazines and television reports all characterize Christians as cold, heartless and judgmental, always on the wrong side of issues relating to the poor. Much of the criticism leveled at Christians is of course unfounded. Jesus warned us that the world would hate us because it also hated Him (see John 15:18). But some of it is justified. We have not lived the way we are called to live in the bible and even the world knows it!

Many Christians have deliberately shied away from social issues. They see the dangers of perverting Christianity into a social gospel (building the Kingdom of God/Utopia on earth) that distracts from the central responsibility of evangelism. They also fear adopting socialistic values, such as liberation theology (economic and political freedom is equated with salvation in Christ), which endorses Marxist theories and solutions. Living out the social implication of the gospel, however, is what we *are* called to do throughout the pages of the New Testament. It is also what the early church did. Doing so didn't distract them from the Great Commission; it only enhanced their effectiveness. They lived the life while they proclaimed the message and the gospel spread throughout the known world.

Let's examine what exactly the early church taught and did with regards to the poor and needy.

- 1. How would you describe the Christian church's response today to the needs of the poor, the homeless, the outcasts of society? In what ways do you think the church has "gotten in right" and in what ways do you think the church has "gone wrong"?**

**STUDY THE PASSAGE:** Acts 2:40-47; 4:32-37; 6:1-3; 11:27-30

### **Introduction to the book of Acts**

Acts was written by Luke, a physician, traveling associate to Paul and the only non-Jewish author in the entire bible. The Gospel of Luke and Acts are companion volumes of history. Because of Luke's care in research and style of writing, these two books provide us with a chronological and historically accurate account of the life of Christ and the early years of the Christian church. Acts covers a span of about 30 years of history, focusing in on the lives and ministries of Peter and Paul. Much can be learned from Acts about the settings and backgrounds for other New Testament writings, in particular, Paul's epistles. Key emphases in Acts are the role of the Holy Spirit in the early church, the spread of the gospel, dealing with persecution, life in the Christian community and

resolving conflicts within the body. Because of the wealth of information found in Acts, the church has throughout the centuries gone to this book to discover timeless principles regarding church life and government.

**Read Acts 2:40-47.**

- 2. It was the feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit had just been poured out, Peter had just finished his first sermon to a large crowd in the heart of Jerusalem and Luke is summarizing. What is the final outcome of that day? If something like this happened today, how would you summarize the event?**

Luke is indicating here that Peter said a lot more than what is actually recorded in Acts 2 and that his words were strong and emotion-filled (“warned” and “pleaded”). The final outcome was the conversion of 3000 people. Some have contested that number, saying it is obviously inflated. The population of Jerusalem at the time was only around 25,000 and a crowd of 3000 people could never hear one speaker without a microphone. Acoustical tests in Palestine, however, have shown that in certain locations, preachers could have addressed large audiences.<sup>1</sup> Also, Jerusalem was filled with pilgrims due to the holiday of Pentecost, which was probably the most well-attended of all the Jewish holidays. Finally, the tense of the verbs in verse 41 allows for the “adding to their numbers” to continue throughout the day, perhaps during one on one conversations.

The fact that the converts were baptized signifies *real* conversion to Christ. From a Jewish perspective, baptism was reserved only for Gentiles who wished to convert to Judaism and break from their past. Baptism for these Jews, therefore, had tremendous meaning and represented an entirely new allegiance (although not a break from Jewish roots).

- 3. What characterized these new Jewish believers (v.42)? What impact did they seem to have on everyone else in Jerusalem at the time (v.43)? What could we learn today from their example?**

Throughout Acts, Luke has inserted various summary statements that conclude blocks of narrative (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31) and summary paragraphs that introduce blocks of narrative (2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16). This is one of them.

According to Luke, what characterized these early Christians was unity around the teachings of the apostles, close and intimate relationships, sharing meals together and prayer. The teachings of the apostles were what Jesus had handed down to the 12 (“teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” Mt.28:20). Today,

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<sup>1</sup>B. C. Crisler, “The Acoustics and Crowd Capacity of Natural Theaters in Palestine,” BA, 39 [1976], 128-41.

believers are still united around the teachings of the apostles, only they are in the form of the New Testament. The verb “devoted” means a steadfast and single-minded fidelity to a certain course of action. These activities were front and center in their lives. Fellowship or “Koinonia” meant sharing in common and was more than coffee after a Sunday morning service. Some debate that “breaking of bread” signified communion, but that is really not clear from the passage. It could just as easily mean an ordinary meal (which it seems to mean in verse 46). And prayer was always a part of the life of Jesus and the life of His church.

Apparently, the people of Jerusalem were watching these early believers and as a result were filled with awe (an emotion in which dread, veneration and wonder are variously mingled<sup>2</sup>). This was due in part to the supernatural phenomenon that surrounded the early church as well as their life styles, both of which may have been correctly interpreted as evidence of the presence of God with His people.

**4. How did these early Jewish believers live out their faith (v.44-46)? Why do you think all these different activities are so vital to the life of a Christian community?**

Luke expands on his original summary statement in verse 42 and describes how these early believers actually lived. They met at their favorite spot, the eastern edge of the outer court of the temple known as Solomon’s Colonnade (their meetings were obviously not very private). They also ate at each others’ homes and had fellowship there. (It is important for our faith invade our personal lives in this way and not restrict all of our “religious” activities to outside of our homes!) But perhaps the most notable thing these early believers did was sell their possessions and hold everything they had in common. While later in Acts, Luke specifically mentions the sale of land and property, here in this passage “possessions and goods” means both land and personal belongings. While nowhere in the New Testament is this commanded of Christians, it does seem to be a voluntary characteristic of the early church.<sup>3</sup>

Giving and sharing in particular has a profound impact on both those who are inside the community of faith and those who are outside. For those who are not Christians, when believers act unselfishly and generously, it is evidence to the truth and reality of Christianity. Today if “well-off” American Christians began to release their death grip on their money and possessions and began to *at the very least*, take care of the needs of those inside the church, the world may begin to sit up, take notice and listen to our message. (It should be kept in mind that according to Luke, “the Lord added to their number daily”. It’s safe to assume that as the

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<sup>2</sup>Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary

<sup>3</sup>The Qumran Essenes was a Jewish monastic group credited with the writing of the Dead Sea Scrolls. According to Josephus (first century Jewish historian) the Qumran community also had all things in common, just like the early Christians. Their community differed, however, in that the sharing of possessions was mandatory and their community was closed to outsiders.

numbers grew, so did the needs!) But giving and sharing also affects the community of believers. Giving will create love and unity within the church. In contrast, selfishness with our material possessions breeds discord and disunity. This is what Paul needed to address in the Corinthian church, where economic differences were creating divisions at their communal meals (see 1 Cor. 11).

**5. How does Luke describe the believers' relationships with those outside of the community of faith (v.47)? What part did their community life play in the spreading of the gospel?**

The believers in Jerusalem enjoyed the "favor of all the people" in the same way Jesus was respected by those in His home town (Lk.2:52) and Paul expected his leaders to be above public criticism (1 Tim.3:2). Christians are to live in such a way so no one, religious or non-religious or pagan or heathen or saint could criticize their behavior. The effect of this kind of life style on first century Jerusalem was continual conversions.

**6. In what ways is your Christian community following the example of the early church? In what ways does your Christian community need to change and improve? What effect is your Christian community having on those around you who are unbelievers?**

**Read Acts 4:32-37**

This passage is another "summary" paragraph of Luke's. Peter and John had just healed a crippled beggar at the temple in Jerusalem and they use the miracle as an opportunity to testify about Jesus. They are brought before the Sanhedrin and sternly charged not to preach anymore in the name of Jesus. They returned to the community of believers, shared the events that had taken place and then prayed for God's favor and help. *"After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."* (Acts 3-4)

**7. How does Luke again describe the believers' relationships with each other (v.32)? How would you describe your relationships with other believers? What is one way their relationship was practically expressed?**

What Luke is describing here is unity. Paul spoke a lot about unity (Eph.4:1-6; 1 Cor.12) making it a vital part of Christian community. Luke's phrase "one in heart and mind" sums it up well. These Christians were together in their desires, ambitions, hopes and dreams as well as their thoughts, opinions and attitudes. This could only happen if Jesus was truly the head of their body (Eph.4:15). Christian unity, however, does mean uniformity. Diversity is not eliminated, for this is what makes the church truly a miracle. There is real unity in the midst of tremendous diversity (see 1 Cor.12:12-13)!

The believers shared *all* that they had with the others. You can't get much more practical than that!

**8. How would you describe these early believers' view of their money and possessions? How specifically do you view your money and possessions? As Christians, how *should* we view our possessions? (see Ps.24:1; 50:9-11; Hag.2:8; 1 Cor.4:7)**

Luke very bluntly states that "no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own". The scripture teaches that everything on earth belongs to the Lord and that whatever we "have" is really His. He has merely given it to us to use. We therefore are stewards and not owners. While this passage in Acts doesn't explain all this, it is clear that these believers acted as if this is was true. They willingly and freely shared with those in need, because, after all, what they had was God's to be used as God saw fit.

Today in our culture we have a strong sense of ownership and clearly defined boundaries of what's mine and what's not. We also highly value independence and tend to view what we do own as things we've rightfully earned. To view everything we have as being given to us from God requires a radical shift in our thinking. But we must learn to see not just our possessions, but also our livelihoods and jobs, as well as our particular talents and abilities to do those jobs as gifts from God. We have nothing that has not been given to us and therefore we have a responsibility to Whom it really belongs. Changing our thinking in this area ought to free of us from the grip our possessions tend to have on us in the 20th century. (They own us as much as we believe we own them!)

**9. Because "no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own", what specifically did they do (v.34-35)? What was the ultimate outcome (see Deut.15:4)?**

It's been said by economists and social scientists that poverty in the world is not the result of a shortage of food and provisions, but rather the refusal of some to share with the many. Such was not the case among the Christians in Jerusalem and the outcome was "there were no needy persons among them".

It's important to point out a few fundamental principles from this passage. First, the selling of land or houses was not mandatory or required of everyone, like socialism. It was voluntary and happened from "time to time" as anyone had need. There were times, therefore, when it was appropriate for Christians to make special sacrifices for the sake of others. Second, it's clear that the giving happened publicly and not secretly behind closed doors. The money was brought to the feet of the apostles' so that everyone in the community knew about it. This shows a tremendous amount of trust in the leadership in Jerusalem as well as a tremendous amount of integrity on the part of the apostles. Today, we shy away from giving

publicly, out of obedience to Jesus' command in Mt.6:1-4. But Jesus was speaking against hypocrisy, or giving simply for the sake of making an impression on others. And third, because it was public, giving became a source of encouragement to the Christian community. It stirred up love and unity in the body. The reverse was true in Corinth. In the church in Corinth, the believers were selfish and did not share what they had with those who were in need. In particular, at their agape feasts, the rich would eat and get drunk while the poor remained hungry (1 Cor.11). As a result, the church in Corinth was riddled with divisions and disunity, which Paul had to address directly (1 Cor.3).

**10. At the same time, what was happening *spiritually* with the community of believers (v.33)? What does this tell you about the importance of how Christians use their wealth?**

Spiritually, things couldn't be better for the Jerusalem church. They continued to preach the gospel message with power and God's grace or favor was with them. It's safe to assume that what Luke had said in 2:47 was still taking place. The sharing of money and possessions with others in need is perhaps the most tangible expression of love possible (1 John 3:17). Jesus said it was by our love for each other that the world would know that we're His (John 13:34-35). Most people's objections to Christianity would be silenced in the face of this kind of love. In the reverse, however, what kind of testimony is it if we hoard our money and possessions, leaving brothers and sisters in the Lord in need?

**Read Acts 4:36-5:11**

Luke goes on to present both a positive and a negative example of the principles he's been discussing.

**11. Luke gives a positive example from the life of Barnabas, a leader in the early church. What basic biblical principle does this story illustrate?**

Christian leaders should always model the way to live. The leader is not just called to teach about it, but to actually do it! This is what Jesus did. There isn't anything He asked us to do that He hadn't already done. This principle is particularly challenging when it comes to material possessions. It's much easier to just talk. But leaders must heed the warning in James: "Not many of you should presume to be teacher, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." Christian leaders must always "practice what they preach"!

**12. Who does Luke use as a negative example and what exactly did they do (5:1-2)? According to Peter, what was their sin (v.3)? What do you think motivated them to lie?**

Ananias and Sapphira's sin was their dishonesty. They had lied. It was not that they hadn't given all the money to the apostles. They weren't expected to do that. The sin was that they had given the impression that they had given it all. They wanted everyone to think they had laid it all down at the apostles' feet like Barnabas. Their motivation was that they wanted others to think well of them. This is the hypocrisy that Jesus so often condemned. (Hypocrisy is the Greek means play acting or wearing a mask.)

**13. What was God's judgment on their sin (v.5-10)? What was the overall result of this judgment on the church (v.11)? Why do you think God took such severe action with them?**

Paul warned in 1 Tim.6:6-10 that "the love of money was the root of all kinds of evil". Jesus warned that we "cannot serve God and money" (Mt.6:24). Money is powerful and acts like a master over us. God did not want His young church tainted with the sin of greed, dishonesty and the love of money. Right from the start, it was essential for the believers to see the importance of absolute honesty and integrity when it came to matters involving money. Today, we have unfortunately seen the fallout from dishonest, greedy ministers of the gospel and the disgrace it has brought to the Christian church.

**Read Acts 6:1-7**

Luke relates here a situation that arose in the Jerusalem church. It involved two distinct groups of Jewish believers. The Grecian Jews were Jews living outside of Palestine, influenced by Hellenistic (Greek) culture and language, who had returned to Jerusalem to live. Hebraic Jews were Jews from Palestine who spoke Aramaic and who were culturally "Jewish".

**14. What complaint is brought to the apostles' attention (v.1)? What do you think could explain the difference in treatment these Grecian Jewish widows received?**

The two distinct groups of Jewish-Christian widows were not being treated the same. In particular, the Grecian Jews were being overlooked. This is quite understandable, since human tendency is to judge and exclude those who are different. These widows, although they were Jewish, and although they were believers, were culturally very different from Palestinian Jews and so were not accepted. Unfortunately, sinful attitudes and prejudices formed before conversion are not always corrected at conversion.

**15. How do the apostles go about resolving the problem (v.2-6)? What set of priorities govern the apostles' decision?**

The Twelve held a meeting with all the disciples in order to reach some sort of resolution to the problem. It should be noted that the Twelve did not act

independently from the rest of the body, especially when their decision would have affected everyone. They also saw clearly what their role was and what should take priority with their time. Although they saw their primary job as the ministry of the Word and prayer, they did see this job of distributing to the widows as being very important. Therefore, they chose only spiritually mature men (“full of the Spirit and wisdom”) to handle the job. The Twelve did not see this distribution ministry as “mundane”, something that any warm body could do! They also chose seven men (“complete” number), which corresponds with the Jewish practice of setting up boards of seven men to perform particular duties.

**16. What was the final outcome of their proposal? What precedents for all time did this incident set for the church?**

Their proposal served to sort of “get things back on track”. The job of evangelism went on, people were getting saved, and the widows were content.

This little incident does set some precedents that the church for all time could follow:

1. The importance of making some decisions corporately. The Christian church is not to be run by an autocratic dictator.
2. The importance of specializing jobs. As the church grows, certain people will perform certain tasks and others, other tasks. This helps the overall work of the church run more smoothly.
3. The importance of spiritual maturity and not just talents and skills. In choosing people for jobs within the body of Christ, it is vital that their spiritual life be considered along with their abilities.
4. The importance of leaders commissioning others with the laying on of hands. This is reminiscent of the story of Moses appointed Joshua as his successor (Num.27:15-23). The laying on of hands indicates a giving of authority and filling with the power of the Spirit. It does not indicate some sort of apostolic succession.
5. The importance of “servers” or “deacons” to the body as well as preachers, evangelists and teachers. (The verb “serve” is the same as the root for “deacon”.) Although Luke does not call these men deacons, this is what they are doing.

**17. From these three passages in Acts, list all the principles you can find that can help us today govern our money, possessions and giving. Which of these principles do you see in operation in the church? What are some practical ways you can begin to implement some of these principles?**

1. As Christians use their material possessions in accordance with the will of God, people will come to faith in Christ (2:47).

2. As Christians share their material possessions with those in need, it will stir up love and unity in the body (4:32).
3. Spiritual leaders must model the right way for Christians to use their material possessions (4:36-37).
4. Christians should be willing to make special sacrifices to meet the special needs of others in the church (4:34-35).
5. Christians ought to be able to observe others giving within the body (4:34-35).
6. Christians who do give ought to be shown appreciation (4:36).
7. Christians should always give to honor God and not themselves (5:1-10).
8. God detests dishonesty, lack of integrity and hypocrisy when it comes to matter of money (5:1-10).
9. God wants all giving to be voluntary (5:4).
10. God wants churches to have some kind of system for meeting the material needs of other in the body (6:1-7).
11. Spiritual leaders may at times need to delegate responsibilities to others (6:1-7).
12. Meeting the material needs of people requires the same high standards from leaders as meeting their spiritual needs (6:1-7).<sup>4</sup>

**WRAPPING IT UP:** In many ways the church today has matured and developed far beyond the early church in Jerusalem. But in other ways, that early church is still far ahead of us. One area that is truly lacking in today's church is the care for the material needs of its members. Many are giving and sharing, but many more are not. What an incredible testimony to God it would be if the church would begin to see itself as stewards and not owners of material possessions and would therefore give sacrificially, so that "there were no needy persons among them".

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<sup>4</sup>These principles are taken from a book by Gene A. Getz entitled A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions (Moody Press) 1990.

