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**COMPASSION & WISDOM:  
THE RESPONSE OF JONATHAN EDWARDS TO THE  
PROBLEM OF POVERTY**

Sharon James

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) is rightly remembered as one of the great Calvinist theologians of all time. Truly Calvinist thinking will show itself by being God-centered in every area, and one of the hallmarks of Edwards' writing is its God-centered emphasis. In our own day, when so much Christian thinking tends to be man-centred, to go back to Edwards is refreshing. It is particularly illuminating to refer to his treatment of a subject which is of crucial relevance today. At the present time, a considerable amount of attention is being devoted by evangelicals to the subject of ministries of mercy.<sup>1</sup> In the United Kingdom a variety of imaginative and effective ministries have been undertaken in recent years by evangelical churches, as well as by evangelical para-church organizations.

When considering the basis for such ministries of mercy, one of Edwards' lesser known works provides a helpful reminder that in this area, as in all our thinking, we must begin with God and his attributes.<sup>2</sup> Our concern for the poor and needy is based on God's deep and detailed concern that such people should be generously and sensitively treated. In the passage used by Edwards as the springboard for a detailed treatment of this subject (Deuteronomy 15:7-11), God does not just provide the "letter" of a law to provide for the needy (i.e. the cancellation of debts every seven years), but he provides a portrait of the *attitude* which his own covenant people are to have towards the unfortunate. This inner disposition (continued open-heartedness) reflects the open heart and mercy of God himself. Charity was not just to be the ritual fulfilment of an obligation every seven years — just as for us, charity is never to remain a legalistic payment of a tithe. It was divine compassion that motivated the

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: the Call of the Jericho Road* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Christian Charity: Or the Duty of Charity to the Poor, Explained and Enforced* [*Collected Works* (1834 ed.; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), II, 163-173]. All subsequent page references are from this edition.

promulgation of the law of release, and fulfilment of the law without the exercise of compassion was not enough; indeed, the passage makes it clear that “wicked” (i.e. calculating and ungenerous) thoughts are an abomination to the Lord.

Throughout this treatise, Edwards bases his arguments on the foundational truth of the grace of God. All God’s dealings with his people are on the basis of grace and, thus, it is mercy that he desires his people to show to others. The whole thrust of this treatise could be summed up in the parable of the debtors. It leaves the reader deeply shamed that having received such riches of grace, one could be so neglectful of mercy towards others. Although Edwards begins with an Old Testament text, there are continual references to Christ’s example and teaching. For Jesus, who is the fullest revelation of God, himself expressed mercy — this foundational attribute of Deity — in the most vivid and striking of words and works.

Edwards’ treatise deserves detailed attention not only because it focuses the basis for mercy ministries on the character of God himself, but also because many of the questions raised are still highly relevant in our own day. Surveying the main elements of his exposition points to a number of practical applications which are still challenging and pointed. For instance, the question is sometimes raised as to who are the proper objects of such ministry: some would wish to focus “charity” primarily on believers in need; others would wish to limit giving to the “deserving poor” (however defined). While there are many objections that may be raised against “indiscriminate” giving, Edwards answers a number that are often raised against wide-ranging and liberal expressions of charity.

The treatise is presented in four sections and is examined here by means of a summary and commentary on each section.

### **1. An Explanation of Deuteronomy 15:7-11**

Edwards begins by asserting that the command to mercy in the passage is not to be limited in its scope.

If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tight fisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. Be careful not to harbour this wicked thought: ‘The seventh year, the year for cancelling debts is near’ so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the Lord

against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work, and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land (Deuteronomy 15:7-11, NIV).

Some might understand this command to apply to “brothers,” as in fellow believers. Edwards preempts this objection by arguing that the “poor man” referred to is equivalent to “your neighbour” in New Testament terms, and that Leviticus 25:35 shows that the obligation of mercy was to be exercised towards aliens and strangers in the land even in Old Testament times. He does argue that our *first* duty is to fellow believers: “We are to look upon ourselves as related to all mankind, but especially to those who are of the visible people of God”(p.164). He also admits that there are some undeserving cases: “There ought to be none suffered to live in pinching want, among a visible people of God, who are able: unless in case of idleness, or prodigality, or some such case which the word of God excepts” (p.164). Nevertheless, the thrust of Edwards’ argument is for broad and generous giving.

He then emphasizes that there is specific direction as to the spirit in which charity is to be exercised: “We should give bountifully and sufficiently for the supply of the poor’s need” (p.163). Negatively, there is the command that aid is not to be given in a grudging or halfhearted or calculating way. The duty to charity is not an option; it is an absolute command, and one that is repeated in the strongest of terms: “be openhanded ... freely lend ... give generously ... be openhanded” (Deuteronomy 15:8, 10, 11). In this way, argues Edwards, “God doth not only say, Beware that thou do not actually refuse to give him, but, Beware that thou have not one objecting thought ... God warns against the beginnings of uncharitableness in the heart” (p.163).

Edwards finds in these verses three “enforcements” of the duty to charity: (1) the needy person is referred to as “thy brother”; (2) God promises to bless the charitable; (3) needy recipients of goodwill will never be lacking. He then makes three further applications: (1) “Merely to give something is not sufficient ... we must open our hand wide” (p.164); (2) the giving must be done freely and without inward grudging, for “God looks at the heart and the hand is not

accepted without it" (p.164); (3) this is as much a duty as prayer or worship; it is not just a commendable thing, but a binding command.

## 2. The Christian's Obligation to Charity to the Poor

Appeal is made to Scripture and reason as Edwards drives home the thesis that charity to the needy was not something only for the Old Testament covenant people: "Where have we any command in the Bible laid down in stronger terms, and in a more peremptory urgent manner, than the command of giving to the poor?" (p.164). Many Christians would concede that charity to the poor is a duty, but would regard it as one of the lesser matters of the faith. Rather, Edwards argues, it is one of the fundamentals. To prove his point, Edwards turns to Micah, who names the *love of mercy* as one of the "top three" obligations which sum up true godliness (Micah 6:8). He cites James 1:27, where mercy to the needy is seen as the first sign of true religion. And he quotes Jesus' own words, who twice turns on the most correctly "religious" people of his day (who no doubt faithfully tithed all they had) and tells them to discover what God meant when he said "I deserve *mercy*, not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13; 12:7; cf. Hosea 6:6). With regard to this last quotation, Edwards seems to imply that this mercy was primarily benevolence to the poor. It should rather be noted that the mercy commanded was "covenant love" in *all* its ramifications, *including* benevolence to the poor.

Reason also demands benevolence, for all men are made in God's image, and are thus worthy of our love. Moreover, we "have all the same nature, like faculties, like dispositions, like desires of good, like needs, like aversion to misery, and are made of one blood ... God hath made us of such a nature, that we cannot subsist without the help of one another" (p.164).

Thus, it is entirely suitable and in keeping with the order of creation that we look to the interests of others (Philippians 2:4). Selfishness is unsuitable to the way in which human society has been ordained by God. A "private niggardly spirit is more suitable for wolves ... than for human beings" (p.164-5). And, Edwards goes on to maintain, as we are all too ready to expect that others should aid us if we fall into distress, it is only reasonable to treat the needy as we ourselves would wish to be treated if in similar straits.

Furthermore, Edwards asks, how much more is it reasonable to aid the needy when we consider that we live in the age of grace, and that all God's dealings with us through Christ have been generous and merciful in the extreme. Christ, though rich, became poor for us so that we might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). How sad, if we, who expect to share in his riches, begrudge the relief of a poor

neighbour. What if Christ had adopted any of the excuses we so commonly advance to avoid kindness to our neighbour? Considering the work of Christ in bringing all believers into one body, it is scandalous to allow any member of the body to suffer need. When one suffers, all suffer (1 Corinthians 12:26) and thus we are to bear each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2).

Sensitive believers are often found examining themselves, lest they have offended God. Edwards suggests that we are very unlikely to regularly examine ourselves with regard to our giving to the poor, but this neglect brings the anger of God. It was one of the gross offenses of Sodom that the poor and needy were oppressed (Ezekiel 16:49). Edwards suggests that the "Papists" of his own time put the Anglophone Protestants to shame in this regard. Even today's Evangelicals perhaps do not always compare well with the Catholics in this matter.

### 3. Exhortation to Charity

First, argues Edwards, we are only stewards of what we possess, not owners (1 Corinthians 6:20). "A steward has no business with his master's goods, to use them any otherwise than for the benefit of his master and his family, or according to his master's direction" (p.165). Thus, hospitality is to be given freely (1 Peter 4:9, 10), for if any steward hoards his master's goods for his own enjoyment while others in the master's family are suffering need, "he is therein guilty of robbing his master" (p.166). Each of us will give account at the Last Day as to whether "we have denied some of his family their proper provision, while we have hoarded up for ourselves" (p.166).

Second, if we give to the needy, we are in fact giving to the Lord himself. "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord" (Proverbs 18:17). Even more powerfully, Christ commends those who ministered to the hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick and imprisoned as having ministered to him (Matthew 25:35-36), and he condemns those who neglected the needy as having neglected him. The whole of the Great Judgement is represented by Christ as turning on this one duty, and so we should get the point: "a charitable spirit and practice towards our brethren is necessary for salvation" (p.166). Just as Christ lived on earth in poverty and was ministered to (Luke 8:2-3), so too, many of the members of his Body depend even now on the charity of others.

Edward also reminds us that God deals with us according to how we deal with others in this regard. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7). Or as James puts it: "judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful"

(James 2:13). In fact, Edwards points out, throughout Scripture, the portraits of the godly include reference to mercy; it is obviously an indispensable aspect of the character who pleases God. "Whoever is kind to the needy honours God" (Proverbs 14:31). The righteous character depicted in Psalm 37 is described as giving generously (vv. 21, 28). Indeed, in biblical terms, "righteous" and "merciful" are "used as synonymous terms" (p.166).

Gifts to the needy are never "lost" to the giver, because they are, in reality, given to the Lord, who promises to repay the giver (Proverbs 19:17). This repayment will be abundant (Luke 6:38): "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (NIV). Thus, Edwards notes that material generosity in this life is eternally rewarded (Matthew 10:42). Jesus commanded: "Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted" (Luke 12:33 NIV). But the Lord's reward to the merciful are often experienced in this life also. "He who gives to the poor will lack nothing" (Proverbs 28:27). "A generous man will prosper" (Proverbs 11:25). Giving, Edwards remarks, is often compared with sowing: liberality brings great rewards (2 Corinthians 9:6-8). It is a simple matter for the Lord to reward the merciful: "only one act of providence in a man's affairs either adds to his estate or diminishes from it, more than he would need to give to the poor in a whole year" (p.167).

On the other hand, Scripture clearly teaches the judgment of God on those who wilfully ignore the plight of the needy. The one who "closes his eyes" to the poor "receives many curses" (Proverbs 28:27). This "is the way of uncharitable men: they hide their eyes from seeing the wants of their neighbour" (p.167-168). The merciful person is alert to find those to whom help can be extended, while a "niggardly spirit ... will always be at a loss for objects of his charity ... They hide their eyes and will not see their neighbours wants" (p.168). Those who are generous to others will find that if the day comes when they themselves are in dire need, then there will be those who will minister to them (Psalm 41:1-4; Proverbs 21:3).

#### 4. Objections Answered

Edwards lists eleven objections to the exercise of charity. Each objection is answered from Scripture.

1. "If I give to the poor without a right attitude it will be unacceptable." This objection, though, can be advanced against

following any of the duties of religion, and neglect of these duties increases condemnation. Edwards argues that obedience to the duty of giving to the poor is as much a part of “the appointed way of seeking salvation, as any other duty” (p.169).

2. “If I am generous I will become self-righteous, and this will do more harm than good.” Again, this excuse can be advanced against obedience to any of God’s commandments. If valid, it means that “you may throw up all religion, and live like heathens or atheists ... lest if you should do otherwise you should make a righteousness of your conduct” (p.169).

3. “I’ve given to the poor in the past, but have not found myself any better off.” Edwards comments that this mentality betrays that any previous giving to the poor has probably been from a niggardly, grudging and covetous spirit rather than from spontaneous generosity. The promises are extended to those who give freely, and even raising this question betrays a calculating spirit. Besides, God will honour kindness to the poor in his own time.

4. “I won’t give to that person — they may be needy but they are not desperate.” Christian charity, however, is not limited to those in extreme circumstances. We are to love our neighbour *as ourselves*, and we ourselves would expect help long before absolute desperation. The Christian spirit makes us sympathize with our neighbour when we see him in any difficulty.

5. “I won’t give to that person — they are aggressive and ungrateful.” Yet Christ clearly taught the duty of love towards our enemies. Edwards expounds the parable of the Good Samaritan to show that Jesus expected his fellow Jews to have mercy on their enemies, the Samaritans, and vice versa. Moreover, we are to love one another *as Christ has loved us* (John 13:34); he loved us even though we were his enemies.

6. “I can’t give to charity because I have nothing to spare.” Certainly, some are less able to give than others, and there is no obligation on the very needy to give to those better off than themselves. In general, though, when we say we have nothing to spare, this says more about our covetous desire for more material things than we really need, and our reluctance to forfeit our luxuries. Since we are told to bear each other’s burdens, this does imply some sacrifice, otherwise the picture of taking up a burden would be wholly inappropriate.



7. "I can't give to that person because I'm not fully aware of all the facts — he may be undeserving." Edwards uses the illustration of Nabal to indict this attitude (1 Samuel 25:10, 11). Yes, there may be those who are undeserving, but "too great a scrupulosity" is to be abhorred. "It is better to give to several that are not [proper] objects of charity, than to send away empty one that is" (p.172). We are commanded to be kind to strangers (Hebrews 13:2), which Edwards understands to include men and women of whose circumstances we are ignorant.

8. "I'm not obliged to give to the poor until they come and ask for help." It is appallingly unkind to force a needy person to come begging to us before we help out. How much more sensitive to offer help before it is asked for. We can in this way treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated. We should be so anxious that none are suffering need that we go out of our way to discover where help would be appropriate.

9. "I'm not obliged to help those who are needy because of their own fault." Many Christians who do manage their affairs efficiently are tempted to believe they have no responsibility to "bail out" those who are less efficient than themselves. It is a fact of life that some do not have the ability to manage their affairs in a prudent manner. Edwards argues that the feckless should not be looked down on: "You should be grateful that God hath given you such a gift which he hath denied to the person in question. And it will be a very suitable way for you to show your thankfulness, to help those to whom that gift is denied, and let them share the benefit of it with you. This is as reasonable as that he to whom Providence has imparted sight, should be as willing to help him to whom sight is denied ... or; as that he to whom God hath given wisdom, should be willing that the ignorant should have the benefit of his knowledge" (p.172).

Particularly if fellow Christians have been reduced to poverty through their own fault, we should have compassion as if they were our own blood relatives. "We should not refuse to help them in that necessity and distress, which they brought upon themselves by their own inconsiderateness" (p.172). What if there is not only carelessness, but actual vice? Edwards argues that if they wilfully continue in vice, relief should be withheld. If vice is repented of then help should be given. If a sinful way of life is persisted in, then the innocent families should be helped if at all possible. If the innocent members of the family cannot be helped without also helping the sinning head of the family, this is better than to "suffer those who are

really proper objects of charity [the wife and the children] to remain without relief" (p.172).

10. "If others did their duty and gave, then I would not have to help." This is invalid as an excuse, because we have a duty to help those who are in need even when the need is a direct consequence of the fault of others. The one assaulted and robbed on the road to Jericho was rightly helped by the Samaritan, even though it was the fault of the thieves that left him in distress. If someone is not helped by those who should properly provide for him, such as his or her family, then as Christians we should help out.

11. "The state makes provision for the poor — leave it to them." Some argued in Edwards' time that although Christians in the early church may have had an obligation to provide for the poor when there was no state provision, this was now abrogated as each town had the duty to look after the poor. As he had argued before, however, Edwards shows that it is not only those who are reduced to extremity who are to be shown mercy. Certainly, Edwards regarded it as right that the law should provide for those with no "estates of their own," but he also believed that it was not the case that such a "safety net" meant that all voluntary or private relief was redundant. If the town in his day failed in its duty to any of its needy citizens, then it was incumbent on the Christians to help out.

### **Conclusion**

Although this treatise was written for a past generation, the principles enunciated so clearly surely speak to us today. The God who promulgated laws for the protection and relief of the vulnerable in biblical times has not changed. His anger is aroused when the powerful despise and ignore the plight of the weak and when the rich close their eyes to the needs of the poor. Appeals to help the hungry, the homeless, the abused, the lonely, and others in need are to be seen from this divine perspective. We profess to worship, love and serve the Triune God revealed in the person of his Son and through the written Word. However, if we underplay this pervasive and powerful theme, which indicates that the desire of God is for his people to joyfully, deliberately, energetically and effectively seek help for the poor, then our professed love is seen to be hollow.

In our day, we face many choices. We can deliberately avoid finding out about the appalling poverty in many parts of Africa, about the terrible hardships faced by displaced persons in Eastern Europe, about the need of the homeless on the streets of our own nations. We

can shut our eyes and our ears to reports of human rights violations; we can close our hearts, as easily as we turn off our televisions, to the tragedies caused in almost every part of this earth by human sin. Or we can choose to open our eyes and ears and hearts. We can choose to weep with those who weep, to inform ourselves of the plight of at least some of this world's poor. We can choose to pray, to give, to sacrifice at least something of our indulgent western lifestyle and to work even in a small way for justice.

It is ironic that Edwards has popularly been caricatured as a harsh, determinist and unloving preacher. This treatise demonstrates that the God he loved and served is gracious, merciful and compassionate. He is the Lord who took care to provide regulations for the protection of the widows and the orphans and the weak, and who demands that our attitude to the needy should reflect his own.

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