

Freedom To: Care for the Poor

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Exodus 22:21-27

Some years back, I think it must have been the late 90's, Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft was reading an article about the health challenges in the developing world when he came across a statistic: Every year a half million children die from severe diarrhea caused by the rotavirus. So that's as many children as there are people in Grand Rapids, wiped off the map every year. The vast majority of those children were poor. They lived in the developing world. The news stunned him. How did he not know about the rotavirus? How had he not heard of half a million children dying?! That moment started the ball rolling for Gates and his wife Melissa. Soon afterwards they started the Gates foundation. Since then, he and his wife have given 28 billion dollars to the fund, much of it designated to help with health issues in developing countries.

What about that: how had Bill gates not heard about all these poor children dying from rotavirus? The same reason you haven't heard about it. Back in the 90's, I didn't know about a half million children dying, did you? I could have told you how many rushing yards Barry Sanders had, but I didn't know about the children. My guess is that you didn't either. We didn't know about them because they are poor, they are far away, and their problem doesn't affect us. When our children got rotavirus, our medical system takes care of it. We have no malice toward the poor, we just don't see them. Let's admit that it's easy to lose sight of the poor. Do you remember how you felt when you first saw panhandlers on the streets of Grand Rapids when the panhandling laws changed? You were shocked. It was jarring to me to see this desperate person right there in front of me in my southeast suburban neighborhood. Do you still have the same reaction? Probably not. We are learning not to see them.

Here's the truth: left to our own devices our hearts, our minds will drift away from the needs and problems of others, and towards our own (very real!) - our own duties, our own desires, our own pleasures, and our own fun. As we think about the shape that God gives Israel's freedom in the book of Exodus, as we think about the path that God lays out for that freedom, it's clear that The Lord understands this drift of the human heart, and he wants to correct it. With these laws God is trying to make Israel - and us - into the sort of people who see the poor and who want to help them.

There is no escaping the fact that the law of God pushes us towards the poor and the outsider and calls us to care for them. In fact in these laws we are introduced to, what I will call - and this is paraphrased from Nick Wolterstorff - the trio of the vulnerable. Throughout the Old Testament God is constantly holding up three needy groups. Throughout the Old Testament God calls us to see the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. The foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. That's the trio of the vulnerable. God calls us to pay attention to them.

Exodus 22:22-23 is the first time in the Old Testament that God brings the trio together. *"Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner. Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless."* So God introduces the trio here, but he brings them back over and over again. Deuteronomy 27 has these strong words: *"Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow."* The trio shows up in the prophecies of Jeremiah: *"Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow."* (22:3) Zechariah says, *"Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless,*

the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.” (7:10) Psalm 94 describes the wicked as the ones who “slay the widow and the foreigner; they murder the fatherless. (94:6)”

Not only did you have these general instructions about caring for the trio of the vulnerable; God also gave them specific practices to make sure that their care for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow was more than a warm feeling in their heart. These laws made sure the warm feelings led to action. The Sabbath law is an example of one such practice. When Israel is commanded to rest on the Sabbath, they are specifically told that the rest isn't just for them, it's for their servants and the foreigners residing in your towns. In Deuteronomy 26, when the people gave their tithes, when they brought a tenth of all they had to the Lord, this is what they were instructed to say: *“I have removed from my house the sacred portion, and have given it to the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, according to all you commanded.”* And finally, Deuteronomy 16 even tells Israel to invite the trio of the vulnerable to their parties: *“Be joyful at your festival—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns.”* Our minds may tend to drift toward our own concerns and needs, but God is trying to correct the drift. He will not let us forget the poor. Again and again, in this wonderful book, God holds up this trio of the vulnerable so that we will use our freedom to love them and care for them.

Why is that? Why does God want us to care for the poor? Our text gives 2 reasons. First, we care for the poor because they are like us. Don't take advantage of the foreigner. Why? Because they are just like you. You were a foreigner. Remember what it felt like to be beaten and oppressed in Egypt? Remember how awful it felt to be treated with contempt? Take care of your foreigners. Don't take advantage of the fatherless and the widows. They are just like you! *“Remember how you cried out to me when you were poor and oppressed in Egypt? What did I do? I heard your cry and helped you. Now the poor among you are crying out. If you don't hear their cry, guess what? I'm not going to be happy.”*

The poor are just like us. This still needs to be said. We have had an uptick in panhandlers around the church recently. I'm guessing that more than a few of you have been approached in the parking lot before or after church by someone who wanted a handout. Now, as someone who works downtown I know that all the experts - the people at Degage, the people at Guiding Light, the people at Mel Trotter - they all tell you: 'When a panhandler approaches you, don't give money! The money will probably be wasted. It will probably be used to support some addiction.' So, I've taken that to heart. I've mostly learned, mostly, to say no. But in order to say no, here's what I've been doing in my head. I say to myself, "This person has a good story, and they seem sincere, but don't be fooled, they are probably an addict and they will use this money for some bad purpose. Don't fall for his story! He's a junkie." What am I doing in my head when I say those things? I'm saying: "this person is not like me. I am not an addict. I use my money well!" I'm telling myself a story of difference so I can stifle my compassion and say 'no'. That's bad. That's the opposite of what God is looking for here. That doesn't mean we should all give money to panhandlers, but it does show how hard it is to love a complicated person. Our challenge is to say 'no' without distancing ourselves, without hardening our hearts. Our challenge is to say 'no' and still see that this person is just like you, so that you will not just say 'no', you will find a better way to help. If you want some good guidance on how to do that, check out a video made by Pastor Mike and Erin Alley, our doorstep person. We'll send it out this week in our email blast so you can see it again. These people may be addicts, but if you get to know them, not only are they fellow image bearers of God, many of them are brothers and sisters in Christ. They are members of your family. They are one in Christ with you.

Which brings us to the second reason God wants us to care about the poor. God tells Israel to care for the poor because he is on their side. He's their advocate. Ancient societies depended for their security on the support and protection of powerful family advocates. Justice often involved the work of a family member who acted on your behalf. Think of the avenger of blood law. If a murder was committed against someone in your family, the avenger of blood was the family member in charge of getting justice. The trio of the vulnerable were vulnerable precisely because they didn't have these connections. It looked like you could take advantage of them because there was no big-shot relative who would protect them. God says don't be fooled. I'm their big-shot relative. They are my people. Mess with the poor, mess with the refugee, mess with the widow, and you mess with me. In verse 24 he doesn't just say that, he growls it.

So God identifies with the poor. How deep does that go? Pretty deep. An analogy: Tim Keller talks about the significance of the way you choose to introduce yourself. Keller notes that when you introduce yourself, the words you choose say something central about your character. He introduces himself by saying, "*Hi I'm Tim Keller, minister at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City.*" He uses those words because, along with being a parent and a spouse, that work is central to who he is. He would never introduce himself by saying, "*Hi I'm Tim Keller and I make Spaghetti for family dinner every Friday night.*" He may do that, but that's not who he is. The words you choose to introduce yourself say something central about who you are. In the Bible God introduces himself as one who cares for the poor. Psalm 68:4-5 "*Rejoice before him – his name is the Lord: a father to the fatherless and a defender of widows is God in his holy dwelling.*" Psalm 146:9 "*The Lord upholds the cause of the oppressed. He gives food to the hungry. The Lord watches over the foreigner. He sustains the fatherless and the widow.*" Deuteronomy 10:17-18: "*For the Lord your God is the God of Gods. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you giving them food and clothing.*" "Hello, let me introduce myself. I am the Lord. I love the poor." It's not some peripheral concern. He is close to these people.

How close? So close, he becomes one of them. In Bethlehem, in a stable, God takes flesh. The Lord of heaven is stripped of his privilege. Mary lays Jesus in the straw and the Lord of glory becomes the child of a couple so poor they have no place to stay. The Lord becomes the homeless. He becomes the hungry. He becomes the thirsty. He becomes a refugee. He becomes the persecuted. He becomes the stranger. He becomes the naked. God's love for the poor and the broken is so strong that he becomes one of them. And then he dies for them. Jesus says, look long enough at those people, look into their faces and you will see me. That's what he said in the passage Mike read earlier: "*Whatever you did for the least of these you did for me.*" "That's me hanging out in Heartside Park, that's me in the woman's shelter, that's me in the refugee camp, that's me in the parking lot asking you for bus fare." Jesus doesn't just love the poor; he becomes one of them. And so to enter into the care of the poor is to be so close to the center of his heart, so close to the center of his concerns, it's like you are caring for him.

It shouldn't surprise us that this is central to his love. After all, what is the gospel about if not God coming to broken people, people who have nothing in their hands, people whose best works are like a beggar's filthy rags, people who can offer God nothing more than our need for forgiveness, people who, when it comes to our salvation, are like beggars and panhandlers, on our knees, asking for mercy. This fierce love that God has for the poor is the same love which saved poor folk like you and me. Thanks be to God for this amazing love.