

Limited Benevolence in Light of Jam. 1:27 and Gal. 6:10

Last week, I listed a number of passages that seem to me to establish a baseline in favor of limited benevolence. I made the point that the New Testament speaks of brethren supporting needy brethren, but does not speak of brethren using the church treasury to support charitable causes in the world.

While the church has a familial responsibility to its own, and while one brother with an abundance should be willing to support another brother with a lack, thereby providing equality throughout the body of Christ, this would be quite impossible to bring about on behalf of the world, or even a single township.

But I did not want to leave us thinking that Christians can safely ignore suffering in the world. In fact, I did not deal with two passages that conservatively-minded brethren use to suggest that church-sponsored charity toward outsiders is not only authorized, but necessary.

The first passage that deserves a closer look is James 1:27, Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. Can Membership Be Assumed? Some would argue that a passage like James 1:27 assumes that the “widows and orphans” in view are actually members of the church. That, perhaps, the likely reason they became widows and orphans in the first place was due to persecution facing the church.

I’m not sure I agree with this argument. Now, it does have some merit. After all, 1 Tim. 5:3–16 presents a long list of qualifications for a widow who is to be supported by the church, and being a faithful Christian is certainly one of those qualifications. Extended families are to learn to take care of widows who land outside those qualifications, “and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.”

So, it’s probably true that passages like James 1:27, Eph. 4:28, Matt. 25:34-40, and Heb. 13:1-3 should be read in the greater context of those other Scriptures, and assume that the objects of the charitable efforts are brethren. Is It Better to Think of It as an Individual Responsibility? But, the previous argument ultimately proves nothing, because membership cannot be assumed in Galatians 6:10. Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. Paul says that every Christian must be ready to help his brother in Christ. But also, every Christian must “do good to all people,” even those outside the church.

It is possible that Paul demands that churches establish good works in the community from

the treasury. But is it just as possible—and in the context of the New Testament quite a lot more likely—that Paul is speaking more in terms of our individual good works in the name of the Lord. Serving others in Christ (Col. 3:17) can and should be done on a daily basis, without an elaborate church-funded program.

Perhaps it would be helpful to consider the purpose of charity in the New Testament. Jesus often helped those in need. He was “moved with compassion” to help lepers (Mark 1:41) the sick (Matt. 9:20–22) the crippled (Matt. 15:29–31) the paralyzed (Mark 2:1–12) the demon-possessed (Mark 5:19) the downcast (Matt. 9:36) the poor (Luke 14:13, Matt. 19:21) the blind (Matt. 20:29–34) the hungry (Mark 8:1–3) and the children (Matt. 19:13–15). He provided this aid to Jews and Gentiles alike (Matt. 15:21–28, Luke 17:16). His apostles did the same (Acts 3:1–26, 8:5–8, 28:7–10). These miracles are often cited as reason for the church to address the worldly needs of non-believers (1 John 2:6).

But, do these passages really direct us by example to open blindness clinics, hospitals, leper colonies, shelters for battered women, orphan homes, clothing drives, disaster relief organizations, and soup kitchens? Those are all good works, but I would suggest if that is the conclusion we draw from these passages, we have missed the point. Jesus, who fed the 5,000, could have fed the world, and yet that was not His mission. Jesus, who healed the sick, could have rid the world of disease, and yet that was not His mission. Instead, these miracles demonstrated His identity as the Son of God, His nature as the compassionate Savior, and His willingness to pour out salvation on all mankind, Jew and Gentile alike (Luke 4:25–30). In John 9, Jesus healed a man of blindness to show that He is the light of the world (9:39). In John 6, Jesus fed the multitudes to show that He is the bread of life. For the apostles, these miracles confirmed their words as God-breathed (Mark 16:17–18, Heb. 2:3). These signs pointed to Jesus’ real mission and power: to heal sin.

In fact, Jesus scolded those who came looking for a handout: Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you (John 6:26–27). Ultimately, Jesus went to the cross and died not to feed the hungry or shoe the shoeless, but to save the souls of mankind. This is the church’s unique, holy, irreplaceable mission.

As a Christian, a follower in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, I do believe it is my responsibility and privilege to be kind and compassionate to the poor (Mark 14:7, Luke 14:13, 18:22), to the extent of my ability. I will contribute to worthy charities, I will donate blood (if you strap me down!), I will work for good political causes, I will help needy families whom I encounter. And I will do it in the name of Christ so that I can speak to them about my heavenly Motivator.

But I do not believe one can make a firm case from the New Testament that God has given this responsibility to the church in a corporate sense, that is, as a line item in the budget. The

church has a mission—“go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” That’s the one task on which it must spend its time and resources.

It would be sad if we missed what Paul and James teach because we spend all our time talking about what they don’t teach. James 1:27 and Galatians 6:10 teach that if our religion is defined only in terms of sins avoided and classes attended, while our hearts are empty of compassion, then our religion is not what it ought to be. Let us reach out in mercy and love to the unsaved people around us!

But it’s a huge stretch to understand James and Paul opening the treasury to the construction of orphan homes and retirement centers. That is an unwise and unscriptural understanding of the use of the treasury.

In fact, in an ironic twist, reading James 1:27 this way would actually drain it of much of its power. Using the church treasury for charitable works is the least personal way of helping other people. It sanitizes the process of helping for most of the congregation. We pay our tithes, and somebody else deals with the problems of divvying it up. We don’t have to get involved in the messy work of helping people mow their yards, traveling to the prison, spending the night with the sick, taking meals to the shut-ins. Jesus’ statement at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan, “go and do the same” (Luke 10:37) becomes instead, “point him to the appropriate department in the church’s bureaucracy.” There is no question that this leads away from personal faith. It often leads to excess and trouble.

So, while I’m not sure I could win an ironclad debate by insisting that Galatians 6:10 refers only to the work of individuals, it does seem to me to be the wisest, safest, and best interpretation of that passage, and the interpretation which takes into consideration all of the New Testament evidence. -- John Guzzetta