

Benevolence

Scripture Reading:

Galatians 6:10 “AS WE THEREFORE HAVE OPPORTUNITY, LET US DO GOOD UNTO ALL *men*, ESPECIALLY UNTO THEM WHO ARE OF THE HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH.”

When we study the purpose of the church that Jesus built we find that the works that it is commanded to perform are threefold. They are evangelism, edification and benevolence. But in my experience I don't remember ever having heard very many sermons, or topical lessons on the subject of benevolence. Occasionally we preach on the subject of giving and one of the purposes for giving in the Lord's church is benevolence but not specifically on this subject of benevolence. So in this lesson we will endeavor to explore this scriptural subject.

As is appropriate we will begin with a definition. In **Galatians 6:10**, we have a scriptural definition and when we turn to an inventory of common usage of the English language called a dictionary we find in the Random House Webster's College Dictionary these words:

Benevolence: 1. desire to do good to others, goodwill, charity
2. an act of kindness, charitable gift

So we see that in this particular instance the world defines benevolence in the same manner as does the God of heaven. So let's explore the scripture and see what we can find in God's revelation regarding our subject. Since God does not change:

James 1:17 “EVERY GOOD GIFT AND EVERY PERFECT GIFT IS FROM ABOVE, AND COMETH DOWN FROM THE FATHER OF LIGHTS, WITH WHOM IS NO VARIABLENESS, NEITHER SHADOW OF TURNING.”

We will begin our study in the Old Testament:

Benevolence – Mosaic Covenant

The first reference we could find in scripture related to the subject of benevolence is the commandment that God gave Israel under the Mosaic Covenant. The initial command within the Mosaic Law is found in:

Leviticus 25:35-36 “AND IF THY BROTHER BE WAXEN POOR, AND FALLEN IN DECAY WITH THEE; THEN THOU SHALT RELIEVE HIM: *yea though he be* A STRANGER, OR A SOJOURNER; THAT HE MAY LIVE WITH THEE. TAKE THOU NO USURY OF HIM, OR INCREASE: BUT FEAR THY GOD; THAT THY BROTHER MAY LIVE WITH THEE.”

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So we see that under God's law the poor must be relieved. And not just those who were brethren, which under the Mosaic Covenant would be a fellow Israelite, but also a person that has no blood relationship or covenant relationship with them a stranger or a sojourner, a traveler. All men were to be looked upon and treated as brethren. This admonition is confirmed and reinforced by the last prophet of the Old Testament:

Malachi 2:10 "HAVE WE NOT ALL ONE FATHER? HATH NOT ONE GOD CREATED US? WHY DO WE DEAL TREACHOUSLY EVERY MAN AGAINST HIS BROTHER, BY PROFANING THE COVENANT OF OUR FATHERS?"

In the sermon of Moses just prior to his death we find in:

Deuteronomy 15:7-8 "IF THERE BE AMONG YOU A POOR MAN OF ONE OF THY BRETHREN WITHIN ANY OF THY GATES IN THEY LAND WHICH THE **LORD** THY GOD GIVETH THEE, THOU SHALT NOT HARDEN THINE HEART, NOR SHUT THINE HAND FROM THY POOR BROTHER: BUT THOU SHALT OPEN THINE HAND WIDE UNTO HIM, AND SHALT SURELY LEND HIM SUFFICIENT FOR HIS NEED, *in that* WHICH HE WANTETH."

They were commanded to lend or give, according to their ability and the necessity of the individual case. Not only were they not to "SHUT THINE HAND" against their needy brother but rather they were to "OPEN THINE HAND WIDE UNTO HIM".

As we continue through the Old Testament we find several occasions of admonition in both the Psalms and Proverbs:

Psalms 41:1 "BLESSED *is* HE THAT CONSIDERETH THE POOR: THE **LORD** WILL DELIVER HIM IN TIME OF TROUBLE."

And just as the word "VISIT" found in **James 1:27** has a deeper meaning, means more than just dropping by to chat for a while; the word "CONSIDERETH" in this verse has a deeper meaning in its application as well. In the consideration of the poor it means to consider their need, our ability and abundance and to provide what relief we are able to provide.

In the **Psalms 112** which is labeled or titled "BLESSED IS THE MAN *that* FEARETH THE **LORD**"

Psalms 112:9 "HE HATH DISPERSED, HE HATH GIVEN TO THE POOR; HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ENDURETH FOR EVER; HIS HORN SHALL BE EXALTED WITH HONOR."

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The man that fears God, the man who honors the commandments of God, will be blessed. We see this promise voiced in many, many ways throughout the scripture. In this case the Psalmist is pointing to someone who has dispersed his goods and given to the poor and calling him "RIGHTEOUS", "EXALTED" and worthy of "HONOR".

In the wisdom of God given to Solomon we find both commandments and promises dealing with benevolence. We will look at two.

Proverbs 3:27-28 "WITHHOLD NOT GOOD FROM THEM TO WHOM IT IS DUE, WHEN IT IS IN THE POWER OF THINE HAND TO DO *it*. SAY NOT UNTO THY NEIGHBOR, GO, AND COME AGAIN, AND TO MORROW I WILL GIVE; WHEN THOU HAST IT BY THEE."

We are exhorted not to put off our brother if he is in need, especially if we have the means "BY THEE", or readily at hand so address that need. Also, when we look a little further, we see that this exhortation is not restricted to one we would consider our neighbor but rather is extended, not only to strangers, but to our enemies?

Proverbs 25:21-22 "IF THINE ENEMY BE HUNGRY, GIVE HIM BREAD TO EAT; AND IF HE BE THIRSTY, GIVE HIM WATER TO DRINK; FOR THOU SHALT HEAP COALS OF FIRE UPON HIS HEAD, AND THE LORD SHALL REWARD THEE."

Lest we misunderstand, we are not to do benevolence to our enemy just to "HEAP COALS OF FIRE UPON HIS HEAD". That is the wrong motivation, the wrong purpose and a sign of a perverted heart that God will recognize and judge accordingly. I fear that the reward He might give us in this case would not be that which we want. But we are to give to his need just the same as any other.

And then to close our review of benevolence under the Mosaic Law we'll look at two of the prophets. First of all Isaiah writing to those of the kingdom of Judea where he is chastising them for making an outward show of their devotion in fasting just like the scribes that Jesus condemned in **Mark 12:39-41**. He asks them a series of questions concerning things God requires to help them understand what God would consider as acceptable behavior. He includes in these questions:

"Is it NOT TO DEAL THY BREAD TO THE HUNGRY, AND THAT THOU BRING THE POOR THAT ARE CAST OUT TO THY HOUSE? WHEN THOU SEEST THE NAKED, THAT THOU COVER HIM; AND THAT THOU HIDE NOT THYSELF FROM THINE OWN FLESH?" **Isaiah 58:7**

Then he makes them a promise:

Isaiah 58:10 "AND *if* THOU DRAW OUT THY SOUL TO THE HUNGRY, AND SATISFY THE AFFLICTED SOUL; THEN SHALL THEY LIGHT RISE IN OBSCURITY, AND THEY DARKNESS *be* AS THE NOON DAY:"

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Then we see Ezekiel writing to the Jews in Babylonian captivity, also reminding them about how they were to conduct their lives. First of all he says in:

Ezekiel 18:5 "IF A MAN BE JUST, AND DO THAT WHICH IS LAWFUL AND RIGHT,"

If you want to be a "JUST" man, a man that is doing that which is "LAWFUL AND RIGHT", then you must be a man that:

"AND HATH NOT OPRESSED ANY, *but* HATH RESTORED TO THE DEBTOR HIS PLEDGE, HATH SPOILED NONE BY VIOLENCE, HATH GIVEN HIS BREAD TO THE HUNGRY AND HATH COVERED THE NAKED WITH A GARMENT." **Ezekiel 18:7**

So: much is said about benevolence in the God's Law given to Israel and we will see that God indeed does not change and the Law of Christ, under which covenant we live, includes these same precepts.

Benevolence – Covenant of Christ

In the New Testament we will begin at the very beginning in the record of the preaching of John the Baptizer. Luke records that when he was asked by the people "WHAT SHALL WE DO THEN?" (**Luke 3:10**) that he began his answer this way:

Luke 3:11 "HE ANSWERETH AND SAITH UNTO THEM, HE THAT HATH TWO COATS, LET HIM IMPART TO HIM THAT HATH NONE; AND HE THAT HATH MEAT, LET HIM TO LIKEWISE."

Next we see the words of Jesus himself in what we call the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:42 "GIVE TO HIM THAT ASKETH THEE, AND FROM HIM THAT WOULD BORROW OF THEE TURN NOT AWAY."

His words are plain and straightforward "GIVE TO HIM THAT ASKETH THEE". Then we see that there are promises attached to the work of benevolence, not just the satisfaction of knowing that we are complying with a commandment of God but, as in many other things, our faithfulness will be rewarded. He provided his disciples with a lesson when they wanted to forbid one from healing and serving God who did not travel with Jesus as part of their group. He says "FORBID THEM NOT". Then he tells them:

"FOR WHOSOEVER SHALL GIVE YOU A CUP OF WATER TO DRINK IN MY NAME, BECAUSE YE BELONG TO CHRIST, VERILY I SAY UNTO YOU, HE SHALL NOT LOSE HIS REWARD." **Mark 9:41**

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Next we must consider the words of Jesus concerning the judgment of man. After just having presented to his disciples the parable of the talents, explaining how that all men have capabilities that God expects us to exercise in his service, he describes the judgment scene. He likens those who follow Him to sheep and those who do not as goats. And when all nations are gathered before him he will divide men into these two groups or categories, those that are followers and doers of his word on his right hand and those who are not on his left hand. Then he said:

Matthew 25:34-40 “THEN SHALL THE KING SAY UNTO THEM ON HIS RIGHT HAND, COME, YE BLESSED OF MY FATHER, INHERIT THE KINGDOM PREPARED FOR YOU FROM THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD: FOR I WAS AN HUNGRED, AND YE GAVE ME MEAT: I WAS THIRSTY, AND YE GAVE ME DRINK: I WAS A STRANGER, AND YE TOOK ME IN: NAKED, AND YE CLOTHED ME: I WAS SICK, AND YE VISITED ME: I WAS IN PRISON, AND YE CAME UNTO ME. THEN SHALL THE RIGHTEOUS ANSWER HIM, SAYING, LORD, WHEN SAW WE THEE AN HUNGRED, AND FED THEE? OR THIRSTY, AND GAVE THEE DRINK? WHEN SAW WE THEE A STRANGER, AND TOOK THEE IN? OR NAKED, AND CLOTHED THEE? OR WHEN SAW WE THEE SICK, OR IN PRISON, AND CAME UNTO THEE? AND THE KING SHALL ANSWER AND SAY UNTO THEM, VERILY I SAY UNTO YOU, INASMUCH AS YE HAVE DONE IT UNTO ONE OF THE LEAST OF THESE MY BRETHREN, YE HAVE DONE *it* UNTO ME.”

Next we will see that when the church was established how they accomplished their responsibilities, how they carried out God’s requirements to this work of benevolence. We see in the early days of the church that those saints in Jerusalem “HAD ALL THINGS COMMON” (**Acts 2:44**)

“AND SOLD THEIR POSSESSIONS AND GOODS, AND PARTED THEM TO ALL *men*, AS EVERY MAN HAD NEED.” **Acts 2:45**

And we see that part of this activity included providing for the widows among them:

Acts 6:1 “AND IN THOSE DAYS, WHEN THE NUMBER OF THE DISCIPLES WAS MULTIPLIED, THERE AROSE A MURMURING OF THE GRECIANS AGAINST THE HEBREWS, BECAUSE THEIR WIDOWS WERE NEGLECTED IN THE DAILY MINISTRATIONS.”

When churches were established in other cities, in other countries outside of Jerusalem and the territory of Judea the benevolent work of these churches was expanded to include those beyond their immediate congregations. When Barnabas and Saul worked with the church at Antioch word came to them from Jerusalem by way of a prophet named Agabus that there would be a great famine throughout the world. And the disciples at Antioch responded:

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“THEN THE DISCIPLES, EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS ABILITY, DETERMINED TO SEND RELIEF UNTO THE BRETHREN WHICH DWELT IN JUDAEA:” Acts 11:29

Then as we look at the epistles of Paul we find various references to collections for the relief of the poor saints in Jerusalem in his writings to Corinth, Philippi, and the church in Galatia. We are familiar with these but we will look at two.

When Paul wrote to the church in Rome he spoke of his great desire to come to see them saying: **“WHENSOEVER I TAKE MY JOURNEY INTO SPAIN, I WILL COME TO YOU” Romans 15:24.** But he had other matters he needed to attend to first.

“BUT NOW IT GO UNTO JERUSALEM TO MINISTER UNTO THE SAINTS. FOR IT HATH PLEASSED THEM OF MACEDONIA AND ACHAIA TO MAKE A CERTAIN CONTRIBUTION FOR THE POOR SAINTS WHICH ARE AT JERUSALEM.” Romans 15:25-26

These Gentile Christians in faraway cities, gave of their means for the benefit of the Jewish Christians in Judea because of a sense of duty, a spiritual debt, a spiritual debt that the Holy Spirit confirms through the words of Paul:

Romans 15:27 **“IT HATH PLEASSED THEM VERILY; AND THEIR DEBTORS THEY ARE. FOR IF THE GENTILES HAVE BEEN MADE PARTAKERS OF THEIR SPIRITUAL THINGS, THEIR DUTY IS ALSO TO MINISTER TO THEM IN CARNAL THINGS.”**

In his instructions to the young preacher, Timothy concerning those that are rich in this world's goods that; first of all:

“CHARGE THEM THAT ARE RICH IN THIS WORLD, THAT THEY BE NOT HIGHMINDED, NOR TRUST IN UNCERTAIN RICHES, BUT IN THE LIVING GOD, WHO GIVETH US RICHLY ALL THINGS TO ENJOY;” I Timothy 6:17

Then he tells Timothy how they are to conduct themselves in their service to God. He says tell them:

“THAT THEY DO GOOD, THAT THEY BE RICH IN GOOD WORKS, READY TO DISTRIBUTE, WILLING TO COMMUNICATE; LAYING UP IN STORE FOR THEMSELVES A GOOD FOUNDATION AGAINST THE TIME TO COME, THAT THEY MAY LAY HOLD ON ETERNAL LIFE.” I Timothy 6:18-19

Then we see the instructions of the writer of Hebrews to those who were disbursed throughout the world in his exhortation to them to be faithful to their commitment to God.

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Hebrews 6:10 “FOR GOD *is* NOT UNRIGHTEOUS TO FORGET YOUR WORK AND LABOUR OF LOVE, WHICH YE HAVE SHEWED TOWARD HIS NAME, IN THAT YE HAVE MINISTERED TO THE SAINTS, AND DO MINISTER.”

Then as we conclude our review of the New Testament concerning this work of the church and of individual Christians; James and John both make our responsibilities very plain. Though James is actually writing about the relationship between faith and works and teaching a lesson on the necessity of showing our faith by our works he uses this illustration:

James 2:15-16 “IF A BROTHER OR SISTER BE NAKED, AND DESTITUTE OF DAILY FOOD, AND ONE OF YOU SAY UNTO THEM, DEPART IN PEACE, BE *ye* WARMED AND FILLED; NOTWITHSTANDING YE GIVE THEM NOT THOSE THINGS WHICH ARE NEEDFUL TO THE BODY; WHAT *doth it* PROFIT?”

By choosing this illustration, one that was familiar to the “TWELVE TRIBES SCATTERED ABROAD” (**James 1:1**) he is also teaching by implication that Christians have a duty to provide for those of our brethren who may be “NAKED” or “DESTITUTE OF DAILY FOOD.”

Then John, the Apostle of Love, in his first epistle, uses this illustration to demonstrate how we show that the love of God is within us.

I John 3:17 ‘BUT WHOSO HATH THIS WORLD'S GOOD, AND SEETH HIS BROTHER HAVE NEED, AND SHUTTETH UP HIS BOWELS *of compassion* FROM HIM, HOW DWELLETH THE LOVE OF GOD IN HIM?’

How indeed? If we truly love God and our fellow man we will respond to the needs of those who are less fortunate than we are. We thereby confirm our faith by our works, we display the love of God, we prove our righteousness by our actions and we honor the commandments of God. But someone asks is the requirement for our benevolence completely open ended? Is there no limit to our obligation to help others? What about those who make their living preying on the generosity of churches and softhearted Christians? What about those who come knocking on the church door asking for money and then use it for purposes that are sins against God. God doesn't leave us completely at the mercy of those who would abuse our benevolence. So in the few moments we have left we will consider what I have chosen to call our:

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Limits and Restrictions

During my childhood I was taught an old adage that “God helps those who help themselves.” While this is probably not scripture, but rather just an “old saying” used to train youngsters to work and do things for themselves; it does have its roots in God’s word. While under both covenants the children of God are encouraged, no, commanded to relieve the condition of the poor, to practice benevolence in its purest sense, at the same time God provided some limits. For example those who are able are expected to work. How do we know that?

Leviticus 19:9-10 “AND WHEN YE REAP THE HARVEST OF YOUR LAND, THOU SHALT NOT WHOLLY REAP THE CORNERS OF THY FIELD, NEITHER SHALT THOU GATHER THE GLEANINGS OF THY HARVEST. AND THOU SHALT NOT GLEAN THY VINEYARD, NEITHER SHALT THOU GATHER **every** GRAPE OF THY VINEYARD; THOU SHALT LEAVE THEM FOR THE POOR AND STRANGER: I AM THE **LORD** YOUR GOD.”

“I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD”; this is a commandment. Moses gives similar commands in his final address to the Israelite nation before his death:

Deuteronomy 24:19-21 “WHEN THOU CUTTEST DOWN THINE HARVEST IN THY FIELD, AND HAST FORGOT A SHEAF IN THE FIELD, THOU SHALT NOT GO AGAIN TO FETCH IT: IT SHALL BE FOR THE STRANGER, FOR THE FATHERLESS, AND FOR THE WIDOW: THAT THE **LORD** THY GOD MAY BLESS THEE IN ALL THE WORK OF THINE HANDS. WHEN THOU BEATEST THINE OLIVE TREE, THOU SHALT NOT GO OVER THE BOUGHS AGAIN: IT SHALL BE FOR THE STRANGER, FOR THE FATHERLESS, AND FOR THE WIDOW. WHEN THOU GATHEREST THE GRAPES OF THY VINEYARD, THOU SHALT NOT GLEAN **it** AFTERWARD: IT SHALL BE FOR THE STRANGER, FOR THE FATHERLESS, AND FOR THE WIDOW.”

The Israelites were commanded to not harvest the corners of the field, to not gather the gleanings, the grain or the stalk of grain or even the sheaf or bundle that would fall by the wayside. They were not to glean the vineyard, that is go back and pick the grapes that might be missed. They were not to beat the boughs of the olive tree a second time but leave what was not harvested on the first pass. Now just how were the stranger, the fatherless or the widow to get this food that had been left for them? They had to go get it. They were required to do work. When we go to **Ruth 2:15-17** we see that this is exactly what was happening in the fields of Boaz as Ruth gleaned behind his harvesters to provide for herself and Naomi, her mother-in-law.

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The Apostle Paul addressed this issue in both of his letters to the church at Thessalonica.

I Thessalonians 4:11 “AND THAT YE STUDY TO BE QUIET, AND TO DO YOUR OWN BUSINESS, AND TO WORK WITH YOUR OWN HANDS, AS WE COMMANDED YOU;”

The second letter is repeats this admonition in stronger words:

II Thessalonians 3:10-12 “FOR EVEN WHEN WE WERE WITH YOU, THIS WE COMMANDED YOU, THAT IF ANY WOULD NOT WORK, NEITHER SHOULD HE EAT. FOR WE HEAR THAT THERE ARE SOME WHICH WALK AMONG YOU DISORDERLY, WORKING NOT AT ALL, BUT ARE BUSYBODIES. NOW THEM THAT ARE SUCH WE COMMAND AND EXHORT BY OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, THAT WITH QUIETNESS THEY WORK, AND EAT THEIR OWN BREAD.”

The Holy Spirit makes it very clear, if someone is able to work and does not; then that person should not expect to eat. One of the implications of this command is to make it a requirement to know why a person needs our benevolence, if not, why not? Does the person need our benevolence because they refuse to work?

Proverbs 6:10-11 “**Yet** A LITTLE SLEEP, A LITTLE SLUMBER, A LITTLE FOLDING OF THE HANDS TO SLEEP: SO SHALL THY POVERTY COME AS ONE THAT TRAVELETH, AND THY WANT AS AN ARMED MAN.”

Is the person poor and need our benevolence because of their love of pleasure:

Proverbs 21:17 “HE THAT LOVETH PLEASURE **shall** BE A POOR MAN: HE THAT LOVETH WINE AND OIL SHALL NOT BE RICH.”

This is repeated in:

Proverbs 23:21 “FOR THE DRUNKARD AND THE GLUTTON SHALL COME TO POVERTY: AND DROWSINESS SHALL CLOTHE **a man** WITH RAGS.”

Does the person need our benevolence because they failed to provide for themselves:

Proverbs 28:19 “HE THAT TILLETH HIS LAND SHALL HAVE PLENTY OF BREADBUT HE THAT FOLLOWETH AFTER VAIN **persons** SHALL HAVE POVERTY ENOUGH.”

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We need to consider one more category of limitations to our benevolence before we close this lesson. In Jerusalem, as we noted earlier, the early church administered to the needs of the widows in the congregation. But the Apostle Paul writing to Timothy records these words from the revelation of the Holy Spirit:

I Timothy 5:3-4 "HONOUR WIDOWS THAT ARE WIDOWS INDEED. BUT IF ANY WIDOW HAVE CHILDREN OR NEPHEWS, LET THEM LEARN FIRST TO SHEW PIETY AT HOME, AND TO REQUITE THEIR PARENTS: FOR THAT IS GOOD AND ACCEPTABLE BEFORE GOD."

Then he reinforces these words:

I Timothy 5:8 "BUT IF ANY PROVIDE NOT FOR HIS OWN, AND SPECIALLY FOR THOSE OF HIS OWN HOUSE, HE HATH DENIED THE FAITH, AND IS WORSE THAN AN INFIDEL."

Then specific qualifications are given by Paul to Timothy regarding those to whom the church was to extend this work of benevolence:

I Timothy 5:9-10 "LET NOT A WIDOW BE TAKEN INTO THE NUMBER UNDER THREESCORE YEARS OLD, HAVING BEEN THE WIFE OF ONE MAN. WELL REPORTED OF FOR GOOD WORKS; IF SHE HAVE BROUGHT UP CHILDREN, IF SHE HAVE LODGED STRANGERS, IF SHE HAVE WASHED THE SAINTS' FEET, IF SHE HAVE RELIEVED THE AFFLICTED, IF SHE HAVE DILIGENTLY FOLLOWED EVERY GOOD WORK."

And we're more than out of time so we must close. As we are commanded in Galatians 6:10 we are to do good to all men, especially to those of the household of faith. But at the same time we are to do so with wisdom and patience, teaching them who can or have family who can to do as much for themselves as they can.

Invitation