

Minister's Message – March 2012

Poverty

When the Lord brought his chosen people out of Egypt they suffered from hunger until God sent them manna and quail. Hunger is one of the outcomes of poverty. Lack of clothes and shelter are others (Luke 16:20, 21). When the manna was gathered each person had sufficient for their needs – no more and no less (Exodus 16:18). When they came into Canaan the manna stopped; their food came from the land. At this point we first read about the poor in the land (Exodus 22:25). The context is about charging interest.

‘There shall be no poor among you’ (Deuteronomy 15:4). God’s people in God’s land were each given a plot of land on which to live. Everyone had a job. The Mosaic Law anticipated some people getting into difficulty/poverty. They might get into debt and sell themselves into slavery. In the Sabbath year all debts were to be cancelled and slaves set free. Some might sell their land also, but this was to be returned in the Jubilee year. There were also laws about gleaning. Such measures aimed at preventing persistent poverty. God commanded generosity towards the poor (Deuteronomy 15:11, Psalm 82:3).

The Sabbath year and Jubilee were rarely observed (II Chronicles 36:21). Rather the rich and powerful exploited and oppressed the poor in the land (Psalm 12:5). They charged excessive interest (Psalm 15:5). They denied justice to the poor. They took their land by force (I Kings 21). The prophets condemned this disregard for the poor (Isaiah 1:17, Ezekiel 22:29, Amos 4:1). It was contrary to the commands given through Moses.

‘He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for his Maker; he who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord’ (Proverbs 14:31, 19:17). In Proverbs there is a lot of wisdom about poverty; wisdom about causes and treatment. Oppression is a sin; but the poor are not without sin. Sin is the basic cause of poverty (Proverbs 30:8, 9).

Jesus came into this world of sin and poverty. He was born in a stable. He came to preach the gospel to the poor (Luke 4:18, Isaiah 61:1). He spoke of the consequences of neglecting a poor beggar; He told a rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give to the poor (Luke 16:19f, 18:22). It seems that his disciples gave to the poor from their common purse (John 13:29). But Jesus had come to deal with the cause of poverty, namely sin. The poor who were poor in spirit would be blessed. He did not glorify poverty as such, as done in the Roman Catholic Church.

From the very beginning the believers shared their possessions with poor members of the church (Acts 2:45, 4:34). Their focus was upon treasure in heaven not on earth. Deacons were ordained to manage the distribution of food to widows. Paul organised a collection from the churches for the poor believers suffering from famine in Judea. He urged generous and cheerful giving. He saw it a giving to the Lord. He operated on the principle of equality (II Corinthians 8:5, 14). God is the one who graciously gives us all things (Philippians 4:19). God is glorified in and through the giver and the receiver (II Corinthians 8:12-15).

In Reformed churches we have deacons whose duty is to administer church property and finances. Part of their duty is to assess the needs of members and give help to those who have genuine need, such as widows, orphans and the like (James 1:27, 2:15f). Helping the poor is a responsibility and a privilege for all believers. It begins in the household of faith but does not stop there (Galatians 6:10).

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