



## Biblical Foundations for the Ministry of Mercy

In the most recent issues, this column has focused most of its attention on the work of the elder. I've argued for a focus on shepherding the flock by building strong men of God and by cultivating a growing knowledge of the Bible. It's about time I turn my attention once again to the work of the deacon.

Long time readers of the column will perhaps recall that several years ago I spent quite some time trying to build the case that the office of deacon was best described as that of steward. I spent quite some time describing the kinds of assignments that I believe the Bible to assign to the deacons who are the stewards of the house of God. I started by suggesting that deacons be *stewards of congregational finance*: cultivating it by teaching Scriptural principles of generosity, researching causes worthy of the congregation's support, and managing the actual receipt and disbursement of those funds given in faith. I argued that deacons are to be *stewards of congregational spiritual gifts*: challenging God's people to determine, in faith, how God has given them gifts, determining the needs of the ministry of the Lord's church and how those gifts fit in, and then deploying the members in needed Kingdom service. And finally, I argued that deacons were to be *stewards of congregational mercy*. I suggested that deacons were not called to "show mercy" instead of the congregation, as professional "mercy-men," but rather to lead the congregation, to encourage the congregation, and to deploy the congregation's gifts and resources in meeting the urgent needs for mercy in church and community.

I wish to spend a few articles fleshing out some of these concepts more. In these paragraphs, we begin with the ministry of mercy. Rather than writing a "speech to persuade," I frame my remarks as a *series of propositions* with brief explanations and notations attached, all designed to stimulate your study of the Scriptures on the subject at hand. So, as you read these words, have your Bible on the table next to you. Look up the references, make notes and become convinced not because Sittima said so, but because Scripture demands our understanding, faith and obedience to these matters.

You may choose to discuss these propositions in your deacon's meeting. After many of them, I draw some specific implications for action. You may wish to develop these further by adding to them your own practical conclusions. (Do me a favor. If you do develop a strategy for action based on these propositions, send me a copy of it. "*As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend*", (Proverbs 27:17).

### **Proposition one**

God allows poverty and gives the poor to the church community to challenge us to care for them with hearts that echo His, and to test whether or not we do (Exodus 22:21-27, 23:6; Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Matthew 26:11). Conversely, neglect of the poor, the fatherless, the widow, or other defenseless ones is a grievous and heinous sin which incurs God's righteous wrath (Exodus 22:22-24; Psalm 68:5; Isaiah 10:1-3). Indeed, He specifically identifies Himself as the God of the poor, the fatherless and the widow, and declares in modern slang, that "he who messes with the defenseless is going to have to deal with me!"

### **Proposition two**

God stipulated that provision be made for the poor through work, specifically, through gleaning laws (Leviticus 19:9-10). Notice that gleaning is work, not a handout. Work is central to one's

dignity and to a sense of one's purpose before the face of God (cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:10; Deuteronomy 24:10-15, 19-22). This concept provides a scathing critique of welfare handouts that demean because they erode the dignity of work. Further, it suggests deacons should exercise great care never to make anyone dependent upon long term care without work.

### **Proposition three**

In the ministry of mercy in both OT and NT, motive is always a key issue. If the motive is wrong, the blessing is removed both for giver and recipient (cf. Deuteronomy 15:9-10; 1 Corinthians 13:3).

### **Proposition four**

To show discrimination against certain needy recipients for personal gain is evil. Scripture calls it favoritism and prohibits it as sinful (James 2:2-6).

### **Proposition five**

Mercy is not only the work of deacons, but is an expected fruit of the heart and life of everyone who is converted (Micah 6:8; Matthew 5:7). This means, in practice, that deacons ought to lead the flock in showing mercy, not "do it for them." Even when the latter is easier (as it often is), it is counterproductive and results in a church that does not cultivate the faith and love of every believer. (It is harder to teach a child to tie his shoes than it is to do it for him. But tying shoelaces for them results in dependent children who cannot function in a world demanding maturity.) That is a grievous error and sin against the divinely-ordained and multi-gifted structure of the body of believers (1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12:3ff).

### **Proposition six**

The ministry of mercy is a component and a dimension of the ministry of the Word, not an adjunct to it or a replacement for it (Acts 2:42-47, 5:32-35, 6:1-7; Galatians 2:8-10). Sadly, worldly liberals today (both within the church and outside of it) believe social handouts and entitlements have some sort of redemptive power in and of themselves. And just as sadly, many who react to such social activism retreat into a "preaching only" mode of church life, as if distributing food or clothing or other physically needed items is a curse rather than a blessing. In point of fact, there is in Scripture a strong link between Word and deed. While the former is always primary (because it alone proclaims Christ and redemption in Him), it seldom stands alone. A quick review of the early history of the church in Acts 2:42 through Acts 6:7 will show how inseparable and crucial was the linking of the apostles' teaching with the church's loving and merciful lifestyle. Such is our duty today as well.

### **Proposition seven**

The ministry of mercy is first and foremost a way of serving Christ, not a way of redistributing wealth socially (Matthew 25:34-46). Sadly, this needs to be said in this day of social re-engineering. At the same time, my proposition is not to be used as an excuse by the wealthy to avoid their calling and duty to be generous and merciful to the needy (1 Timothy 6:17-19). The key is the heart of Christ that ought to be beating in the chest of everyone redeemed and renewed by Him. When Christlike, the wealthy will desire to meet the needs of those in trouble, not being worried about losing their "stuff." Likewise, when Christlike, the needy will not be greedy, demanding and ungrateful. Rather, they will be moved by the grace of the Lord through those whom He uses to care for them. Read the neat "cycle of gratitude" described in 2 Corinthians 9:10-15. First, those who received the gospel are called to give to others in generous demonstration of their heartfelt faith (v. 7). Then, those who receive these gifts thank both the earthly givers and the Divine Giver (vv.10-14). And that gratitude results in praise ascending from all concerned (v. 15)!

### **Proposition eight**

In showing mercy, a priority must be placed on giving to those within the family of faith (Matthew 10:42; Acts 2:42ff, 4:32ff; Galatians 6:9-10). However, the last listed passage suggests that, after priority care for the family of faith is met, there is yet a burden to demonstrate grace, mercy and

generosity outside of the family of faith. Such is part and parcel of our witness to Christ and His gospel of love and grace.

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