

Thoughts on Ministry of Healing

(12) Help for the Unemployed and the Homeless (pages 183-200)

Summary:

The ultimate solution to unemployment and homelessness will not be found in education or government programs, but in implementing God's plan for Israel; providing the means and the incentive for a useful, industrious and self-supporting life.

Thoughts:

A caveat to the theme of this chapter is the next, "The Helpless Poor." Ellen White there recognizes that there are some who are unable to support themselves, no matter how much incentive one might provide. These will always need charity or a safety net of some sort.

At the time Ministry of Healing was written, New York City was the size of a San Bernardino, California or a Lincoln, Nebraska. That raises the question of the degree to which the remedy of this chapter could be implemented in the context of the megalopolis, which is where an increasing percentage of the world's population lives (vast distances from city center to true country living). Could one implement God's plan for Israel in Cairo or Dacca or even New York City today in a way that would make a discernable difference to the urban context? How would one do that?

As Ellen White describes it, God's plan for Israel was that every family would have a home on the land, with sufficient ground for tilling (183-184). This is what we call subsistence farming today. But in an age of factory farms (it takes almost 5000 acres in many places to break even), farm subsidies and trade wars, could people in the West survive on subsistence farming any more? In the original context of this chapter, the counsel made a lot of sense, have circumstances changed so much that she would re-write the chapter drastically today? This is not a statement of doubt, but following through on her own principle of "circumstances alter cases." We need to recognize that these are complex issues and we need the Holy Spirit's guidance to rightly apply Ellen White's counsel today.

One thing to keep in mind while reading this chapter is that the 19th Century had a somewhat romanticized view of nature and her comments fit within that context. She also shares a somewhat Victorian attitude toward the problems of the city, and most cities were quite unattractive in those days. The Victorians tended to read the Pentateuch in light of their own city problems and Ellen White did much the same. On the other hand, her comments track very well with many current environmentalists, who are calling for a decentralization of land ownership. There is a trend in her argument that is being picked up more and more today. A related trend is a proliferation of urban rooftop gardens, even with bee colonies. In some "Third World" countries suicide rates are high among farmers because centralization of land ownership makes it impossible for small farmers to take care of their families.

The principle of the jubilee is an interesting one (184-185). Some economists have suggested that it would eliminate inflation, as the value of land would be constantly declining; measured in the number of years of crops that remained before the land would revert to the original owner. Again, this principle is grounded in the role of subsistence farming in the ancient economy.

Ellen White summarizes God's plan for Israel as follows: ownership of tillable land,

industrial training (how to work with one's hands), provision for the poor (gleaning), liberality in giving, and sound and just business principles. This plan may not be realistic in all cases today (think Hong Kong). With regard to teeming urban slums, however, one could perhaps imagine a rotation system where the poorest of the poor could experience the benefits of the above and then bring those principles back to the city and work for their neighbors and friends. (189-194)

The best kind of charity work helps people to help themselves. We harm the poor when our well-intentioned efforts teach them to be dependent. As a rule, it takes training to develop habits of industry, perseverance economy and self-denial. (194-196)

Quotable Quotes:

“Within the vast boundaries of nature there is still room for the suffering and needy to find a home. Within her bosom there are resources sufficient to provide them with food. Hidden in the depths of the earth are blessings for all who have courage and will and perseverance to gather her treasures.” (188)

“Many look upon labor as drudgery, and they try to obtain a livelihood by scheming rather than by honest toil. This desire to get a living without work opens the door to wretchedness and vice and crime almost without limit.” (189)

“We may give to the poor, and harm them, by teaching them to be dependent. Such giving encourages selfishness and helplessness. Often it leads to idleness, extravagance, and intemperance. . . . The world owes no man a living who is able to work and gain a living for himself.” (195)

“Real charity helps men to help themselves. If one comes to our door and asks for food, we should not turn him away hungry; his poverty may be the result of misfortune. But true beneficence means more than mere gifts. It means a genuine interest in the welfare of others. We should seek to understand the needs of the poor and distressed, and to give them the help that will benefit them most. To give thought and time and personal effort costs far more than merely to give money. But it is the truest charity.” (195)

“Simplicity, self-denial, economy, lessons so essential for the poor to learn, often seem to them difficult and unwelcome. The example and spirit of the world is constantly exciting and fostering pride, love of display, self-indulgence, prodigality, and idleness. These evils bring thousands to penury and prevent thousands more from rising out of degradation and wretchedness. Christians are to encourage the poor to resist these influences.” (196-197)

“Jesus sought to correct the world's false standard of judging the value of men. He took His position with the poor, that He might lift from poverty the stigma that the world had attached to it. (197-198)

Tweets of Healing:

Within the vast boundaries of nature there is still room for the suffering and needy to find a home. (188)

Giving to the poor is harmful if it teaches them to be dependent. (195)

Real charity helps people help themselves. (195)

To give thought and time and personal effort costs far more than merely to give money, but it is the truest charity. (195)

Bible religion never makes people idlers. (195)

Kindness will accomplish more than censure. (196)

Jesus sought to correct the world's false standard of judging the value of men. He took His position with the poor. (197)

Life's best things—simplicity, honesty, truthfulness, purity, integrity—cannot be bought or sold. (198)

He who owns the world is rich in resources, and will bless everyone who is seeking to bless others. (200)