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EQUIPPING MEMBERS OF FAITH FAMILY CHURCH, FINKSBURG,
MARYLAND TO BE MINISTERS OF BIBLICAL MERCY

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EQUIPPING MEMBERS OF FAITH FAMILY CHURCH, FINKSBURG,
MARYLAND TO BE MINISTERS OF BIBLICAL MERCY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACE	v
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Purpose	1
Goals	1
Context of Ministry Project	2
Rationale for Project	3
Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations	4
Research Methodology	6
2. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR EXTENDING MERCY	9
Mercy Required in Formation of Israel as God’s Special People	11
Israel’s Failure to Extend Mercy Condemned by God’s Prophets	15
Jesus Calls His Followers to Extend Mercy to the Poor	20
Mercy Evidence of Genuine Faith	25
Conclusion	31
3. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES RELATING TO MINISTRIES OF BIBLICAL MERCY	33
A Gospel Framework	34

Chapter	Page
The Need for Caution.....	40
Operating According to Spiritual Gifts	48
Conclusion	53
4. DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT	56
Preparation	57
Implementation	59
Conclusion	72
5. EVALUATION OF PROJECT	74
Evaluation of Project’s Purpose.....	74
Evaluation of Project’s Goals.....	76
Strengths of the Project	78
Weaknesses of the Project.....	82
What I would do differently.....	83
Theological Reflections	84
Personal Reflections.....	86
Conclusion	88
Appendix	
1. BIBLICAL MERCY SURVEY	90
2. BIBLICAL MERCY TEACHING SERIES EVALUATION RUBRIC.....	95
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	97

PREFACE

This project is the result of following the conviction that one should finish what one begins. Seventeen years ago an opportunity opened for me to further my education through a Doctor of Ministry program at Bob Jones University. Men who had at least seven years of pastoral experience could apply. I began attending sessions each summer and winter for a number of years before life changes and logistics brought things to a screeching halt. I always regretted not finishing the degree.

In February of 2008 while attending a Pastor's Conference at First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, I heard Dr. Al Mohler Jr. for the first time. I was impressed by his scholarly and articulate delivery and his passion for the Word of God. Here was a man to be respected for the strength of his convictions. Dr. Mohler is president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) in Louisville, Kentucky. While I knew absolutely nothing about the school, I decided that if I ever were to finish the degree I had begun years before, it would be at SBTS. By the grace of God that door opened through the generous support of Faith Family Church in Finksburg, Maryland.

Eventually I was accepted at SBTS to do work equivalent to a Master of Divinity degree upon which the Doctor of Ministry degree is based. Most of my credits from Bob Jones University transferred, and through SBTS's extension classes offered at the Baptist Center in Columbia, Maryland, I was able to complete the equivalency in two years. I am grateful to have had this opportunity and look forward to completing what has turned out to be a very long journey. I deeply appreciate the professors at SBTS at whose feet I have received a new level of knowledge and love for the Holy Scriptures.

I am very grateful for my church's encouragement, prayer, and financial support that have made it possible for me to continue my education. The last twelve years have been the greatest years of ministry for my wife and me. Planting and serving Faith Family Church has been a venture of faith that has yielded wonderful fruit for the glory of God. The Lord has faithfully guided, protected, and blessed the work of our hands. To him be all the glory for he alone is worthy.

Finally, I am also thankful for the incredible support of my wife of forty years, Judy, without whose help and encouragement I would never have made it this far. Her willingness to proofread over and over again and her insights have proven extremely valuable in the formation of this project. Without question, it is my greatest privilege to have such a godly and faithful partner in life and ministry. Often her calm assurance carried me through times of great stress and frustration.

My hope and prayer is that God will sanctify this project to expand his kingdom through the ministry of biblical mercy at Faith Family Church. It is also my sincere hope that the lives of those who will extend mercy and those who will receive it will be transformed by the grace of God. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

Paul David Andrews

Finksburg, Maryland

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to equip members of Faith Family Church (FFC) in Finksburg, Maryland to be ministers of biblical mercy.

Goals

The first goal of this project was to assess what faithful adult members of Faith Family Church understand and practice concerning biblical mercy.¹ This goal was measured by administering the Biblical Mercy Survey which assessed members' understanding and practice of biblical mercy.² The goal was successfully reached when the survey had been completed by forty (roughly 25 percent) of the adult members of FFC and analyzed by a mercy ministry team, revealing members' current knowledge of and participation in biblical mercy.

The second goal of this project was to develop a curriculum for an eight-week teaching series on biblical mercy. The series focused on the theology of biblical mercy and its relevance and application to the church's mission. This goal was measured by the elders of the church who utilized a rubric to evaluate the material.³ This evaluation considered the material's fidelity to the Scriptures, its clarity, and its practical

¹Faith Family Church has an adult membership of approximately 165 members.

²See appendix 1.

³See appendix 2.

application. The goal was considered successful when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criteria met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The third goal of this project was to equip members to be ministers of mercy by teaching the eight week series. This goal was measured by administering a post-series survey of members' understanding and practices of biblical mercy. Members should be able to explain the concept of biblical mercy and should be able to list ways it can be demonstrated. This goal was considered successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference between the pre and post-series scores.

Context of Ministry Project

This project took place within the context of Faith Family Church, in Finksburg, Maryland. There were three factors related to the ministry context of FFC that made this project necessary. First, the members were favorably disposed toward helping others. This disposition was evidenced by their faithful involvement in church programs and short term mission work. They also gave generously to the church's missions program. On occasion, members who experienced serious need had been helped by fellow believers responding with open hearts and hands. This gracious disposition had been fostered and reinforced by expositional preaching that emphasized our responsibility to love God and others. However, while members demonstrated compassion for those within the body, the application of mercy toward those outside the body was lacking. The congregation required a renewed vision to reach out to anyone in need.

Second, most members simply were not cognizant of the increasing problems of poverty within Carroll County. The lifestyles of FFC members kept them isolated from any purposeful contact with the poor and disadvantaged. There was a need to create points of contact with the homeless, addicted, and abused in our community. Members needed to know how to proactively reach out to them and extend biblical mercy.

Third, the previous structure of benevolence at FFC had proven ineffective. For years the church would help needy people who came seeking assistance. Later, it was discovered that the same people were making rounds to area churches on a regular basis. Accountability and relationships with those who received help from the church were never established. A weakness in this system was an inability to verify needs. Often those who came for help were being dishonest and deceptive about their problems.

Furthermore, no gospel impact was being made on people's lives and FFC members had no knowledge of the church's efforts. This lack of impact represents the difference between simple benevolence and biblical mercy. Biblical mercy attempts to orient deeds of mercy within a gospel framework. The church's leadership experienced frustration as it became obvious that the present system of benevolence yielded no visible results. It became apparent that members needed to be equipped to effectively minister to the poor.

In summary, this project was relevant within the context of FFC because the members had already demonstrated compassion to those in need. Their willingness to invest time and resources had great potential for ministry among the poor. This project arose out of a concern to channel this potential into effective ministry. It was also relevant for informing members concerning the growing poverty in Carroll County and the resulting societal difficulties. Finally, the project was pertinent to this ministry context because previous efforts had proven ineffective, yielding no visible results. The concern was that FFC members would see lives changed through the extension of biblical mercy.

Rationale for the Project

The aforementioned contextual factors demonstrated an atmosphere at FFC that was conducive to being equipped in biblical mercy. First, because members were already sympathetic to those in need, this project equipped them to reach out and lovingly

minister to the felt needs of others. The congregation also trusted the church's leadership and followed a vision cast for such a cause as helping the poor.

Second, members benefited spiritually from this project as their understanding of the gospel was deepened. The call to biblical mercy is the call to love one's neighbor as oneself. Through careful exposition of Scripture this project helped members understand the Christian's responsibility to the poor. Only the church can effectively confront the root causes of societal ills. However, believers often fail to see their own obligation because so much social justice is done through state and federal agencies.

Third, learning to be proactive ministers of mercy within our community brought members into contact with people in need. Such contact informed them of the increasing problems associated with poverty in Carroll County. Seeing the felt needs of the disadvantaged and poor brought a renewed appreciation for the mercy that members themselves have received through the gospel of Christ.

Finally, the present structure within FFC to help the poor was minimal. This project was the first time that the church had intentionally made strategic effort in ministry to the indigent. Understanding and practicing biblical mercy enhanced the church's gospel mission. It was vital to proceed with this project because the congregation was ready for it, was receptive to it, and benefited spiritually from it.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms were used in the ministry project:

Biblical mercy. Biblical mercy is "the meeting of felt needs through deeds."⁴

For this project, the terms biblical mercy and mercy ministry will refer to this definition.

To be more specific, biblical mercy is any deed of love offered in the name of Jesus Christ to relieve the felt needs of the poor.

⁴Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy, The Call of the Jericho Road* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 1997), 46.

Community. Among Christians the word “community” is often associated with fellowship. However, in this project it most often refers to the geographic area in which members of Faith Family live. In some cases it may refer to Christian fellowship and the context will determine which meaning should be understood.

Kingdom. Ministries of mercy are often described as kingdom work. In this project the term refers to “the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God, and derivatively, the sphere in which the rule is experienced.”⁵

The poor. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the 2014 Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is an income of \$23,850 or less for a family of four.⁶ However, in this project the term refers to anyone in need, including the homeless, the working poor, the addicted, disadvantaged children, the unemployed, the abused and neglected, as well as the imprisoned.

Two limitations applied to this project. First, the accuracy of the pre and post-series surveys depended upon the willingness of participants to honestly respond to the questions. To encourage candid response, those participating were assured of confidentiality. Names were not attached to the surveys. Second, the effectiveness of the teaching was limited by the faithfulness of members to attend each session. It was difficult to ascertain how effective the teaching had been if participants did not attend all the sessions. All lessons were posted on the church’s website should a participant miss a session.

Two delimitations were placed on this project. First, the teaching was restricted to those who volunteered to faithfully attend the sessions and only members of FFC could participate. Second, the project was confined to a thirteen-week period which was the

⁵George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 109.

⁶Federal Poverty Level (FPL), accessed June 24, 2014, www.healthcare.gov/glossary/federal-poverty-level-FPL.

usual length of time for adult discipleship classes which are scheduled quarterly. This schedule provided adequate time to prepare and teach the eight-week series and conduct the post-series survey.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for this project included a pre-series survey, a post-series survey, and an evaluation rubric.⁷ At the first session the Biblical Mercy Survey was distributed to participants who had previously enrolled for the sessions and committed in writing to faithfully attend unless providentially hindered. At the end of the survey they were instructed to choose a 4-digit identification code for the purpose of anonymity. They wrote this code at the bottom of their survey.⁸ Each participant was expected to participate in at least six of the eight sessions and committed to listen to any missed sessions online. Each participant was asked if they had made up the missed session.

The first section of the survey collected basic demographic information. The second section assessed participants' knowledge and understanding of biblical mercy. Statements that focused on biblical literacy and understanding of theological issues regarding biblical mercy were evaluated using a Likert scale. The third section of the survey assessed the lifestyle of participants regarding their current practice of biblical mercy. Statements regarding helping the poor and sharing the gospel were also evaluated according to the Likert scale. The first goal was considered successful when at least two-thirds of the participants had completed the survey and the survey had been analyzed, resulting in a clearer picture of their current understanding and practice of biblical mercy.

⁷All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

⁸See appendix 1.

The second goal of this project was to develop an eight-week teaching series on biblical mercy. The series consisted of eight one-hour sessions dealing with such topics as the theology and character of biblical mercy, the church's responsibility to the poor, and how the ministry of mercy relates to evangelism. Each lesson was submitted to the church's elders at least four weeks before it was taught. This goal was measured by a rubric used by the elders to evaluate lesson material.⁹ The rubric aided the elders in evaluating the series' faithfulness to Scripture, its clarity, thoroughness, and practicality. If less than 90% of the indicators on the rubric were scored at the "sufficient" level or above, the elders provided feedback to modify the series, after which the material was submitted again to the elders for approval. This process continued until at least 90% of the indicators on the rubric were scored at "sufficient" or above, at which time the second goal was considered successfully met.

The third goal of this project was to equip members of FFC to be ministers of biblical mercy by teaching the eight-week series. The series was held on eight consecutive Sunday mornings during the regular adult discipleship time. Each session began with prayer and the teaching filled at least 45 minutes of the hour allotted for adult discipleship. To emphasize the importance of accountability and teamwork the participants were formed into groups for the purpose of discussion and application of biblical mercy. Each group was asked to perform some kind of ministry to the poor by the end of the series.

At the end of the series, participants, as individuals and together in their groups, were encouraged to persevere in showing mercy to those in need. On the Sunday after the final week of teaching, a follow-up session was held to summarize the teaching material. Participants were also given an opportunity to share the ways they were able to minister to the poor, the challenges involved, and to discuss areas that need improvement.

⁹See appendix 2.

Participants met on Saturday of the last week to take the post-series survey, which was an instrument by which this third goal was measured.¹⁰ Only those who completed a pre-series survey and who attended all eight teaching sessions, up to two of which may have been listened to via internet, were permitted to take the post-series survey. Each participant identified themselves using the previously chosen 4-digit code. Like the initial survey, the post-series survey assessed each participant's current understanding and practice of biblical mercy.

A t-test for dependent samples was used to determine if there was a positive significant difference between the pre-series and post-series scores. A t-test for dependent samples "involves a comparison of the means from each group of scores and focuses on the differences between the scores."¹¹ Since this project involved a group of the same people being surveyed under two conditions, a t-test of dependent samples was the appropriate test statistic.¹² The third goal was considered successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive significant difference between the pre-series and post-series scores.

¹⁰See appendix 1.

¹¹Neil J. Salkind, *Statistics for People Who (Think They) Hate Statistics*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 191.

¹²*Ibid.*, 189.

CHAPTER 2
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SUPPORT
FOR EXTENDING MERCY

That God cares for the poor becomes obvious to those who read the Bible with caution and interest. Scripture reveals the Lord as having mercy that endures forever (see Ps 136). The Hebrew word for mercy, *chesed*, often translated “loving kindness,” appears almost 250 times in the New American Standard Version and, viewed negatively, refers to the Lord’s forbearance in withholding punishment to sinners who deserve it. From a positive perspective, it is that part of God’s nature which renders him forgiving and compassionate. Mercy is bound up in the character of God and therefore those who represent him must be merciful as well.

Extending mercy to people in need is not a modern concept, nor is it exclusively a New Testament approach to gospel ministry. As part of his covenant stipulations, the Lord required the Israelites to help the poor as integral to their identity as his chosen people. At Sinai they bound themselves to God in covenant relationship, promising to keep all his commands, including those instructing them to love their neighbor as themselves (Lev 19:18).

A significant part of God’s covenantal requirements related to how his people treated others. The Lord commanded them to consider the needs of their neighbors and those strangers who were “foreigners who put themselves under the protection of Israel and of Israel’s God.”¹ Unfortunately, the Old Testament chronicles Israel’s failure to keep this requirement and to maintain covenant with God. To call them to repentance and

¹Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 812.

back to covenantal faithfulness, the Lord raised up prophets as his spokesmen. These special messengers, anointed by the Spirit of God, denounced the nation's failure to obey, often citing their lack of mercy to the poor. When judgment fell on the recalcitrant nation, part of the reason was their lack of justice and compassion for those in need (see Isa 1:23, Jer 2:34, Ezek 22:29, Amos 2:6-7).

Because of their inability to keep covenant, God promised, through Jeremiah, a New Covenant. Robert Plummer observes, "One should not understand the old covenant stipulations as intending to save or transform but primarily as intending to prophesy and prepare for the necessity of the new covenant instituted by Messiah Jesus."² Under that New Covenant the Lord would "put his law within them, and write it on their hearts" (Jer 31:33-34). This inward transformation would enable compassion for others, not as mere outward conformity to God's law, but as God's love flowing out of the human heart. Under this new covenant, the call to extend mercy to the poor is perpetuated and even magnified in light of Christ's redemptive work. The New Testament reveals that the call to follow Jesus Christ involves an obligation to help those in need. The New Covenant ensures that God's mercy can flow through his children to others as they yield to the Holy Spirit's control.

This chapter will demonstrate the scriptural and theological support for the Christian obligation to the poor by citing four pertinent observations concerning biblical mercy from key passages of scripture. First, God's requirement to extend mercy to the poor was integral in the formation of Israel as his chosen people. Second, Israel's failure to show compassion and justice was condemned by God through his prophets. Third, the New Testament demonstrates that the call to follow Jesus involves an obligation to the poor. Finally, the chapter will discuss the exercise of biblical mercy as evidence of true faith.

² Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 155.

Mercy Required in Formation of Israel as God's Special People

The Torah (Law) provided Israel with instructions that, if obediently followed, would set God's people apart from all other nations. Having delivered them from Egyptian slavery, the Lord brought the children of Israel to Sinai and entered into covenant with them. Through Moses, God mediated the purpose of the covenant: "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:5-6a).³ Israel was formed to communicate to the world not just the character of God but how life is supposed to be lived as his chosen people. As a kingdom of priests the Jews stood in the place of God to reveal his loving kindness to the nations.

Leviticus 19:9-18

Leviticus and Deuteronomy in particular share a canonical context in that both are expressions of God's design for living as his priestly people. Two passages that emphasize Israel's obligation to the poor are Leviticus 19:9-18 and Deuteronomy 15:7-18. According to Allen Ross, these passages demonstrate that God "formed Israel as a people to be his personal representatives on earth, a people with whom he might dwell."⁴ Timothy Keller supports this view of God's calling: "Israel was charged to create a culture of social justice for the poor and vulnerable because it was the way the nation could reveal God's glory and character to the world."⁵ This emphasis on God's character can be seen in the repetition of the phrase "I am the Lord" throughout the chapter.

³All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

⁴Allen Ross, *Holiness to the Lord: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 45.

⁵Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010), 9.

The passage begins with the command to be holy and the message is directed to the entire congregation. God's call for holiness was all inclusive, indicating this requirement obligated every Israelite and not just a select few. In verses 9-18, holiness is set forth in terms of consideration for others. The passage explains what it means to "love your neighbor as yourself." It reveals that within the command to be holy is a requirement to treat others with kindness. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that kindness and compassion for others is integral to living a holy life.

It is unfortunate that holiness is often portrayed in a negative light. Michael Reeves observes a common misconception about holiness that involves what he calls "prickliness and prudery."⁶ Yet, according to this passage being holy is described as being honest in one's dealings with others. Stealing or taking advantage of others reflects a lack of trust in God and respect for others. The reference to the deaf and blind marks God's concern for people who suffer due to no fault of their own. Furthermore, the Lord forbids showing favoritism to the rich by perverting justice. Slander and malice also have no place among God's chosen people. In describing the holiness of the Triune God, Michael Reeves states, "The beautiful, loving holiness of this God makes true godliness a warm, attractive, delightful thing."⁷ For this reason, God calls upon those who represent him in this world to be holy. This passage reveals holiness in terms of living for the good of others, a life that demonstrates the Lord's concern for people.

God's covenant with Israel required not only the proper action but the proper motivation as well. Biblical mercy is driven by a servant mentality that seeks to meet the need of another. It is instructional that the command not to reap the corners of the fields follows guidelines pertaining to the peace offering. Ross explains that "to offer the peace

⁶Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity, An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 114.

⁷Ibid.,117.

offering was to claim to be at peace with God; it was a thanksgiving offering. But if the offerer did not provide for the poor it was a hollow claim. In other words, if the test of gratitude was generosity, then someone who claimed the former but lacked the latter was a hypocrite.”⁸ As God’s covenant people, and in light of the grace bestowed upon them, the Jews were to love him and to show kindness to others. The Lord Jesus taught that these two commands summarize the entire law (Matt 22:37-40).

Even though these instructions were given to an ancient agrarian culture there is a clear application for the Christian. Ross summarizes the entire passage: “The theology this passage communicates is that God’s people must make provision for the poor The way to become holy is to keep the commandments, but the way to keep the commandments is by loving God and loving people.”⁹ Mercy reflects the character of God and therefore those who would represent him to the world must extend that mercy in love.

Deuteronomy 15:7-18

While Leviticus and Deuteronomy share a common canonical purpose they differ greatly in their respective historical settings. Both books present the stipulations of Israel’s covenant relation with Jehovah but Leviticus was given at the beginning of their time in the wilderness and Deuteronomy at the end, just before entering the Promised Land. Therefore, this last book of the Pentateuch should be considered as renewal of the covenant relationship between God and his people. According to Patrick Miller, the book of Deuteronomy “summarizes and brings to an end the beginning period of Israel’s history, the story of redemption, and the formation of a people instructed by the Lord.”¹⁰

⁸Ross, *Holiness to the Lord*, 359.

⁹Ibid., 352.

¹⁰Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Know Press, 1990), 10.

In Deuteronomy 15:7-18 Moses reiterates God's concern for the poor and the responsibility of his people to reflect that kindness. Block defines the poor as "individuals who through landlessness or lack of resources are economically deprived and dependent on others for relief."¹¹ Because such conditions are perpetuated throughout time, extending kindness and mercy to others remains relevant for all God's children. Block asserts, "There is no better opportunity for Christians to distinguish themselves from the self-indulgent Canaanites of this land than through their generosity and charity toward the poor."¹² Thus, as they prepare to enter the land, this reminder reinforced the Lord's requirement.

What is also significant in this passage is the emphasis on both attitude and action. To God's people the cause of the poor must be a matter of the heart. The instruction Moses gives here raises the stakes considerably. Block makes the following appraisal: "He is not interested in the personal sin that might underlie the poor person's indebtedness, but the propensity of the rich to sin against these poor brothers."¹³ This statement speaks directly to present day acts of charity done by people who look down on the poor, considering themselves to be better people. If such is the case, this is not mercy in the biblical sense.

The repeated use of bodily terms in this passage intensifies the application. Miller points out, "The prominent use of body language indicates to the hearer that attitude and action, disposition and conduct, are involved in relating to those who are poor."¹⁴ Jonathan Edwards, the preeminent American theologian, in applying the passage,

¹¹Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 366.

¹²*Ibid.*, 368.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 136.

relates how Christians should give both willingly and bountifully to meet the needs of the poor.¹⁵ In fact, Edwards counters the tendency to look down on the poor as if they have no one but themselves to blame for their plight:

If they are come into poverty by a vicious idleness and prodigality; yet we are not thereby excused from all obligation to relieve them, unless they continue in those vices If we do otherwise, we shall act in a manner very contrary to the rule of loving one another as Christ loved us. Now Christ hath loved us, pitied us, and greatly laid out himself to relieve us from that want and misery which we brought on ourselves by our own folly and wickedness.¹⁶

Therefore, he who shows mercy must do so in light of the grace he himself has received. Apart from this mindset there is a tendency toward a judgmental attitude.

Taken together, these two passages from Leviticus and Deuteronomy highlight the importance of living a life set apart for God which is the essence of holiness. As his special people and a priestly kingdom, they are called upon to reflect his character to the world. Block eloquently expresses this thought:

We the redeemed remember that God in his grace has rescued us from the bondage of sin and adopted us as his sons, lavishing on us his provision in accordance with our needs. Knowing not only the pain of deprivation and slavery but also the grace of redemption, we look at the world through the eyes of our heavenly Father and are inspired to treat others as he has treated us.¹⁷

In similar fashion, Israel, as God's redeemed and chosen people, was required to extend to others the same grace that had been extended to them. Thus, in the formation of Israel as a nation the Lord required them to care for the poor in the land.

Israel's Failure to Extend Mercy Condemned by God's Prophets

The biblical history of Israel records their failure to comply with God's expressed will concerning the poor and the prophets' denunciation of their lack of mercy.

¹⁵Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 4:372.

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:172, quoted in Timothy Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1989), 60.

¹⁷Block, *Deuteronomy*, 376.

They failed to realize their purpose as God’s kingdom priests and as his representatives to the world. Through Moses, the Lord had communicated the stipulations of the covenant and the people had originally pledged their obedience. Yet over time they chose to go their own way and demonstrated just how self-indulgent religion without heart can become. In response, God demonstrated his own compassion by raising up prophets to call the rebellious nation to repentance.

Israel’s negligence to demonstrate compassion was a major reason for God’s judgment on the nation which eventually led to their destruction and exile. The seriousness of their neglect is demonstrated by Ezekiel’s relating the same sin to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: “Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, *but did not aid the poor and needy*” (Ezek 16:49, italics added). God’s wrath against these cities is indicative of the seriousness of Israel’s failure.

Isaiah 58:1-12

A recurring theme in Isaiah is Israel’s failure to deal justly and reach out to the poor. In Edward Young’s introduction to this great prophecy, he reminds us of the Lord’s intention for Israel: “A nation among nations, one in which the righteousness of the righteous God would be justly exhibited in the judicial proceedings of the people and in their daily lives.”¹⁸ Instead of displaying the truth about God, Israel’s worship of God degenerated into mere formalism. Concerning this chapter John Watts suggests, “By the time this scene is portrayed fasts had become holidays on which all manner of people gathered. They were popular occasions which had little or nothing to do with worship.”¹⁹

¹⁸Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 5.

¹⁹John D. Watts, *Isaiah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 25 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 273.

As one reads the book of Isaiah, it becomes obvious that the prophet is speaking into a climate of religious formalism and spiritual apathy.

Isaiah's argument in chapter 58 addresses the modern tendency to make religious practices a means of manipulating God for personal benefit. His words speak to the consumeristic philosophy that infects many churches. J. Alec Motyer observes, "Within the Isaianic literature, chapter 58 belongs with 1:10-20, in condemnation both of the unholy alliance between religious punctiliousness and personal shortcoming, and of a religion that assumes a relationship with God while discounting a relationship with other people."²⁰ He further maintains, "Humans are a body-soul unity, and bodily postures and disciplines can indeed enhance reverence and humility but no 'aid' is immune from degenerating into a performance."²¹ This degeneration is precisely what Isaiah foresaw happening to God's people. The point is that they were actively involved in religious practices to the neglect of their societal obligation to the poor.

Fasting had become formalistic and Isaiah denounces such ostentatious displays of religion as forsaking God's commands and being in a state of rebellion. The people were involved in fasting, which God had not required, while ignoring other matters he had required. Thus the Lord rhetorically asks in verse 5, "Is this the fast that I choose?" John Oswalt aptly points out, "God calls for behavior that is self-forgetful and outward-looking. Let acts of self-denial be for the sake of others and not for one's own sake. Work to set the oppressed free. Eat less in order to have food for the hungry. Wear less expensive clothes in order to clothe the naked."²² The prophet is confronting the absence of such practical expressions of concern.

²⁰J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah, An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 478.

²¹*Ibid.*, 481.

²²John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 625.

In verses 6 and 7 Isaiah depicts the kind of fast that God requires. Young suggests that the use of the Hebrew infinitives indicates “the permanence of the divine requirements.”²³ The whole tenor of the passage is geared toward a consistent attitude of mercy. Relieving burdens of the oppressed, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and clothing the naked are actions that spring from a heart that delights in God. The phrase about hiding from one’s own flesh in verse 7 speaks of “refusing to act humanely toward any who are in need. Love toward all men is a hallmark of those who belong to the Lord, and this love will manifest itself in a true concern for those in need.”²⁴ This message is the one that Isaiah communicates and that found fulfillment through the ministry of Jesus.

Zechariah 7:8-12

Another passage that displays God’s disdain with Israel’s failure to help the poor is found in Zechariah 7:8-12. Zechariah prophesied in the post-exilic period and at a time when national morale was low and the work of rebuilding the temple was being neglected. In spite of this the prophet announced the coming of one who would restore true worship. The prophetic nature of Zechariah’s message underscores God overruling human failure to establish his kingdom. Throughout Scripture, this kingdom is one characterized by justice and mercy for all the oppressed (see Ps 72:1-4).

In his treatment on this subject Thomas McComiskey states, “The sovereignty of God that brought the temple to completion has established on earth a temple far greater than the one on Mount Zion: the temple that the Branch builds—the kingdom of God—which is resident now in the church and which God will bring to eternal fruition.”²⁵

²³Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 419.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 421.

²⁵Thomas E. McComiskey, *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 3:1018.

Reaching out to meet the needs of the poor reflects a kingdom where God is enthroned in the hearts of his people. For this reason, mercy ministry is often depicted as “kingdom work.” When God’s people intentionally minister to the needs of the poor they demonstrate life under the rule and reign of God.

In chapter 7, Zechariah addresses the same empty ritualism Isaiah confronted. According to McComiskey, Zechariah is echoing the message of Jeremiah as well: “He envisions the temple looming behind Jeremiah as he preached his impassioned sermon to the throngs of worshipers.”²⁶ It is indeed sad to realize that God’s people in the postexilic time fell into the same empty ritualism that was condemned by the pre-exilic prophets. Zechariah is reminding the people of his day that the same hard-hearted, uncaring attitude toward the poor and disadvantaged is what brought God’s judgment on the nation in the first place.

Micah 6:8

Micah 6:8 is often sighted in discussions on mercy ministry. The emphasis of the verse is that showing mercy is a requirement of God above mere external religious observance. The entire chapter powerfully and beautifully depicts Israel’s failure to keep her covenant with God. The opening verse of Micah mentions both Samaria and Jerusalem, indicating his message is directed to both the northern and southern kingdoms. McComiskey observes that Micah, “has often been called ‘the prophet of the poor.’ More accurately, he is a prophet of an oppressed middle class (2:6-11). He gave voice to the sighs of the oppressed, too weak to have a voice.”²⁷ The prophet stands as an advocate for the socially oppressed.

²⁶McComiskey, *The Minor Prophets*, 3:1131.

²⁷Ibid., 2:594.

In verse 5 the people are called upon to remember “the righteous acts of the Lord.” Memory serves to aid the ministry of mercy by recalling to mind God’s faithfulness and goodness. Following in verses 6-7 the people respond to the message but not in true repentance. E. B. Pusey remarks, “Thus arraigned, the people burst in with professions that they would be no more ungrateful; that they will do anything, everything—but what they ought They would offer everything, (even what God forbade) excepting only what alone he asked for, their heart, its love and its obedience.”²⁸ He goes on to say of God’s requirements, “To do judgment, are chiefly all acts of equity, to love mercy, all deeds of love. Judgment is what right requires, mercy what love requires.”²⁹ Walking humbly before God is the only way to walk in fellowship with him. Pusey further remarks, “Micah’s words then are, for their vividness, an almost proverbial expression of the nothingness of all which we sinners could offer to God.”³⁰ Humility is the soil in which mercy flourishes, and those who understand the mercy God has extended to them can best extend that same kindness to others.

This verse sets forth the ethical standard God required of his covenant people. Israel’s failure to meet this standard ultimately led them into exile. In spite of God’s repeated rebukes and admonitions through his prophets they broke covenant with him. Taken together, the Scriptures discussed in this section demonstrate that God desires that all of his people reflect the mercy and grace that they themselves have received. Failing to do so is sinful neglect and a breach of the covenantal relationship.

Jesus’ Calls His Followers to Extend Mercy to the Poor

The Lord’s public ministry opened in his hometown of Nazareth. There in the synagogue, Jesus publicly announced the fulfilling of Isaiah’s prophecy, that when

²⁸E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1950), 2:82.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 83.

³⁰*Ibid.*

Messiah appeared he would be anointed by the Spirit to “proclaim good news to the poor, release for those in captivity, the recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed” (Luke 4:16-18). At the outset, the public ministry of Messiah involved extending mercy to people in need. The next three years would witness Jesus’ extraordinary compassion to the sick and suffering. Years later, in describing the Lord’s life to Cornelius’ household, Peter said, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:38). To follow in his steps, the Lord’s disciples were called upon to carry on the work of their Master. Throughout the New Testament the call to follow Jesus involves caring for the poor (see Matt 11:5, 19:21, Mark 10:21, Luke 10:37, 14:21, 18:22, 19:8, John 20:21, and Gal 2:10).

Luke 10:25-37

The gospel of Luke was penned by the man responsible for writing more than one fourth of the New Testament. His account of Jesus’ life and ministry is the broadest of all the gospels. Approximately one fourth of the materials in the gospels is peculiar to Luke and the story of the Good Samaritan is found only here. William Barclay, in comparing the message of Jesus with that of John the Baptist comments, “The initial message of Jesus, as Luke has it, is proof that Jesus believed that it is easier to love a man to God than it is to threaten him to God.”³¹ In Luke, Jesus’ ministry fulfills what Israel had failed to do in revealing the Father’s love for a broken world.

Nowhere is this more forcibly demonstrated than in Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan. Several important lessons about the Christian’s responsibility to the poor stand out in this parable. The sound biblical scholarship rendered on these verses presents a consensus as to the story’s main points. The lessons considered here reflect those points which concern the motive, nature, and manner in which biblical mercy is shown. A

³¹William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 27.

deeper understanding of Jesus' parable will reinforce the conviction that every believer is called to be a minister of mercy.

The victim in the story, while unidentified, is assumed to be a Jew. No reason is provided for the lack of mercy by the two representatives of the Jewish religion, the Levite and the Priest. Yet, Jesus clearly sets forth the motivation of the Good Samaritan as being compassion. The Greek word "compassion" in verse 33 is *εσπλαγγνισθη* and refers to the bowels, which were considered to be the seat of emotions. It is not exaggerating to say this Samaritan had a "gut reaction" to the plight of him who had been beaten and robbed. Joel Green makes the following point: "Luke's presentation of the Samaritan's comportment replicates that of God in his covenant faithfulness."³² In other words, what the Levite and priest failed to do in covenantal obedience was carried out by one outside of that covenant.

It must be remembered that Jesus is illustrating what it means to love God "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all of your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (v. 27). Mercy as demonstrated in the life and teachings of Jesus is that which is energized by one's love for God. Inherent in the call to follow Christ is the requirement for Christians to love others as they love themselves. Keller explains that this is precisely why Jesus places the victim in the story as an assumed Jew: "Jesus was asking each listener to imagine himself to be a victim of violence, dying, with no hope if this Samaritan did not stop and help."³³

A beautiful comparison can be made between the Samaritan and the Lord Jesus Christ. Looking back on this story through the cross, believers can see themselves as the victim. In a sense, all apart from Christ are "half dead" (see Eph 2:1). As the man in the story was without hope so are all without Christ. Man is utterly helpless to do anything for himself, but Jesus, moved with compassion, comes down the dangerous road and

³²Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 426.

³³Keller, *Generous Justice*, 75.

finds the helpless ones. For him it was not just a costly sacrifice, for man's need demanded death on the cross. This perspective helps to understand why biblical mercy is always motivated by love.

Another lesson that emerges from Jesus' parable is that mercy is an active quality. The lawyer's question in verse 25, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" provides the platform for Jesus' teaching. From a standpoint of law it was necessary to do more than feel compassion for others, and required steps to be taken for relief. Green explains, "That the practice of God's Word is the central issue in this narrative is obvious from the repetition and placement of the verb 'to do.' 'What must I do; following their exchange, Jesus responds, 'Do this.'"³⁴ Biblical mercy is never passive. Throughout the New Testament it is presented in terms expressing specific actions.

Perhaps the greatest lesson this story teaches about mercy is that it is to be administered without bias. Darrell Bock claims that this encounter with the lawyer, "reveals how Jesus does not allow distinctions to be made when it comes to the treatment of people. There is no easy escape for failing to serve and be a neighbor."³⁵ The call to follow Jesus directs Christians to minister to those in their path regardless of who they are. Jesus obviously confronts the racial prejudice of the Jews toward the Samaritans.³⁶

Furthermore, Green suggests that the lawyer's question in verse 29, "who is my neighbor?", is disingenuous: "It is not so much to determine to whom he must show love, but so as to calculate the identity of those to whom he need not show love."³⁷ Yet this man had just interpreted the way to eternal life is by loving God and others. His

³⁴Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 425.

³⁵Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 299.

³⁶Alfred Edersheim provides an excellent treatment of Jewish bias towards Samaritans. A good understanding of how this animosity developed will help the reader sense the power of Jesus' portraying the hero of this story as the Samaritan. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson Publishers, 1993), 270-79.

³⁷Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 426.

insincerity is further heightened by the fact that he was only testing Jesus (v. 25). He is aligned with Jesus' enemies who constantly scrutinized the Lord's words and actions in hope of finding some way to accuse him of unfaithfulness to the law.

It is ironic that the very ones who stood as representatives of the covenant community failed to act in love. Both the Levite and the priest saw the man in his need and both chose not to act. Some have sought to mitigate the guilt of these two by insisting they were acting to avoid ceremonial defilement. Craig Evans counters this idea suggesting that such an interpretation weakens the actions of the Samaritan and that Luke's purpose is to show, "one excluded from the covenant fellowship of neighbors, but who, in contrast to the embodiment and representatives of the covenant people, carries out the requirements of the covenant."³⁸

Others have sought to revive an allegorical approach to this parable. Robert Stein, rejecting Augustine's allegorical interpretation of this story, remarks, "Clearly, Luke's main point in retelling the parable must have been what it means to be a neighbor. Jesus and Luke sought to illustrate that the love of one's neighbor must transcend all natural or human boundaries such as race, nationality, religion, and economic or educational status."³⁹

It is relevant to consider how often God's people today replicate the behavior of the Levite and the priest, seeing the need and failing to act because of some form of bias. The two men who "passed by on the other side" are not unlike many professing Christians. By virtue of their place in that society, the priest and the Levite were held in high esteem and considered pious by all other Jews. Jesus' injection of a Samaritan into

³⁸Craig A. Evans, *Luke*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson Publishers, 1990), 469.

³⁹Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, New American Commentary, vol. 24 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 319.

the story is a shocking intrusion given the contrast between the Levite and the priest who, according to Green, represented “a worldview of tribal consciousness, concerned with relative status and us—they cataloguing.”⁴⁰

The only difference Jesus provides between these characters is that of inaction and action. Green continues, “The Samaritan then, participates in the compassion and covenantal faithfulness of God, who sees and responds with salvific care.”⁴¹ The entire story illustrates what it means to be a neighbor. In addressing the lawyer, Jesus is calling his covenant people back to their obligation as God’s priestly representatives. That the lawyer’s response is not mentioned provides an opportunity for introspection on the part of Luke’s readers.

Mercy Evidence of Genuine Faith

This final section will consider how the extension of mercy to the poor is a demonstration of true faith and will concern two similar passages, Jas 2:14-17 and 1 John 3:16-18. The teaching of mercy as evidence of saving faith is consistent throughout the entire New Testament. The passages chosen for consideration here illustrate this truth in a simple and powerful way. Since James, among the writers of the New Testament, wrote first and John wrote last, it appears that the conviction within the early church that real faith acts on behalf of the needs of others persisted.

James 2:14-17

James is considered the earliest book in the New Testament and perhaps the most practical.⁴² In his letter he relates the expression of faith to tangible acts of kindness.

⁴⁰Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 431.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Non-Pauline Epistles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), 54.

D. Edmond Hiebert explains, “The condition of the readers had led James to realize that their faith was not vitally operative in their lives. Accordingly, he presents to them a series of practical tests whereby they may test the genuineness of their Christian faith.”⁴³ Lenski adds, “This entire epistle deals with Christian faith and shows how this faith should be genuine, true, active, living, fruitful.”⁴⁴

According to R. C. H. Lenski the message of James, “is that faith which cannot be seen, makes its presence known by a proper confession and by its proper and natural works.”⁴⁵ At the same time, it must be understood that this is in no way different or opposed to what Jesus or his apostles taught (see Matt 7:16-20). Paul’s emphasis on salvation apart from works is not in conflict with James. Simon Kistemaker adequately explains what some insist is a contradiction between the two:

Is Paul saying one thing and James another? Not at all. Rather, James looks at the one side of the coin called faith and Paul at the other. To put the matter in different words, James explains the active side of faith and Paul the passive side. In a sense, the writers say the same thing even though they view faith from different perspectives. Paul addresses the Jew who seeks to obtain salvation by keeping the law of God. To him Paul says, ‘Not the works of the law but faith in Christ brings salvation.’ By contrast, James directs his remarks to the person who says that he has faith but fails to put it into practice.⁴⁶

When viewed correctly it becomes evident that James and Paul are dealing with two completely different problems. Paul is addressing the falsehood of legalism and James confronts the error of antinomianism. Robert Stein further clarifies the argument:

The discussion concerning “good works” is all too often set purely in the framework of justification by faith. What is the relationship between the new standing of righteousness that a person possesses and Christian living? Is “justification” simply

⁴³Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Non-Pauline Epistles*, 54.

⁴⁴R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966), 530.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 576.

⁴⁶Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1986), 87-88.

a legal fiction? The debate all too often loses sight of the fact that justification is not synonymous with Christian conversion. If, when a person is justified, he is also born again and made a new creation through the gift of the Spirit, the issue of whether faith must be accompanied by works is a moot one. Good works are not an option for the believer, but a necessary fruit.⁴⁷

In chapter 2, James focuses on demonstrating faith in an atmosphere of social injustice. His example of a brother lacking basic needs is relevant since this idea of being completely without law has been presented as a test of faithfulness to the gospel. Indeed, there are some who count the charge of antinomianism as a compliment. To them, “Accusations of antinomianism are an important barometer useful for determining whether the atmosphere of one’s ministry is adequately pressurized by grace.”⁴⁸ This mindset may well explain why many remain comfortable in a faith that exhibits no concern for the poor or any involvement in ministry directed toward societal ills. It may be that those advocating this approach have worthy motives, but it seems to minimize the importance of works in the life of a believer. While it is understandable that performance-based Christianity is inconsistent with scriptural grace, it must also be remembered that the believer is “created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10).

Just as God required Israel to demonstrate compassion to the poor and needy under the Old Covenant, so those under the New Covenant share the same calling. The difference is that under grace the believer in Jesus Christ is enabled by the Holy Spirit to fulfill the law’s demands. The Spirit “pours God’s love into the heart” (Rom 5:5) and empowers Christians to act in mercy thus fulfilling of the law’s requirement (see Rom 13:10). The example James uses of a brother lacking adequate clothing and food is a

⁴⁷ Robert H. Stein, “ ‘Saved by Faith [Alone]’ in Paul versus ‘Not Saved by Faith Alone’ in James.” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 4-19, accessed September 30, 2014, http://www.sbts.edu/documents/sbjt/sbjt_2000fall2.pdf.

⁴⁸ Jason B. Hood, “Heresy is Heresy, Not the Litmus Test of Gospel Preaching,” *Christianity Today* (January 23, 2011), accessed September 30, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/januaryweb-only/heresyisheresy.html?start=1>.

common one. Inadequate clothing and hunger are both familiar problems that require what Lenski calls “an elementary act of Christian faith and brotherly love.”⁴⁹ Such acts seem to be what Paul calls “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6).

1 John 3:16-18

The first epistle of John communicates truth in simple yet powerful ways. D. Edmund Hiebert observes, “The forceful simplicity of its sentences, the note of finality behind its utterances, the marvelous blending of gentle love and deep-cutting sternness of its contents, and the majesty of its ungarnished thoughts have made 1John a favorite of Christians everywhere.”⁵⁰ John Phillips points out that John writes with the limited vocabulary of a seven year old child.⁵¹ Hiebert adds, “The plainness of 1 John makes it intelligible to the simplest saint, while the profundity of its truths challenges the most accomplished scholar.”⁵² Regarding the demonstration of biblical mercy the great apostle employs this kind of language to make his point that real love expresses itself through deeds of compassion.

While the example cited here is similar to that of James, it is presented in a different context. Kistemaker explains, “Whereas John places his words in the context of love, James in his epistle discusses the same matter in connection with faith. Love and faith have this in common; both need deeds to prove their genuineness.”⁵³ What is so powerful in this passage is John’s connection of mercy to Jesus’ supreme example of sacrificial love, laying down his life for his followers (v. 16). The comprehension of

⁴⁹Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James*, 579.

⁵⁰D. Edmund Hiebert, *The Epistles of John* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1991), 1.

⁵¹John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospels, John* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Bros, 1988), 11.

⁵²Hiebert, *The Epistles of John*, 1.

⁵³Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John*, 312.

Christ's sacrifice is, according to Hiebert, "A knowledge that has been gained through diligent contemplation of the significance of that historical event."⁵⁴ What greater demonstration of selfless, sacrificial love could there be? Hiebert further comments, "Since one's life is an individual's most precious possession, Christ's willingness to lay down that life on behalf of others constituted the greatest possible expression of love."⁵⁵

While John in no way disparages the redemptive character of the Lord's death, he is emphasizing its exemplary nature. Readers are reminded by Peter, "To this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps" (1 Pet 2:21). There is no suggestion here that laying down one's life for others has any atoning efficacy whatsoever. Rather, John's use of *και* in verse 16 connects Jesus' sacrifice with the believer's duty to sacrifice in order to meet the needs of others.

The verb *οφειλομεν* speaks to this duty and being in the present tense communicates an ongoing obligation. Daniel Akin sees the apostle's purpose in writing as relating to the believer's responsibility to love: "John's point is that Christians have a calling to follow the example of their Lord even unto death if such an occasion presents itself."⁵⁶ Kistemaker further comments, "When the honor of God's name, the advancement of his church, and the need of his people demand that we love our brothers, we ought to show our love at all costs—even to the point of risking and losing our lives."⁵⁷ Biblical mercy is intensified in light of Christ's supreme example.

Against the backdrop of Jesus' example of sacrificial love John paints a practical picture of a brother in need. Two active verbs in verse 17, "having" and

⁵⁴Hiebert, *The Epistles of John*, 159.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 160.

⁵⁶Daniel L. Akin, *1,2,3 John*, New American Commentary, vol. 38 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 159.

⁵⁷Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John*, 310.

“seeing” describe the condition of one who possesses the means to supply the need of another while perceiving the need with complete understanding. Akin reflects, “The challenge for John’s hearers is to apply their Christian love to a context that is true to everyday life.”⁵⁸ While most people will never be called upon to give their life for another, this particular circumstance remains constant in the believer’s life experience.

John presents this scenario from a negative standpoint. One individual, endowed with means, sees and comprehends the need of a brother or sister in Christ and refuses to do anything to alleviate that need. The one blessed with material possessions can plead neither inability nor ignorance. Hiebert speaks well to this point:

He has noted the other’s need and is aware of the call for sympathetic action to meet that need; instead he restrains his initial sympathy and ‘shuts up his bowels of compassion.’ His self-centered interests lead him to shut out any consideration for the needs of the brother. The verb literally means to close or lock a door or gate; here it is used figuratively to depict his deliberate erection of a barrier between himself and the brother so that his sympathetic action cannot flow out to him. His response is the exact opposite of that of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33-34).⁵⁹

Having presented the scene John rhetorically asks, “How does God’s love abide in him?” The anticipated response is emphatically that it does not. John presents a vivid contrast between this person’s selfishness and the self-giving love of Jesus. The phrase “love of God” in verse 17 has been interpreted in various ways. Is John referring to God’s love for John’s readers or their love for God, or to a love which is characteristic of God? Westcott answers the question this way: “It is the love of which God is at once the object and the author and the pattern.”⁶⁰

John concludes this section with an exhortation to his readers that, as God’s children, one’s words must be consistent with one’s actions. John’s statement provokes self-examination for anyone who professes to have faith or to love God. If a person has

⁵⁸Akin, *1,2,3 John*, 159.

⁵⁹Hiebert, *The Epistles of John*, 162.

⁶⁰Brooke F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 115.

real love in his inner being it will manifest itself in deeds of compassion for those in need. Such affection echoes the words of Jesus when he told his followers, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Akin further comments, “One of the distinguishing marks of the child of God is love, a love that originates in God, displays itself in actions of self-sacrifice, and is evidence of eternal life.”⁶¹

Conclusion

When God called Abram he promised that through him all nations would be blessed (Gen 12:3). Israel was formed to be a conduit of God’s mercy and kindness to the world. God’s people were called to be his representatives, reflecting his holiness and love. When the Lord entered into covenant relationship with those he redeemed out of Egypt, he promised, “You shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine” (Exod 19:5b). Philip Graham Ryken maintains, “The Israelites were mediators of divine grace, serving as God’s priests to the nations. As they worshiped God and as they lived in covenant holiness, they preserved the treasure of Biblical truth until the coming of the Savior brought salvation to the rest of the world.”⁶²

Part of the covenant stipulations included the requirement to reflect the same mercy the Israelites had received. “You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt” (Exod 23:9). When Peter relates the covenant relationship to his readers he reminds them that “once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:10). As those who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and called into relationship with God under the

⁶¹ Akin, *1,2,3 John*, 161.

⁶² Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus, Saved for God’s Glory*, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 499.

New Covenant, believers continue to share an obligation to demonstrate God's love and kindness to the world.

Unfortunately, Israel failed to keep covenant and turned from following the Lord. God raised up prophets to denounce their rebellion and call them back to repentance and covenant faithfulness. A common denominator in the message of these human firebrands of truth was a rebuke for injustice and neglect of the poor. Eventually, exile was the only cure. The sad result is recorded in 2 Chronicles 36:15-16:

The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy.

At this point Israel had crossed its Rubicon and judgment was inevitable.

Yet God would not forget his promise to Abraham that through his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. The apostle Paul saw the fulfillment of that promise in Christ when he wrote, "In the fullness of time God sent forth his Son" (Gal 4:4). Messiah would show the world the heart of God. Jesus as the light of the world, the light that Israel had failed to be, reflected the love and kindness of God. Through Him, Jehovah extended mercy without condition to thousands in Israel. Those he called to follow him he instructed to consider the poor and oppressed. Sending them out to proclaim the kingdom's arrival, Jesus said, "You received without paying, give without pay" (Matt 10:8).

Throughout the period Luke records in the book of Acts, the church would carry on the work that Jesus began to do (see Acts 1:1). Christians throughout the Roman Empire demonstrated a compassion for others that "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). The New Testament's teaching that true faith and love will be demonstrated by showing mercy is clear. The biblical proof that all believers are called to extend mercy to the poor and downtrodden is abundant. For all Christians, showing compassion to those in need is never an option but a matter of obedience.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES RELATING TO MINISTRIES OF BIBLICAL MERCY

The local church is the primary agency God uses in this age to accomplish his redemptive purposes. Though there are many para-church organizations that work alongside local congregations, the local body of believers comprises the core of gospel outreach. Even though many reputable ministries outside the church engage in social justice, the local assembly must never surrender her God-given role in extending mercy to the poor. And while it is encouraging that so many churches are beginning to take their responsibility in this area seriously, it is also regrettable that the response to the pressing needs of humanity by some congregations carries more heat than light. The plight of the indigent masses often prompts knee jerk reactions that reflect a glaring lack of understanding with respect to the church's responsibility and mission.

Christian leaders, pastors, and educators from various denominations are raising the flag of social justice for the poor, earnestly calling upon believers to do more to alleviate human suffering in their communities and around the world. Much of what is written on the subject induces feelings of guilt in many believers. While bleak statistics and stories of impoverished lives may provoke some Christians to action it could, in the long run, produce more harm than good if it is the wrong action done for the wrong reason. Still, to a great degree, churches are culpable as far too many members remain completely disengaged from any form of mercy ministry. Craig Blomberg addresses this issue and states, "In light of the statistics on the paucity of charitable giving, it would

seem that there is a genuine guilt that too few middle-class believers experience.”¹ This disengagement is a reality the church will ignore to her detriment, and is indicative of the great need for clarity regarding the church’s mission and how that mission relates to the church’s outreach to the poor. Therefore, this chapter will consider issues relating to the ministry of mercy as a stewardship of the local church to be administered within a gospel framework, with caution concerning the distribution of resources, and mobilized according to members’ spiritual gifts.

A Gospel Framework

The apostle Paul referred to the gospel ministry as a stewardship entrusted to him by God (see 1 Cor 9:17). The New Testament presents the gospel in terms of all that God has done for sinners through the atoning work of Christ on the cross. It would be a mistake to separate acts of mercy from that message. The two must go hand in hand. Doing mercy ministry biblically requires not only the demonstration of God’s love but the articulation of the gospel. Both aspects suffer when one is emphasized to the neglect of the other. Pertaining to this, Chris Sicks distinguishes two types of Christians – word people and deed people:

Too often word people and deed people are suspicious and critical of one another. Sometimes their critique is warranted—when word people abandon deed ministry entirely, or when deed people don’t call people to repentance. When those things happen, we truncate the gospel message and our efforts suffer. The church must both demonstrate and declare God’s compassion for bodies and souls. That’s what the early church did, following Jesus’ example.²

Therefore, it is the position of this project that a gospel framework must govern the church’s outreach to the poor. To build that framework, pastors and church leaders must

¹Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty or Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 24-25.

²Christopher Sicks, *Tangible: Making God Known through Deeds of Mercy and Words of Truth* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2013), 18.

educate church members on two closely related subjects on which much confusion persists: the church's mission, and the nature of the kingdom.

The Church's Mission

Some have questioned whether it is possible to be definitive concerning the mission of the church. Apparently, many have the idea that it can be anything done in the name of Jesus, or any activity involving church members. There continues to be much disagreement over what the church's role is to be in this world. Brunner's statement gives pause at this point: "The Church exists for mission as a fire exists for burning. Where there is no mission, there is no church."³ One might add that where there is neither Church nor mission, there is no faith. Therefore, the church must be clear in its understanding of mission.

In the last decade the term "missional" has come into vogue regarding church outreach and tends to further cloud this issue. The term "missional" is increasingly being used to expand the church's mission to include things like giving food and clothing to the poor, planting trees, and renovating a home. However, Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert make a compelling case that the mission of the church is encapsulated within the Great Commission passages. They assert,

The mission of the church is to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches, that they might worship the Lord and obey his commands now and into eternity to the glory of God the Father.⁴

Therefore, everything the church aspires to do pertaining to outreach must be framed within this context. Without clarity on this point the church is in danger of becoming

³Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1931), 108, quoted in Keith Ferdinando, "Mission: A Problem of Definition", *Themelios* 33, no. 1 (May 2008): 46-59.

⁴Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2011), 62.

side-tracked. Like the proverbial man who jumped on his horse and rode off madly in all directions, a congregation that assumes that anything and everything can be mission may marginalize the very thing Christ has called them to do.

The strategy of the church, and the success of accomplishing that strategy, requires specificity in defining its mission. Yet, such precision is difficult for many who have broadened the term to embrace a more relativist approach. Keith Ferdinando identifies four concepts of mission that range from an extremely broad perspective to a very narrow view. The most expansive concept sees mission as everything God is doing in the world, while the narrow outlook treats mission as the mandate to make disciples. The middle ground between these focuses on social engagement and the alleviation of human suffering. Ferdinando makes a balanced and compelling case for the mission of the church being the making of disciples:

The point here is not to deny the importance of Christian social commitment, but to maintain distinctions in the interest of clarity, and to reserve the word mission for the discipling of the peoples. For those who respond to the gospel and are effectively disciplined, social engagement then becomes an integral part of their Christian life and obedience There is a danger of the marginalization of disciple-making if its distinct and unique nature is not specifically recognized and singled out as the great work of the people of God—the work that they alone can do.⁵

That Paul's understanding of the church's mission was framed by the gospel is obvious from his letters to the churches and the time he spent in cities establishing the believers there in the faith. He stayed in Corinth for eighteen months and in Ephesus for over two years. In addition, he commended the Thessalonians and speaks of the message of Christ "sounding forth" from the church there (1 Thess 1:8). He urged the believers in Ephesus to have "as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel" (Eph 6:15). He reminded the Corinthian church that they were "ambassadors for Christ"

⁵Ferdinando, "Mission," *Themelios*, 46-59.

(2 Cor 5:20). In addition, Paul urged the churches to follow his example regarding the proclamation of the gospel (1 Cor 4:16).

This gospel centered mission bound the early church together in strong community. This singular focus of mission enabled first century Christians to “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) for Jesus Christ. Having clarity on mission was conducive to church unity. The apostle Paul’s exhortation to the church at Philippi reinforces this idea: “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil 1:27).

So, unless there is a strategic, purposeful initiative to maintain an outward focus that emphasizes the proclamation of the gospel, the church is in danger of falling into spiritual self-absorption to the great neglect of her commission. LifeWay Research reveals that a common denominator of declining churches in America is that they invest most of their time, energy, and resources in inwardly focused programs and activities.⁶ The reason for this is that there is a tendency—a spiritual entropy—whereby churches become inwardly focused. Since the nature and direction of mission is always outward, maintaining a gospel framework will help churches avoid this dangerous tendency toward spiritual self-centeredness.

The Kingdom

Another point of confusion among Christians pertaining to the ministry of mercy involves their perception of the kingdom. Much has been written on this subject and the debate continues: is the kingdom here now or do believers still look for it to come? Does the kingdom refer to a physical realm or a spiritual realm? Has the church

⁶Thom Rainer, “The Most Common Factor in Declining Churches” (May 31, 2014), accessed January 28, 2015, <http://thomrainer.com/2014/05/31/common-factor-declining-churches>.

been sent out to bring in the kingdom? To answer these and other kingdom questions it is best to remember that at the center and heart of all Scripture is the Lord Jesus Christ. Granted, there is a kingdom thread that runs throughout Scripture. From the beginning God intended man to reign as his vice-regent on the earth. However, Israel would eventually reject God from being king over them (see 1 Sam 8:7). The failed monarchy of the Old Testament establishes the need for the one true King whose reign will never end. A biblical understanding of the kingdom sees it in relation to Christ's atoning work on the cross. Graeme Goldsworthy declares, "Ultimately it [the kingdom] is the royal Son of David's progress to Jerusalem to suffer, die, and to rise again that is at the heart of the coming of the kingdom."⁷

In light of this perspective, it is a mistake to think of God's kingdom in terms of political agendas, social justice, environmental projects, or even providing meals to the homeless. The kingdom Jesus spoke of is not an extension of government social programs. Biblical theologians see the kingdom of God in what has been called an "inaugurated eschatology." DeYoung and Gilbert explain the concept, "This position holds that God's kingdom has already broken into this world but has not yet been fully realized."⁸ The kingdom is the reign of God in general. It refers to the reign of God in the hearts of his people, his sovereign control over all things, and also to the future reign of Christ on earth. The basis of all of this is the work of Jesus on the cross.

A community of believers, functioning as the body of Christ, will demonstrate the rule of God in their lives and will, to a degree, display something of the nature of God's kingdom. However, expanding and extending God's kingdom is only possible through the gospel. Jesus began his teaching ministry by saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3). The poor in spirit are those who

⁷Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 50-51.

⁸DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 17.

humble themselves and bow in submission to Jesus as Lord. The concern is that “in all our passion for renewing the city by tackling social problems, we run the risk of marginalizing the one thing that makes Christian mission Christian: namely, making disciples of Jesus Christ.”⁹

Ministries of mercy are often referred to as “kingdom work.” Many well-meaning Christians consider repairing project housing, planting trees in an inner-city park, providing health care, restoring the environment, and feeding the hungry to be the mission of the church and as participating in kingdom building. They connect the Abrahamic covenant to a cultural mandate to bless the world through deeds of kindness and service. It is dangerous to equate social justice in terms of God’s redemptive purpose. Ferdinando addresses this tendency which makes the gospel other than what it is revealed to be in the Scriptures:

This understanding of the kingdom is substantially different from that which Jesus proclaimed. For him it was not primarily the reconstruction of human societies within history, but God’s sovereign intervention to save and to judge, reconciling sinners and creating a new community . . . There is indeed a distinction between history and salvation history, between world and church, between God’s providential rule over the earth and his redemptive intervention within it.¹⁰

Therefore, it is essential that congregations comprehend the primary task God has given them to perform in this world. That understanding must also be undergirded with a biblical perspective of the kingdom. This gospel framework is explained well by DeYoung and Gilbert:

Though we do not believe that the mission of the church is to build the kingdom or to partner with God in remaking the world, this does not mean we are against cultural engagement. Our point is simply that we must understand these endeavors in the right theological categories and embrace them without sacrificing more explicit priorities. We should not cheapen good deeds by making them only a means to some other end (evangelism), but neither do we want to exaggerate our responsibility by thinking it is our duty to build the kingdom through our good

⁹DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 22.

¹⁰Ferdinando, “Mission,” *Themelios*, 46-59.

deeds. Similarly, we should not over-spiritualize social action by making it equivalent to God's shalom. As the church loves the world so loved by God, we will work to relieve suffering wherever we can, but especially eternal suffering.¹¹

The salvation God has provided in Christ is holistic and reaches not only the souls but the lives of individuals who can be transformed by the gospel of grace.

The Need for Caution

In 1964 President Lyndon Johnson made his famous declaration of war on poverty. Although his motives may have been completely altruistic, the results have proven disastrous as poverty in this country remains unabated. According to a recent report in *World Magazine*, the federal government funds almost 100 different programs for indigent Americans.¹² In the last fifty years the U. S. has spent over 22 trillion dollars in what appears to be a losing battle. Since Johnson's declaration, the rate of poverty is basically unchanged and remains around 15 percent. Never have Jesus' words "for you always have the poor with you" been more pertinent (see Matt 26:11).

Given the failure of government, God's people must exercise great caution in reaching out to the poor lest the same fiasco be repeated. As stewards of both material and spiritual resources, the church must act responsibly in reaching out to those in need. Unfortunately, many churches are engaged in assistance to the indigent that not only wastes church resources but also harms the individuals receiving the so-called aid. Their efforts do little, if anything, to change the root cause of the problems which persist since individuals are not motivated to change their behavior or circumstances. Therefore, caution must be taken in discerning needs and developing policies that will guide the church in actual ministry to the poor.

¹¹DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 27.

¹²Jamie Dean, "Far as the Curse is Found," *World*, September 27, 2014, 38.

Discerning Needs

Wealth and poverty are relative terms. What is considered wealth in a third world country could easily be considered poverty here in America. How Christians perceive poverty will impact the way they address it in ministry. It is important that church members be educated so that a unified mindset directs their outreach. Once they understand that mercy ministry must be framed by the gospel, the next step is helping them understand the nature of poverty itself. A congregation must labor under the conviction that poverty is more than a lack of material resources. At the heart of all poverty is sin. The fall left mankind broken and in need of reconciliation.

Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert identify four basic relationships broken by sin: the relationship people have with God, with self, with others, and with creation.¹³ Healing these broken relationships is the goal of mercy ministries. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert assert, “When these relationships are functioning properly, people are able to fulfill their callings of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruit of that work.”¹⁴ This kind of support is the transformation mercy seeks to achieve. As bearers of the *imago Dei* all people have worth and dignity. Yet much of what passes for social justice contributes to feelings of worthlessness and inferiority among the poor. People need a hand up not a hand out.

Seeing poverty through this paradigm does several things for church members. First, it keeps them from over-simplifying the problem as a mere lack of resources. American culture conditions people, even many Christians, to believe that money is the answer to everything. This over-simplification seems to be the mindset driving government programs even though the track record of these efforts demonstrates the utter

¹³Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 54.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 55.

failure of such an approach. Bryant Myers claims this is due in part to the influence of the modern worldview. He explains,

One of the primary characteristics of time in history has been the belief in the West that the spiritual and material domains of life are separate and unrelated The result is a tragic pair of reductions. First, poverty is reduced to a merely material condition having to do with the absence of things like money, water, food, housing, and the lack of just social systems, also materially defined and understood. Second, development is reduced correspondingly to a material series of responses designed to overcome these needs.¹⁵

Addressing the same issue, Timothy Keller states, “Our real purpose must be to restore the poor person . . . Mercy must have the purpose of seeing God’s lordship realized in the lives of those we help.”¹⁶ Therefore, local congregations need to grasp the complexity of issues involved in reconciling people to God, to themselves, to others, and to the environment in which they find themselves.

Second, seeing mercy as a ministry of reconciliation also protects against the pride which would lead ministers of mercy to think they are superior to those they are trying to help. Those involved in helping the poor must first come to grips with their own brokenness. Myers speaks powerfully to this point:

When the non-poor play god in the lives of other people, they have stopped being who they truly are and are assuming the role of God. Losing sight of their true identity leads the non-poor to misread their true vocation as well. Instead of understanding themselves as productive stewards working for the well-being of their community, they act as if their gifts and position are somehow rightfully theirs, or earned, and hence solely for themselves and for their well-being.¹⁷

Mercy is most effective when it is extended by those who know they have received it themselves. Church members must, in humility, recognize the work of God’s

¹⁵Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 5.

¹⁶Timothy Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), 96-97.

¹⁷Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 146.

grace in their own lives. When mercy is embraced as a stewardship of grace there will be a realization that all wealth and the ability to attain it come from God. There is no such thing as a self-made man. Corbett and Fikkert refer to the “god-complexes” which afflict many church members. They define this mindset as “a subtle and unconscious sense of superiority.”¹⁸ They further claim, “One of the biggest problems in many poverty-alleviation efforts is that their design and implementation exacerbates the poverty of being of the economically rich—their god-complexes—and the poverty of being of the economically poor—their feelings of inferiority and shame.”¹⁹ Seeing their own brokenness will promote an attitude of humility in those who aspire to help the poor.

Third, the perspective that views mercy ministry as a ministry of reconciliation will guard against impatience. Many believers experience frustration at the apparent lack of results their efforts often bring. Church members must come to realize there is no such thing as a quick fix when it comes to restoring broken relationships. Granted, many feel they have done their part by writing a check and may think their responsibility is fulfilled by giving money or donating goods. Yet reconciliation requires a much greater investment and this is where the stakes truly go up. Building relationships takes time and is a process. Most church ministries tend to emphasize projects which may provide temporary relief but fail to accomplish the goal of reconciliation. According to Corbett and Fikkert, the objective is to see people’s lives restored, and that they possess, “the capacity to make decisions and to effect change in the world around them; people who steward their lives, communities, resources, and relationships in order to bring glory to God.”²⁰ Therefore, it is imperative that churches proceed cautiously and operate from a

¹⁸Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 61

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 62.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 77.

paradigm of reconciliation. Such an approach will guide the church in discerning the true nature of poverty and the real needs of those to whom they extend mercy.

Finally, the perspective that sees mercy ministry as a process of restoring broken relationships helps the church discern their level of involvement with those in need. At times churches are confronted with critical situations requiring immediate action. Viewing these circumstances through the paradigm of reconciliation means that relief becomes a catalyst to open doors for relationships to begin between the helped and the helper. This reconciliation also provides the church with an opportunity to determine whether or not the person is culpable in regards to their plight, or if they are suffering from some form of victimization, and if they have already received assistance from other sources. Corbett and Fikkert advise, “Relief needs to be seldom, immediate, and temporary. Once relief efforts have stopped the bleeding, it is time to move quickly into rehabilitation, working with, not for people.”²¹ Thus, even relief efforts should focus on the long range goal of restoration.

Developing Policies

Churches not only need to exercise caution in discerning people’s true needs, but also in the development of policies that will guide their efforts to help the poor. Beginning within a gospel framework means the church holds the conviction that apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ people will not experience the transformation that redirects their lives for the glory of God. From that conviction the goal of mercy ministry becomes restoring the broken relationships that are at the heart of poverty. From here the church must develop guidelines that are consistent with that conviction and goal. These guiding principles will ultimately shape the church’s programs of mercy. Three primary guidelines should inform the local church’s leadership in establishing policies for mercy ministry: accurate assessment, reciprocal involvement, and feasibility.

²¹Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 105.

First, the church must make assessment of need based on precise data analysis. Myers affirms, “Assessment of community assets and needs is done in order to provide the information necessary to set the stage for the design of the program.”²² In this project the poor refer to the homeless, the working poor, the addicted, disadvantaged children, the unemployed, the abused and neglected, as well as the incarcerated. Assessing the needs of the community in regards to these categories requires communicating with agencies that are already engaged in confronting the problems associated with each group. According to Keller, “The only way to get into an active stance is [for the church] to complete a community survey, to network the city.”²³ Making an accurate assessment of needs within the community means discovering the kinds and degrees of poverty in the area and what local agencies are doing to address it. Such an assessment will help the church identify any gaps between the needs and the services being rendered by the state.

Concerning the process of gathering this data Keller recommends interviews over phone calls or drop in visits so as to maximize the contact with these agencies. These calls and visits will also provide an opportunity for church representatives to explain their vision and goals.²⁴ Data collected from welfare and social agencies can also aid the congregation in forming spiritual profiles of the various groups in order to maintain a holistic perception of their specific needs.

Second, reciprocal involvement means that the church must never do for the poor what they have in their power to do for themselves. Experts experienced in ministry to the indigent agree that paternalism proves only to exacerbate the plight of the impoverished. Webster defines paternalism as a “system under which an authority treats those under its control paternally by regulating conduct and supplying needs.”²⁵ This

²²Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 239.

²³Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*, 146.

²⁴Ibid., 148.

²⁵*The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, new ed. (2004), s.v. “paternalism.”

mindset reduces mercy ministry to the level of social childcare. Robert Lupton assesses this approach as careless, saying, “Religiously motivated charity is often the most irresponsible. Our free food and clothing distribution encourages ever-growing handout lines, diminishing the dignity of the poor while increasing their dependency.”²⁶

Corbett and Fikkert explain paternalism in its various forms. Resource paternalism finds the answer to poverty in material and financial resources. Next, there is spiritual paternalism which fails to recognize that many poor possess genuine faith and, though living in poverty, maintain a close relationship with God (see Jas 2:5). Knowledge paternalism assumes that those who live in poverty have nothing to offer in the way of insight into the problems they face. This mindset is an example of the “god-complex” mentioned earlier which exudes an air of superiority. Labor paternalism basically does work for those who could very well perform tasks themselves while managerial paternalism moves in and takes control because those being served fail to respond quickly enough.²⁷ The irony is that such practices hinder the very compassion they are intended to communicate.

Church policy in mercy ministry must require some level of involvement by the poor in the church’s efforts to help them. If the people who are being served are unwilling to allow the church into their lives the flow of charity must end, or in another sense, change form. Since the goal is to restore broken relationships at some point the claims of Christ must be presented. Keller points out, “In the final analysis, only mercy can limit mercy. We may cut off our aid only if it is unmerciful to continue it.”²⁸ This

²⁶Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 4.

²⁷Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 109-13.

²⁸Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*, 98.

aspect of mercy calls for wisdom and discernment since it is often difficult to ascertain when limitations should be imposed.

The church must also exercise patience and long-suffering in dealing with those who are uncooperative and reluctant to let others into their lives. Ministers of mercy must decide to err on the side of compassion. Of course, there will be times when it will be clear that no further aid need be extended when individuals express no interest in change and continue in behavior that contributes to their problem. For example, if a person refuses counseling, job training, or neglects opportunities to work, no further aid should be given. Failure here will only encourage the sense of entitlement and dependency. Lupton is right when he asserts, “For disadvantaged people to flourish into their full, God-given potential, they must leave behind dependencies that impede their growth. Initiatives that thwart their development, though rightly motivated, must be restructured to reinforce self-sufficiency if they are to become agents of lasting and positive change.”²⁹ Therefore, stopping aid may be the only way a person will come to feel the burden of their situation deeply enough to provoke the necessary motivation for change.

Third, local churches aspiring to minister to the poor of their community must recognize that there are limits to their outreach. Some efforts may not be appropriate for some churches due to issues of feasibility. One obvious factor that must be considered is resource capability. Keller urges, “As much as possible, when beginning to establish mercy ministries, use existing resources.”³⁰ The size of the congregation will determine the potential for outreach since larger churches, in general, possess greater resources. However, the demands of the poor are so great that they can easily overwhelm any size congregation. Resource capability also extends to the number of members participating in

²⁹Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 102.

³⁰Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*, 142.

the church's outreach. A good rule of thumb is that a church should not attempt what it cannot staff or fund. Most churches have either a benevolence line in their budgets or maintain a benevolence fund. Either way limited resources is a constant reality for every church. The process of establishing clear guidelines and policies must therefore consider what can feasibly be funded and staffed.

Another area regarding feasibility is the geographical location of the church. Churches in highly populated areas simply are not capable of meeting all of the demands of the needy in their community. At this point, leadership must carefully target areas that are within a reasonable proximity and not so distant as to make members' involvement an inconvenience. It may also be a good idea to network with other churches in the area.

Teaching mercy ministry as a stewardship reinforces the need for caution in discerning needs and developing policies for church programs. No church member would intentionally waste the Lord's money or harm individuals in need of help. Yet, this is what often happens when churches fail to grasp a holistic approach to benevolence. In his biblical theology of possessions, Blomberg concludes, "If holistic salvation represents the ultimate good God wants all to receive, then our charitable giving should be directed to churches or organizations that minister holistically."³¹ The goal of mercy ministry is to restore individuals both physically and spiritually. As church members come to see poverty as a manifestation of broken relationships they can be better equipped to function as ministers of mercy within the community.

Operating According to Spiritual Gifts

The church is God's primary agency in carrying out his redemptive purposes. Those purposes, which include the restoration of broken lives through mercy ministries, can only be effectively accomplished when churches are mobilized for ministry according to the spiritual gifts of their members. Spiritual gifts are abilities given by the

³¹Blomberg, *Neither Poverty or Riches*, 247.

Holy Spirit to individual believers for the edification of the whole body. The administration of gifts within the body will determine the effectiveness of the church's ministry to those outside the body.

Even Christ conducted his public ministry in complete dependence on the Holy Spirit. After his wilderness temptation Luke remarks that "Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee" (Luke 4:14). Then, in that Nazarene synagogue he announced, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). Following in the steps of Jesus demands that believers also minister in dependence on the Holy Spirit. Unless a church's outreach to the poor is conducted according to and in dependence on the endowments of the Spirit, efforts to alleviate human suffering and poverty will depend upon natural gifts and fleshly capacities which cannot please God (see Rom 8:8).

The New Testament teaches that every believer has been given a spiritual gift and stresses the importance of those gifts within the body of Christ. A.W. Tozer's words speak well to this point:

The Bible teaches us that the genuine gifts of the Holy Spirit are a necessity in the spiritual life and ministries of every Christian congregation serious about glorifying Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord A careful study of the Apostle's teachings concerning Jesus Christ and his church should persuade us that any local assembly ought to demonstrate all of the functions of the whole body. Paul clearly teaches that each Christian ought to demonstrate a proper gift or gifts, bestowed by the Holy Spirit, and that together the believers would accomplish the work of God as a team.³²

The apostle Peter underscored the importance of serving according to spiritual gifts when he wrote, "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God

³²A. W. Tozer, *Tragedy in the Church: The Missing Gifts* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1978), 21-22.

may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 4:10-11). Mercy ministry has great potential for bringing glory to God as broken lives are being restored by his grace.

Educating the Church

Mobilizing the church for ministry to the poor is primarily the responsibility of the church’s elders. Orlando Costas insists, “After the Holy Spirit, the key to this endeavor is the pastoral leadership. More than anyone else, pastors through their ministry of preaching and teaching have access to the minds and hearts of their congregation.”³³ The apostle Paul taught that God gave the church pastors and teachers who were to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:15). Since every Christian has been endowed with a spiritual gift it follows naturally that every member of the church has the potential for ministry both inside and outside the body. Keller proposes, “This process starts by articulating clearly and regularly a theology of every-member ministry. Word ministries can flourish somewhat in a church without this emphasis; deed ministries cannot grow without this theology sown like seed throughout the congregation.”³⁴ Faithfully keeping before members the believer’s responsibility to exercise spiritual gifts will help keep them outwardly focused on the needs of others.

Unfortunately, many church members are ignorant and unlearned concerning spiritual gifts. Too often this represents the failure of the pastor to teach the whole counsel of God. Tozer laments, “The Christian church cannot rise to its true stature in accomplishing the purposes of God when its members operate largely through the gifts of nature, neglecting the true gifts and graces of the Spirit of God.”³⁵ Therefore, men who serve the church as pastors must take seriously their responsibility to educate their

³³Orlando E. Costas, *The Integrity of Mission: The Inner Life and Outreach of the Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 26.

³⁴Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*, 156.

³⁵Tozer, *Tragedy in the Church*, 33.

members about the gifts of the Spirit and the absolute necessity of these gifts for the success of the church's mission.

Such education may take various outlets such as lessons taught, sermons preached, or small group studies. Perhaps the best way to teach the importance of spiritual gifts is to address the subject in a New Members Class. Such a class could provide an excellent platform to communicate member expectations, that is, what the church expects from its members. Attendees to this class need to learn how to discover their gifts. While some advocate giving a spiritual gifts test to prospective members, others are reluctant to do so, being unconvinced by the results. Instead, prospective members are encouraged to involve themselves in ministry where their respective gifts can be revealed in the process of serving the body. Of course, this approach requires close supervision by ministry leaders who are discerning and who can monitor the effectiveness of members' service. It would also be advisable to conduct a follow-up interview to discuss the individual's perspective and to ascertain if they would be better suited in another area of ministry. To encourage member involvement Keller advocates, "Pastors and leaders should regularly brainstorm and make an up-to-date list of people needs which are going unmet inside the church and out in the community."³⁶ Every Christian possesses gifts for ministry, and it is crucial that the church's ministry of mercy be developed and implemented according to the spiritual gifts of its members.

Organizing the Outreach

In addition to the responsibility to teach members about spiritual gifts and how those gifts can serve the needs of others, pastors also have the responsibility to lead the church in the implementation of mercy ministry. According to Costas, mobilizing the church for ministry to the poor involves recruiting workers, organization, and

³⁶Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*, 160.

supervision.³⁷ At this point the pastor's ability to delegate becomes critical. He must be able to enlist the help of other staff, deacons, and members who possess gifts of administration and leadership. They must also share the pastor's burden and vision and meet the church's qualifications for those who serve in ministry.

For churches that have no previous involvement or organized outreach to the poor it is advisable to begin with one church wide project. Given the insurmountable needs of the poor, the ministry of mercy in the local church could easily overwhelm the average church member. If there is not a clear vision with a focused objective the congregation could fall into confusion and discouragement. Keller's advice is sound: "To see the congregation as a whole, become truly committed to the ministry of mercy, the officers should undertake one carefully designed ministry of mercy in which significant church resources are used."³⁸

Bernard Thompson lists three benefits of beginning with one church-wide project: "(1) You will meet a specific need, (2) establish the identity of your [mercy] ministry as one of the ministries of your local church, and (3) recruit more volunteers for your [mercy] ministry team."³⁹ Beginning with one project, with existing resources, utilizing members gifted in the various ways to construct the team will position the church for the future growth and development of the church's mercy ministry. Those in leadership must choose a project that targets an individual or a group whose needs have been carefully assessed. Those assigned to actual tasks must reflect not only the gifts and abilities conducive to the project, but also possess a heart of compassion and a track record of faithfulness.

³⁷Costas, *The Integrity of Mission*, 26.

³⁸Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*, 167.

³⁹Bernard Thompson, *Good Samaritan Faith: A Strategy for Meeting Needs in Your Community* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), 103.

Actual formation of a mercy ministry team falls under the supervision of the pastor, or a staff or lay leader appointed by the pastor. Organizing such a team involves details pertaining to a vision statement, deciding a strategy, enlisting volunteers, developing the program, and devising some means of evaluation.⁴⁰ The first outreach may involve extending mercy to one person or several persons inside the church, or to some needy person, family, or group in the community. Organizing with the goal in mind of restoring broken relationships for the glory of God will keep the church on track and protect it from going from one emergency relief project to the next with no lasting results.

Conclusion

God has called the church to join him in restoring relationships broken by sin. At the heart of all poverty is a sinfulness that distorts man's spiritual, social, emotional, and physical being. Christians have been given a stewardship of the gospel that entails both the message and the ministry of reconciliation. As ambassadors of Christ, believers are to serve as his representatives in this world. This service involves both the proclamation of the gospel with their lips and the extension of mercy through their lives. For this reason ministries of mercy must approach the indigent in their communities with a holistic mindset. This mentality assumes that filling the stomach while leaving the soul empty fails to accomplish the mission Christ gave to the church.

Failure to bring together the spiritual and physical needs of people in gospel outreach risks wasting valuable resources, and creating unhealthy attitudes. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16) and that salvation extends to the souls, lives, and even to creation itself. Myers reflects,

One of the challenges of Christian holism in development will be to release the Bible and the biblical narrative to speak to all phases of the process of human

⁴⁰In chaps. 9 and 10 of *Ministries of Mercy*, Keller provides several helpful outlines that give step by step measures for establishing mercy ministry within the local congregation.

transformation. One of the best gifts that we have for the poor and the non-poor is the living word of God. We need to share it with them and let the living word speak for itself.⁴¹

The church is not left on its own. The results of ministry and mission are not the responsibility of the church, but as the body of Christ is faithful to carry out its mission God will give the increase.

The leadership of the church is responsible to educate and lead their flocks to address both the spiritual and material needs of people. Leading members to comprehend the church's mission and their own spiritual gifts will provide a solid foundation on which to build a ministry of mercy. Employing members according to their spiritual gifts will facilitate effective ministry and mission. Yet, there is one further essential that must never be overlooked; the necessity of prayer.

A wise man once said, "There are some things you can do after you pray, but there is nothing you can do until you pray." Prayer is the key to success for every endeavor of the church. Harvie Conn raises a sobering question:

Who is more naïve? The liberal leaders of what we now call the "the social gospel" with their passionate concern for a broken world and their never-ending optimism of how we may rectify it? Or the evangelical who has given up on the world's headaches in favor of a stripped-down form of evangelism reduced to four spiritual laws? Or the evangelical social activist who does not see intercessory prayer as the first and constant component of our "social evangelism?"⁴²

The New Testament reveals that prayer was the divine catalyst for God's hand to move in power, transforming multitudes by the gospel. The importance of prayer in mercy ministry, or in any ministry, cannot be stressed enough.

Churches are not hotels built for the sake of customer comfort and satisfaction. Rather they are hospitals where members continue in recovery together. Because every person is broken by sin they experience some measure of poverty, albeit in different

⁴¹Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 81.

⁴²Harvie M. Conn, *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1982), 80.

forms. Corbett and Fikkert wisely advise, “Our perspective should be less about how we are going to fix the materially poor and more about how we can walk together, asking God to fix us both.”⁴³ Let this be the guiding truth in every effort to restore people’s lives for the glory of God.

⁴³Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 75.

CHAPTER 4

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

Introduction

Much of what passes for social justice today actually does more harm than good. This is not just true regarding secular efforts. Many churches engaged in outreach to the poor not only fail to truly help them, but also waste precious resources in the process. The loss of dignity inflicted on the indigent, the pride of people who look down on the poor, and the pitiable lack of true and lasting transformation demonstrate the great need for Christians to address poverty and its effects from a biblical perspective. This project was initiated with that viewpoint in mind.

In the course of research and planning, it was determined that this project would seek to address the church's responsibility to the poor with a holistic approach. According to Bryant Myers, "A foundational paradigm shift has worked itself out in Western culture and one of its most enduring features has been the assumption that we can consider the spiritual and physical realms as separate and distinct from one another."¹ This dichotomy creates a disconnect that hinders the well-intentioned church member from engaging in the church's true mission. Therefore, a driving conviction for this project has been the belief that at the heart of all poverty are spiritual issues that must be confronted along with the meeting of physical needs.

Based on the biblical and theological foundation previously established and constructed according to sound theoretical and practical insights, this project's implementation was designed to equip members of Faith Family Church in Finksburg,

¹Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 5.

Maryland to effectively minister to the poor. Many adult members had already demonstrated a propensity toward such outreach by their involvement in benevolence projects, short term mission trips, and by their generosity in giving to missions. However, it was determined that the church's ministry to the poor lacked clear focus with no meaningful involvement in the lives of those in need. Consequently, the lack of significant, positive results became the catalyst for undertaking this project, and this chapter will attempt to describe the process so that it could be implemented in other church settings.

Preparation

Recognizing Christ as the Head of the church, Faith Family Church has a structure of leadership that places authority on two levels. On the first level is the board of elders which exercises spiritual oversight of the church. The second level of authority is the Leadership Team which is composed of the church administrator, church treasurer, and other ministry heads. The elders have determined that complete consensus be achieved in any decision regarding church ministries or projects. If at any time there is dissent, the proposed action is tabled so that team members might further seek the will of God through Scripture and prayer.

Believing that change was needed concerning the outreach of benevolence at FFC, the elders recommended to the Leadership Team (LT) that steps be taken to establish a ministry of mercy to the poor. The vision involved moving the church from a relief posture to a development posture; that is, no longer simply meeting felt needs, but seeking to transform lives through the power of the gospel. It was explained that this decision would eliminate the line item for benevolence in the church budget and create a whole new ministry of outreach. It was further explained that such a change would require a higher level of investment of time and money. The recommendation of the

elders was embraced by the LT with great enthusiasm and this project was born out of that context.

Since the purpose of this project was to equip members of Faith Family Church for ministry to the poor it was necessary to assess their current level of understanding and practice of biblical mercy. The Biblical Mercy Survey (BMS)² was designed for that reason. Members were given the survey prior to an eight lesson series on Biblical Mercy. At the end of the teaching series the same survey was administered to eligible class participants who conformed to the class requirements set forth in the project methodology section.

At the heart of this project was the Biblical Mercy Series. This series consisted of eight one hour sessions taught by the pastor during the regular Adult Discipleship time on Sundays. The series reflected principles and insights gleaned from the study of Biblical Mercy and presented in chapters two and three. Detailed lesson outlines were evaluated by the board of elders according to a rubric prepared for that purpose.³ All lessons were approved with a few slight modifications. One suggestion that proved helpful was the inclusion of outlines for each session. These outlines were given to participants each week with blanks to be filled in as the lesson was taught. It was also recommended that key lesson notes be projected on the sanctuary screen during each session to assist in note-taking.

About one month before the series was to begin, a pastoral letter was mailed to every member of FFC explaining the Biblical Mercy Series and encouraging them to participate by their presence and prayer. A men's prayer meeting was held to seek the Lord's direction and blessing on the ten-week series. During that month announcements were made in the services specifying details and requirements of the class, as well as the deadline for registration. It was a goal to enlist not fewer than 40 adults who would

²See appendix 1.

³See appendix 2.

represent about 25 percent of the church's adult members. To the delight of FFC's leadership, 90 people registered for the class. A spirit of anticipation was evident among the congregation.

Due to the large number of registrations, the class was held in the church sanctuary. Two members were recruited to take attendance each week and an excel document was created for that purpose. The church's tech team was also contacted and given instructions about the audio/visual requirements and the uploading of each lesson to the church website. Utilizing the Easy Worship software program, lesson notes were prepared for projection. Prayer, planning, and preparation created a sense of enthusiasm in both the teacher and the class.

Implementation

Biblical Mercy Survey

The first week of the ten-week series was devoted to taking the Biblical Mercy Survey. The class opened with prayer, and instructions pertaining to the survey were given. Participants were reminded of the attendance requirement that no one may miss more than two sessions and be eligible to retake the survey at the end of the series. It was stressed that any missed session must be made up by listening online via the church website. The importance of not putting their name on the survey and choosing a 4-digit identification code that could easily be recalled was reiterated. Class members were given the rest of the class time to take the survey after which they were free to gather in the Fellowship Hall for coffee and fellowship.

Following the initial survey a postcard was prepared and sent out from the pastor to each participant in the series. It read as follows:

THANK YOU! Thank you for taking the Biblical Mercy Survey! Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated. It is my prayer and my hope that all of us will gain scriptural insight and wisdom into matters pertaining to the ministry of mercy at Faith Family Church. I look forward to seeing you this Sunday at 10:00 a.m. in

the sanctuary. I also want to encourage you to bring your Bible and to take notes. A small handout for notes will be provided. *Pastor*

Eighty-five surveys were processed indicating that some attendees chose not to take the survey. Most of those not taking the survey admitted they would not be eligible to retake the post-series survey because they would not be able to fulfill the attendance requirement. Two participants would only attend the first half of the series before leaving for a short term mission's trip.

Lessons 1 and 2

The first two sessions were dedicated to teaching a biblical theology of mercy from the Old Testament. Introduction to the first lesson included scriptural references that are an expression of God's compassion for the poor. A brief word study on the Hebrew word *chesed* followed, demonstrating how the word is used in the Old Testament to denote steadfast love, goodness, kindness, and mercy. The goal of the introduction was to reveal that mercy is bound up in the character of God. To set the stage for the entire series, a working definition of mercy was given, borrowed from Timothy Keller: "Biblical mercy is the meeting of felt needs through deeds of compassion."⁴

The first lesson presented two main points; the character of mercy and the community of mercy. According to Leviticus 19 God entered into covenant with the children of Israel so that as a kingdom of priests they would mediate his mercy to the nations. As his representatives they were required to be holy. One way that holiness is expressed is through extending mercy to others. An exposition of the passage reveals that mercy provides sustenance for the poor (vv. 9-10), protects the vulnerable (vv. 11-14), and strives for reconciliation (vv. 16-18).

Concerning the community of mercy the idea is simply that mercy must begin among God's people. Deuteronomy 15:7-18 was used to substantiate that principle. Sabbatical year requirements demonstrated a spirit of compassion within the covenant

⁴Timothy Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 1997), 46.

community. If the people followed the Lord's commands explicitly there would be no poor people among them. Israel's economic self-sufficiency would demonstrate to surrounding nations that the God of Israel was faithful to meet needs of his people. The passage also serves as a warning against hard-heartedness. Holiness is never just outward actions but flows out of a compassionate heart.

To conclude the lesson, three applications were made. First, believers are to be merciful to those in need because they represent a God who is merciful. Second, the church as a covenant community witnesses to God's mercy through the love and care members have for one another. Third, God is concerned with the attitude of one's heart, not just outward actions. When God's people perceive the great mercy that has been extended to them through Christ they will be better prepared to extend mercy to those outside the covenant community.

The second teaching session continued an emphasis on the Old Testament's teaching of mercy's requirement. While the first lesson emphasized God's requirement to show compassion, this lesson focused on Israel's failure to obey that command. Passages in Isaiah, Micah, and Zechariah were used to address the failure as a problem of the heart. The Jews' callous hearts would eventually bring God's judgment upon their nation. However, in mercy the Lord sought to stem the tide by speaking through his prophets in hopes that Israel would turn from her sinful ways.

The second lesson began by citing examples of Israel's failure to extend mercy and the seriousness of their neglect. A brief background of the three prophets chosen to speak to this issue gave historical context to the content. Isaiah, in addition to being known as the greatest Old Testament prophet, was chosen because he prophesied more than a century before Israel's exile. Zechariah was chosen because he ministered in the post-exilic era. Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, is known for his ministry's emphasis on mercy and Micah 6:8 is well known in social justice settings.

The first major point in lesson 2 expounded on Isaiah's condemnation of formalistic worship. It is sadly ironic that the nation God had established to shine the light of truth to the Gentiles fell into darkness by turning to those nations for aid. If Israel had lived according to God's laws the nations would have come to her for help. Isaiah condemned their heartless neglect of the poor and their attempt to manipulate God for personal gain. The point's application to the church is to avoid outward acts of worship offered without heart. A further point was that the Lord blessed those whose hearts are humble before him.

The second major point expounded Micah's depiction of Israel's failure and the true disposition of mercy. Regarding that disposition, the text expresses two great truths. First, mercy is best expressed when there is a remembrance of mercy received. Memory is the fuel of gratitude (see Ps 103). Second, mercy is a matter of humble obedience. A final emphasis on this point was that God makes clear what he requires and therefore ignorance is never an excuse.

Zechariah 7:4-12 provided the content to drive home the theme of lesson 2. Historical details helped to strengthen the conviction that mercy is a matter of the heart. Even after returning from exile the hearts of the people had not really changed. Zechariah's ministry sought to encourage the returning remnant to rebuild the temple but unfortunately, God's people manifested the same hard-hearted, uncaring attitude toward the poor and continued in formalistic worship in an effort to use God to satisfy their own selfish desires.

Application of these passages reminded the participants that God never changes. He still requires just dealings with others, a heart of compassion for those in need, and humility before him. Christians today commit the same sin due to the hardness of their hearts, going through the motions of church life, hoping to gain God's blessing. The lesson ended with a discussion of humility being the recognition of their complete dependence on God for everything.

Lessons 3 and 4

Session 3 began with a review of the previous two lessons which were meant to serve as a basic introduction to the Old Testament's teaching on mercy. The next two lessons explored the New Testament's revelation of mercy. The thrust of lesson 3 was what it means to love God and one's neighbor as oneself, using Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan. Introducing this lesson involved a brief look at how the Lord's public ministry began in Nazareth where he openly proclaimed himself the fulfillment of Isaiah's Messianic prophecy (Luke 4:16-19). This introduction was followed by a brief overview of the extraordinary compassion he poured out on the multitudes over the next three years.

It was also important to set forth the context of Jesus' story because the lawyer's attempt to justify himself is relevant to the church today. The same problem continues to manifest itself through church members who feel their duty to the poor is accomplished by throwing money into an offering plate. Finally, it was emphasized how Jesus turned the whole issue around by teaching believers that the question is never "Who is my neighbor?" but rather, "To whom might you be a neighbor?"

Four major points made up the bulk of this lesson. (1) Biblical mercy regards the worth of every individual. The Samaritan looked upon the victim in the story as possessing inherent worth. (2) Biblical mercy responds proactively to human need. The emphasis was on how the Bible portrays mercy as an active quality. (3) Biblical mercy relates to people without bias, which is usually the main point people take away from this story. (4) Biblical mercy recognizes God's providence in daily living. Class participants were exhorted to consider that when following Jesus there are no chance encounters and that every believer walks the Jericho road.

Lesson 4 began with a brief review of the previous lesson's main points and was intended to be a basis for teaching that following Jesus means caring for and meeting the needs of those whom the Lord places in one's path. The teaching of the New

Testament is consistent in communicating that mercy toward others is evidence of true faith. Two passages in particular which bring that thought to bear, James 2 and 1 John 3:16-18, were explicated. The bulk of the lesson concentrated on James 2 which was broken down into three teaching points. The first point involved the problem of partiality. The problem James addresses is something with which today's church struggles. Too often modern culture proves to be a stronger influence than truth. Many professing Christians, perhaps unconsciously, put labels on people according to economic, social, or educational levels. The example James uses of a poorly dressed person entering the assembly is not far-fetched at all. The sad truth is that the materialism of this age tends to pervert judgment and the way people see others.

The second point in lesson 4 addressed the peril of partiality. What was emphasized here was that favoritism toward the wealthy and looking down on the poor is not just a social faux pas but a sin against God. Just as God brought judgment on Israel in the Old Testament for her hard hearted ways, James warns of similar judgment on those who show partiality. It was urged that those who profess faith in Christ would do well to remember that according to Jesus an unmerciful heart is an unrepentant heart (see Matt 18:21-35).

The third point emphasized the proof of faith. Genuine faith manifests itself through compassion for those in need. Arguing from absurdity James demonstrates that rendering mental assent to facts is not true faith, for the demons believe and even tremble. The final passage in 1 John reveals the wonderful reality of "faith working through love" (see Gal 5:6). The lesson concluded using the example of Jesus' self-sacrificing love to bolster the exhortation to extend mercy to those in need. Those who walk in the steps of Jesus will manifest their faith through sacrificial living.

The fourth session ended by giving participants time to break into groups of four to six in order to do two things: first, to begin discussing how each group might conduct some outreach to the poor; and second, to have a time of prayer about that

outreach. Approximately ten to fifteen minutes was allotted for this. It was a blessing to see people respond readily, engaging in robust conversation and then praying together as a team. These mercy ministry teams were encouraged to exchange contact information so that the conversation could continue through the week.

Lessons 5 and 6

Having laid a biblical foundation for ministry to the poor, the lessons now turned to instruction for building on that foundation. These next two sessions sought to make the case that the ministry of mercy within the context of the local church must be built with a gospel framework. Lesson 5 addressed the importance of clarity in regards to the church's mission since on this topic there is much debate and confusion.

Several reasons were offered for the existing misunderstanding pertaining to mission. First, more and more people are becoming aware of the need for social justice. Evidence suggests that the result of the raised awareness is an unscriptural dualism that separates word and deed. It is the position of this project that the Bible teaches that believers have been given both the message and the ministry of reconciliation. Closely related to this is the resurgence of the social gospel. It is truly sad to see churches focused merely on the alleviation of physical suffering and need to the neglect of the spiritual. The late Vance Havner, a well-known Southern Baptist evangelist, remarked, "If they had had a social gospel in the days of the prodigal son, somebody would have given him a bed and a sandwich and he never would have gone home."⁵

Then there is the problem with the term "missional" which has evolved to mean just about anything a church does in terms of outreach. It has become imbued with a secular flavor which affects the way churches understand "mission statement." The issue is whether or not a church has the authority to determine its own mission. This

⁵ Vance Havner, *Vance Havner: Just a Preacher* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 119.

project was undertaken with the view that no church is free to decide its own mission since Christ, as the Head of the church, has already clearly stated that mission.

The second part of the lesson was given to a diagram inspired by Keith Ferdinando's article, "Mission: A Problem of Definition."⁶ He identifies four ways mission is perceived by the contemporary church. A chart of four concentric circles was devised and included on the handout for this lesson. The most outward circle was labeled the *Missio Dei* [the mission of God] and represented God's work in this world in the most general of terms. The next circle was labeled "The Cultural Mandate," which perceives mission as everything the Lord has sent us into the world to do. It affirms that the church's mission embraces the Abrahamic covenant mandate to bless the world. The third circle was labeled "Social Justice." This view holds that the alleviation of human suffering in all its forms is the church's mission. Finally, the innermost circle was labeled "Making Disciples." This diagram is the view espoused by this project and which holds that the mission of the church is found in the Great Commission passages of the New Testament.

At this point in the lesson a brief exposition of the Great Commission in Matthew's gospel was given. The participants were shown why this particular command of Jesus is distinguished from his other commands. It was also pointed out that at the heart of Jesus' commission is the imperative to "make disciples." The overall thrust of this lesson was that mercy ministry must be framed within a gospel context that seeks the salvation of the lost and the transformation of their lives by the grace of God.

Lesson 6 was the second part of the previous lesson that sought to teach that the ministry of mercy must be constructed on a biblical foundation and within the framework of the gospel. It was introduced by a brief summation of the apostle Paul's ministry which demonstrates a commitment to the propagation of the gospel and making

⁶Keith Ferdinando, "Mission: A Problem of Definition," *Themelios* 33, No. 1 (May 2008): 46-59.

disciples. His extended stays in strategic cities reflect his commitment to that mission. The gospel-centeredness of the early church not only proved an effective mission, but also united the church with a singleness of heart and mind.

The bulk of lesson 6 addressed the mission of the church as it relates to the kingdom of God. Since the ministry of mercy is often described as “kingdom work” it was deemed necessary to explain how a gospel centered ministry of mercy fits into a biblical concept of the kingdom. That concept portrays the kingdom of God as a present reality in the hearts of his people but not yet a physical reality on earth. Such a mindset differs from the view of the kingdom that perceives political and environmental projects as means of kingdom expansion.

The next part of lesson 6 was devoted to the ministry of Jesus and his announcement of the kingdom. In Jesus the kingdom had arrived and entrance into it is gained through submission to him in faith. Following this, the lesson considered how the kingdom broke into the present age by the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The kingdom inaugurated by Christ continued through the church as an institution given the keys to the kingdom.

Application was made in showing how this understanding of the kingdom relates to the ministry of mercy. When perceived scripturally, church members see the ministry of mercy as primarily the regeneration of the heart and not the renovation of the environment. It was further stressed that as the Lord’s people live out the gospel the world is given a peek into what life is like under the rule of King Jesus. Comprehending the kingdom biblically protects against the disappointment that often afflicts those who fail to see material results in this world. It also keeps the focus on the King and not the kingdom. Mercy ministry must seek to lead people to embrace Jesus as king of their lives.

Lessons 7 and 8

Mobilizing the church for ministry to the poor was the focus of the last two lessons. Lesson 7 began by establishing the utter failure of government to solve the plight of the poor. The incredible waste of tax payer dollars can be seen in the lack of any significant improvement among the country's indigent masses. The church cannot afford to make the same mistake the country has made by thinking that throwing money at a problem will solve it. It is therefore imperative that the church exercise caution in discerning needs and setting policies in their outreach to the poor.

Many social justice programs fail because they never address the root cause of poverty. Lesson 7 confronted the heart of the problem and taught participants that mercy ministry must seek to reconcile people with God, themselves, others, and their environment. True and lasting transformation can occur only as people are open and willing to cooperate with the gospel as God's means of reconciliation. And in addition to helping the poor, this approach restrains the pride that often surfaces in ministries of mercy. It would be easy for those who help the poor to consider themselves better people, or more intelligent, or of finer character than those whom they seek to assist. This lesson reminded participants that all men are broken and that they cannot effectively minister to those in need unless they understand their own brokenness.

The next part of lesson 7 concerned practical aspects of mercy ministry that demand a cautious approach. For example, making accurate assessments for outreach requires gathering data which reflect the community's needs and what secular agencies are doing to confront those needs. Opportunities for ministry lay in areas of need that are overlooked by social agencies. It was also stressed that paternalism, which basically treats the impoverished as children, must be avoided. Robbing a person of their inherent worth and dignity will only hinder the ministry of mercy. The church should never do for the poor what they have the ability to do for themselves.

Lesson 7 concluded by providing some guidelines for determining what is actually possible for the local church to achieve through ministries of mercy. Every church needs to recognize their limitations in this respect. A local church must avoid taking on projects that cannot be adequately staffed or funded. The needs of the indigent will always be greater than the number of volunteers required to meet those needs.

The final lesson was part 2 on mobilizing the local church for ministry to the poor. Its focus was to encourage participants to minister according to their spiritual gift(s). Basic instruction concerning spiritual gifts was given to emphasize their importance for both ministry and mission. If the Lord Jesus, as believers' great example, conducted his ministry in dependence on the Holy Spirit, how much more must believers rely on him? Effective ministry is that which is enabled by the Spirit. Warren Weirsbe's definition of ministry speaks to this truth: "Ministry takes place when divine resources meet human needs through loving channels to the glory of God."⁷ The lesson also discussed how church members could discover and develop their gifts through faithful service within the body of Christ and by serving the needs of others outside the church. At this an exhortation to prayer was made. Participants were made aware that apart from total reliance on God our efforts to see lives changed would be in vain.

A sufficient amount of time in this last teaching session was given for the Church Administrator to close the teaching series with some basic guidelines as to how Faith Family Church would be organized for outreach to the poor. Participants had already organized themselves into short term mercy ministry teams and had been instructed to attempt some kind of small project that would employ the principles they had learned in the series. However, it was made clear to all participants that the church would be organizing corporately in addition to these smaller team efforts.

⁷Warren Weirsbe, *On Being a Servant of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 4.

Church leadership had determined that it would be wise to concentrate efforts in mercy ministry into one church-wide project. A number of experts recommend this so that a sharper focus can be achieved by the entire church body. It was decided that FFC would channel her efforts and resources through the Westminster Rescue Mission. The WRM is a local, non-denominational ministry that seeks to bring men struggling with addiction to know Christ as Lord and Savior and to rehabilitate them to become productive citizens. Prior to this series a relationship had already been established with the mission and a number of members had participated in various ways. For example, several men from FFC conducted Bible Study on Thursday evenings to a small group of men at the mission. Other members spent Thanksgiving Day at the mission serving food and just getting to know some of the men.

Faith Family's Church Administrator shared with participants the numerous opportunities that exist to serve the poor through ministry at the Westminster Rescue Mission. It is the church's goal to build relationships with men in the program, and also with their family members, that will result in making disciples for Jesus Christ. The session ended with prayer for the Lord's guidance in the church's development of outreach to the poor.

Post Series Survey

It was originally hoped that the post series survey could be conducted on the Saturday following the last teaching session. This schedule would provide a relaxed atmosphere that would include a meal, a time of fellowship, and discussion pertaining to future ministries of mercy at FFC. However, it was determined that members preferred to extend the series for one more Sunday in order to complete the post series survey since Saturday activities hindered a number of participants from coming. Church staff and teachers were informed of the extended quarter in plenty of time in order to prepare for the additional Sunday.

Another post card from the pastor was mailed out early in the week to remind class participants of the requirements for taking the post-series survey. This reminder would give members time to make up any missed sessions online. The post card read as follows:

THANK YOU! I am so grateful for your participation in the Biblical Mercy Series. Now the time has come to take the post-series survey. This Sunday I will take a few moments to review the study and then administer the survey. Class participants who completed the pre-series survey, and who attended all eight sessions, up to two of which may have been made up by listening online, will be eligible to take the survey this Sunday. I want to encourage you to go over the notes you made on your outlines as preparation for this survey. I look forward to seeing you this Sunday!

Pastor

Of the 85 participants that took the first survey only 59, approximately 69 percent, completed the post-series survey. If those who had missed one or two sessions had made up those by listening online, 73 participants would have been eligible to take the post-series survey. Fifteen participants, making up about 18 percent of those who took the pre-series survey, missed three or more sessions. These numbers mean that 11 individuals failed to remember their identification code, decided not to take the survey, or failed to make up the required lessons online. Several people who could not remember their personal code were easily matched using the demographic information in section one of the survey.

The last session opened with prayer and special thanks was given to express appreciation for the faithfulness demonstrated by the majority of participants. One of the participants had agreed to share what their team was doing in light of what they had learned from the series. In coordination with the chaplain of the Carroll County Detention Center, a correspondence ministry was organized. Following guidelines set by the state as to what could and could not be sent to inmates, this team was given a list of inmates they could write in hopes of beginning a relationship. Though some efforts met with frustration there was a sense of optimism as they proceeded to develop this program.

Following this, a general review of the major points from each lesson was given to reinforce some of the principles about biblical mercy addressed in the survey. Surveys were then passed out and series participants were reminded to follow the instructions carefully and the importance of remembering their identification codes. Upon completing the survey participants were free to hand them in and leave.

Conclusion

To be consistent with what is believed and taught at Faith Family Church it was decided to establish a beachhead for mercy ministry through one project which involved a relationship with the Westminster Rescue Mission. To begin plowing the ground for this ministry relationship to be cultivated, a meeting was set with the Assistant Director of the mission. The purpose of the meeting was to explore ways members of FFC could become involved with the men in their program and with their families.

The church will be committed to the Rescue Mission project on three levels. First, there will be a financial commitment. FFC has already begun supporting the mission as an evangelistic outreach. Second, the church is looking to increase volunteerism for the mission's various outreaches. Third, because discipleship is at the core of what the Great Commission is all about, the church will be encouraging members to mentor individuals in need of rebuilding their broken relationships. Spouses and children of men in the mission's program represent the poor on a number of different levels. Some are victims of abuse; others are dealing with issues of poverty, while still others are themselves in the grip of addiction.

The series ended with a higher degree of excitement than when it began. It is very important to the leadership of FFC that the knowledge and biblical truth presented and embraced by the participants in this study be acted upon swiftly and efficiently. It would be unfortunate indeed if the work entailed by this project produced only theoretical changes without any tangible ministry results. Notwithstanding, FFC believes it is not

just possible but very likely that over time positive changes will take place in the lives of poor people in the community as their broken relationships find healing and restoration through the gospel of Christ and for the glory of God.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF PROJECT

Introduction

This project was designed to prepare members of Faith Family Church (FFC) for ministry to the poor by teaching the Biblical Mercy Series. The series was conducted during the spring quarter of 2015. Registrations for the teaching series reflected a majority of the active adult membership. When confronted with the problems associated with poverty, the ineffectiveness of past efforts of church benevolence, and the biblical obligation to minister to the poor, members of FFC demonstrated a readiness to learn and to obey the scriptural mandate to proclaim the gospel both in word and deed.

Following the methodology set forth in Chapter 1, the project was carried out over a ten week period. Some adjustments were made in order to accommodate members' schedules so that a maximum number of participants would remain eligible to take the post series survey and thus provide sufficient data for making the best possible assessment. The hope was that the teaching series would yield a significant statistical difference in the understanding and practice of biblical mercy among participating members. This chapter evaluates the project's impact on the church and offer some reflections as to what could have been done differently to improve it. Some personal observations will also be shared.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

As stated at the beginning of chapter 1, the purpose of this project was to equip members of FFC to be ministers of biblical mercy. The primary motivation was remedial in nature. The ministry context necessitated corrective measures in order to bring the

church into conformity with biblical principles that relate to helping the poor. Members proved receptive and the response exceeded initial expectations. Overall, the investment of time and energy required by this project continues to reap positive results. Presently, a Mercy Ministry program is being activated and church members are demonstrating a heart for ministry that reflects compassion guided by gospel truth.

The instrument for measuring the project's impact on church members was the Biblical Mercy Survey (BMS). The survey was intended to reveal participants' level of understanding and practice of biblical mercy. It was administered during the first session and then re-conducted after the completion of the teaching series. To insure anonymity, each survey was identified by the participant's identification code. At the end of the teaching series when the identification codes were paired, 59 participants had completed both the pre and post surveys. This number represents almost 70 percent of all participants.

Utilizing the Likert scale, each question or statement in the survey was given a value based on whether a positive or negative response was required. Every answer on every survey was entered into an Excel spreadsheet so that a t-Test for Dependent Samples might reveal whether or not a significant statistical difference had been achieved. The table below indicates that the mean did, in fact, increase and that the absolute value of the tStat result is larger than the t-Critical two-tail value. Since the *p* value is less than .05 it was confirmed that the change in scores was not due to chance but that the teaching series produced a significant statistical difference.

In random conversations after the series, participants expressed a definite contrast between their answers in the post survey and those in the pre-survey. In other words, members' statements coincided with what the analysis confirmed. It was a gratifying experience to discover that the project's teaching series produced a more biblical understanding of the ministry of mercy among participants. An even greater blessing was to witness their readiness to act upon the insights and knowledge gained

from the study. In light of these results it may be stated with confidence that participants, in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, have been equipped to extend biblical mercy to the poor. To the glory of God the purpose of this project was successfully fulfilled.

Table 1. T-Test for Dependent Samples

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>Pre-Survey</i>	<i>Post-Survey</i>
Mean	3.761	4.309
Variance	0.165	0.187
Observations	57.000	57.000
Pearson Correlation	0.507	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0.000	
df	56.000	
t Stat	-9.931	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.000	
t Critical one-tail	1.673	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.000	
t Critical two-tail	2.003	

Evaluation of Project Goals

Three goals had been established for this project. The first goal was to assess FFC members’ understanding and practice of biblical mercy. The BMS was developed in order to measure this goal. The goal required that not less than 40 adult members would complete both the pre and post surveys. Through adequate preparation and promotion a spirit of anticipation gripped the church and the goal was significantly exceeded. As previously noted, a total of 59 adult members completed both surveys, representing over one third of FFC’s adult membership. Data from both surveys was collected and analyzed by a small team assembled for that purpose. Due to the large percentage of participation a sense of ownership is apparent throughout the church as a whole. Members are coming to share the vision of reaching out to those whose lives have been affected by poverty.

The second goal of this project was to develop an eight-week curriculum on biblical mercy. This curriculum would focus on the theological aspects of mercy and their application to the church’s mission. The basis for all eight lessons was derived from the material covered in chapters 2 and 3 of this project. Content for these lessons was produced by research that involved the study and exposition of key passages of Scripture, as well as reading books that approached the subject of mercy and social justice from both theological and secular perspectives. I felt it would be prudent to first lay a biblical foundation and then to build on that foundation by teaching principles conducive to the ministry of mercy within the local church.

Each lesson was evaluated by the church’s elders utilizing a 10-point rubric⁸ designed to determine the lesson’s faithfulness to biblical integrity, its clarity in presentation, and its practical application. Upon completion, a detailed outline of each lesson was presented to the elders for evaluation. The goal required ninety percent of all the rubric’s criteria to meet or exceed the sufficient level. The table below represents the elder’s examination of the lessons and the successful completion of the second goal. All lessons were prepared at least four weeks in advance of the date they were to be taught.

Table 2. Percentage of Lessons Meeting or Exceeding Sufficient Level

Lesson	Pastor Kuehl	Pastor Streett	Average
1	90	90	90
2	90	100	95
3	100	100	100
4	90	100	95
5	100	100	100
6	90	100	95
7	90	100	95
8	100	100	100

⁸See appendix 2

Several suggestions were made in conjunction with the evaluations which led to changes in lesson presentation. Two major changes resulting from the elders' evaluation were projecting the main points of each lesson onto a screen as the lesson was being taught, and providing each participant with weekly fill-in-the-blank outlines. Both elders provided helpful input that enhanced the learning experience. Based upon their evaluation the curriculum was determined to be satisfactory for the teaching series, thus achieving the second goal.

The final goal of the project was to equip members to be ministers of mercy by teaching the series. Because of the number of registrants it was decided that the class would have to be held in the sanctuary. This setting would provide adequate, comfortable space, as well as the good lighting and sound conducive to teaching the series. The sanctuary was also equipped with the necessary technology for projecting lesson points on screen, and for recording each lesson and posting them on the church's website. As expected, an insignificant number of participants did have to make up lessons by listening online, and no one expressed any problems with that process. This goal was successfully completed on June 7, 2015.

Strengths of the Project

A consideration of the project's strengths calls for evaluation that is honest, objective, and presented in humility. Remembering Jesus' words to his followers that "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5), the project became the subject of much prayer by church leaders and members alike. By referring to "strengths" it is assumed that aspects of the project proved beneficial to members individually and to FFC corporately. From a purely human perspective, one would hope to see some kind of return on the investment of time and energy put forth in this endeavor. At the same time, it must be admitted that even in failure lessons can be learned and some good can result

from mistakes made in the process. However, it is believed that the project's strengths are evidenced by benefits to members, to the church, and to the cause of Christ.

Though no formal process was made to determine members' personal assessment of the teaching series, numerous conversations with participants took place to ascertain what, if any, value was received. Several common observations became evident through these discussions. First, members gained a deeper understanding of what the Bible teaches regarding their own personal obligation to the poor and disadvantaged. Second, on becoming aware of the Christian responsibility to help the poor, participants expressed an eagerness to put into practice the principles learned through the series. Both Men's Ministry and Youth Ministry leaders of FFC began to communicate to their respective groups a plan to reach out to the poor. Finally, members also confessed to have gained an appreciation for a holistic approach to mercy ministry. There is a much clearer comprehension that both words and deeds are necessary to extend mercy within a gospel framework. It has been encouraging to hear post-series testimonials from members and see evidence of spiritual growth and maturity in their lives.

A corporate benefit from the project is that a ministry problem has been addressed and biblically corrected. In chapter 1 of this project it was pointed out that the church's previous efforts to help the poor proved ineffective. Coming to believe that the poor are never served by mere handouts, it was determined that not only was the Lord's money being misused, but the poor were not really being helped at all, but harmed by the church's past practice of benevolence. To be truthful, there was even an air of paternalism discerned among members; a looking down on the poor and a perception that the indigent had nothing to offer in return. In short, the church failed to see the broken relationships that existed in the lives of those who came to us for help.

As a result of this project, FFC is presently partnering with the Westminster Rescue Mission (WRM) as a basis for the church's Mercy Ministry program. WRM is a local ministry that seeks to rehabilitate addicts through the gospel and an emphasis on

discipleship. One member of FFC who participated in the series and who also recently completed a theological degree has stepped forward to lead FFC's Mercy Ministry program which will be called "Word and Deed Ministry." He will be recruiting volunteers for various projects connected with the mission in order to begin building authentic relationships with men in the program.

It is hoped that FFC's connection with the WRM will open doors that will provide opportunities for other forms of outreach. Those who volunteer will be driving men from the mission to appointments, working side by side with them in the mission's thrift store, assisting them in a food distribution program, and even inviting them to church and having them in their homes for a meal. Men from FFC are already assisting in the mission's chapel program. In addition to these services, members will be encouraged to think outside the box and use their God-given abilities and talents in specialized ministry. These services might include such activities as giving haircuts to the men, mending their clothes, helping them with resumes, and teaching skills that will equip them for employment. It is hoped that as relationships develop with the men the church will be able to connect with their families. Family members are often the innocent victims of addiction and the church sees the need to reach out to them.

In preparation for this outreach, announcements will be made from the pulpit in Sunday services. The leadership of FFC believes this is critical in communicating several key issues. First, we want the congregation to understand the church-wide nature of this outreach. It is our goal that every member participates to some degree. Second, it is important that members are given adequate information about procedures and how they can be involved. Finally, it is also important that our people grasp the nature of this ministry and that they understand the necessity for patience. Seeing real transformation in the lives of those who live in poverty is a painstakingly slow process.

Another benefit of this project is its ability to be easily duplicated within any church setting. Many congregations are dealing with the same frustrations that FFC

experienced in terms of helping the poor. Other churches have virtually nothing in their structure or strategy for addressing the societal ills of their communities. For those desiring a fresh approach to mercy ministry, each lesson in the teaching series is capable of being adapted to any church context. The principles taught in this project are biblical and it is my conviction that these truths need to be taught in every church. It is especially crucial that churches understand the need for mercy to be extended within a gospel framework. Richard Stearns, president of World Vision, has written about “The Hole in Our Gospel.” He states,

The idea behind *The Hole in Our Gospel* is quite simple. It’s basically the belief that being a Christian, or follower of Jesus Christ, requires much more than just having a personal and transforming relationship with God. It also entails a public and transforming relationship with the world When we committed ourselves to following Christ, we also committed to living our lives in such a way that a watching world would catch a glimpse of God’s character—His love, justice, and mercy—through our words, actions, and behavior.⁹

It became clear to us at FFC that a hole existed in our ministry in that we failed to see the need for both meeting felt needs and spiritual needs through the gospel. It is our intent to close that hole and to experience a transforming relationship with our community.

A final strength of this project is the positive spiritual impact that has been made in the lives of individual members. This impact is evidenced by a willingness to serve in the Word and Deed program and also by an increase in concern for members of the body who are struggling and in need. An overall improvement has been achieved in the outreach ministry of FFC. Our church is becoming a much better steward of benevolence dollars and the budget has been adjusted to reflect to the priority of mercy ministry. Our people are much more cognizant of human needs and how to best address them scripturally. It is our prayer that the future will reveal spiritual fruit in the lives of people whose broken relationships have been restored through the gospel of Christ.

⁹Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 2-3.

Weaknesses of the Project

A discernable weakness of the project involves the teaching series. Due to the amount of material presented in the lessons, the project could have easily been extended to 12 weeks instead of 10. In several sessions, covering the lesson content left very little time for group interaction. The participants had been divided into groups of four or five for that purpose and had begun to explore ways they could apply what they had learned. They began discussing various ways they could serve the poor together as mercy ministry teams. Even though time was limited, some very practical ideas came out of these group discussions. However, in retrospect, at least two of the lessons should have been divided into two separate lessons, thus extending the series to 12 weeks.

A second weakness of the project is that none of the results were analyzed on the basis of the demographic information provided by the survey. It may have been helpful to learn if a particular age group or gender responded differently overall to particular issues or if they were impacted to a greater degree. Women made up 57 percent of the class and it would be interesting to go back and compare their answers with the men's answers. Of course, because all data has been retained, a demographic study is something that could easily be done at a later time.

Finally, it could be construed as a weakness that a significant number of participants did not qualify to retake the BMS. While this may be indicative of the times, it calls for an examination of the planning and preparation given to the project. It was learned that schedule and time pressure hindered some participants from satisfying the attendance requirement. As indicated in chapter 4, about 30 percent of participants were not able to take the post-series survey. Although a sufficient number did guarantee the success of the first goal, it would have produced an even better outcome if a greater percentage of participants had taken the second survey. However, by conducting the project in the spring we did take advantage of a more consistent season for attendance.

What I Would Do Differently

Based upon observations of the project's weaknesses, a few things would be done differently if the project were to be done again. Eight weeks of teaching proved inadequate to provide time for group discussion and therefore, if done again, at least two weeks would be added. The project lends itself to a quarterly study and the ideal for such a project would be thirteen weeks. In addition, structuring the project for a 13 week quarter would allow for a question and answer time within the series. This schedule would have been helpful since participants often had questions that were asked after class dismissal. The material simply proved to be more than could be taught in eight weeks.

Second, if the project were to be repeated over again, a greater emphasis would be placed on the importance of remembering participants' identification codes. I would be more emphatic in stressing that failure to remember the code renders a participant's survey worthless in terms of data analysis. If done again, I would provide a small card for participants on which they could write down their code and keep it in their Bibles. However, the demographic information did enable the data analysis team to match several post-series surveys with their pre-series survey. Regretfully, more than 10 members decided not to retake the survey because of their inability to remember their code. It is a simple yet important detail that should have had a stronger emphasis.

As part of teaching the series, several videos would have served to encourage members' involvement in some kind of ministry to the poor. One in particular is a short documentary on Sandtown in Baltimore City where biblical mercy has created a neighbor liberated from the bondage of crime, addiction, and poverty. Yet, because of time constraints, this video was not used. Even though there was a flow to the series that seemed to build from week to week, it really should have been conducted over an entire quarter. Of course, this does not preclude the possibility of addressing certain issues and principles in the future from the pulpit. This project will continue to be an ongoing educational and training process in the life of our church.

Theological Reflections

Though God has testified to his existence in man's conscience and has revealed in creation his "eternal power and divine nature" (Rom 1:20), it is in the Word of God that his heart for man is revealed. Calvin observed, "The course which God followed towards his church from the very first, was to supplement these common proofs by the addition of his Word, as a surer and more direct means of discovering himself."¹⁰ In considering the amount of holy writ directed toward helping the poor and disadvantaged, it was forcibly driven home to me that the God of the Bible has revealed himself as a merciful and gracious Creator who cares about the poor.

One issue brought to my attention as I pondered this project was in what way success would be measured for this ministry. There is a theological aspect to this question. Western culture's tendency to judge by outward results is ubiquitous. These secular influences often impact churches and success becomes a matter of how large, how many, or how much? Given the nature of mercy ministry, this mentality could easily lead to frustration and discouragement. In his excellent work, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, J. I. Packer notes, "The way to tell whether in fact you are evangelizing is not to ask whether conversions are known to have resulted from your witness. It is to ask whether you are faithfully making known the gospel message."¹¹ God will not reward us according to physical results but by faithful obedience to do his will.

Since the ministry of mercy is evangelistic in nature our success will be determined by members' involvement and not by any visible outcome. It will be important to communicate this so that the entire church understands that immediate results in this kind of outreach should not be expected. Members will be reminded that all results rest in the hands of a sovereign God. We will consider this ministry successful

¹⁰John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 1:65.

¹¹J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 50.

when the bulk of our members are faithfully serving the needs of the poor through word and deed.

One other theological reflection must be noted in regards to the church. In the beginning, the motivation for this project was simply to correct a problem. The church's practice of benevolence was being carried out with no expectations on those receiving aid. Furthermore, FFC was being exploited by con men and posers looking to take advantage of our generosity. It was discovered that some were even using the church to foster their drug habit. In short, the church had a problem that needed to be fixed. There was not a clear sense of purpose in terms of transforming lives through the gospel.

Through the study of the Scriptures and research into social justice ministries, it was discovered that in addition to a problem that needed to be addressed was a ministry that needed to be implemented. The Lord Jesus did not come just to fix problems but mend broken lives. Theologically, mercy acts to redeem and restore shattered lives for the glory of God. Furthermore, it makes perfect sense to assume that whatever God has made prominent in the Scriptures should be prominent in the individual lives of believers and in the corporate life of the church. Through this project it has become clear that FFC has an obligation to reach out to those suffering the plight of poverty. This body of believers is now coming to see themselves as agents of Christ in restoring the broken relationships which lie at the heart of all societal ills.

The Lord's command to remember the poor is continual reminder to us of the mercy each of us has received. In his instructions for showing mercy to strangers God often reminded his people of their previous bondage in Egypt. The physical poverty of those one aspires to help harks back to one's own spiritual poverty. This reflection may explain why those who serve the poor are often very humble people. One of the best ways to develop the virtue of humility is through showing compassion to the poor. No doubt the ministry of mercy was intended by God to benefit both the giver of mercy and the recipient.

Personal Reflections

A great distinction needs to be made between knowing about God and having a personal relationship with him. The scriptural research required by this project brought the heart of God into much clearer focus for me. Not that I did not know that God was gracious and merciful, but reading through the entire Bible, marking every passage that enjoins some command, exhortation, or promise concerning the poor, served to draw me nearer to God. The Lord's benevolence and mercy, so consistently displayed throughout the storyline of Scripture, ceased to be mere theological fact assented to in the mind, but shone with the warmth of a sunbeam into my heart. A devout study of God's concern for the poor brought me to see again my own spiritual poverty, and how Christ, who became poor on my behalf (2 Cor 8:9), has made me spiritually rich. A consistent focus on this topic in the Bible led me to delight in the God who has poured out his magnificent kindness on such an undeserving sinner. Without question, through this project the Holy Spirit has given me a deeper love for God and a much greater appreciation of his love and compassion for me.

Second, in addition to the personal edification received, I gained a new and fresh understanding of the dignity of all humanity. Every person, regardless of their station in life, is a bearer of the *imago Dei*. It would be easy to forget this in light of the flotsam and jetsam of the masses. Yet, no one is an accident and people are not just a mass of molecules floating toward oblivion. It is as C. S. Lewis said,

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals who we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit . . . your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.¹²

A sad irony was brought to my attention in this regard. Christians champion the pro-life cause for the very reason that all life is sacred and has infinite value. Yet those same

¹²C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1949), 46.

Christians tend to discount and neglect the lives of those ravaged by poverty. I discovered that I was an unwitting hypocrite in that I took pity on the poor unborn while neglecting the living poor. It seems inconsistent to me to assign value to one and not the other. Yet, I think I was unconsciously doing that very thing. Tim Keller observes, “The image of God, then, is the first great motivator for living lives of generous justice, serving the needs and guarding the rights of those around us. It brings humility before the greatness of each human being made and loved by God.”¹³

God has changed my life through this project. A heavy burden has been laid upon my heart as pastor of FFC and I have come to feel a great responsibility to lead my congregation to serve the needs of the poor. The Lord’s hand is at work and it is my desire that our church joins him in his redemptive mission within our community. I have given much thought as to how I will lead our people to do that. My spiritual gifts lie in the areas of leadership and teaching and therefore these are the divine graces that must shape my role in our church’s Word and Deed Ministry.

In terms of leadership, I have prayed about how to make this project a reality within the life of our church. It has been said that a man needs to know his limitations and my limitations have become obvious over three decades of ministry. I have learned that there is a great difference between leadership and administration. There are those in our ministry who are gifted in planning, organizing, and recruiting, but I am not one of them. I easily get lost in the details. When it comes to challenging and exhorting the body, or admonishing them in regards to biblical mercy, I can do that. It is my strength to cast the vision and to delegate the details to others. For this reason it is important that I maintain clear communication with our gifted church administrator as we begin to implement our Word and Deed program. What a blessing it is to see the individual gifts of our members begin to play out as we go forward in mercy ministry.

¹³Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010), 87.

In connection with leadership, it is my responsibility as pastor to set an example of biblical mercy in my own personal life. I don't believe I should ever ask of FFC members what I am unwilling to do myself. Yet at the same time it is often difficult for a pastor to ascertain what level of involvement is prudent so that other areas of ministry are not neglected. However, with this new emphasis on serving the poor I feel it is important that I take part in the program by serving at the mission one night a week. WRM has opened up Tuesday nights for men from FFC to spend time with the men in their program and to begin developing mentoring relationships with them.

Reflecting on my role as a teacher, I am reminded of one important area that will require attention going forward. No ministry of the church is self-perpetuating. At this juncture it is especially important that promotion of this new program remains consistent. It is one thing to begin a ministry and completely another to maintain it. Therefore, it will be my responsibility to keep our Word and Deed Ministry before the people through continuing education and exhortation. There are several ways this can be done.

First, it is vitally important to communicate from the pulpit the philosophy and goals of our program on a regular basis. Another way to accomplish this may be having one of the men from the WRM give a testimony about how God is working in his life. Perhaps members could share what the Lord is teaching them through their involvement in this outreach. I could also bring a message tailored to encourage our members to serve the indigent. The important thing here is to guard against spiritual entropy. It is critical that our people receive from their pastor fresh insights, updates, and challenges about our Word and Deed Ministry.

Conclusion

The time for ministries of mercy is now. If Christians are going to be Christ's hands and feet they must act today. Through much prayer and in dependence on God,

FFC will reach out to the forgotten, cast off, and broken members of our community. The need is great and growing. Timothy Keller observes,

Poverty is on the rise, the percentage of the elderly in our society is exploding, ethnics are pouring into our country by the millions, and federal money for helping agencies, hospitals, and other such institutions is drying up. Do we want to reach these new neighbors with the gospel? Then we must give our faith active expression through deeds of compassion coupled with evangelism and discipleship.¹⁴

Whether Christians realize it or not, they are all like the man in Luke 10 who journeyed toward Jericho. In their path lay men, women, and children whose broken lives desperately need the church to respond. The stakes could not be higher. To pass them by would spell disaster for them and disobedience for those believers. By the grace of God, this project has spurred our congregation to action, and I am grateful for the challenge it has presented in my own life.

¹⁴Keller, *Generous Justice*, 25.

APPENDIX 1
BIBLICAL MERCY SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed as an instrument to assess the current understanding and practice of biblical mercy of the participant. This research is being conducted by Paul Andrews for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. In this research, you will answer questions before the project and you will answer the same questions at the conclusion of the project. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. Participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. By completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

Section 1

General Information: This section will collect demographic information about those participating in the survey. Please circle the appropriate response.

1. Please circle your age group:
18-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 56-65 +66

2. How long have you been a Christian?
1-7 years 8-14 years 15-21 years 22-28 years 29-35 years +35

3. Please indicate your gender.
Male Female

4. Please indicate your marital status.
Single Married Divorced Separated Widowed

5. How long have you been attending Faith Family Church?
1-4 years 5-7 years 8-11 years +12 years

6. Are you presently in a Life Group?
Yes No

Please continue to the next page

Section 2

Directions: Please consider how the following statements relate to you. Using the scale at the right as an expression of your honest opinion indicate: **SD** = strongly disagree, **D** = disagree, **DS** = disagree somewhat, **AS** = agree somewhat, **A** = agree, **SA** = strongly agree; please circle the appropriate answer.

- | | | | | | | |
|---|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 1. Good Christians show mercy to the poor. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 2. All Christians are called to to help the poor. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 3. Helping the poor is determined by income. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 4. My knowledge of the Bible is above average. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 5. My devotional life is consistent and meaningful. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 6. The Old Testament demonstrates God's concern for the poor. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 7. Helping the poor is a part of Christian discipleship. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 8. Biblical mercy is related to evangelism. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 9. The church is obligated to help the poor. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 10. I am able to cite examples of how Jesus ministered to the poor. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 11. I know how to use the Bible to lead a person to Christ. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

Please continue to the next page

Directions: Please consider how the following statements relate to you. Using the scale at the right as an expression of your honest opinion indicate: **SD** = strongly disagree, **D** = disagree, **DS** = disagree somewhat, **AS** = agree somewhat, **A** = agree, **SA** = strongly agree; please circle the appropriate answer.

- | | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 12. The early church ministered to the poor. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 13. Biblical mercy is an issue of biblical stewardship. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 14. Biblical mercy is related to the kingdom of God. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 15. Widows and orphans are classes of the poor in the Bible. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

Section 3

- | | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 16. Biblical mercy should only be extended to those who deserve it. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 17. Helping the poor is an expression of genuine faith. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 18. Helping the poor relates to a person's spiritual giftedness. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 19. Extending biblical mercy is only effective as a result of prayer. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 20. Christians should look for ways to extend biblical mercy. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 21. It is important that Christians volunteer in some kind of social work. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

Please continue to the next page

Directions: Please consider how the following statements relate to you. Using the scale at the right as an expression of your honest opinion indicate: **SD** = strongly disagree, **D** = disagree, **DS** = disagree somewhat, **AS** = agree somewhat, **A** = agree, **SA** = strongly agree; please circle the appropriate answer.

22. Helping the poor is the mission of the church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
23. A Christian is obligated to show mercy first at home.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
24. Helping the poor should involve sharing the gospel.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
25. State and federal welfare programs hinder biblical mercy.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
26. I proactively seek to help people in need.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
27. I sacrifice my own needs in order to help others.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
28. Schedule and time pressure hinder my involvement in gospel outreach.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
29. I feel equipped to serve in a ministry of mercy.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
30. Faith Family Church effectively ministers to the poor.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

In order to insure confidentiality do not put your name on this survey. Instead, please use a four digit code that you can easily remember and write it in the space provided. You will need to remember your code when you take the post-series survey.

My Code is

____-____-____-____

APPENDIX 2
LESSON MATERIAL EVALUATION RUBRIC

Directions: Please place an **X** in the appropriate box. Make sure you have carefully and completely read each lesson before rating them.

FAITH FAMILY CHURCH					
Biblical Mercy Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson One Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2= requires attention 3= sufficient 4= exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is relevant to the issue of biblical mercy.					
The lesson methodology is explained.					
The material is biblically consistent.					
The main idea of the lesson is clearly stated.					
The points of the lesson clearly support the main idea.					
The lesson contains points of practical application.					
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.					
The lesson's vocabulary is understandable.					
The lesson provides for interaction among participants.					
The lesson material flows in logical progression.					

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ABSTRACT

EQUIPPING MEMBERS OF FAITH FAMILY CHURCH, FINKSBURG, MARYLAND, TO BE MINISTERS OF BIBLICAL MERCY

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015
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This project explores the responsibility of the local church to the poor and the process of establishing a ministry to the poor. Over a ten week period participants were shown the importance of biblical mercy within the storyline of Scripture and given practical insights as to how the local church can address the problems of poverty. Chapter 1 sets forth the goals of the project and its historical and contextual setting at Faith Family Church. Chapter 2 lays a biblical foundation that emphasizes the church's obligation to the indigent through an exegesis of key passages from the Old and the New Testaments. Chapter 3 addresses the issue of mercy as a stewardship of the gospel. Chapter 4 provides a description of the project's implementation with analysis and results. The final chapter evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of the project, and offers some personal and theological reflections.

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Assistant Pastor, First Baptist Church, Ruskin, Florida, 1978-1980

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