

Remember the Poor

God desires to lavish His mercy on the needy of the land.

The church's responsibility to address the plight of the poor is fundamental to biblical faith. From the Bible, we understand that God hears the cry of the poor. Israel's deliverance from Egypt is a powerful example of God's justice on behalf of the needy (see Ex. 2:23-24; Ps. 68:8-10).

Old Testament law structured the life of Israel so that the poor could be touched by His love. Many special privileges were given to the landless poor (see Deut. 23:24-25). In fact, every seventh year financially weakened neighbors were given large amounts of food with dignity. Exodus 23:11 says emphatically: "But during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it" (NIV).

In addition, creditors were instructed to cancel the debts of their neighbors in the seventh year (see Deut. 15:1-2). This concept has made its way into American law. Our credit history in the United States is reported only in seven-year increments.

God desires to lavish His mercy on the needy of the land. Proverbs 28:27 says boldly, "He who gives to the poor will lack nothing." Yet the verse doesn't stop there. It promises a penalty to those who overlook the needy: "But he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses."

I don't want the curses. I want to walk in the goodness of God that I see in Proverbs 19:17: "He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and He will pay back what he has given"

(NKJV).

When talking about the needs of the poor, believers often quote John 12:8, "For the poor you have with you always," as a quick response to appeals for offerings earmarked for the needy. This statement on Jesus' part was not a cynical denunciation of the abilities of the poor. Jesus knew the hardness of men's hearts. His words reflected His recognition of the choices of men and society.

In contrast to man's priorities, God exhorts us to be generous. Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy 15:11: "There will always be poor in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land" (NIV).

Regretfully, our generation is not serious about reaching the needy. Let's face the facts; we have a hidden problem of poverty in our nation. Further, poverty is worse in minority communities. It works like this:

According to the Department of Labor, unemployment of those 16 years and older has risen 9 percent among whites, nearly 11 percent among blacks and 35 percent among Hispanics in the last 10 years.

In 2001, the Associated Press reported that the income of black and Hispanic college graduates lagged white income by 38 percent and 46 percent respectively. By most accounts, the overall poverty level is increasing as the middle class shrinks.

How do we stop the madness? A practical answer may be to

follow the example of Dennis Bakke, an impressive evangelical businessman. In a press conference some years ago in Brazil, he expressed the purpose of his energy company, AES Corp.

The conference was held around the time of Mother Teresa's death. With godly inspiration Bakke placed the celebrated nun's picture on the podium and discussed his concept that businesses exist to help a community, not to strip it. The newspapers celebrated his speech, but the headlines read, "Christian or Communist?"

Bakke just shrugged off the criticism. He let the financial results of his "godly experiment" speak for themselves. Bakke's company yielded unprecedented growth, reaching \$40 billion in assets, with revenues of more than \$10 billion per year before he sold it in 2002.

The kingdom of God needs four partners to reflect God's love toward America's poor—government, business, church and individual people.

What can we do as individual Christians? There are many options.

First, we can join Project Angel Tree, sponsored by Prison Fellowship International, and help the families of incarcerated prisoners by giving Christmas gifts.

Second, we can give Jesus a birthday gift by helping two needy families, one in the church and one outside.

This Christmas, let's be kind to the poor and watch the Lord

repay.

Harry R. Jackson Jr. pastors 3,000-member Hope Christian Church in the nation's capital with his wife, Michele. Having earned an MBA from Harvard, Jackson is a best-selling author and popular speaker. His most recent book, High Impact African-American Churches, was released in July.