

GIVING TO THE COMMUNITY

“What is this refuge ministry I was hearing about?” Nikita asked Diamond, who was driving her home from Sunday service. That morning, the pastor singled out several people who were making an impact in the community. There was also a special opportunity to give.

“Our church happens to have a lot of licensed counselors. Years ago, we had the idea to offer mental health resources for anyone who can’t afford it.”

“Say more,” said Nikita, adjusting in her seat.

“It was about five years ago, and the Lord laid on our pastor the profound need around here,” said Diamond. “He talked to a woman in our church who was a licensed therapist, eager to help. With the church’s blessing, she developed a three-month training course. Several people went through it, and four of them went on to receive degrees and certificates as counselors themselves! But the point all along was to be a resource for the community.”

“We have a small office off of Martin Luther King Jr. Drive,” Diamond continued. “Counselors from the church volunteer their time, on a rotation. It helps to make an appointment. But if there are walk-ins, that’s okay too. As you can imagine, we get all kinds of people. Around here, many are veterans.”

Diamond glanced at her friend and added, “Just culturally, there is resistance to seeking mental health services. We wanted to make it simple. I actually volunteer with the administrative work.”

“I noticed something different about this church right away,” said Nikita.

1 What does it look like to be “openhanded” in your current context?

2 Is there anything that makes it harder for you to give or to serve others?

⁴ Save when there shall be no poor among you; for the LORD shall greatly bless thee in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it: ⁵ Only if thou carefully hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all these commandments which I command thee this day. ⁶ For the LORD thy God blesseth thee, as he promised thee: and thou shalt lend unto many nations, but thou shalt not borrow; and thou shalt reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over thee.

⁷ If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother: ⁸ But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth. ⁹ Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the LORD against thee, and it be sin unto thee. ¹⁰ Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou puttest thine hand unto. ¹¹ For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.

⁴ However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, ⁵ if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. ⁶ For the LORD your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you.

⁷ If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. ⁸ Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. ⁹ Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. ¹⁰ Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. ¹¹ There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

A Generous and Just Nation

God brings the Israelites out of Egypt, calling them His people. He gives instructions to set them apart from every other nation. Some laws are about how to worship the Creator, but others regulate the treatment of other humans.

The Israelites are to demonstrate justice in all financial dealings. Under Pharaoh, they were exploited for financial gain. This is not to be the pattern for God's people. They should be generous with one another, "openhanded" instead of "tightfisted" or "hardhearted" (Deut. 15:7–8). God says, "There need be no poor among you" (Deut. 15:4).

One way to follow those words is to lend money freely, instead of seeking the highest return. Every seven years, God commands a year of "release" (see Deut. 15:1–3). Debts would be canceled and lands returned to their ancestral owners on a regular basis. Thus Israel would not be a nation of *haves* and *have-nots*, a place where poverty becomes inescapable.

But will this make wealthy people unwilling to loan money at all, if debts will eventually be forgiven? God calls the lender to put the thought aside, or else the poor will "appeal to the LORD against you" (v. 9). Such generosity would bankrupt other nations, but God guarantees blessing, if Israel shall obey (v. 10).

It is helpful to reverse the logic of this. Since God *can* bless His people with abundant resources, they can be generous in turn, sharing resources and forgiving loans. The result is that there shall be no destitute people in the entire nation! Someone in a tough situation shall have a community ready and eager to help. This is the just community that God wants for Israel: a community where generosity is normalized.

1 Where do you see poverty becoming like a trap today?

2 If God commanded generosity for the Israelites, what will God ask for believers today?

3 Are business relationships a place to show generosity? Why or why not?

⁴² For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: ⁴³ I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

⁴⁴ Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

⁴⁵ Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

⁴² “For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

⁴⁴ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

⁴⁵ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’”

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The ancient Israelites fall short of the just requirements of God. Yet Israel is reconstituted around God’s own Son. Jesus sends twelve disciples to proclaim the kingdom of God to the “lost sheep of Israel,” offering blessing on those who repent and respond to the good news (Matt. 10:6). Their welcome of Christ’s messengers is as important as the welcome of Christ Himself (Matt. 10:40–42).

He expands this message in Matthew 25 with an image of final judgment. Jews knew that God would judge all people, separating those deserving of reward and punishment. And when Jesus says that “all the nations” shall be presented to the Son of Man, listeners would anticipate God’s favor for Jews and harsh judgment for Gentiles—certainly those who, like Rome, had oppressed others for selfish gain (v. 32). *At last*, they might think, *God’s justice unveiled*.

Jesus makes an unexpected pronouncement. It’s not ethnicity that the judge sees, nor membership in Israel. The judge—Jesus Himself, called “Son of Man”—decides based upon the treatment of others. He doesn’t provide a list of works to do, but He points to the defining trait of His true disciples: serving others in need (v. 31).

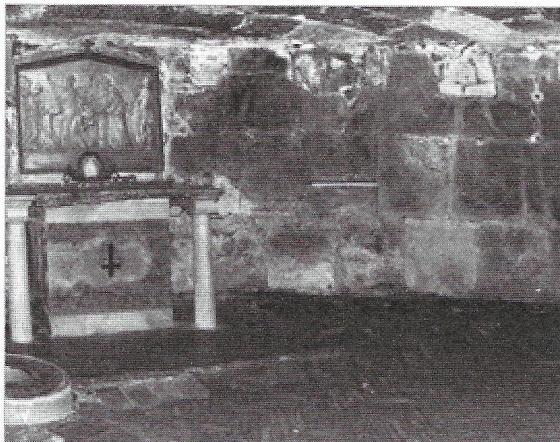
Treatment of brothers and sisters determines how Jesus feels treated by us. If we do not care for the needs of others, we reject Jesus, since He identifies with those in need. He says, “I was a stranger . . . I needed clothes . . . I was sick and in prison” (Matt. 25:43). When followers of Jesus see others in need, they should imagine how Jesus would want to be treated. Instead of, *What would Jesus do?* the question is, *What would you do for Jesus?*

In Jesus’ telling, the test catches people off guard (Matt. 25:44). They call Jesus “Lord,” but they did not realize their treatment of “the least” was relevant (vv. 44–45). God has a special heart for the most vulnerable. Anyone who receives unmerited favor must open their eyes to the needs all around—to Jesus in disguise.

1 What kind of people does Jesus mean by, “the least of these” (v. 45)?

2 Why does care for these people matter to Jesus?

3 Why would Jesus preview future judgment?



Two of Jesus’ apostles to be imprisoned were Peter and Paul, and each is rumored to have been held in the *tullianum*—a dark hole accessed only through a small opening. Prisoners survived only if visitors would bring food.

Chris 73

What Is Money For?

Think about some things people have used as currency in history: shells, beads, salt, gold, whale teeth, and now even cryptocurrency. At its core, money is a tool to convey value. Unless you are a collector, you value money because of what it promises: freedom, time, esteem, relaxation, and more.

We are always tempted to project value onto the possessors of money, but Jesus reforms our understanding of value. Being rich is not a mark of our worth, just as being poor is not a knock against us. When Jesus tells of a man who enjoys the status of riches, the man loses it all because he is not “rich toward God” (Luke 12:16–21). If money is to have value to Jesus’ followers, it is for what they use it to accomplish, who they are able to help, and what glory they bring to God.

We shouldn’t forget that money is a tool. We might have a goal to earn more, but the next goal should be to surrender it for God to use. After all, earthly riches are temporary; they pass from our control when we die. Heavenly treasures last forever: faith, relationships, the love we show (Matt. 6:19–21). More money doesn’t signal spiritual success. But what we do with it is surely relevant.

Like the community of ancient Israel, the Body of Christ is called to embrace justice and decency for anyone in need. The witness of the community in Acts 2:45 was that “anyone” had enough. As individuals, we can’t make ourselves responsible for every need we encounter. But as a community that follows a just God, generosity should be a distinctive act of worship.

1 Imagine you were given a 150% raise at work. What would you do?

2 Where have you seen someone valued according to how much money they have?

3 Has your church community been known for generosity? How?

Seeing Need as God Does

Make a list of needs in your local community (your church's prayer list; requests from your small group; or other needs of your neighborhood, workplace, or school). Commit to pray for these needs today and in the week ahead. Pray for your openhandedness toward God's invitations to you. Perhaps it will be a phone call for encouragement, an offering, or some other way that God will use you to be the hands and feet of Jesus.

Jesus, I open my hands and commit myself to serving these needs:

Key Text

For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.

—Deuteronomy 15:11 KJV

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

—Deuteronomy 15:11 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of March 16 through March 21

Mon. 1 Samuel 18:1–5—Souls Bound Together.

Tue. 1 John 4:7–16—Abide in God's Love.

Wed. 1 John 4:17–21—Loving God and Each Other.

Thu. Isaiah 56:3–8—All Peoples Will Worship God.

Fri. Psalm 133–134—Living Together in Unity.

Sat. Galatians 3:25–29—Children of God Through Faith.

Next Week: Acts 10:9–15, 30–35; Galatians 3:28–29

We are equal in God's sight. What examples of welcome and equality can you spot this week, perhaps in news stories or in conversations with friends?