

Wisdom for Life: Give to the Poor

Proverbs 22:9; 28:27; 19:17

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on February 9, 2020

Introduction

- ❖ So far in our study of the book of Proverbs, we've mainly been preaching through whole chapters. It works pretty much through chapters 1 to 9. Once you get into chapter 10 and on, there is less of an apparent organization, and each proverb could be taken and studied alone. But even if you did that, it's still important to interpret that proverb in the context of the book as a whole and then in the context of the whole canon of Scripture.
 - **So today our primary proverb is Proverbs 22:9. It's main focus is on generosity, specifically giving to the poor.** We'll also consider a few other related proverbs, while setting it within the overall storyline of Scripture. The reason we chose this proverb is because this morning's message is in aligned with the new Mercy Ministries that we introduced this past Friday in our English membership meeting.

- ❖ Towards the end of last summer, I preached on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and in that message, I issued an invitation to anyone feeling convicted – to join a task force to figure out how to better serve the poor around our church. And the key was to do so in a responsible, sustainable, Christ-centered way.
 - Well, a handful of people responded, and we've been meeting together since September. We've identified three touch points where we, as a church, typically encounter the poor:
 - (1) The Poor at our Door** – During the week we occasionally have people come to our church door asking for help. They often ask for money. But is giving them money the most responsible way to care?
 - **(2) The Poor We Drive By** – Wherever you drive around Houston – especially on your way to church – you're bound to see panhandlers at an intersection. We've made care packages in the past, but we've never maintain inventory. So our care package ministry has always been sporadic. Can it be more sustainable?
 - **(3) The Poor Under the Underpass** – Most of you, on your way to and from church, have noticed the high number of homeless under the underpass at Main and 610 and Buffalo and 610. Instead of just waiting for them to come to us asking for help, can we go to them?

- ❖ With these touch points in mind, this team of volunteers have developed three new ministry initiatives that we're publicly launching this weekend. I'll tell you more about them later. Overall, you can see this as the new **Mercy Ministries** of our English congregation. And our ministry to the poor – through these three initiatives – is only the first of (Lord-willing) other ministries of mercy that will address the various practical needs in our community. This team will be available in the lobby after service to answer questions about how to get involved.

- ❖ **My main goal this morning – besides informing you about these new initiatives – is to lay out a biblical foundation for why Christians should take seriously our ministry to the poor.** Especially the biblical imperative to give of our resources to meet the practical needs of the poor. Yes, that's in the Bible – Old and New Testament. **Giving to the poor is a duty of all Christians.** It's an imperative. We'll see plenty of passages saying that.

- ❖ But giving to the poor is not just a duty of a Christian – **it’s a description of a Christian.** That means it’s not a task that you have to check-off to be a good Christian. **Giving to the poor is an activity that characterizes a Christian.** It’s not the only characterization or description. But it is one way to characterize or describe a Christian – someone who gives to the poor.
- ❖ It’s like how you would say that dribbling a ball or hitting a jump shot is not just the duty of a basketball player. It’s a description of one. Yes, you could say it’s something a basketball player *has* to do. But it’s more accurate to say that it describes what a player enjoys doing.
 - Have you ever seen true basketball players dribbling down the court with a sense that they’re carrying this heavy burden – this tremendous duty – to have to dribble this ball and make a jump shot or else? No, if they’re truly basketball players, then you expect them to be naturally (and for the most part joyfully) dribbling down the court and making shots. That’s what basketball players do. It’s an important activity that characterizes them.
- ❖ That’s how I want us to understand this activity of giving to the poor. It is an imperative. It is a duty. But it’s best to see it as a description. **Which means you should be wondering – if you’re a Christian – does this describe you?** Are you living characteristically like a Christian?
 - Now if we’re going to talk about poverty and generosity, it’s important to understand the relationship between key concepts. We need to grasp the relationship between (a) poverty and curse, (b) generosity and blessing, and (c) giving to the poor and loaning to God.

Poverty and the Curse

- ❖ The first pair of concepts I want to look at is the relationship between poverty and the Curse of sin. I want to consider the question of what causes poverty. Now some would say that poverty is self-inflicted. It’s a consequence of your sin. You’re being cursed by God. That’s why you’re poor. That may be a convenient way to understand poverty for those who aren’t poor. But it doesn’t hold up. It doesn’t explain godly people who are poor or sinful people who are rich.
 - Let me offer a biblical way to see it. **Poverty is a result of the overall Curse of sin – but being poor doesn’t mean you’re cursed.** In other words, there wouldn’t be such a thing as poverty if not for the fact that we’re living in a sin-cursed world, but there is no biblical warrant to assume poverty is a sign of being cursed.
- ❖ Let’s bring this back to Genesis and the one human activity that most directly addresses the plight of poverty – work. **In Genesis 1-2, we see that, from the beginning, work was a part of God’s good created order.** Labor is the creational means by which we meet our material needs. Having to work for one’s food – to provide for yourself or the needs of your family – is not punishment for sin. No, it’s part of God’s good design.
 - **A lot of us have this idyllic picture in our minds of the Garden of Eden as this land of leisure.** We have this perception that Adam and Eve just laid on beds of roses, and trees lowered their branches and offered up their fruit. Crops would just spring up by themselves. Forest animals would forage the woods for them and lay food at their feet.

- ❖ But when you read Genesis 1, it says that Adam and Eve are commanded to, "*be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.*" (Gen 1:28) **The idea of subduing the earth suggests that a large part of what God made in those six days of creation was still undeveloped and in need of additional creative work.**
 - So it says in Genesis 2:15, "*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.*" To cultivate the garden; to keep it up; to make things grow. **Adam and Eve were living in paradise, and yet if they expected to reap a good harvest every season, then they were going to have to work for it.**

- ❖ So work is not a curse. But by Genesis 3, it becomes cursed. **God places work under the curse of sin.** Listen to Genesis 3:17, "*17And to Adam he said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 19By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'*"

- ❖ So from the beginning, work has been the God-designed means to meet our material needs – for food, for clothing, for a roof over our heads. That hasn't changed. **But due to the curse of sin, it has become so much harder to meet those same needs.** The ground has become stingy in giving up its crops and brings forth thorns and thistles instead.
 - Because the ground is cursed, it's increasingly harder to satisfy our material needs. And that increases the potential for poverty. **Work does work the way it was meant to.** It's no longer dependable. It doesn't always bear fruit. It doesn't always pay off. And work itself is not always available. All of that contributes to the problem of poverty.

- ❖ **The point is that poverty is definitely a result of the overall Curse of sin.** People are poor because the ground is cursed. Because work is cursed. **But that doesn't mean poor people individually are cursed.** There is no biblical warrant to say that they deserve being poor. Or to assume that it's their own fault. That their poverty is completely self-inflicted.
 - Now that's not to say that the poor are completely blameless and hold no responsibility. But let's be careful not to make too many assumptions – lest we find ourselves in the company of the Pharisees, asking, "*Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born poor?*" We might hear the Lord say, "*It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.*" (Jn 9:2-3)
 - In other words, we can't assume that poverty, blindness, sickness, or thorns in our sides are direct consequences of sin. There are too many factors involved. But we *can* assume that they're opportunities for God's glory to be displayed in our lives.

- ❖ **I hope you see that I'm trying to shift our focus from wondering who's to blame and to not assume that poverty is direct consequence of sin.** It *is* a result of the overall Curse of sin – just like blindness or sickness. But being poor doesn't necessarily mean that you're cursed.

- ❖ **If you want to know who is cursed, according to Proverbs 28:27, it's those who ignore the poor.** Let me read that again, "*Whoever gives to the poor will not want, but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse.*" Now let's be clear about this: **This doesn't mean that one individual act of ignoring a beggar will directly incur a curse from God.** The same could be said of how committing any particular sin doesn't result in God suddenly striking you with a curse.
 - But if you're characteristically hiding your eyes from the needs of the poor – it could indicate that you're still under the overall Curse of sin. **The reason you can hide your eyes like that is because those eyes may still be blinded from seeing Jesus.** From seeing Jesus in the least of these (Mt 25:40). Your heart may still be unconverted, and the eyes of your heart can't see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor 4:4).

- ❖ **It would be the same for anyone who continues to hide their eyes from any command of God. That's called living in disobedience.** Living in unrepentance. Just imagine if a father continually hides his eyes from his family – ignoring their material needs, being self-serving, leaving his family penniless and destitute. With a man like that, we probably wouldn't object to an assumption that he's unconverted and still blind to Christ.
 - Well, it would be no different for someone who hid his eyes from the poor. Ignoring the needs of the poor could very well demonstrate a false faith. That's what **James 2:14-17** teaches. Listen to James, "¹⁴*What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*"

- ❖ **Now this doesn't mean the mere act of giving to the poor is proof you're a Christian.** Devout Muslims give to the poor. It's one of the five tenets of their faith. So giving alms to the poor obviously doesn't make you a Christian. You're made a Christian through faith in Jesus. He's the Son of God. The High King of heaven. He was rich and yet for our sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich (2 Cor 8:9).
 - He humbled himself as a servant, and served us by taking up his cross and becoming a curse for us (Gal 3:13). **In his death, Jesus bore the overall Curse of sin, which liberates us.** That's how you're freed from the Curse. Not by works but by faith. You're saved by faith – a faith that works, that issues forth in good works.

- ❖ **Giving to the poor doesn't make you a Christian but it does describe one.** A Christian is someone who reads Proverbs 28:27 – "*Whoever gives to the poor will not want*" – and exercises real faith, living faith. A Christian gives to the poor trusting that I will not want. **God is going to faithfully supply my needs – as I'm giving of myself to meet the needs of others.**
 - But if you hide your eyes from the poor; if you don't have a heart to help them, then be warned that it very well could mean that the eyes of your heart are still blinded and you're still under the curse of sin. If that's you, then ask God to come into your life; to change your heart; to open your eyes to see Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Generosity and God's Blessing

- ❖ Then, what your new heart needs to hear is a promise that generosity to the poor won't leave you empty. You need to hear how your generosity won't be overlooked by God. **You need to hear how giving to the poor will lead to blessing.** That's how our primary proverb this morning connects these two biblical concepts of generosity and blessing.
 - Let's listen to **Proverbs 22:9**, "*Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor.*" So to have a bountiful eye – literally, a *good eye*, an eye that's been opened by the Spirit – having that bountiful eye is paralleled with sharing bread with the poor. And that generosity to the poor is connected with being blessed by God.
- ❖ This is no isolated text. **Proverbs 11:24**, "*One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.*" **Deuteronomy 15:10**, "*You shall give to [your poor brother] freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.*" **2 Corinthians 9:6**, "*The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*" **Acts 20:35**, "*In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*"
- ❖ Here's the point: **Generosity generally leads to blessings, but being rich is not a sure indicator of blessedness.** Now we need to take seriously these verses in Scripture telling us that it is more blessed to give than to receive. That if you sow bountifully; you'll reap bountifully. If you give freely to the poor, God will bless you in all your work and in all you undertake. The one who gives freely, grows all the richer. Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed.
 - **It would be a disservice to you and an unfaithful treatment of God's Word if we downplayed or minimized these passages – just because they sound too good to be true or too eerily like prosperity teaching.**
- ❖ That's why we need be clear and insist that there's no biblical warrant to say that God's will is for all his children to be rich. **That's why we need to state clearly, with no equivocation, that being rich is no sure sign of blessedness.** Since ancient times that's been the world's assumption – that if you're rich, it meant you're blessed by God. And if you're poor, it meant you're cursed.
 - But then Jesus came preaching the kingdom, upending the world's assumptions. He came announcing blessings to the poor and woes to the rich (Lk 6:20, 24). So if we're Jesus' people, then let's not fall back into worldly thinking, assuming that being rich means you're being blessed or that being blessed means you'll be rich.
- ❖ But having issued that warning, I do want to make sure we emphasize the general truth of this proverb – that giving to the poor generally leads to blessings. **I think the error of most prosperity teaching is that it interprets those blessings solely in terms of material riches.** And even when the scriptures do promise material things, it's assumed to be meant for the here and now. There's no recognition that the promise might be fulfilled in the kingdom come.

- **But the most egregious offense of prosperity teachers is that when they tell you to be generous and give – they don't have the poor in mind.** They mean give to them – to their ministry, to their church. Sow this seed (by that, they mean a monetary donation to them) and God will multiply it and return it to you tenfold.

- ❖ That's what prosperity teachers say. Now listen to what Jesus has to say. This is from **Luke 14:12-14**, *"¹²He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. ¹³But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."*
 - Did you hear what he said? You will be blessed – not because your generosity will be readily paid back in kind. Not because your friend is going to invite you over to his place for another feast next week. **No, you will be blessed because of the fact that the poor cannot repay you.** The blessing that Jesus had in mind is not material and is not for the here and now. It's a blessing to be experienced in the kingdom come – *"you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."*

- ❖ I hope you're starting to see the wisdom in Proverbs. It knows why we hesitate to give to the poor – and speaks directly to those fears. **Many of us fear what might happen if we're too generous.** Are we going to have enough for ourselves, for our family?
 - Listen: *"Whoever gives to the poor will not want"* (28:27) *"Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed."* Yes, you're going to be fine. You can trust God to take care of you as you spend yourself on behalf of others.

Giving to the Poor and Lending to God

- ❖ Now so far we've been making this bare statement over and over again – that generosity to the poor leads to blessings. But we haven't really explained why. Why does one lead to the other? That's what we'll demonstrate in this third relationship that I want to draw together. It's between giving to the poor and lending to God. I get this idea from **Proverbs 19:17**. I'll read it again, *"Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed."*
 - **I think it's fascinating how giving to the poor is like giving a loan to God.** It's like you become a creditor to God. It's like you're lending him something, and he's in your debt. It sounds blasphemous when you put it that way. But that's what it says. *Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD.* This investment is going to yield a good return. Now let me make two observations here.

- ❖ **First, notice how closely God identifies himself with the poor.** When you give to the poor, you're giving or lending that money or that resource to God. It's like when Jesus said in Matthew 25 that when you show this or that mercy to the poor, to the least of these, you're showing it to him. **Jesus identifies with the poor and needy.** And that's why Christians can't hide their eyes from the poor, or else they'll be hiding their eyes from their own Lord and Savior.

- ❖ Here's the second observation. As we've already said, giving to the poor is an act of trusting God to take care of us. There are so many needs around us, so we worry that we won't have enough for ourselves or our family if we give too much to others. But if we still give, in spite of that fear, trusting in the Lord with all of our heart, then there is a sense in which God becomes a debtor.
 - **God becomes a debtor to the glory of his own sufficiency.** When I put all of my trust in him – if I'm trusting that he is sufficient for all my needs, which makes me willing to give generously to others – then God is honor-bound to uphold his own glory as a Sufficient Provider. In that sense, he's in debt. God doesn't owe me anything. **But he owes it to his own glory not to let me down when I put all my hope in him.**

- ❖ Listen to John Piper explain it much better. *“The focus of Proverbs 19:17 is not on the Lord's need, but on the certainty of our receiving back from the Lord something corresponding to what we gave to the poor. God treats our gifts to the poor as obligating his own divine generosity back to us with the same certainty as if we lent the money to him and made his integrity the guarantee of our return. When our investment in the poor is an expression of faith in God's provision, then God himself is committed to bringing that investment back to us with the same certainty as though he were in our financial debt.”*¹

- ❖ **Friends, that's why giving to the poor is one of the wisest ways to invest your money. It's like lending to God.** Is there anyone more reliable, more reputable, more dependable to lend money to than the LORD our God? Is there anyone you can count on more to repay you?
 - He sees what you do for the poor. He sees how much you give. And he knows if you're doing it out of faith – faith that he will graciously provide all your needs, which frees you from fear and enables you to sacrificially give to meet the needs of others. When you're trusting God like that – he won't let you down because he won't let his own glory down.
 - **That's why giving to the poor leads to blessings. It's because God honors his own glory as your Sufficient Provider.** That's why he will repay you for your deeds. If not in this life, then at the resurrection of the just (Lk 14:14).

- ❖ **So this morning I want to urge you to be generous to the poor and lend to God – and see how he honors that.** I mentioned in the beginning that we're launching three new ministry initiatives. After our membership meeting on Friday, 100 care packages have been assembled and are ready to be distributed to you as you leave service. There will be a table in the lobby where you can pick one or two up and bless the **Poor We Drive By**.
 - Our goal is to maintain a consistent inventory of care packages, so occasionally we'll make appeals to donate specific items to keep our inventory in stock. Those are all practical ways in which you can help and give to meet the practical needs of the poor.

- ❖ And when it comes to the **Poor Under the Underpass**, for the past 3-4 months, a team has been visiting those intersections right after lunch on Sunday, and they've been going twice a month. They've already been able to build relationships and provide care packages and prayer.

¹<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/on-lending-to-god>

- And they'd like to invite you to join them this afternoon for a visit. If you're interested, meet in trailer room 411 at 1pm for a brief orientation. Then they'll walk you over to one of the intersections and visit with the people there for 1 to 1.5 hours.
 - Lastly, for the **Poor at Our Door**, we're in the process of developing a pantry ministry where we can meet the practical and spiritual needs of those who come knocking and asking for help.

- ❖ **We hope these initiatives will equip you and encourage you to give of your time, money, and resources to meet the needs of the poor in the community.** If you're interested to join one of the teams of volunteers, visit their table right after this and sign up.
 - Friends, please remember that we do this not just because it's a duty of Christians. But because it's a description of who we are – we are co-heirs with Christ, partakers of his inheritance secured for us in the heavens. We are citizens of a kingdom to come, and until that day, we give of ourselves for the glory of God and the good of others. Amen.