

For you always have the poor with you, *and*

Matthew 25:31 - 26:14

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### Scene 1

**Jesus tells his disciples: “For you always have the poor with you.”**

I went to a Sunday School class at another church a few years ago. On my way to church, a homeless man was standing at the corner stoplight. You may have seen him. Standing at the corner holding a sign. A sign that says something simple, like, “I am hungry.” Or, “God bless.”

When I got to Sunday School, we discussed the first 14 verses of chapter 26 of Matthew. The SS teacher used this scripture to suggest it is okay to ignore the poor, since we all know any money we give them will be used for drugs and alcohol any way.

A few years ago I was an assistant scout master for my son’s Boy Scout troop. One of the boys in our troop wrote up his intended Eagle Scout project. He wanted to collect used school book bags, the kind kids discard after using for one year, and fill them with camping gear to distribute to the homeless. The committee of three who decide on whether Eagle Scout projects have merit decided this one did not have merit. They decided this project did not have merit, because the homeless would just sell the bags and their contents and buy cheap wine.

The word Messiah is a Hebrew word which means anointed. The word Christ is not Jesus’ last name. It is a Greek word which also means anointed. In a leper’s house, a woman anoints Jesus’ head. In so doing, she becomes the only person besides Jesus in all the gospels whom we are told to remember. His disciples say what a waste, the money spent on the perfume could have been spent on the poor. And Jesus tells his disciples, and us, “For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.” To some of us this implies Jesus subordinates the concerns of the poor. To others of us this seems a different tone than the last verses of Matthew chapter 25, which Scott read today.

**But I believe the correct interpretation of this verse depends on how we translate the Greek preposition “ .”**

## Scene 2

Matthew chapter 26:11, “For you always have the poor with you,” is nowhere to be found in the three year preacher’s lectionary. No where to be found in the suggested material from which most pastors take their sermon material. I wonder if the interdenominational committee, the one who decided what scripture would be in the lectionary, did not know what to do with that, because it runs so contrary to the rest of the Gospel message. Or does it?

Is the reign of God both / and, or is it either / or? Let us look at the Greek word in the oldest manuscript, the Greek word that follows “For you always have the poor with you.” The Greek lexicon, which is what translators use to translate from ancient Greek to modern English, lists two different translations for the preposition “ ”. “But” is the usual translation, however I submit the alternative translation is a better fit considering the scripture that immediately precedes verse 26:11. The alternative translation for “ ” is AND. You always have the poor with you, AND, you will not always have me. Giving to the poor is an ongoing obligation. Not an obligation for the right time or not at all. An ongoing obligation.

Several days ago, I was discussing today’s meditation with my son Shane over supper. He suggested the tension between ministering to the poor and devotion to Jesus is like the story of Martha and Mary. You remember, Martha who is busy in the kitchen, and Mary who is sitting at Jesus’ feet. But remember in the case of Martha and Mary, Jesus is not criticizing Martha or writing her off. He is simply saying both things are important: ministering and being ministered to. Both are important. Not either / or. Both / and. In today’s scripture, Jesus is not telling us we should ignore the poor on our way to church. He is not saying we should ignore the poor during our efforts to assist our families. That is, he is not saying we can either glorify God or feed the poor, but not both. And he is certainly not saying we can either glorify our families or feed the poor. He is not saying “yes, but,” and he is not saying “either, or.” No. I think he is saying “both, and.” This is the very heart of glorifying and praising God. This is the very heart of stewardship. That we are called to provide not just for ourselves, and not just to worship God on Sunday. We are also called to worship and glorify God every day of the week, and we worship and glorify God by providing for the least of these.

Yes, I believe Jesus tells us we glorify God by stewardship of God’s creation. Stewardship is not about glorifying ourselves, and not even about going to church on Sundays. Stewardship of God’s creation, is about both / and, not either / or.

**But let us look more closely at the materially and spiritually poor.**

### Scene 3

**Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.**

What happened to the hardened heart of the Eagle Scout committee? Knowing this boy's family, and knowing the chair of the committee making the decision, I decided to take the committee chair to lunch. He met me at my office, where I donned my assistant scoutmaster's uniform, and I took him to the physician's dining room. We talked in general about Boy Scouts, and about his life, and mine. He told me he was a retired engineer, and how his wife had recently died, and he missed her. And 5 minutes before it was time to go back to work in my office, I got to the reason for my asking him to lunch. I told him about the boy's Eagle Scout project, and how I thought it had merit. He told me he remembered, and recounted how the project did not have merit because the homeless would just sell it for wine. I told him last night I had met an engineer at the Room in the Inn project my former church was doing. Room in the Inn allows local churches to provide a warm place to sleep and a warm supper for Nashville's homeless. I told him the engineer I met was not a church member, but was one of the homeless. Seems the engineer had become depressed over the death of a child, had started drinking, and had lost his job. His wife kicked him out, and he had no where to go. I suggested that both he and I could some day be homeless. That none of us are immune. I suggested this boy's Eagle Scout project was a worthy one. He asked me if the boy I was helping was my son, and I told him no, just a boy in my son's Scout troop. He told me that if the mother of that child would put the boy's paper work in his mailbox tonight, he would sign off on it.

You can ignore the homeless with the signs who stand at stoplights and entrance ramps. You can look away from them, and pretend they are not there. Or, you can keep a few one dollar bills in your car. And when you give them a dollar bill, they will say, "God bless you." When they tell you this, it is indeed God who is blessing you. Matthew 25 tells us so.

And when Matthew talks about poor, he does not just mean the materially poor. The Beatitudes with which Jesus opens the Sermon on the Mount tell us "Blessed are the poor in spirit." When Jesus speaks of the poor, he means both the materially and the spiritually poor. Not just the hungry, but also the forgotten folks in nursing homes, forgotten and spiritually hungry. Forgotten autistic children and their parents. Forgotten descendents of the Mayans in Guatemala, persecuted by the government of the second poorest country in the western hemisphere.

## Conclusion

It is said if you want something done, give it to a busy person. Because the busy person has learned the art of time management. I want you to look at the ministries of our church, listed on the last page of our bulletin. Go ahead, and take a look now. Perhaps God is not calling you to stewardship of your time in one of these ministries. But I implore you not to take Matthew 26:11 out of context. I implore you not to tell yourself that Jesus says, "You always have the poor with you." Because I believe the reign of God is not "either / or." I believe the reign of God is "both / and." Because Jesus tells us just before this verse that we see the very face of God in the spiritually and materially poor. And the preposition after this verse is best translated, in my opinion, as "and," not "but." You always have the poor with you AND you will not always have me. Not BUT, AND. When we attend to the spiritually and materially poor, in so doing we attend to God and ourselves. We do not choose which one. The reign of God includes you, and me, and God, AND the materially and spiritually poor.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say...