

The first has to do with the presence of the poor upon the earth. In Matthew 26:11, Jesus told His disciples, "The poor you will always have with you."

Some Christians have interpreted this to mean that any attempt to alleviate or eliminate poverty is contrary to God's will. Yet in Matthew 19:21, Jesus told a rich young man, "Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor." And in Galatians 2:10, James, Peter, and John asked Paul to continue to remember the poor, which Paul was eager to do.

The solution to this seeming contradiction is the distinction between two meanings of God's will -- God's Plan and God's Law. Hypothetically, it could be argued that if all wealth were redistributed, poverty would be completely eliminated, and Jesus' words proven false. But Jesus did not say that we should have the poor always with us, but rather that we would have the poor always with us! Jesus told His disciples, not what should be, but what would be. He knew that poverty would not be totally eliminated until He would come, and then every man would own property and sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree. But this did not tell us what we ought to do; the Law of God told us that. The Law of God told the rich young man to love God supremely (not his wealth), and to love his neighbor as himself. In order to be able to be free to serve one master -- God -- the rich young man would need to give away his wealth; and in order to love his neighbor most fully, he would need to give his wealth to those who needed it most -- the poor. (Incidentally, this command cannot be applied to all wealthy persons; only to those for whom wealth has become a god and they have become its slaves.

The second scriptural concept showing the distinction between the Plan of God and the Law of God has to do with the presence of faith on the earth. In Luke 18:8 the Lord Jesus asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" The implication appears to be either that many professing Christians will fall away from their profession shortly before Christ returns, or that very few people will be converted to Christ shortly before His Coming. This Scripture appears to be a prediction in the form of a rhetorical question, which expresses serious doubt that the Lord will find faith on the earth at the time of His Coming.

If people believe that the Coming of the Lord is near, is this prediction a command to them not to trust in Christ, or a command to Christians not to proclaim the gospel, or a command to professing Christians to fall away and apostatize? That is, if we believe that there will be few believers on earth at Christ's return, should we make that knowledge the rule of our obedience? Or should we go forth and proclaim the gospel and urge people to trust in Christ, the meanwhile holding fast the confession of our faith without wavering?

Once again, a distinction between the Plan of God and the Law of God helps clear up this seeming contradiction. God's revelation of His Plan is to be believed; God's revelation of His Law is to be obeyed.

But these two scriptural concepts illustrating the distinction between God's Plan and God's Law still leave us with a paradox.

Suppose that Christians were to become very concerned and very dedicated and very busy about relieving the poor and winning the lost. Could they not totally wipe out poverty and win the entire world for Christ?

To this we must answer: By the Plan of God we know that these things will not happen; but by the Law of God we know that we have a responsibility to attempt to do these things.