

## **Tough and Tender Love to the Poor**

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Rich Nathan

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Mastering Your Money

1 Thes. 4:11,12; 2 Thes. 3:6-15; Prov. 6:6-11; James 1:2-11

For those of you who have been here, you know that over the last six weeks or so, I have been teaching about money. And I have continually said to you that the reason I am doing this is because the Bible speaks so much about the subject. And the Bible speaks about money beyond simply a call to give money. I realize that is the subject that comes up all the time in churches—I am going to teach on giving. But I wanted to lay a foundation so that you saw the breadth of teaching regarding money in the Bible. It is so important at this particular time in our lives and in our country's life that we get our financial house in order.

Last week I spoke about the Bible's view of the rich, the wealthy, and today I want to talk about what the Bible says about the poor. I mentioned last week that Americans are really ambivalent toward the wealthy. We have a love/hate relationship with the wealthy. In fact, the same thing applies to the American view of the poor. There is a lot of ambivalence. Our society is really polarized regarding how to think about poor people. There are folks like Charles Murray and other conservative economists who would basically say that the problem of poverty in this country is not 100%, but 95% explainable by the life choices of the poor. In other words, it is because of what the poor do to themselves that they remain poor.

So, Charles Murray, for example, as well as a number of other conservative authors, would say that just about the only statistic that really matters regarding whether somebody or family will be poor is whether that family is a two-parent family. And Charles Murray and others have fairly convincingly shown that illegitimacy, the problem of moms' having children out of wedlock, is a very reliable predictor for poverty in the next generation. The conservative economists have basically shown that other, more popular, indicators of poverty, like race or ethnic minority, really don't hold up so long as we are talking about two-parent families. Two-parent families generally do much better economically than one parent families.

So, you have the conservative argument that poverty is the result of bad choices made by poor people. It is the result of illegitimacy. Poverty is the result of drug abuse, of alcohol abuse, of decisions to drop out of school and so on. And then, of course, by way of complete contrast, we have the liberal argument that says that by and large, a good amount of poverty in this country is the result of a simple lack of opportunity. That folks simply do not have available options to escape the poverty trap. There are not enough jobs. That first step up and out of poverty is closed off – there simply aren't good paying factory jobs or unskilled labor or apprenticeships for folks who don't attend college. People still will not hire folks of color. Union rules, minimum wage laws and government regulations stack the deck regularly against the poor.

And government choices – we can simply point to things like the location of trash burning power plants and the location of sewage treatment plants or

halfway houses for the mentally ill or criminally insane or the sexually deviant, and we know where all of that stuff is going to be placed. Whenever they build a huge new project for people who are unemployed and have very few social skills, many of whom have shown criminal behavior in the past, we know where they are going to stick that project. They are not going to put it in the suburbs. They will put the project right in the center of a poor neighborhood right next to the halfway house, right next to the garbage disposal dump.

So, on the liberal side they would say that poverty is really a result or consequence of social forces beyond the control of the poor. And that to look to the poor themselves as to the cause of their poverty is to blame the victim. It is like blaming a rape victim for dressing seductively. "You must have done something wrong; otherwise you wouldn't have been raped." You must have done something wrong, otherwise you wouldn't be poor.

Well, you know the more I read the Bible, the more impressed I am that the Bible is the only book in my possession that exactly accords with what I observe in the world around me. It is a regular occurrence that I can take a page or verse in the Bible and place it squarely on top of the world around me and say these things exactly overlap. I guess part of the reason why I enjoy reading the Bible so much, is that I don't have to try to make the Bible fit what I see. The universe described in the Bible is the universe that I live in. And the way people are described in the Bible exactly accords with the people that I meet in the last decade of the 20th century. There isn't a huge leap between the Bible and its description of the poor, or its description of the rich, or the problems that we have and what I observe.

So what is the Bible's approach to the poor? Well, the Bible is neither conservative nor liberal in my estimation. It doesn't fall on the political spectrum in giving us the typical answers that we would expect. It doesn't have a conservative Republican approach to the impoverished, nor a liberal Democratic answer. Instead, what I see in the scriptures is what I would hope to find because it conforms to my deepest intuitions, and that is, a tough and tender love approach to the poor. *Tough and Tender Love to the Poor*—that is what I am going to call today's talk. Let's ask God's presence here in Jesus' name.

Now let's begin by looking at the Bible's tough love approach to those who have needs. To do so, I would like to look at 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12. Paul says:

*"Make it your ambition to live a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody."*

Note that he exhorts people who are not working. The attention is directed toward those who have a need. Here are needy people, people who may be economically desperate, being challenged, being confronted with the truth. We'd expect needy people to be pitied or comforted; sometimes that is not the right approach. Tough love is simply being willing to confront somebody else with the truth, to put truth, at times, above having a counterfeit peace.

What I would like you to note, however, is the context for Paul's confrontation. The context can be found by reading up just a few verses. In 9 and 10, Paul writes:

*“Now about brotherly love, we do not need to write to you. For you, yourselves, have been taught by God to love each other. And, in fact, you do love all the brothers through out Macedonia, yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.”*

Brotherly love was the characteristic of the church at Thessalonica. You know, churches excel in different areas. You can look at some churches and say, “Here is the mark of this particular church. They are very strong in evangelism. Or they are very strong in Bible teaching. They are very strong in worship.” Well, the Thessalonian church was very strong in brotherly love. They really had love in action toward different members of the body down. In fact, if you want to flip to a parallel text, look at 2 Corinthians 8. This was a characteristic of the church in Thessalonica. They knew how to share their goods and their money with each other. They were very generous. 2 Corinthians 8:1-3, Paul writes to the Corinthians:

*“And now brothers we want you to know about the grace God has given the Macedonian churches. [Who are the Macedonian churches? Well, the Macedonian churches were the church at Thessalonica and the church at Phillipi, and how is this grace shown regarding the church at Thessalonica?] Out of the most severe trial their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Saints.”*

Here are folks who were not very wealthy. And yet they gave even when they didn't have that much for themselves. They remind me of a little Haitian church that I went to about 8 years ago with a guy from this church. We visited a little Haitian church way back in the countryside in Haiti. We went to this one family's house and walked into this little hut. They had a little table and chairs and almost nothing else. We sat down and the husband sat down. The wife took out a chicken for us to eat. I watched as the children of the family stood around and looked through the window and watched us eat. I realized that here were folks who didn't eat chicken but maybe once a year. But they gave out of their lack. They were like the Thessalonian believers. They gave out of their poverty and it was a privilege for them to express brotherly love to us. They loved to give. They gave beyond their ability. They gave beyond common sense.

You know, I believe that the generosity of the Thessalonian church is a wonderful indicator of the touch of God in that church. There are different ways to measure whether God's presence is in a place. Worship is one indicator, humility is another. But one of the really good indicators of the touch of God is the freedom and the generosity of the people in the place. Are these people really liberal? Are they giving and are they giving with joy?

Now, let me state the opposite of this principle and then we are going to flip back to 1 Thessalonians again. The opposite of the principle is whenever I see a group of people who are suspicious, who are really tight-fisted with their money, who are angry and who draw these really sharp lines. “Well, what are we talking about? 3.1%? 4.5%? 6%?” You know the kind of folks I mean? You get a restaurant bill and the amount is \$10.19 and they are splitting it down with you to the penny. “Well, \$10.19—I guess we will have to decide who pays \$5.10 and who is going to pay \$5.09.” Give me the bill! That whole legalistic, tight, stingy

spirit means that folks have not experienced the abundant life. They have not been touched by God. And because we haven't experienced God's overflow, we have to hold on so tight.

Here in the Vineyard these last couple of weeks, we have been having some renewal meetings for the sake of inviting the presence of God. We are going to do so again tonight and Wednesday. But it is not just to have an experience. I want you to know what we are trying to do. We want God's presence and I believe God's presence, the touch of God, changes everything – results in the ability to express brotherly love. The touch of God, the Spirit of God, empowers repentance; habitual patterns, ruts in our thinking and behavior can be broken so much more quickly when God is there. Likewise, we see empowered ministry and evangelism. It is the difference between digging a hole with a pick and shovel, and using a steam shovel. Come out especially if this is new or you are a teen, and drag some friends or your spouse. But when you lack God's touch in your own heart, when there is no breathing room, when you feel like you are suffocating and you are frustrated, I don't know about you, but at those times when I am living on emotional and spiritual fumes, I don't have anything to give away. But when God begins to fill my life and I feel revived and I feel renewed, it is no problem for me to get together with somebody who is normally extremely draining. I have the energy for it. I have energy for other people. And there is no problem for me in loosening my hand around my money because I am experiencing abundance. God is supplying.

So the Thessalonian church and, in fact, the whole early church was living out of an abundant experience of God. In that way, they were givers. Now, listen, what happens in a fallen world when certain people get around very generous people? Is there any danger facing a generous church? Or to put it at an individual level, if you are a giver, a mercy extender, or your spouse is a giver and mercy extender, do they face any particular dangers at all? Do you? Well, yes, the danger of being taken advantage of by people who are more than happy to live off of your generosity.

And so Paul speaks a tough love message to those who are coming into the church in Thessalonica and taking advantage of the churches generosity. This is what he says back in 1 Thessalonians 4:

“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life.” After he commends the church for its generosity, he then speaks to the people who take advantage of others—the users, the takers, and he says “Make it your ambition to live a quiet life and to mind your own business and to work with your hands just as we told you. So that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.”

Now, Paul gives us two searching tests regarding our own work habits. He confronts us; he puts us under the microscope with two searching tests concerning our work habits. He says first of all, “Do your work habits win the respect of those who are not followers of Christ?” Work hard, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders. If somebody who doesn't know Jesus yet, a boss, a coworker, a colleague, looks at the way you work, would they be prone to really respect you? Would they say about you that here was someone who gives the job their all? They are not standing around chatting around with friends and co-workers all day long. They look at the time you come into the office in the

morning and the time you leave at night and they say that you are a hard worker. Is that the testimony that you have? It is a searching test. And I can tell you that there have been jobs that I passed the test with flying colors and there are jobs that I failed miserably at as I applied that to my life.

I can look back at a job that I am ashamed of now. Because I allowed myself to just conform to the general, laid back, apathetic, critical, cynical environment that was at work in that particular place. I slipped into all of it. And I think if people there thought about me or heard that I was pastoring now, they would say, "Well, there is nothing about his job here that would commend him to pastor." There are other jobs and, by God's grace, the one that was immediately preceded to this job, that I had for six years is one that I feel very good about and I worked hard at.

But how about you? Do your work habits win the respect of outsiders? That is one of the tests for leadership in the church according to 1 Timothy 3. Do outsiders respect you?

And the second searching test is this: Are you dependent on anyone to keep you financially afloat? He says, "Work hard so that you will not be dependent on anyone." Work hard so that you don't have to live by way of another person's grace or another person's hard work, or another person's provision.

So let me ask you this: Are you dependent on anyone else's provision at this point in your life? Are you dependent on the provision of a parent, the provision of a friend, the provision the church, the provision of the government, the provision of food stamps? Paul says to make it your aim, as much as you can, to not be in permanent dependence on anyone else.

Now, obviously, there are situations that make dependence unavoidable. We are pushed into dependence by illness, job failure, by a spouse leaving us—you know, cleaning us out, running up huge debts, cleaning out the bank accounts, running off and we become unavoidably dependent. But to the extent that it lies within our power, the Bible challenges us to not have that be a permanent condition. Unlike many Americans, Christians are people who do not want to be permanent takers. We do not enjoy always being the receivers of someone else's kindness other than God's. We want to be givers. That is why we need to make responsible decisions regarding child bearing. Can we pay for our family, right now? That is a good question to ask. Because if we can't pay for ourselves, and we can't pay for our children now, if having another child will increase our dependence, then brothers and sisters, I would suggest that we are falling short of this verse in 1 Thessalonians 4:12. We need to make responsible decisions regarding work choices and marriage choices. If I can not pay for myself, how will I be able to support this other person?

So, it is the delight, Paul says, of the believer to break free of a dependency syndrome. To plan for the day when we can stop taking from a parent. Or stop taking from the government. Or stop taking from the church. This is something that each one of us should want and look forward to with eager expectation.

You know, Paul turns up the tough love approach even further in 2 Thessalonians 3—I know this is hard stuff, but the Bible often takes a tough love approach to us, even when we would like people to join us in our self pity. And it is because God loves us and he wants us to live free. He doesn't want us to be in permanent bondage. He doesn't want other people to manage our lives or pity

our lives or control our lives. Our Father wants his children to experience as much liberty as we can experience given the choices and given the opportunities presented to us. Again, don't hear me to say that if you are in dependence, you are wrong or you have done something wrong. Sometimes choices are forced upon you that you have not asked for. But to the extent that we have power, God would have you be free.

Paul steps it up in 2 Thessalonians 3, where he says:

*"In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching he received from us. You yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you. Even when we were with you, we gave you this rule, if a man will not work, he shall not eat. We hear that some among you are idle, they are not busy, they are busy-bodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right. If anyone doesn't obey the instructions in this letter, take special note of them. Do not associate with him in order that he might feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."*

Do you know what he is saying to the church? Generous people, kind people, merciful people, people who have been touched with the tender heart of God, do not enable laziness. Do not allow your mercy and your generosity to facilitate other people's long-term irresponsibility. Don't do it! He says, "I urge you...[and then] I command you..."

Oh, sometimes you know we have to grab hold of the mercy extenders and say, "Hold on, sister, this is wrong. You have stepped over the line. You are enabling really irresponsible behavior here. This person is in long-term dependence upon you. And as a result, they are being dehumanized." People need to work. They need to provide for themselves and their families. Parents, it is not good to have our kids live in permanent adolescent dependence. There comes a time to push kids out of the nest.

Now, I love the limits that Paul places on tough love. He says, "I want you to note that person, indeed, don't associate with them. I want a long-term idle person to feel ashamed, but do not treat this person in the church as an enemy. Treat them as a brother." You know, the tough love approach that he is talking about has been called church discipline. And, frankly, brothers and sisters, the American church has been by and large, an abysmal failure when it comes to church discipline because like on so many other issues, we fall to polar opposites. Either the American church doesn't practice any discipline or correction of its members, so that we see all kinds of things flourishing in the church, immorality and long-term rebellion, and folks feeling very comfortable to just deliberately cut at right angles against God's Word with out anybody ever saying anything because who are we to judge.

Or on the other hand there is a harshness and a coldness in those churches that do exercise church discipline. It is almost like people who fail simply get kicked out. No restorative approach, no gentleness. "Kick 'em out. We don't need you. We don't want you. You have no part of us. Get out of here." That is so far from the spirit of the scriptures. Never does Paul say "Kick 'em out and forget about them. They are just excess baggage." What does that say about us

when we can do that to each other? What does that say about our spirit? What does it say about our heart and the reality of whether we have been touched by the tender love of Jesus Christ?

What I see in this passage is that I see Paul saying, "I want you to exercise discipline with the utmost sensitivity." The tough love approach that I am describing is a sensitive approach. We are talking eye surgery here. You are taking a splinter out of your brother's eye. When you go to confront, if that doesn't cause you more pain than the pain it will cause the other person, then your heart is probably not right. If you are relishing the opportunity to show them where they are wrong, if you love the confrontation because now you are going to sit down with the unemployed person, or the immoral person, or the person who has committed some sin and you are going to tell them where they have been wrong, if that whole process doesn't break your heart, so that your utmost desire is to win a brother, I will tell you that you might as well forget it. Because you are already wrong! Because the whole thing won't be blessed. You might as well forget it. Don't go, if you are seeking to score points. Don't go in correction, if you are really rejoicing in the opportunity to batter your opponent. If you are treating a brother or sister like an enemy, stop in your tracks and get on your face before God and say, "God, don't let me go unless I first have the opportunity to have a broken heart for this person."

Continuing this tough love approach a little further, we have to acknowledge that biblically one of the causes of poverty, and not by any means the only cause, but one of the causes is the bad decisions made by the poor. And those bad decisions include a lack of diligence at work. We will take a look at one or two passages in Proverbs and then we are going to move forward past the tough love issue.

It is the case in the book of Proverbs that a lack of diligence leads to poverty. You can look at Proverbs 6:6 for that. And that is the case, in the books of Proverbs, that chasing fantasies leads to poverty. When a person is involved in get-rich-quick schemes or chases a fantasy and not listening to counsel, that leads to poverty.

Proverbs 28:19 says, "He who works his land will have abundant food, but the one who chases fantasies will have his fill of poverty."

And on the other hand, hard work, diligence, gathering little by little, and not trying to get it all at once, Proverbs is real clear. Hard work leads to money. Here is the bottom line of tough love. The bottom line of tough love regarding the poor is to speak a message about work. And to challenge people to consider this truth: hard work is not an add-on, an extra, a luxury, to an already full life. It is part of our humanity. To be unable to work, or to be unwilling to work, frankly cuts out something of the image of God in us. God is a worker. And to be made in the image of God is to be a worker and to be a hard worker, to be a diligent worker.

Well, let's pause and reflect for a moment. Let's say you find yourself in tough economic straits. You really are having a hard time. Or you know somebody who is impoverished. You are trying to figure it out. What is at the root of this? How shall I make heads or tails of our difficult situation? Does this person need a tough love approach? Somebody to come along side and be willing to sacrifice the temporary peace for the sake of the truth, but really for the sake of loving

their brother or sister. Does this person need to stop being enabled and to be called to the fully humanizing, the fully encouraging benefit of hard work?

Or is this poverty here the result of something beyond this person's control? Do they need further assistance? Someone to write a check? Someone to pick up a bill? Someone to pay the utilities or bring over a bag of groceries? Would comfort, in this situation, would be entirely wrong? How do I get God's mind about myself or another? Look at James 1. I am going to look at James 1, verses 2-11:

James says, "The way to sort life out is to ask God for wisdom." James 1:5:

"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him."

You need wisdom for yourself or for someone you see in financial straits? Look up at the sky and say, "Dad, my heavenly Dad, what is this all about? How shall I understand this?" Wisdom is not just knowing the Bible, it is knowing how to use the Bible in your life when trials come. "I am in the swirl of this particular trial, it is an economic trial. Dad I need wisdom."

He might say, "Now, let me help you to use the Bible to make sense of life. That is why I gave you this book. But let me help you to employ it. Let me help you to wield it because we need wisdom to use the Bible appropriately and sensibly. There are verses in the Bible that don't apply to you, in this instance."

And we could be like the friends of Job and come along and speak hard truth, but we speak truth inappropriately. Hardness is inappropriate. Tender love is what I'm calling for here.

And so, "Dad, are you speaking tough love to me now about my money? That I really have been irresponsible with my credit cards? And my spouse and I, or me by myself, really need to take to heart the message of cutting up my cards. And I am not good at shopping. I really need some training. I need some budgetary help."

"Well, Dad, I really need the support of some folks, but I have to get out there and start treating finding a job as a 40 hour a week job. I have been dependent. And my life is not gaining the respect of outsiders." Or, "I have done everything in my power, but I don't have the power to change this."

We are looking for God's perspective. And I appreciate the fact that James says, "Remember who this God is that you are looking to for wisdom. He is the generous God, who gives generously, literally. You are speaking to God the giver." God, the one who loves to open his hand and he is not upset with you for not understanding something. If you don't have his mind about something that is a problem or pain in your life, and you are wondering why you are experiencing this pain, God is not upset with you when you ask him. But remember, if you are going to ask God for his perspective, then you better want to hear his answer!

If I say, "Dad, what is wrong with me? Why am I in this fix?" I had better want to hear his answer because James goes on and says, "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think that he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."

Make sure when you are asking God about why you have a problem, that you want to know the answer. Verses 6 through 8 are testing our sincerity. Do we want to know God's mind? Do you want to know God's mind or are you split



between wanting to know God's mind about something and wanting your own agenda? Because if what you want, really, is your own agenda, then that is being double-minded. And in that way you are going to lose stability and also it will hurt your prayer life. Don't think that you are going to get anything from God while you are double-minded.

You go to God and you say, "God, why aren't I getting blessed financially?" while you hold onto your plan. The scripture is saying, "You don't want to hear because the Lord might be saying, 'Let go of your plan, give it up to me.'" So we must be fully and single-mindedly committed to hearing the mind of God and God will give us his perspective on our trials.

Let's turn, then, to the tender side of love toward the poor. And if there is a general attitude of God displayed in the Bible toward the poor, it would be one of tender love. Just look at Jesus with the widow of Nain, burying her only son and with him burying her only hope for provision in this world. It says in Luke 7:13 when the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." And he acted on her behalf! Tender love. You know, I looked up the words used in Hebrew for poverty, for the poor, and in these words we can find what God is drawn toward, perhaps. Not that this isn't always a matter of grace, but there are things in the poor that are especially pleasing to the Lord. And one of the Hebrew words "ebyon"—the word literally means to be pliable, to be easily bent, to acquiesce over against the wealthy which the Bible describes as stiff-necked.

The poor in the scriptures are easily moved and the reason why the poor are so vulnerable is that they haven't the strength to resist. But if you think about it, isn't that precisely the response that God wants toward himself? Someone who is docile, someone who when they get a command or receive a word is very quick to respond and move with it? That is the description of the poor in the Bible. When God wants to press out something, he knows that he can come to a poor man and that his will generally will be done.

I mentioned last week that the reason why Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor" and not "Blessed are the wealthy" is because the poor are in touch, generally, with their neediness. It doesn't mean that the poor are morally superior to the wealthy. That the poor live more righteous lives than the wealthy, often they do not. But the poor, generally, in society, across history and across countries, are more in touch with their need than the wealthy.

And in order to come to God, what one must have is a recognition, a cognizance of their own need. We come to God always with empty hands, and we always come to God as failures because God is the supplier. God is the fountain. So those who are full of themselves, those who are complete and sufficient in themselves will likely not draw near to God.

The needy, the failure, the one who is in touch with their own unrighteousness, will be the recipient of God's grace. God has a special place in his heart for the poor and the needy. And it is upon God throughout the Old Testament that the needy particularly lean. You know, God becomes the refuge for those who have no place else to turn. And I don't know about you, but there have been times in my life, where I had nowhere else to turn, when I had no other support system. When as a result of circumstance, and I believe by the great grace of God, God pulled all the props away. I felt completely alone and completely abandoned. Completely isolated. And in those moments, either of self imposed failure

because of my own foolishness, or because of circumstantially imposed failure, I was forced to cast my lot on God and bank on him alone.

This is the place of the poor in the Bible. They don't have wealthy parents. They don't have a huge support network. They don't have people around who are throwing help their way. And so, in verses like Isaiah 25:4, it says:

*"That the Lord has been a refuge for the poor. A refuge for the needy in his distress. A shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat."*

If you find yourself, today, isolated and alone and having no network of support, it may be that the Lord is saying to you that you need to entirely bank on him and rely on him, and he has a tender spot in his heart toward you. He would love to have his church have a tender heart toward you as well.

Just as in the tough love approach in which there is a confrontation of the dependent, in the tender love approach, God directs his confrontation to those who would abuse the weak position and the needy position of folks who have nothing. And so God scorches the wealthy. And he scorches society and he scorches the government, both in the Old and New Testament. He scorches those who take advantage of people who are weak. In the Pentateuch he scorches people who take advantage of folks who have very little means by charging them exorbitant interest rates. He scorches those who would take advantage of folks who have just been through a hard time by raising the prices of food and necessities. The Lord would scorch people who take advantage of grieving widows by selling them high priced funerals.

He would scorch folks in California who are going around selling high priced repairs and roof repairs, taking advantage of folks who have just been through an earthquake or a hurricane. He would scorch companies that are large and take advantage of the weak position of smaller competitors. He would scorch high pressured sales people who take advantage of the weak position of the elderly or the ignorance of a consumer.

He hates it when folks take advantage of other peoples' weaknesses. He doesn't rejoice in this aspect of a free market system. And if you are working in a place that systematically and regularly takes advantage of someone else, their weakness, you as the person who desires to follow Christ, must disassociate yourself with that. Whether it is a law firm or a business or a sales team, taking advantage of weakness is scorched in the Bible by God.

And so, where does that leave us? Two practical suggestions and then we are going to finish. Where the tender love of God leaves us is first of all in a call to give. Over against taking advantage of people, or folks who are in economic necessity, having to pay interest to us, borrowing money at interest and having to labor to get anything from us, throughout the scriptures, the call is to give to those in need. Give money, give appliances, give time, give services, and give to those in need!

The second call, I think, is even more personally challenging. The tender love of God runs toward people who are in pain. The normal human response toward someone with a need is to move in the other direction. To separate. To push this person to the back gate. Like the rich man did with poor Lazarus in the book of Luke. To say to someone who is in need, "You need to see a professional. You need to go to the church. You need to go to those services that are set up

already. Don't bother me. I personally can't help you." The tender love of God moves toward, not away from, people in pain.

Here is what I would like to suggest. God wants folks, all of us, to get near, to get really near, to get in the face of those who are without. To get in the shoes of someone who is very much unlike us. To walk along in the shoes of a person who has had very different life experiences than us. And the reason why God wants us to walk around in the shoes of someone else is because only when we are walking around in the shoes of someone else do we begin to feel God's tender heart. It does something to us. You know, that's what God did in the incarnation. He walked in the shoes of people who had nothing. God, the wealthy, powerful king put on rags to display his tender love.

Let me put it this way. Unless you walk around for a little while in the shoes of someone who is handicapped, who has multiple sclerosis, who can't get into the church building because there is no room down the aisle for their wheelchair; unless you put yourself in the place of a deaf person and draw near, you can't feel the tender love of God toward the disabled. Unless you get to know and befriend someone who is a homosexual [I am not countenancing homosexual acts. I am not suggesting to you that it all just doesn't make a difference. What I am talking about is becoming a friend of someone, drawing near to a person. To learn someone's history, to go through with them the kinds of things that they have gone through.], you will never feel the tender love of God toward homosexuals.

Unless you spend time with the elderly, or spend any time in a nursing home, you will never feel the tender love of God toward the elderly. This is a basic principle of life in feeling the tender love of God. Being near people who are in pain, changes us. I think God wants you and me around folks in pain. Not only because we can meet the needs of those in pain or the impoverished, but because God wants to do something in us. We pray for the fruit of the spirit to be born in our lives—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness. How is the fruit of the spirit going to be born? By being alone in our house and praying for the fruit of the spirit? By watching TV? Or will the fruit be born by being in situations where we must be stretched, where we have to grow, where we are forced to make a choice to show agape love toward someone who is very inconvenient, where we are forced to be faithful to someone who is unfaithful to us?

Why does God throw us in difficult circumstances with difficult people? Because only in those circumstances, do we grow the fruit of the spirit.

My bottom line is this. Something happens to you, something wonderful happens to you, when you are around people who have needs, financial needs, emotional needs, if you allow it to happen. But if you have erected a life style, a world, a busy schedule that lets no one in, if you are simply passing needy folks off to professionals and church and government, if you go from appointment to appointment and shopping trip to family without giving space for the needy, then you are doing damage to your soul because your heart is almost certainly becoming harder and harder.

It is not the poor that need you so much as it is you who need the poor! I can tell you that the great benefit of me traveling to other countries. I have had the great privilege to do that. The great benefit is not the wonderful things that I have been able to bring to other people, but what it has done to me. I still do some

counseling with people both inside the church and outside, folks who will do nothing for Vineyard, not because people need me, but I need to hear people in pain.

I am sure folks who are coming back from Brazil now have seen God's heart for non-Americans, for Brazilians. Those who travel to Muslim countries have gotten the same heart. Spend time around people in pain, spend time around people who are poor and something is going to happen in your heart. You will become tender. You will become kind. You will become more like Jesus. Let's pray.