Charity Gives But Justice Changes
by Brett Blair with Leonard Sweet

Everyone is familiar with Mother Goose stories. We read our children these stories to help them sort out the world. The tortoise keeps on going to beat the hare in a race. Perseverance and determination beat pride and laziness! That third little pig uses the best quality building materials and has a safe home from the big, bad wolf. Quality construction materials win out over home invaders. Often in these stories, good wins out over evil through hard work, determination, and a little cleverness. These stories are cute, and they can help us teach our children a bit about good and evil. But how do we explain real poverty to our children? How could we possibly explain situations where there is no clean water, there is no safe place, there is no food, and disease or war might strike at any time? Hard work and a little cleverness are not enough to win the day. The Mother Goose ideals don't seem to solve the problems of poverty. Mother Goose isn't going to cut it. What you need is a Mother Teresa approach.

The story is told of a Franciscan monk in Australia who was assigned to be the guide and "gofer" to Mother Teresa when she visited New South Wales. Thrilled and excited at the prospect of being so close to this great woman, he dreamed of how much he would learn from her and what they would talk about. But during her visit, he became frustrated. Although he was constantly near her, the friar never had the opportunity to say one word to Mother Teresa. There were always other people for her to meet.

Finally, her tour was over, and she was due to fly to New Guinea. In desperation, the Franciscan friar spoke to mother Teresa: If I pay my own fare to New Guinea, can I sit next to you on the plane so I can talk to you and learn from you? Mother Teresa looked at him. "You have enough money to pay airfare to New Guinea?" she asked.

Yes, he replied eagerly. "Then give that money to the poor," she said. "You'll learn more from that than anything I can tell you." Mother Teresa understood that Jesus' ministry was to the poor and she made it hers as well. She, like Jesus, also understood the need to challenge the status quo and demand a systemic change to end poverty.

So how do we help the poor? How do we change the life of someone in need so they no longer need our help? Isaiah says it's acts of justice, mercy, compassion, sacrifice. The Hebrew term used to define any charitable endeavor is "tzedakah," which can be translated by the word "charity" but literally means "righteousness" or "justice." Charity is probably a misleading interpretation of tzadakah. Charity is something very familiar to us all. We hear someone is in need and we give some money or gifts to help. Charity is the first step in giving. Tzadakah is the second step. I have always loved Jesus statement: "No greater love does a man have than he lay down his life for a friend." There is love and then there is a greater love. There is charity and then there is Tzadakahi.

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We as Christians are all called to a higher love. A love that changes. A love beyond merely giving. We are called to three purposes. First…

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I. We Are Called to Compassion: The Spirit not the Letter

When I read the words of Isaiah 58 I get the sense that God is frustrated. He is frustrated that he has to explain what should be obvious. He has to explain the "no brainer." He has to explain that which has been with them for hundreds of years. Something they have had plenty of time to absorb and understand. What is it? It's the Ten Commandments. Nothing could be more obvious and yet more explained throughout the course of human history. I guess it shouldn't surprise us.

700 years later after the death of Isaiah someone else had to explain the Ten Commandments: It was Jesus. If you take a close look at the "Sermon On The Mount" in Matthew 5 it's primarily a teaching and explanation of the Ten Commandments. So I am sure from time to time God sits in heaven with his head in his hands, "Why must I always explain."

I think God should have written an eleventh commandment. Right after Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not covet, He should have written "And you know what I'm talkin' about. Don't make me explain myself"

But the sad thing is it had to be explained. So Isaiah names eight things the Israelites must do to keep the spirit of the commandments alive. Here is how God tells them, through his prophet Isaiah, to clearly and truly keep the commandments:

1. Do not forsake the true meaning of the commandments (58:2):

2. On the day you fast you also exploit your workers. Stop it. (58:3).

3. Your fasts end in quarreling, strife, fights, malicious talk and finger pointing. Stop it. (58:4, 9).

4. A true fast loosens the chains of injustice setting the oppressed free. (58:5-6)

5. True humility shares food with the hungry. (58:7)

6. True commandment keeping provides the poor wanderer with shelter. (58:7)

7. The spirit of the Law clothes those who need garments. (58:7)

8. And finally live in a loving relationship with your own flesh and blood – your family (58:7)

The Israelites attempted to live their lives for God. They sought God (58:2); they asked God for just decisions (58:2); they fasted (58:3); they humbled themselves (58:3); they worshiped God (58:5); they observed the Sabbath (58:13). They kept the letter

of the Law but there was one law they missed. That hidden eleventh commandment that whispers in your ear…you know what God is talking about. You know what he means when he says, "Do not murder." He doesn't simply mean don't stick a knife in someone's chest and cause them to die. He means don't participate in all the evil leading up to such an event: The anger, the jealousy, the revenge, the getting even, the rage, the hatred. Remember how Jesus redefined the 6th commandment? He said, "You have heard it said, 'Do not murder.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother shall be subject to judgment."

Isaiah had to explain the very simple commandment "Do not Steal." Now, we all know what that means, but do we apply it throughout our lives. How many times do we wear a $200 coat to warm ourselves in the winter knowing it was made by a lady with six kids who is paid $2 day in a deplorable working environment in some third world country. And do we get upset enough about it to fight these kind of injustices in the world?

Does Isaiah really call this stealing? Listen to his words: "On the day of your fasting, you do as you please, and exploit all your workers." Sounds like he is talking to the business owners and it sounds like he is saying, "You business owners are stealing from your employees." Workers are to be treated with dignity and paid well for their work. If you don't pay your workers a fair wage and create a reasonable working environment you are stealing.

You can follow an external interpretation of the Law and keep it perfectly or you can follow an internal interpretation of the Law and allow the commandments to influence your entire world. Which will it be? Do you want to legally keep the commandments or do you want to spiritually keep them? I'm sure you want to keep the spirit of the law. I know that about you. I trust in your Christian character. I have seen your compassion. And that's the key. It's a deep seated compassion in our hearts, that God places there, that enables us to see the true intent of the Law and not just what's written down on paper. Compassion is allowing God to write the law upon on your heart and not just in your head. Keeping the commandments means building relationships: Your relationship to your family. Your relationships with one another. Your relationship with the poor. Your relationship with God.

2. We Are Called to Action: Works not Words

So God has called us to Compassion. That's our first calling as Christians. Secondly, we are called to Action. Isaiah challenges those worshipers in the temple to get off their knees and onto their feet. God doesn't need their empty praise. God is not honored when they lie about in "sackcloth and ashes." What honors Yahweh is for them to be actively helping those whose most basic human needs are not being met.

Let me tell you that I am proud of the church. We give to the community and we give to the world. We help the poor on many occasions throughout the world and with our weekly offerings we are daily involved in missions. We are a charitable church.

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Let us never grow weary of giving. But let me add that charity is no substitute for Justice. Charity gives but Justice changes. Let me say that again: Charity gives but Justice changes. It changes the lives of the poor for the good and for good.

Justice sends a young girl to school who can't afford it. Justice lends, expecting nothing in return, to the African entrepreneur to start a small family business which sustains his family for a life time. Justice demands that free markets stop preventing the poor from selling their products in the open market at competitive rates. Justice demands that the richest nations forgive the debts of the poorer nations. For all that charity does it is a band-aid when structures in our corporate and political world prevent real change.

This is why I say charity gives but justice changes; it demands the changes necessary for the lives of the poor to be elevated on a level playing field with us all.

Isaiah defines the new kind of "fast" that the Lord requires: "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (v.7) This is the kind of "righteousness" or "tzedakah" that defines the biblical understanding of justice.

Earlier, I made distinction between charitable giving on the one hand and acts of justice on the other. This is not a new distinction. Let me take you back 900 years to a Jewish scholar named Maimonides (1135-1204). He wrote out what he thought were the eight levels of tzedakah -- justice. I will start with the eighth which is the least desirable kind of justice and move up to the first. See if you can find your level of righteousness. Let's see how righteous you are [jokingly]:

8. Giving to the poor unwillingly.

7. Giving to the poor happily but inadequately.

6. Giving to the poor after being asked.

5. Giving to the poor without or before being asked.

4. Giving to the poor without the recipient knowing who you are but allowing the recipient to know your identity.

3. Giving to the poor knowing who they are but without allowing the recipient to know your identity (this is called: anonymous giving).

2. Giving to the poor without knowledge of the recipient and without allowing the recipient to know your identity.

1. Strengthening the poor person in a manner that they can become self-sufficient.

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Did you catch it? Did you hear the shift? The first seven acts of justice are really charity: giving….giving….giving…..giving. Seven times he uses that word and then he abandons it in the eighth and highest form. He uses the word: Strengthen!

What I have given you is the shortened form of what he wrote. Here are his actual words on the highest form of tzedakah: "There are eight levels of tzedakah, each greater than the next. The greatest level, above which there is no other, is to strengthen the name of another Jew by giving him a present or loan, or making a partnership with him, or finding him a job in order to strengthen his hand until he needs no longer [beg from] people. For it is said, "You shall strengthen the stranger and the dweller in your midst and live with him, " {Leviticus XXV:35} that is to say, strengthen him until he needs no longer fall [upon the mercy of the community] or be in need." [1]

The highest form of charity involves a just relationship. In fact it stops being charity and becomes partnership with those who are in need. Each successive level of giving demands more participation, more action, on the part of the one who gives and more relationship with the one who receives. The final, greatest type of giving is the establishment of true relationship, a partnership, a binding relationship for mutual aid, between the giver and receiver, the rich and the poor. At that point there really is no longer a "giver" or a "receiver," a "rich" person and a "poor" person. There is only a newly created relationship within the community. It is that highest form of "charitable" relationship, righteousness that is no longer charity but community, that really transforms the world. Isaiah said: If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in darkness and your gloom be like the noonday (v.10).

Pope Benedict's has said that "the Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (kerygma-martyria), celebrating the sacraments (leitourgia),and exercising the ministry of charity (diakonia). These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable."

Pope Benedict went on to say: "The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the states. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply."

3. We Are Called to Community: Wii not i

And this brings us to our third point: First, we are called to Compassion. Second we are called to Action. And third we are called to Community. In our "outreach" we need less Mother Goose and more Mother Teresa. We need less Mother Goose glamour and more Mother Teresa grime. The forces of evil are rampant. Like Mother

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Teresa, you and I are in the good and evil business. You are going out there to battle evil . . . evil forces of ignorance, poverty, racism, substance abuse, hatred. It's not about feeling good and happy highs. Like those worshipers in today's text, we are attracted to the goosebumps, but what happens when the goosebumpiness diminishes and the bumpiness is all that's left?

We need a major paradigm shift from how "charitable" ministries are conceived and conducted in most churches today. Many ministries major in principles and minor in relationships. As the head of a rescue mission said to me not too long ago, "Our biggest problem with Christians is that they all want to take stands for the poor, to come here and visit the poor and view the poor, and to "hand-out" food to the poor — especially at Thanksgiving and Christmas. But you can shake a stick at the number of Christians who come here wanting a relationship with the poor."

An unlikely model for the kind of shift that is needed in the church is the new game console by Nintendo called the Wii. That's spelled "w" "i" "i" but pronounced "we." Until now gaming has been something done almost in isolation and by the young. But the Wii can be found in nursing homes and at the center of family entertainment centers. Why? Because Nintendo changed the joy stick and made it work like the real world works. My family and I all Wii. When we play the bowling game which can be done with multiple people we actually go through the same actions a bowler goes through. Same with tennis and golf and several other games. Suddenly everyone can understand a video game because everyone understands how to bowl, how to swing a racket. The video game is no longer a bunch of buttons but like real life.

And let me tell you that's justice because this father can finally beat his son at a video game. The Wii has leveled the playing field between modern kids and out of date dads.

Here's my point: Charity requires that I give. Justice requires that I change the game so I no longer have to give, so that the poor can play the game the same as me, so they can live, move, and have their being in the same community as all of us Let's make governments and politicians play the game the same way we all have to play it. Let's face the present reality that the future is greatly threatened around the globe by extreme poverty. We have the power to raise our voices against this situation and demand more action from our governments and our corporations. There are many children who have been left orphaned by HIV/AIDS and war. There are children who are sold into child labor. Vast numbers of children have no schools or opportunity to get an education. Basic medical care is missing for mothers and young children. We can demand support for programs that provide mosquito nets, anti-retroviral drugs, and clean water. This is an election year, so you can bet our elected officials will listen. It is time for us to raise our voices. It is our responsibility to protect the future of every citizen, especially the children.

You will remember the young man, who was rich and religious, who came to Jesus wanting to be saved. He told the young man, "Follow the Law." "I have done that all my life" he said. "One thing you lack." Said Jesus. "Sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven, then come and follow me." Jesus

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required that the man give but he also required that he change his life's orientation. What must I DO? That was his question. What must I DO? Jesus said let me tell you what God is doing. Come follow me and WE shall DO it together. Then you will know what salvation is. You will have treasure in heaven.

A Jewish story goes: I went up to Heaven in a dream and stood at the Gates of Paradise in order to observe the procedure of the Heavenly Tribunal. I watched as a learned Rabbi approached and wished to enter. "Day and night," he said, "I studied the Holy Torah."

"Wait," said the Angel. "We will investigate whether your study was for its own sake or whether it was a matter of profession and for the sake of honors."

A Righteous Person [a Zaddik] next approached. "I fasted much," he said, "I underwent many ritual cleansings; I studied the Zohar the mystical commentary on the Torah day and night."

"Wait," said the Angel, "until we have completed our investigation to learn whether you motives were pure."

Then a tavern-keeper drew near. "I kept an open door and fed without charge every poor man who came into my inn," he said.

The Heavenly Portals were opened to him. [3]

Amen.

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