

“There will never cease to be poor in the land.”

—Deuteronomy 15:10.

Over 200 Bible verses speak about the poor. In both Testaments, God reminds us about his special care for the poor. Jesus spoke of the poor over 20 times. And the verse most commonly quoted is John 12:8.

“For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.”

Though accurately quoted, Jesus’ meaning is often profoundly misunderstood. In the context of all he taught, Jesus’ point was *not* that concern for the poor is unnecessary.

Jesus was affirming that we would care for the poor in imitation of his example and witness.

After all, Jesus didn’t just care about the poor—his entire life, from birth to death, was an identification with them.

In his Sermon on the Plain, Jesus said, *“Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.”* The life of the extremely poor was marked then, as it is now, by social, economic and physical vulnerability that often made simply surviving a daily and crushing struggle.

At least in part, Jesus was saying that the poor find the presence and reality of God in the midst of their struggles in ways that the comfortable will never know.

For many years, I have had opportunities to lead groups to other nations, to meet and to serve the needy. I tell them, “We are not taking Jesus to the poor; he is already there.” I believe this is true.

I need the poor more than they need me. Why is that? First, the poor are a reminder of God’s grace to me. The poor man or woman is like a mirror who reminds me of how often Jesus has rescued me from my many self-made disasters.

Second, according to Matthew 25:31-40, when



caring for the poor, I minister to Jesus himself. Authentic spiritual intimacy with Jesus cannot help but lead me to the poor, the widow, the outcast and the fatherless. For these two reasons alone, the poor are a great gift to me.

My favorite author, Jean Vanier, writes, *“The poor call us to love and awaken within us what is most precious: compassion.”*

Compassion is one of the great forces of the cosmos. Compassion, love and forgiveness express not only God’s heart, but the very way he moves in all of His creation. When I choose compassion, I am moving with and in him.

Later in his Sermon on the Plain, Jesus says, *“Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate”* (Luke 6:36, NLT). Compassion is most precious. It is foundational to following Jesus, to experiencing his life in us.

Compassion does not come naturally to me. I believe it in my head, but oh, how often I am aware of my own hard-heartedness! The more I insulate myself from the poor, preferring my own comfort and convenience, the colder my heart becomes. My wife sometimes admonishes me to get out of the house and go to the poor. There I find Jesus and I remember deeply who I really am in him. I am like the prodigal who “came to his senses”—this is a different kind of homecoming, where compassion is once again awakened in me.

I need the poor so much more than they will ever need me. That is why Jesus’ promise that they will always be with me is his pure and wonderful grace. □

Steve Stewart is the director of Impact Nations.