

Christmas, A Season of Mercy

We cannot read the story of the incarnation without understanding that God is merciful to the poor. He is merciful to all bringing the Light of the World, Jesus Christ, of darkness. In the accounts of the birth narrative God is telling us of his mercy toward the humble poor. Zechariah and Elizabeth, the father and mother of John the Baptist, were of little significance living in the hill country of Judea. Mary and Joseph, the virgin mother and Jesus' surrogate earthly father, were young, poor, uneducated, and socially insignificant. The shepherds keeping watch of their sheep in the fields were of the lowest caste in their culture. Yet, these are the one's God chose reveal himself to as he came in his love for the salvation of the world. We should be ready for his love and mercy to continue through our lives to all especially the humble poor. And yet we must do this with wisdom.

One of the important questions to ask in showing mercy to the humble poor is, "What should I do when people ask for money? Most people have had the experience of walking our cities streets and being confronted by someone asking for money. What should we do when this happens to us? There is not a simple answer. On one occasion C.S. Lewis walking the streets of London with a friend when a man approached him and asked for money. Lewis responded by digging into his pockets and pulling out some money and giving it to the man. Lewis' friend said to him after the beggar walked away, "Why did you give him that money? You know he's only going to use to buy something to drink." C.S. Lewis replied, "Well, that's what I was going to do with it. Why not give him the pleasure?" The truth is we need wisdom in these moments as we seek to love our neighbors by showing them mercy.

We must remember that the person asking us for money holds his hands out to you as an image bearer of God. They have as much dignity, worth, and capacity as you do. Therefore, God's goal for their life is the same as it is for yours - to be restored to be all that it means to be truly human. However, human restoration takes more than a dollar in hand.

We must acknowledge that most people asking us for money are in crisis. They're probably experiencing chronic poverty created by poverty of relationship with God, themselves, others, and the world they're living in. They may be experiencing mental and emotional anguish, health issues, and addictions of different kinds. A dollar in hand cannot solve these problems and restore the person human flourishing. It's possible that a handout could actually cause more hurt. So what should you do?

The first thing to do is to communicate your compassion and care for them. Let them know that they are not in your way or an inconvenience to you. Tell them that they're not alone. Offer them some kind of hope through the reason for the hope you have yourself.

Secondly, offer to assist them by getting them in touch with resources in our city or in your community. It is good to familiarize yourself with those resources. The mercy ministry team at our church has a list of those resources in our city that you can keep in your car or your bag, that you can give to someone, or use as information to assist someone. These agencies, churches, etc. are set up to give people the longer term assistance they need.

Third, you can offer a relationship. You may become a part of the work that God is doing in the restoration of someone's true humanity. You can offer to take the person to get something to eat, or to get a cup of coffee. You can keep blankets or coats in your car this time of year and offer them one of those and offer to sit with them to hear their story. Most people who are living in homelessness will not put their trust in someone

else immediately. It will take them encountering a lot of people before they will trust someone with a long term relationship. Don't assume that you are the first person they've encountered. Pray for wisdom, offer some kind of relationship, treat them as another human being, like one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread that satisfies. The goal is to be a part of a relationship that restores another into all that it means to be an image bearer of God.

[Follow this link to watch this video](#) from the Chalmers Center on what to do when someone asks you for money.

Orthodoxy - Sin

New City Catechism Question 16: What is sin?

Answer: Sin is rejecting or ignoring God in the world he created, rebelling against him by living without reference to him, not being or doing what he requires in his law—resulting in our death and the disintegration of all creation.

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. - 1 John 3:4

Every person knows guilt without sin because every person knows they're in relationship. Every culture has it's expressions of right and wrong. It may be wrong to not say, "Yes ma'am." It may right to simply say "Yes." But whichever we say we know we're guilty in relationship by just being. Sin is throughout, whether we know our sins or not.

We were created by God to live for his glory in the earth where he has placed us in relationship to his creatures. But we are rebellious creatures who reject our relationship with our Creator. Though we may acknowledge there is a God, our life is defined by living without him. Therefore our relationship is defined as sin, not by our sins. We sin against God because we are sinners. Sin is our being in relationship with God in rebellious thoughts, words, deeds, and affections. Sin is the stain of our souls we cannot clean.

We find this idea of sin in William Shakespeare's tragedy Macbeth. In the first scene the playwright offers to us the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth. As she walks in her sleep she recounts the horrors of her past. As she walks we hear her cry, "Out, damned spot!" Shakespeare does not depict sin as her particular sins, even though she is remembering particular horrific acts in her life. He is writing sin as a non-removable spot on her being clearly revealed by her past actions. Sin is the creatures rejecting of his Creator in his being. We are not what he created us to be.

Sin is expressed in reference to God as he reveals himself through his law. Sin is not being or doing what God requires in his law. Whether we know that law as written on our hearts or revealed to us in his words of Scripture, we do not do it. When we violate God's law we don't live according to who God is. Every violation of God's law by thought, word, or deed is a violation of God himself. When a person steals from another person he is living in reference to what God's pleasure is and in reference to God himself. God's pleasure is self giving not self taking because God is always self giving. When we take from another person we are destroying and disintegrating our relationship to the Creator and his creation. We are like branches on a tree that break ourselves free, taking other branches with us, and expecting to live. But as we lay on the ground dying we disintegrate. Therefore, sin always leads to disintegration and death. But God so loved the world of sinful creatures that he gave his only Son to experience death and disintegration in our place, paying the penalty for our sin, so that we would not have to.