

## Working Smarter

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“The poor shall eat and be satisfied. . . . Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” – Psalm 25:26a, John 15:2b

One of the fundamental principles of understanding the Bible is that Scripture interprets Scripture. Or, to put it another way, Scripture is its own best interpreter. Or, to put it yet a third way, if you want to understand any particular passage in the Bible, you start with other passages in the Bible that are, in some way, related to the passage you're trying to understand.

I want to apply that principle this morning by taking not one but two texts for today's message. The first is from the psalm that we read from to open the service, Psalm 25. The first half of verse 26 of that psalm says that “The poor shall eat and be satisfied.”

The second passage that I'm using to help us understand how we might apply the first passage to our own lives is from Jesus' words in the Gospel of John, when he says, in the second half of the second verse of the fifteenth chapter, “Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.”

Taken together, these two passages tell me that one of the things we as advocates for the poor need to do is to work smarter rather than harder. Those of us who are concerned about the poor – who want to try to help the poor lift up their voices not just to God but to a society that can help them – we need to learn how to do our work more efficiently and effectively. We can't simply keep doing the same thing, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, and expect things to change significantly for the better. Life is a constant process of change, and the work we do on behalf of the poor has to keep up with those changes if we're not simply going to make well-intended but largely ineffectual gestures on behalf of those in need.

I think that's what Jesus might have been telling his disciples, among other things, when he told them that God prunes the branches that bear fruit to make them bear more fruit. Over time, and if we're learning from our experience, we discover ways of doing things that allow us to cut back and yet get more accomplished. That's what pruning does. It's cutting back on parts of the plant that are perfectly useful in their own way to allow other parts of the plant – the flowering or fruit-bearing parts – to develop more effectively.

Every gardener knows this. If you want more blooms on your roses, you'll need to prune the branches that don't have buds or whose buds don't look like they're going to produce beautiful flowers. If you want larger, juicier tomatoes, you have to prune the plants so that most of the energy is directed toward the tomatoes you have rather than the tomatoes that may, perhaps, appear on every branch. If you want your lilac bush to produce lots of fragrant, beautiful flowers, you'll have to prune some of the greenery away so the plant feeds the flowers rather than all of those leaves.

It's elementary gardening, and it's a lesson for those of us engaged in what sociologists call eleemosynary work. Eleemosynary comes from the Greek word *eleos*, which means mercy or pity, and it's where the phrase *kyrie eleison*, “Lord, have mercy,” comes from that we used to sing in this church

at the start of the prayer of confession. Eleemosynary work is work that is merciful, that is, work that is not performed in exchange for compensation of any kind and it is not work that is done because one is obliged to do it. So it is not the work that we do for a living, and it is not work that we do for people we're related to by the bonds of kinship or friendship.

The works of mercy are the works we do largely for people we don't know at all or know only slightly. When we serve food to the guests who show up for Loaves and Fishes, most of us don't know those folks and they don't know most of us. Some of them are regulars, others we might see once or twice and never again, depending on their circumstances. But if they're hungry, they're welcome at the meal we serve. That's eleemosynary work; we commonly call it charity. And that's one of the ways we help God help the poor “eat and be satisfied” as Psalm 25 puts it.

But there is another way we help God help the poor and that is by writing letters as a Bread for the World Covenant Church. We do this because of a “working smarter” insight from the father of the Rev. Arthur Simon, one of the founders of Bread back in 1974. Art's father used to say that it was better to put a fence at the top of the cliff than to have an ambulance waiting at the bottom, and that insight led Simon and a group of other Christians to focus their attention and energy on trying to get at the roots of the social conditions and policies that keep poverty a way of life for so many in our extremely wealthy country. We as a nation have tremendous resources at our disposal to address the root causes of poverty, but we need to look carefully to see if we're using those resources as good stewards, and Bread for the World does just that. And based on its analysis of how Congress spends our money and plans to spend our money, it makes recommendations to local churches on how we might speak intelligently and passionately to our leaders on behalf of those whose voices are silenced by poverty.

So next Sunday, we're going to take perhaps thirty minutes after church and hand-write letters to our representatives in Congress reminding them that part of what we expect our tax dollars to do is help those in need. Our tax dollars pay for the things we as a society want, and one of those things is help for those who need help.

We ask our leaders to help us help God help the poor because we can't be everywhere. We can't know every need. We can't respond to every request. But what we can do is direct a portion of what our government demands from us toward helping those needs and responding to those requests that are beyond our immediate knowledge and reach. We can drive down to Cleveland and help the poor there, and, through our tax dollars, we can also help the poor in Maine and Mississippi and Montana. We can also help the poor in Bangladesh and Syria and the Sudan. Our tax dollars – our money, which belongs to us and not to our government – we have both the right and the responsibility to say how and where we want that money spent, and writing to our Congressional representatives is our way of exercising both that right and honoring that responsibility.

That's working smarter to help the poor. It's working smarter to make the best possible use of our resources. Working smarter means not wasting the opportunity to be both good Christians and good citizens. Jesus told us to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and the things unto God that are God's – he said “and” not “or.” As Christians, we have a double responsibility: we are responsible to God and we are responsible for the society that we have helped to build. And our Bread letters help us meet both of those responsibilities. They're a two-fer, and that's working smarter.

So I hope that many of you – all of you, if you can – will take just a few minutes of next Sunday after church and write two or three letters to our senators and representatives reminding them to help us help God help the poor. Doing so just might help the hungry eat and be satisfied.