

HELPING YOUR NEEDY MEMBERS

Today's Text: Acts 11: 27- 30

Extracts:

And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul [Acts 11: 27-30]

The Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) has developed a World Giving Index (WGI) which ranks countries in terms of monetary donations and the charitable acts of the people.¹ For the year 2011, the United States of America was ranked the most charitable country in the world, followed by the Irish Republic, Australia and the United Kingdom. However, the most generous population was Thailand where 85% of Thais made charitable contributions, followed by 79% of Britons. A significant finding was that only 5 out of the top 20 economies (measured by Gross Domestic Product-GDP) made CAF's top 20. That suggests that the richest countries were not necessarily the most likely to give.

We learn from those findings that helping the needy is more than having the ability to do so, especially the needy in the place where you worship. It is immaterial how much you give to the Red Cross or Caritas International. We are not talking about what you are doing for your aged parents or siblings. As you look around your place of worship, you could be shocked by what you can discover. It is not everyone there who will tell you what s(he) is passing through materially, emotionally or spiritually. The pastor or priest may be inaccessible as he pursues his "quixotic" schemes. Yet, you are at a loss to separate the genuinely needy from the gold diggers. How do you know who needs help and how to go about it? In this week's Bible story, there was a great famine in the world that adversely affected members of the church in Judea. The church at Antioch did something to help their fellow Christians that were in need there. We can learn a few lessons from that story to guide the kind of help that we can render to needy members in our various places of worship. Let us find out from this week's study.

¹ Based on "US tops world charitable giving index," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-16260782>
20 December 2011.

1. Background: The church at Antioch helps the needy in Judea

“As poor as a church rat.” That expression has always intrigued me. What does it really mean? A rat is ordinarily a rodent, a small mammal, found in garbage dumps or in dirty homes or offices where it can find left-over foods. The bigger animals, such as dogs and predators like cats, can make going to dumps unattractive for rats. Homes and offices are hardly safer for them because we set traps or plant poisons to eliminate them. We presume that a church rat is to be found in church premises where they preach love and abundant supplies among members. So, if a church rat is poor, it is either churches are too clean for leftovers or there are not enough to go round humans there, not to talk of mere animals. Figuratively, however, it could mean that ***churches have become rich clubs of poor members!*** Look around your place of worship and see how hostile an environment it can be for the needy.

A needy person is one who lacks the basic necessities of life. Such necessities may be material or physical (such as food, drink, clothing or health) or emotional (such as loneliness or stress) or spiritual (such as demonic oppression). In your place of worship, there are ***church workers*** (with or without their own families) whose monthly stipends can barely feed one person. There are ***widows and orphans*** who have no hope where the next meal will come from. There are ***couples who*** have been married for so many years but they ***cannot have children*** in spite of all their prayers and fasting. There are ***materially affluent members who are considering suicide because they are hiding incurable diseases and other forms of joylessness*** and there is hardly anyone that they can confide in. Needy people come in different shapes and sizes but who in your congregation is genuinely interested in them? On the other hand, there are some people who are hardly poor or needy but besiege places of worship to prey on the faith of members trying to obey Christ’s teachings on charity and love. How can we draw a line between one and the other? That is what this week’s study will do for us.

It was in the church at Antioch that believers were first called Christians [Acts 11: 26]. When the church in Jerusalem heard of this great church, they sent Barnabas, “a good man, full of grace and faith” to go there. When he saw “the grace of God” there, he was glad and he encouraged “them all, that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.” Then, he went over to Tarsus to bring Saul (Paul) and both of them spent a whole year with the church at Antioch, worshipping with them and teaching a great many people [vv. 22-26]. Certainly, they were not called Christians or followers of Christ for nothing.

Our interest today in the church at Antioch is the way it handled charity to fellow needy believers in Judea. Here goes the story:

- a) *There was a felt need*

The church at Antioch was certainly a spiritually attractive place for believers from other locations. We have seen how Barnabas and Saul of Tarsus came to spend a whole year there. Our story opens with the visit of prophets from Jerusalem at a much earlier period [v. 27]. Prophets serve as the Holy Spirit's microphone for God does nothing "unless He [first] reveals His secret to His servants the prophets" [Amos 3: 7]. One of the prophets from the Jerusalem church was called Agabus. He had prophesied by the Holy Spirit that there was going to be "a great famine throughout all the world." It came to pass during the reign of Emperor Claudius Caesar [Acts 11: 28] which coincided with the time of the visit by Barnabas and Paul [v. 30]. The churches in Judea were badly affected and the disciples in Antioch "determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea" [v. 29].

There was a felt need. The church members in Antioch knew about it. Therefore, the first principle to establish is that *you can only know about a need that you feel or is expressed to you*. Some people who are in need are too proud or too ashamed to tell others or to ask for help. Some people do not even know that they have a need. Therefore, you cannot assume what you do not know. *Even God who knows our needs before we ask still requires us to still ask Him [Matt. 6:8]! Nevertheless, you can still assess others' felt need without their telling you*. For example, the Shunammite woman that built Prophet Elisha a guest room in their home never let him know that she had no child. When the prophet even sent for her to tell him what he could do for her in appreciation of her kindness, she maintained that she needed nothing since she lived among her people. It took the prophet's servant, Gehazi, to tell him, "Actually, she has no son and her husband is old [2 Kgs 4: 8-14]. So, that was how Elisha knew her felt need and he took steps to meet it.

b) *Members gave according to their ability*

We are told that the disciples gave "each according to his ability" [Acts 11: 29]. Ability, in their case, was defined largely by material things required by victims of a great famine. You can be sure they included food and drinks, money and medical supplies, among others. However, *felt need may be much more than physical or material*. How about the mental anguish of some farmers that had lost all their investments in crop and flock?

Therefore, your members may need more than material help and we all have something to give.² For example, all that a needy member may desire is information or advice and guidance. How would Peter have known where Jesus was buried if Mary Magdalene had not told him so [Jn 20: 1-3]? How would Paul have known that he needed protection from the

² "We All Have Something To Give!" *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 5 Feb. 2012;

Roman soldiers against a Jewish sect that took a vow to kill him in an ambush if his young nephew (his sister's son) had not sneaked into the army barracks where he had been locked up to tell him [Acts 23: 16]? Therefore, ***help for the needy may not always cost you money; all it may take is time, advice and guidance or prayers.***

c) *They gave through trusted members*

The disciples at Antioch sent their collections to the elders of the churches in Judea “by the hands of Barnabas and Saul” [Acts 11: 30]. Having worshipped with them for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul had become trusted members of that church. A Levite from Cyprus formerly known as Joses, Barnabas means “Son of Encouragement.” He was so named by the apostles in recognition of his service to the early church. In fact, he had sold his land and given all to the church [Acts 4: 36-37]. Saul was a Roman citizen by birth and studied law under Gamaliel [Acts 22: 3, 25-28]. Though a former persecutor, he had become a trusted disciple of Christ who could be trusted to represent the church in Antioch throughout all Judea.

Many of us are willing to give to needy members but do we trust those through whom we plan to help them? How many priests and pastors have been caught misappropriating church funds or property? How many pastors and church leaders have seduced other people's wives that they are supposedly counselling? How many so-called needy people turn out to be phonies running fraudulent schemes? Therefore, ***until what you have given reaches the truly needy, its purpose has not been met.***

From the foregoing, we learn a few principles to guide how to help the needy members in our congregations. First, there should be an opportunity (either institutionally or individually) for the needy to express their needs without losing self-esteem or privacy. Second, in meeting such needs, you should measure your ability to give in accordance with the blessings and talents that God has given you for such purposes. Therefore, you will have to look beyond your material means to meet others' needs. Finally, ***always remember that whatever you are doing is for the Lord; not for you or for the needy.*** So, what is your current attitude to meeting the needs of your fellow church members? Let us find out.

2. Assessing your attitude to helping

God rewards sacrificial giving, that is, giving not because you have but because you care. That is why ***God measures your giving not by what you give but by what you have left after giving.*** That was why Jesus rated the widow's mite higher than everybody else's contribution into the temple treasury because she gave her all [Mk 12: 41-44]. So, what is your attitude to helping your church members? The following are common profiles in our places of worship:

a) *You could be a shylock!*

Some people do have but they cannot part with it. In addition, they have no conscience taking from others. All they care about can be summarized under “I, Me, and Mine.” Such people are generally called shylocks- after a character in one of Shakespeare’s plays, *Merchant of Venice*. He lent money at exorbitant interest rates aimed at reducing others to an inferior status to his own in the event of default! In your church, there are some people like that and you could be one of them! They have what it takes to help others- money, position, talents, etc. But they resent it when anybody comes near them to ask for any favours. They see such people as lazy and not worthy to be helped.

God is the one who has given you the talents you have for His own purposes [**Deut. 8: 18**]. You also have needs which only other people can meet. For example, how would you feel if you needed a kidney transplant and the poor woman that you had scorned a few Sundays ago was the only one whose kidney matched your requirement?

b) *Or a hostage taker!*

Some people ***give quite freely*** to the needy in their congregation ***but*** they ***attach strings*** that tend to make beneficiaries hostages to their benefactors. For example, you can only benefit as long as you remain a member of that specific place of worship or parish or share the church leaders’ views on issues. Such givers can be regarded as hostage takers! The needy may need a loan or a job or a contract. No problem! If hostage takers cannot provide, they can link you up. They become your godfather and they put a short leash around your neck to make sure that you cannot escape or stray.

Hostage takers cannot win because they only own their church buildings but not the church. Sooner than later, God sets their hostages free! For example, when Jeroboam became king of the bigger northern kingdom of Israel (after the death of Solomon), he wanted to ensure that people did not go to Jerusalem in the southern kingdom of Judah to worship. One way to do that was to ensure that he recognised only the priests and Levites who were loyal to him. What followed? Many priests and Levites left their common-lands and possessions in Israel and relocated to Judah and Jerusalem! After their departure, “those from all the tribes of Israel, such as set their heart to seek the Lord God of Israel, came to Jerusalem to sacrifice to the Lord God of their fathers” [**2 Chron, 11: 13-17**].

c) *Or a besieged giver!*

It is also common to find yourself *the only tall tree among stunted shrubs*. Everybody is asking you for favours as if the first recipient has let everybody else know that you are a generous giver. That is common if you attend a church in the poor neighbourhood you grew up in before you went to college and moved up the social ladder. It can be discouraging. However, you can also handle this type by enabling others to equally help the needy. Become a mentor and encourage those you have helped to mentor others. In no time, you will have so many others who can also give.

d) *Or the cheerful giver*

The cheerful giver is the ideal giver. You *give without expecting*. You give *willingly and cheerfully*. You may never have enough for yourself but you thank God that the little you have can make others happy. In no time, giving becomes your second nature. In no time, God will discourage scammers and fakes from asking from you. Only the genuinely needy God will bring to you because He has already planned your blessing through helping them.

3. Conclusion: We are all needy before God!

No matter how you see the needy in your congregation, remember that we all are needy before God. Without Him, we are nothing. He says that you should never be tired of doing good because only He can reward you for it [**Gal. 6: 9**]. God loves the cheerful giver [**2 Cor. 9: 7**].

God says you should love your neighbour as yourself. Your nearest neighbour could be a member of your church- that woman who cleans the toilets so joyfully; that beggar at the gate who watches so dutifully over members' vehicles during service; that inspiring altar boy whose father could not pay his school fees before he died; that great singer in the choir who is getting married soon but cannot even afford a modest wedding dress; that dedicated assistant evangelist or catechist whose wife needs a complicated surgery; that former wayward girl who now needs mere advice and guidance from a caring church mother to remain straight.

Where are you helping in all these?