

Did Christ Defend the Status Quo? An Examination of Mark 14:7

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According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, in 1994 38 million Americans or 14.5 % of the population lived below the poverty level. That figure included 14.6 million children or more than one in every five and over eight million families.¹

Robert Frost wrote the poem "The Road Not Taken" to describe the process he went through in choosing a career. He likened his choice of becoming a poet to coming to a fork in the trail while walking through a wood. Standing at the fork he looked down both new trails before him as far as he could to the point where they disappeared in the undergrowth. From his perspective he could not see where either trail led, but he was able to distinguish that one trail was noticeably more worn from travel than the other. He concluded his poetic description of this life's choice with these lines:

¹See the U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1996* (116th edition.) Washington, D.C., 1996, 439-477. The poverty level for a family of four in 1994 was \$15,141 per year (p. 472).

I shall be telling this with a sigh
 Somewhere ages and ages hence:
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
 I took the one less traveled by,
 And that has made all the difference.

By his own testimony his choice was determined at least in part by the degree of travel on the road—he “took the one less traveled by.” It is impossible to say whether or not the “principle of the worn-path” is a legitimate basis for making career choices. According to Frost it apparently worked for him. Unfortunately, too many Fundamentalists seem to make their choices for the same reason—others have traveled the road; therefore, it should be avoided. However, if we are to live up to our claim to be ‘Biblicists’, then we must make God’s Word the only basis of our faith and practice. We cannot allow the practices, claims, or misconduct of others to cause us to avoid those paths which God’s Word directs us down.

When it comes to the topic of the poor and needy, typical responses among Fundamentalists range from vigorous avoidance to passive neglect. The topic of the poor and needy either is vigorously avoided as evidence of a denial of the faith and compromise with the “Social Gospel”² or is simply ignored

²Some speak of the “Social Gospel” as if it applied to anyone who spoke of “social” issues; assuming that life can biblically be “pigeon-holed” into separate categories such as spiritual, social, employment, etc. Historically the term “Social Gospel” is associated with Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist pastor in New York City at the end of the 19th century. Rauschenbusch, who is known as the father of the “Social Gospel,” provided it with its “firmest theological support . . . and its most untiring leadership.” (Edwin S. Gaustad, *A Documentary History of Religion in America Since 1865* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993], 120). He “called his message ‘the social gospel’ and insisted that the purpose

by quoting Christ's words in Mark 14:7, "the poor you have with you always." The purpose of this study is to more closely examine the second response. Before we thoughtlessly or routinely wield these words in justification of our lack of ministry to the poor and needy, we would do well to more accurately understand not only what Christ meant when he said, "The poor you have with you always" but also what the Old Testament passage underlying this quote teaches. In order to more accurately understand what Christ meant, we will examine both the Old Testament source and the New Testament setting.

The Old Testament Source

The source of Christ's reference in Mark 14:7 is Deuteronomy 15:1-11. The book of Deuteronomy is quoted by Christ more than any other Old Testament book. Two factors may help to explain this focus. First, Deuteronomy serves as the "theology book" of the Old Testament. On the one hand, the doctrines of the Pentateuch are reviewed and expanded in Deuteronomy. On the other hand, basically no new doctrines are introduced throughout the rest of the Old Testament. The doctrines of the Wisdom writings and the Prophets can be traced back to the book of Deuteronomy. Second, Deuteronomy is organized in the form of a covenant. In the

of the Gospels was to change totally the nature of our social life on behalf of justice" (Bruce Chilton, "The Fundamental of Fundamentalism," *Bible Review* 12 [December, 1996] 19). "His claim that Christianity was a matter of programmatic social action, rather than individual belief, found more support among intellectuals" than in Baptist circles in which he ministered (*Ibid.*, 19). Also consider chapter 6 in the book by William A. Dyrness, *How does America hear the gospel?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989) "Forays into an American Gospel: Walter Rauschenbusch and Robert Schuller."

ancient near east³, covenants served to function much like contemporary contracts. They detailed the relationship between two parties and how it could be maintained. In Deuteronomy, as in ANE covenants, God revealed to his people how they might maintain their relationship with him and please him.

The Covenant Format of Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy, in the form of an ANE covenant, begins with an "Introduction" (1:1-5) and "Historical Prologue" (1:6-4:40). In the historical prologue the parties involved in the covenant are introduced, the basis of their relationship is established, and their history is briefly outlined. In this case the parties are the LORD God and the people of Israel (1:6ff.). The basis of their relationship is redemption; specifically God's redemption of Israel from Egypt including his care and direction in bringing them through the wilderness and into the Promised Land.

Following the historical prologue, Deuteronomy contains a section of "Basic Regulations" (5:1-11:32) just as is found in covenants contemporary to the time of Moses.⁴ This section specifically begins by recounting the events at Mt. Horeb (5:2, i.e., Sinai) which focused on the giving of the Ten Commandments (5:1-33). Then immediately following is the section of scripture which has come to be known as the Shema⁵ (6:4-9). The Shema is the fundamental statement of Israel's faith and is still repeated daily by conservative religious Jews.

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God [is] one LORD:

⁵And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine

³Hereafter referred to as ANE.

⁴Compare Kenneth A. Kitchen, "The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?" *BAR* 21 (March-April 1995) 48-57, 88-95.

⁵"Shema" is a transliteration of the first word in verse 4 (שמע) which is translated "Hear!"

heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. ⁶And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: ⁷And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. ⁸And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. ⁹And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.

The next section of an ANE covenant included “Specific Regulations” which are also found next in Deuteronomy (12:1-26:15). This section typically involved an explanation of how the basic regulations regarding the relationship between people and deity was to be practiced in daily life. One’s relationship with God evidenced itself in his daily practice and relationship with his fellow man. This section is very much a practical commentary on how to apply the Ten Commandments and the Shema—what loving God “looks like.” Merrill likens the relationship between Deuteronomy’s basic regulations and specific regulations to expanding concentric circles.

One might view the development in terms of concentricity in which the Shema forms the focal point, the Decalogue a specific categorizing of the principles of the Shema, the remainder of the general stipulation section as a narrative and parenetic comment on the Decalogue, and the specific stipulation section as the application of the principles to every aspect of life, that is, as case law rooted and grounded in the covenant relationship.⁶

⁶ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, NAC (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994) 31.

The final two covenant aspects found in Deuteronomy are “Blessings and Cursings” for law keepers and law breakers (27:1-28:68) and “Witnesses” (30:19; 31:19; 32:1-43).

Christ’s oft quoted words come from the book known as the “theology book” of the Old Testament which takes the form of a covenant detailing how God’s people are to maintain a relationship with him. Deuteronomy 15:11, the verse referred to by Christ, is located in the section of Deuteronomy where Moses details how to apply the Ten Commandments and the Shema to daily life. That is, what it means to “love the Lord your God” with your whole being on a daily basis in practical form.

The Immediate Context of Deuteronomy 15:11

Deuteronomy 15:11 is located within a paragraph describing the law of remission of debt (vv. 1-11). The law is composed of five parts: (1) a statement of the law (v. 1); (2) an explanation of the law (vv. 2-3); (3) a clarification of the law (vv. 4-6); (4) a condition in the law (vv. 7-10); and (5) a conclusion to the law (v. 11).

Statement of the Law: v. 1. The paragraph begins with a statement of the law of remission of debt in its basic form. The law is: “You shall grant a remission of debt at the end of seven years.” Every seventh year by God’s command debts were to be remitted or forgiven.

Explanation of the Law: vv. 2-3. Verses 2-3 provide additional information and explanation of the law. The rudimentary form of the law contained in verse 1 is filled out and developed in verses 2-3.

²Now this is the matter of the remission: All creditors shall remit his loan; he shall grant forgiveness to his neighbor. He shall not press his

neighbor or his brother for repayment; because the remission of Yahweh has been announced. ³You may press the resident alien for repayment. But whatever your brother should have of yours, your hand shall let go.

The conjunction beginning verse 2 marks this material as parenthetical in nature, providing additional explanation of the law of remission of debt. From these verses it becomes evident that the law applied to “all creditors” and involved any “loans” they might have lent out. Further they were forbidden to press either their “neighbor”⁷ (any member of Israel) or their “brother” (family or clan member) for repayment even if the year of remission was near at hand (“the remission of Yahweh has been announced”). They were allowed but not commanded to continue their collection of loans from resident foreigners. The arrival of the year of remission meant the forgiveness (“your hand shall let go”) of “whatever” had been lent. It did not mean increased efforts to have loans repaid.

A Clarification of the Law: vv. 4-6. Verses 4-6 form a distinct section within the law of remission. An auxiliary consideration along with the remission of debt was the topic of individual and national poverty which this section addresses.

⁴Furthermore: There will never be poor among you; because Yahweh will certainly bless you in the land which Yahweh your God is giving to you as an inheritance to possess. ⁵Only if you shall surely obey the voice of Yahweh your God, to observe by obeying all these commandments which I am

⁷The term עֵרֵב occurs 187 times in the Old Testament and refers to a “friend, neighbor, associate—close or occasional. Often it is used in the phrase, one to another.” R. Laird Harris, “עֵרֵב,” *TWOT* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1980) 2:853.

commanding you today. ⁶Because Yahweh your God blessed you according as he had spoken to you; and you will lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. And you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you.⁸

A major break in the text occurs between verses 3 and 4. This break is indicated by the use of an adverbial combination translated “furthermore” (וְעַתָּה).⁹ The topic of poverty introduced in this section is significant even if only considered in an auxiliary manner subordinate to the topic of remission of debt. The importance of the topic of poverty is reflected by the amount of space which it received in this law.

The section begins with a statement of fact: “There will be no poor among you.” The reason for the absence of poverty immediately follows: “because Yahweh will certainly bless you in the land.” Poverty will not be experienced in their land because of God’s blessings. However, this fact is not without exceptions. Verse 5 is introduced by a combination of an adverb (רַק, “only”) and particle (אִם, “if”) marking it as both dependent and containing an exception to the immediately preceding statement.¹⁰ Poverty will not be experienced in their land “*only if* you surely obey the voice of Yahweh your God.” God’s blessing was not automatic; it depended on their obedience. The absence of poverty would result from God’s blessings, and experiencing God’s blessings depended on their obedience. Obedience expressed by heeding God’s commands would provide both

⁸For the remainder of this article, I will use my personal translations of the biblical texts.

⁹For a discussion of restrictive adverbs see Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 668-673. The restrictive adverbs break the continuity of the text and highlight the material they introduce.

¹⁰Waltke and O’Connor, *Hebrew Syntax*, 642.

individual and national benefits. Not only would they not experience poverty on an individual plane, but also they would not as a nation find themselves in a position of being subservient borrowers (v. 6).

A Condition in the Law: vv. 7-10. The absence of poverty was conditional. Because the absence of poverty depended on God's blessings and God's blessings depended on their obedience, the possibility existed that poverty would appear among them due to disobedience. This section of the law provides regulations concerning proper conduct toward the poor "if" and "when" poverty should result from disobedience.

⁷If there shall be among you a poor person, even one of your brothers in one of your gates (i.e., cities) in your land which Yahweh your God is giving to you; then you shall never harden your heart and you shall never close your hand from your poor brother. ⁸Because you shall surely open your hand to him and you shall freely lend him enough to meet his need which he has need of. ⁹Give heed to yourself, lest there be a thought of wickedness in your heart saying, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is drawing near." And your eyes be evil against your poor brother; so that you do not give to him. And so that he should cry against you to Yahweh and then it will be sin to your account. ¹⁰You shall surely give to him and you shall never allow evil in your heart, while you are giving to him. Because on account of this matter Yahweh your God will bless you in everything which you do and in all the outstretching of your hand.

This section is composed of two parts: First, in verse 7a the protasis or condition ("if"); and second, the apodosis or proper response ("then") to the preceding condition. The

condition is the existence of *any* poverty. This is evident from the repeated use of the numeral "one" (אֶחָד) in the original text. Verse 7a more literally reads: "a poor [person] from *one* of your brothers in *one* of your gates (i.e., cities) in your land." If even one poor person existed in any city of Israel, the following regulations were applicable. They were not to wait until an intolerable level or concentration of poverty existed before they reacted. They were not to wait until poverty touched their own tribe or family before they reacted.

The proper response to the presence of poverty is contained in three sets of regulations. The first set of regulations is composed of two prohibitions concerning their attitudes and actions toward the poor (vv. 7b-8). Not only were they never to "harden" their hearts, but also they were never to "close" their hands to the poor. Their compassion toward the poor was not to be determined by poverty reaching a certain level, but by the existence of poverty itself. Their compassionate reaction to poverty was not to be dependent on their immediate knowledge of the poor, since they were to react compassionately even if the poor person lived across their country in a city they had never visited. And their compassionate response was to be enough to meet the needs of the poor (note the emphatic dual reference to "need" in v. 8).

The next set of regulations for a proper reaction to the poor and needy involved personal introspection (v. 9). They were exhorted to "Give heed to yourself." They were to guard their hearts and to guard their gaze. Guarding their heart against "a thought of wickedness" provided the tenderness necessary for compassionate giving. Guarding their gaze from being "evil against" the poor provided the sensitive acceptance necessary for the poor to receive compassionate giving without being

humiliated by the act.¹¹ Without this necessary introspection and preventative guarding, the poor would continue in their poverty.

Nevertheless, the continuing of the state of poverty is the least of adverse results to be guarded against. Two other results carry even more significance. First, if God's people do not fulfill their responsibility to "open their hands to the poor," then the only recourse available to the poor was to turn to God in their need. Second, God judges this situation to be "sin to your account." The word translated "sin" refers basically to "missing the mark." To fail either actively (we do not act) or passively (we make giving so humiliating that the poor do not come) is to miss the mark that God expects (i.e., commands) his people to live up to.

The third set of regulations for a proper response to the existence of poverty combines elements of the two previous sets while focusing on the act of giving (v. 10). The command to give to the poor is repeated in emphatic form: "You shall *surely* give to him." The heart's attitude is again scrutinized: "You shall never allow evil in your heart." The added emphasis in this verse is that the absence of evil in one's heart is to *accompany* the act of giving. In verses 7 and 9 the prohibitions are against wrong attitudes of heart that *would prevent* giving. The emphasis in verse 10 is against wrong attitudes of heart *while* giving. Giving to the poor (opening one's hand) was not to be grudgingly, with measured response, or in pride; nothing "evil" was to occupy the heart while giving to the poor and needy.

A Conclusion to the Law: v. 11. The law of remission of debt (vv. 1-11) concludes with God's command concerning proper conduct toward the poor.

¹¹Scripture references to an "eye evil against" (עַיִן עָוֶל) convey the idea of being distressed (Gen. 21:12; 2 Sam. 11:25); to be displeased (Gen. 38:10, 48:17; Isa. 59:15); to begrudge (Deut. 28:54, 56); or to be unwilling (Josh. 24:15).

¹¹Because the poor will never cease from the midst of the land; therefore, I am commanding you saying, "You shall surely open your hand to your brother, to your needy, and to your poor in your land."

The concluding verse, like the preceding section, takes the form of a protasis-apodosis, condition-response statement. The condition is contained in the first clause of the verse and is stated in the form of fact: "the poor will never cease from the land." The idealism of verse 4a ("shall never be") is balanced by the realism of this verse ("shall never cease"). God's provision allows for conditions whereby his blessings will eliminate poverty; but man's fallen condition prevents him from experiencing God's ideal. Thus, in reality the poor will ever be present. Therefore, it is important to know how God expects the poor and needy to be treated.

Very significantly in bringing this paragraph to a conclusion, God highlights the idea of "land." The other occurrences of this term in context (vv. 4, 7) are both modified by the phrase "which Yahweh your God is giving to you." Their "land" which provided them with material sustenance and wealth was *given* to them by God. When they were in *need*, God responded by providing them with a land that would sustain them.¹² Having experienced *receiving*, they should not

¹²Compare the need they experienced in the Egyptian Captivity and the Wilderness Wandering with God's description of the Promised Land in Deuteronomy 8:7-10. (7) For the LORD thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; (8) A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey; (9) A land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack any [thing] in it; a land whose stones [are] iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass. (10) When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the LORD thy God for the good land which he hath given thee.

find it difficult to practice *giving*. Verse 4 specifically reminded them that the “land” was the place of God’s blessing which, according to verse 6, would prevent them from becoming poor, if they practiced obedience. In this “land,” which served as God’s gift to provide for their needs, there would be poverty. And from the bounty of God’s gift (the “land”), they were to share with those in need.

The point-of-view in this concluding verse is first person oriented; God is speaking (“I am commanding you saying”). In light of the condition that the poor would never cease from their land, God gives them a clear, pointed command. God states the command emphatically—“You shall *surely* open your hand.” They were not to use their hands to grasp what the land provided them, but to extend (v. 10, “outstretching”) those blessings to the poor and needy.

The recipients of their compassionate giving are designated by three terms: “brother,” “needy,” and “poor.” While the term “brother” (אָח) is primarily used of those related by blood in families, clans, or nations, it is occasionally used of “foreigners” in the Old Testament.¹³ The terms “poor” (אֲדָמָה) and “needy” (אֲבָיָה) are the two most common terms in the Old Testament to designate those who are included in the category of being in poverty. Both terms are used generically without inherent ethnic or political references in the Old Testament. The occurrence of the three terms together in the conclusion allows for the understanding that anyone “in your land” who is in poverty, ethnically related or not, was to be cared for. The

¹³For a discussion of the range of meanings of אָח (“brother”) in the Old Testament see: Herbert Wolf, “אָח,” *TWOT*, 1:62-63 or Helmer Ringgren, “אָח,” *IDOT* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974) 1:188-93.

protection and provision of this law apparently extended beyond ethnic boundaries.¹⁴

When poor and needy are present, compassion is called for. The presence of poverty does not justify acquiescence to the way things are (i.e., the status quo), but does constitute a call for compassionate action. When God's blessings are experienced, compassion is an appropriate response to those who are in need. As Miller points out, this is "one of the clearest expressions in the whole book of the love of neighbor and the humanity of the Deuteronomic instruction."¹⁵

Corollaries from the Law. Before concluding this section, it is beneficial to review five corollaries found in this Deuteronomic law which demand consideration.

First, it must be realized that the sphere in which this law is to be practiced is the *moral*. This law does not simply outline social or economic responsibilities or alternatives. The responsibilities contained within this law are moral responsibilities for God's people. Failure to practice the terms of this law did not simply result in social inconvenience or economic gain or loss. Failure to practice the terms of this law resulted in moral

¹⁴Note the inclusion of the "foreigner" in the fourth commandment: "Thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor . . . thy stranger that is within thy gates" (Deut. 5:14). The resident alien (significantly modified by a possessive suffix, "*thy* stranger") who fell within the domain of any Israelite ("within thy gates") was exempted from economic exploitation during the Sabbath rest. Also note Leviticus 25:2-7 which deals with the sabbath year when the land was left fallow. The resident alien ("sojourner") was not to be economically exploited, but cared for in the same manner as ethnic Israelites—"The sabbath of the land shall provide food for you, . . . and the sojourner who lives with you" (v. 6). The economic provisions of Israel's laws also provided protection for resident aliens within the land.

¹⁵ Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 134.

condemnation. God considered such failure to be “sin” (v. 9). No distinction is made for failure due to active or passive neglect. Failure resulted in sin according to God’s determination.

Second, it must be realized that care of the poor is closely tied into the matter of *stewardship*. Should God’s people practice obedience resulting in the ideal state characterized by the absence of poverty, it would be due to God’s blessing (vv.4-6). The location and focus of this blessing was “the land which Yahweh your God is giving to you.” Their stewardship of the land coupled with their obedience would secure the blessings of God which eliminate poverty. However, should they disobey, which was far more realistic, poverty would exist in their land. Even in this state it was their stewardship of the land that would enable them to provide compassionate care for the poor (vv. 7-10). Their ability to give and fulfill God’s demands in this law was based on their *having received* the land from God as a stewardship.

Third, it must be realized that this law involved *accountability*. This law made God’s people directly accountable to Yahweh God. The “law of remission” is designated “the remission of Yahweh” in verse 2. God’s people were not allowed to think of this law as primarily being one of social convenience or economic justice, but primarily as a law of God. The arbitrator of the law was Yahweh (“he should cry against you to Yahweh, v. 9). The adjudicator of the law was Yahweh God (“it will be sin to your account,” v. 9). This law was founded on the eternal character of God and the unchanging principles of God’s Word as focused in the Ten Commandments and the Shema.

Fourth, it must be realized that this law provided the means of demonstrating *devotion* to God. God had commanded his people in the basic regulations of this covenant, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5). No Old Testament believer could have missed the connection between that command and this law. Notice the repeated reference in the law of remission of debt to eyes (v. 9), hands (vv. 3, 7, 8, 10),

and heart (vv. 7, 9, 10). The devotion of Deuteronomy 6:5 in loving God with one's whole being (heart, soul, might) is reflected in the law governing remission and poverty in Deuteronomy 15:1-11 (heart, eyes, hands). Proper devotion to God which captures the whole being is practically demonstrated by compassionate care for the poor which involves the whole being.

Fifth, it must be realized that this law points to poverty and need as resulting *from theological and not economical conditions*. The presence of poverty in the land was due to disobedience (moral failure, vv. 4-5) not economic failures. The presence and degree of poverty and need in the land are also due to the indifference of those who had the means to alleviate poverty (cf. vv. 7b, 9).

The law of remission in Deuteronomy 15:1-11 provides a model of how to address the presence of poverty. The source passage of Christ's words provide an example of loving God in daily life. According to verse 11, the presence of poverty and need in society is not to be defended so that the status quo continues uninterrupted. The proper response to the presence of need is compassionate care in proportion to the stewardship with which one has been entrusted and for which one will give an account.

The New Testament Setting

The phrase under discussion actually is found in three of the Gospel accounts: Matthew 26:11, Mark 14:7; and John 12:8. For the purposes of this study, we will focus on the account recorded in the Gospel of Mark since it presents the quotation in its fullest form.

Content of the Quotation

In Light of Christ's Full Response. One fact that becomes clear from a simple reading of the text is that the

phrase so readily used to justify ignoring the poor and needy actually represents less than half of the verse in which it is found. In fact, in the Greek text the phrase consists of only seven of sixty-two words in Christ's reply (vv. 6-9); that is, just over 10 percent of what Christ actually said on this occasion.¹⁶ The complete response of Christ in verse 7 reads, "For always the poor you have with you, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but me you do not always have [with you]."

In Light of Available Terms. It is surprising to think that anyone's theology and practice in reference to the poor and needy would be built on this single fragment of verse 7. This incongruity is magnified by the fact that Scripture contains numerous references to the poor and needy. Wilson lists eleven separate terms, which together occur hundreds of times in the Old Testament, to refer to those in the category of poverty and need.¹⁷ Louw and Nida list six separate terms, which together occur over forty times in the New Testament, to refer to those

¹⁶The count is taken from *Bible Windows* 4.52 (Cedar Hill, TX: Silver Mountain Software, 1996). The Greek text used is UBS 4th Edition, 1993.

¹⁷William Wilson, *Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Co., n.d.) 317-318. The terms include עָנִי ("poor") which occurs 60 times; חָסֵר ("poor," "lacking") which occurs 46 times; עָנָה / עָנִי ("needy," "afflicted") which occurs over 150 times; etc. Statistics are taken from George Wigram, *The Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974).

in the category of poverty and need.¹⁸ Considering only one out of seventeen terms which refer to the poor and/or needy does not provide sufficient basis on which to build a doctrine or a practice in response to poverty.

In Light of Scriptural References. This incongruity is also heightened by the fact that commands, illustrations, and exhortations to care for the poor and needy *are not dispensationally limited*, but occur throughout the pages of Scripture. This is not a topic limited to any one period or dispensation of Scripture which consequently may be neglected today. Consider the following examples:

Psalm 37:14 The wicked draw out the sword and bend their bow, to bring down the poor and needy.

Proverbs 14:31 He that oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker: but he that is kind to the needy honors Him.

Proverbs 31:8 Speak up! Judge righteously and plead the cause [i.e., defend the rights] of the poor and needy.

¹⁸Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: National Book Publishers for the United Bible Societies, 1988) 564. Included in the list are πτωχός ('poor') which occurs 34 times; πεινχρός ('needy') which occurs once; πένης ('poor') which occurs once; πτωχεύω ('destitute') which occurs once; πτωχεία which occurs three times; and ένδεής which occurs once. Statistics are taken from *The Englishman's Greek Concordance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974).

Amos 5:12 For I know your multiple transgressions and your great sins: who afflict the just, who take a bribe, and who push aside the poor in the gate.

Matthew 19:21 Jesus said unto him, "If you will be perfect, go and sell what you have and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me."

Galatians 2:10 Only they asked that we should remember the poor; the very thing which I was eager to do.

James 2:14-17 What use is it, my brothers, if a man should say he has faith, but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, "Depart in peace. Be warmed." But you do not give them those things which they need for their body; what is the use? Even so faith, if it is without works is dead, being alone.

1 John 3:17 But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother with a need, and shuts up his feelings of compassion from him, how can the love of God dwell in him?

To base one's theology and practice concerning the poor and needy on one occurrence of one term in one part of one verse is to ignore wide ranging references on the topic throughout Scripture. Such a practice can hardly provide an accurate view of what the "whole counsel" of God teaches concerning one's theology and practice toward the poor and needy.

In Light of Theological Practice. The practice of developing a “half-verse theology” on poverty would be like dealing with the topic of soul winning by simply quoting the first half of Romans 6:23, “The wages of sin is death.” The quote may be accurate; however, it does not present a complete picture of the subject of soul winning. Therefore, it is insufficient to use it alone as the basis of a theology and practice of soul winning. The wages of sin may truly be death, but that does not relieve us of the responsibility of taking the gospel to mankind as the second half of the verse and countless other scripture references make clear: “the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Basing one’s theology and practice concerning the poor and needy on a single verse fragment surely does not find a precedent in other realms of faith and practice. One would do well when developing and/or defining a theology and practice concerning the poor and needy to “compare scripture with scripture” (1 Cor. 2:13). God has provided us with hundreds of references to the poor and needy and their proper treatment throughout the pages of Scripture. Before we thoughtlessly or routinely quote one familiar verse fragment to justify our action or inaction toward the poor and needy, we would do well to search the scriptures. If we claim the title “Biblicists” we must accept the responsibility to base our theology and practice on God’s Word alone.

Context of the Quotation

Perhaps the most basic rule of interpretation is to examine and interpret *in context*. Therefore, in order to accurately understand the meaning of Christ’s words it is necessary to examine the context in which they were spoken.

Setting: vv. 1-3a. The opening verses of this paragraph not only provide the setting of the story in which Christ’s words are located, but also introduce two topics

essential to understanding Christ's words. The story is set in the home of Simon the leper during a meal attended by Christ and his disciples. The essential topics to consider are: (1) The brevity of the time—only two days remained before the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread. And (2) the imminent death of Christ—the chief priests and scribes were treacherously conspiring to have Christ killed.

Occasion for the Quote: vv. 3b-5. The events leading up to Christ's words focus on an unnamed woman.¹⁹ She entered the room carrying an alabaster vase of the precious perfume spikenard. After breaking the vase open she poured the contents out and anointed Christ's head. John mentions that she also anointed his feet and dried them with her hair (John 12:3). Her actions carried multiple significance. For instance, her act required *great sacrifice* on her part, since the perfume would have cost as much as a fully employed man could have earned in a year.²⁰ It should also be noted that her act exemplified *great humility* on her part as is evidenced by her drying Christ's feet with her hair. Finally, her actions served to foreshadow Christ's death and burial as Christ himself clearly points out (v. 8).

Her actions could hardly have gone unnoticed, if for no other reason than the readily recognizable fragrance of the spikenard that filled the house (John 12:3). If her entrance did not grasp the disciples' attention, the fragrance of the perfume immediately captured their attention and concern. The immediate response to the woman's act came from the disciples (Matt. 26:8) who were apparently led in their response by Judas

¹⁹However, John, who places the meal in the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, identifies the woman as Mary (John 12:1-3).

²⁰"Either Mary and her family were very wealthy, or perhaps this was a family heirloom that had been passed down to her." D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991) 428.

Iscaiot (John 12:4).²¹ They were indignant over the act and considered it a waste. In expressing their indignation over this act it was the disciples led by Judas who introduced the topic of the poor—"For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor" (v. 4). Mark makes it clear that their comments were more than a simple observation or an honest correction of what they considered to be misguided zeal, for he points out that they were "scolding" her for the act (v. 5, καὶ ἐνεβριμῶντο αὐτῇ).²² The disciples were angered by the woman's actions and were responding in their anger.

Defense of the Woman: vv. 6-9. Christ himself interrupts the disciples to defend the woman. Christ's initial response is threefold: First, he exhorts the disciples to "Leave her alone." Second, he questions their intent—"Why are you troubling her?" Finally, he clarifies the nature of her actions—"She has done a good thing to me."

Next Christ directs their attention to Deuteronomy 15 and provides a scriptural basis for his defense. Having gained their attention, Christ directs them to the first phrase of verse 11 and quotes it nearly verbatim—"always you have the poor

²¹"With Judas Iscaiot, the case is far worse: his personal greed for material things masquerades as altruism. Like the hired hand, he cares nothing for the sheep (10:13) because he was the treasurer of the apostolic band, the *keeper of the money bag*, probably he hoped such gifts as this nard could in the future be turned into cash, to which he could then help himself." Carson, *John*, 428.

²²The verb ἐμβριμᾶσθαι carries the idea of anger and displeasure, to be indignant, to censure; see BAGD, 254.

with you.”²³ Christ does not refer to the poor to condemn compassionate treatment of them. He uses the topic introduced by the disciples to direct their priorities back to a scriptural basis. In the next clause of verse 7, Christ gives a commentary on the second half of Deuteronomy 15:11 particularly in application to the emphasized word “always.” Since the poor will always be present, opportunities for compassionate treatment of the poor will be limitless. In the third clause of verse 7 Christ brings the scriptural principles back to the focus of the story—time is short and death is imminent. The woman’s actions were preparatory for his imminent death. Since his time was short, opportunities to show him “good things” were limited and fleeting. On the other hand, opportunities to show the poor and needy “good things” were not limited since they would “always” be present. Christ did not call compassionate giving to the poor into question—he only questioned their timing.

Christ’s defense of the woman was that she had done a “good” thing to him. Her actions did not merit the disciples’ anger. Since it was only two days until Passover, opportunities

²³Actually in the Gospel accounts Christ does not quote Deuteronomy 15:11 verbatim, but paraphrases the clause he uses. The changes that Christ made are instructive: (1) First, Christ drops all reference to “the land.” The term “land” is the one term in the law of Deuteronomy 15:1-11 that ties this law most closely to the OT dispensation. By dropping this term Christ in effect gives this law a transdispensational application. Properly dealing with the poor and needy is not limited to Israel “in the land;” it is a universal concern. (2) Second, Christ changes the subject of the clause. While the subject in the OT quote is the “poor”; the subject of Christ’s reworking of the quote is “you.” Note the emphasis that Christ puts on the subject, “always *you* have the poor with *you*.” Christ’s response to the disciples (i.e., present day believers) is that *they* had the poor with *them* and therefore could practice compassionate care whenever they so chose. The wordings is reminiscent of the Great Commission—“Go ye into all the world . . .”

to do "good" things to him were rapidly coming to an end. However, opportunities to do good to the poor were always present since the poor would always be present. Far from condemning care for the poor and needy or justifying their neglect, Christ is pointing out that during his few remaining days the disciples' priority should focus on him. They would have unlimited future opportunities to minister to the poor, but few future opportunities to minister to him. He concludes his defense of the woman in verse 9 by revealing to the disciples the timelessness of her actions. Wherever the gospel would be preached throughout the whole world this story of this woman's kindness and Christ's defense of her would be proclaimed.²⁴

Contrary to the common interpretation that Christ was condemning practical ministries to the poor, Christ was, in fact, acknowledging that practical ministry to the poor was appropriate and opportunities were as long lasting as the presence of the poor in society—"always." A theology and practice characterized by neglect of the poor and needy is not supported by Christ's words in the Gospel accounts. The New Testament quotation of Christ provides a mandate for compassionate care of the poor without dispensational limits.

Conclusion

Far from an excuse for ignoring the poor and needy the words "the poor you have with you always" call us to action whether we read them in the Old or in the New Testament. While the Old Testament reference provides a model, the New Testament reference provides a mandate for a proper theology and practice involving the poor and needy.

²⁴This meal occurred 2 days before Passover. Pentecost (Acts 2) would follow 50 days later. Christ was not instructing his disciples to preach the gospel to the whole world in less than two months before the new dispensation would begin.

The Old Testament model. This passage in Deuteronomy in particular and the Old Testament in general are not to be written off as applying to a distant age and/or another dispensation. They are not to be relegated to distant history or some academic pursuit. They provide a model of loving God in daily relationships. As Christopher Wright points out, they provide an instructive pattern which we, as New Testament believers, cannot ignore.

The whole point of the paradigmatic application of the ethical force of the Old Testament laws lies in the assumption of the moral consistency of God. That is, if this is what God demanded of his people *then* in their treatment of dependent persons in their households, then surely, in the light of the love of Christ and our higher motivation 'in the LORD,' he demands no less of us *now*. . . . 'Love is the fulfilling of the law.' It is the *law* which shows me, in a very practical economic and unmistakable way what it means to *love* a servant.

So then, if I feel it is important that we as Christians should work hard at finding appropriate applications of Old Testament law, it is not merely because we ought to obey the law as such. It is rather because obedience to the law was one important ingredient in fulfilling the more fundamental demand which is the basis of biblical ethics in both the Old and New Testaments—to love the LORD your God, and to love your neighbor as yourself. It is when we ask, 'What does it mean to love my neighbor?' that the Old Testament answers: 'Here is a model and pattern of what it meant for Israel in their context. This is what God—their God and yours—required of them, in every down-to-earth, demanding detail. Take it and compare it with your own context and the issues you face, and in the light of its authority endorsed by Christ, with the help of

the Holy Spirit, it should become clear what the LORD requires of you.²⁵

The New Testament Mandate. Christ based his rebuke of the disciples and defense of the unnamed woman on the Old Testament model in Deuteronomy 15:1-11. Christ's correction of his disciples did not involve their desire to help the poor, but only their timing. Because the poor would always be present, there was plenty of time to practice the Old Testament model. But since his own time was short, their focus, for the time being, should properly be on him.

Christ's defense of the woman who anointed him for death and burial serves not only to correct the misguided disciples at the supper in Simon's home, but also to correct misguided "disciples" living in our society today. After all Christ's correction of the disciples, by Christ's own words, was not limited to that occasion, for he stated that the story of this woman and her kindness and its ramification would be proclaimed as extensively as the proclamation of the gospel throughout the whole world. Since the gospel is still going forth in the world today, we need to heed the mandate of Christ's words.

¹Blessed is he that considers the poor: the LORD will deliver him in time of trouble. ²The LORD will preserve him, and keep him alive; and he shall be blessed upon the earth: and will not deliver him unto the will of his enemies. ³The LORD will strengthen him upon the bed of illness: you will restore him to health.

(Psalm 41:1-3)

²⁵Christopher J.H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990) 264-65.