

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.

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Our text this morning is Proverbs chapter 31, verses 8 and 9. Turn there in your Bibles if you would, Proverbs 31, verses 8 and 9.

In the past few weeks, we've hit on some pretty serious, pretty intimate topics. Some of you have mentioned to me how the Lord has used this study in your lives. You should know that He's used it in mine too, and so I'm grateful to Him, in spite of how uncomfortable some of these sermons have been to preach.

The topics we've looked at so far, greed, lust, vengeance, and anger have basically two things in common: first, they are all dangerous and potentially sinful attitudes of the human heart that our enemy uses however he can to destroy our relationship with Christ.

Please hear God's warning: "Beware of these things." Nursing attitudes and lifestyles of greed or lust or vengefulness or anger is sinful behavior. Left unchecked in our lives, they *will* eventually destroy us. This is the first thing these attitudes have in common.

The second thing they share, thankfully, is a vulnerability to the power of Christ. Christians need *not* struggle with these attitudes in our hearts forever. They

*can* be overcome and not just managed. This is part of the hope of the gospel.

You see, when God calls us to be like Jesus, He really means it. That's not just a figure of speech. It is His desire to *make us holy*, as Jesus is holy.

And, He knows that we don't have the power to transform ourselves, to make ourselves holy, and so He says, "Come to me." "Come to me, you who are heavy-laden." "Ask and you'll receive." "Seek me, and you'll find me." "Knock, and the door will be opened."

Over the past few weeks, God has called us to Himself that He might change our hearts with regard to greed and lust and revenge and anger. Today, God calls us to Himself for a change of heart in our attitude toward the poor. God says to His people: "Beware of neglecting the poor."

Proverbs 31 there: "*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute; speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.*"

Ron Sider is the president of the organization, "Evangelicals for Social Action." If you've heard of him, you've probably read an article of his in Christianity Today, or maybe you've read one of the couple dozen books he's written. His most famous book was written in 1977, titled: "*Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger.*"

Think about that title for a minute. “*Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger.*” If that title makes you uncomfortable, as it does me, that’s good. That means that we’re spiritually sensitive. The question then becomes, of course, “What do we do with that uncomfortable feeling?”

Do we avoid it? When confronted with the reality of the poverty and hunger in our world, do we try to push those images out of our minds? Do we try not to think about it? You know what I mean. I find myself doing that. Why? Why do we do that?

Sure, the problem is immense. Sure, it even seems unsolvable. But could it be that we avoid the issue because we *know* that we are all *incredibly wealthy* relative to most of the world?

Although we’re all troubled by the poverty in the world, could it be that we’d rather not be *troubled enough* to make the changes in our lifestyles that God might ask us to make if we were to really face this issue?

Deep down, do we really even want to know what Jesus might ask us to do, personally, about the problem of poverty in our world? Do we really want to know?

A pastor in Maryland tried to illustrate the problem of world hunger for her congregation by having a dinner. She set up three tables.

The first table was very long and was set with a bare, brown paper top. The people seated there received only a small cup of water and a dry biscuit to eat.

The second table was also very long and had a plain white covering and those seated there received only a cup of water and a cup of noodle broth.

The third table was very short. It was set with a linen tablecloth, a floral arrangement, candelabras, and full table settings. The few who were seated there were served a plate overflowing with all sorts of food.

In the discussion that took place over the meals, one 5-year-old boy, seated at the brown table, looked around and then announced: “Hey! This isn’t fair, and I think, if Jesus were here he’d do something about it!”

Most of the rest of the message today comes from an article by Ron Sider, written in 2004. I read it this week, and frankly I have not been able to escape it, so I’m just going to let him speak. The article is titled, “The Healthy Church, Embodying Prophetic Witness.”

Sider begins: We cannot have healthy churches unless our preachers faithfully proclaim biblical truth, and there is strong biblical reason for thinking that many evangelical preachers are idolatrous heretics. (Being an evangelical preacher, this got my attention, as you might imagine.)

Sider goes on: If you think this statement is a bit strong, ask yourself these questions: “Do today’s preachers consistently preach and teach about God’s concern for the poor as seen in the Bible?” And then, in turn, “What does the Bible say about those who neglect the poor, as well as those who fail to teach their people what God has to say on the matter?”

Three sets of facts simply do not fit together:

1. There is widespread poverty in our world.
2. The Bible says God and his faithful people have a special concern for the poor.
3. North American Christians give less and less to the poor every year. According to studies by the World Bank, the richest 20 percent of the world’s people (including the vast majority of people in the U.S.) are about 150 times as rich as the poorest 20 percent.

The Bible is full of texts demanding that God’s people share God’s concern for the poor. Jesus had blunt words for those who neglect the poor; saying in Matthew 25: “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat.”<sup>1</sup>

Tragically, every year since 1969, per capita congregational giving in the U.S. has declined. It is now below a quarter of a tithe, below 2.5 percent, and materialism is far more pervasive in North American Christian circles today than it was thirty years ago. Most

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<sup>1</sup> Matt 25:41

of us are substantially wealthier than we were thirty years ago. The size of the average new house in America has almost doubled in the last forty years. Money and its effects seems to be winning the battle for most Christian hearts.

If the church today is to be healthy, and faithful to her kingdom calling, she must come to terms with four essential biblical truths regarding God and the poor.

First, *the Bible says repeatedly that God works to lift up the poor and oppressed. God lifts up the poor.* The most dramatic example is the way God acted in the Exodus to call out the chosen people of Israel, and He did so in part because He hated their oppression.<sup>2</sup> Annually at the harvest festival the people of Israel repeated this confession: “The Egyptians mistreated us. . . . Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil, and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt.”<sup>3</sup> God acts in history to lift up the poor and oppressed.

The second truth regarding God and the poor is this: *Sometimes, the Lord tears down rich and powerful people. Sometimes, God tears down the rich.* Mary’s Song in Luke is shocking: “My soul glorifies the Lord” she says. “He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.”<sup>4</sup> The message of James chapter 5 is more direct: “Now listen, you rich people,

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 3:7–8; 6:5–7

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 26:6–8

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1 46, 53

weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you.”<sup>5</sup>

What does this mean? Is creating wealth a bad thing? No. The Bible is very clear that God has created a beautiful world and has placed us in it to enjoy it and to produce an abundance of good things. Creating wealth is a good thing.

Is God biased against the rich? No. The Bible is explicit that God has no bias either toward the rich or the poor.<sup>6</sup>

So then, what’s the problem? Why do the Scriptures warn again and again that God sometimes works in history to destroy the rich? He does so because the rich sometimes get rich by oppressing the poor, *and/or*, because the rich neglect the needy. In either case, God is furious.

James warned the rich so harshly because they had hoarded wealth and refused to pay their workers.<sup>7</sup> Most of the prophets repeat, in some form, the words of Jeremiah chapter 5: “Among my people are wicked men...their houses are full of deceit; they have become rich and powerful and have grown fat and sleek.... They do not defend the rights of the poor. Should I not punish them for this?”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> James 5:1

<sup>6</sup> Deut 10:17–18

<sup>7</sup> James 5:2–6

<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah 5:26-29. See also Psalm 10; Isaiah 3:14-25; Jeremiah 22:13-19

Repeatedly, the prophets warned that God was so outraged that he would destroy the nations of Israel and Judah. Because they “trample on the heads of the poor...and deny justice to the oppressed,” Amos predicted terrible captivity for Israel<sup>9</sup>, as did Isaiah and Micah.<sup>10</sup> And it happened just as they foretold.

But what if we work hard and create wealth in just ways? This is good and pleasing to God *as long as we don’t forget to share*. No matter how justly we have acquired our wealth, God demands that we act generously toward the poor. When we don’t, the Bible says, God treats us the same way he treats those who *oppress* the poor. For example, there is no hint in Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus that the rich man exploited Lazarus to acquire wealth. He simply neglected to share. So God punished him.<sup>11</sup>

Ezekiel contains a striking explanation for the destruction of Sodom where he writes: “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.... Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.”<sup>12</sup> Again, the text doesn’t charge them with gaining wealth by oppression. The people of Sodom were destroyed, in part, because they refused to share their abundance with the poor.

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<sup>9</sup> Amos 2:7; 5:11; 6:4, 7; 7:11, 17

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 10:1–3; Micah 2:2; 3:12

<sup>11</sup> Luke 16:19–31

<sup>12</sup> Ezekiel 16:49-50

The Bible is clear. Whether we get rich by oppression, or, if we have wealth and do not reach out generously to the poor, we make God mad. God judges societies, in part, by what they do to the people at the bottom.

A third truth regarding God and the poor is this: ***The Bible says that God identifies with the poor so strongly that caring for them is like helping God Himself. God identifies with the poor so strongly that caring for them is like helping God.*** “He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,” says Proverbs 19:17. On the other hand, Proverbs 14:31 tells us that those “who oppress the poor show contempt for their Maker.”

Jesus’ parable of the sheep and goats is the ultimate commentary on these two proverbs. Jesus surprises those on the right with his insistence that they ***had*** fed and clothed him when he was cold and hungry. When they protested that they couldn’t remember ever doing that, Jesus replied, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”<sup>13</sup>

Finally, ***the Scriptures teach that if we do not share God’s concern for the poor, we are not really his people—no matter how frequent our worship or how orthodox our creeds. If we do not share God’s concern for the poor, we are not really his people.***

Because Israel failed to correct oppression and defend poor widows, Isaiah, in chapter 1, insisted that

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew 25:40

Israel was really the pagan people of Gomorrah.<sup>14</sup> God despised their fasting because they tried to worship God and oppress their workers at the same time.<sup>15</sup>

Through Amos, the Lord shouted in fury that the very religious festivals he had ordained were making Him angry and sick because the rich and powerful were mixing worship with the oppression of the poor.<sup>16</sup> In 1 John 3:17 we read that “if anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”

In Jeremiah chapter 22, we learn that good king Josiah had a wicked son, Jehoiakim. When Jehoiakim became king, he built a fabulous palace by oppressing his workers, and so God sent the prophet Jeremiah to announce a terrible punishment.<sup>17</sup> The most interesting part of the passage, however, is a short aside on this evil king’s good father, saying: “Josiah defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. *‘Is that not what it means to know me?’* declares the LORD?”

Knowing God is inseparable from caring for the poor. Of course, we dare not reduce knowing God only to a concern for the needy. But if we don’t share God’s passion to strengthen the poor, as John asks, “How can God’s love be in us?”

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<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 1:10-17

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 58:3-7

<sup>16</sup> Amos 5:21-24

<sup>17</sup> Jeremiah 22:16

I fear that many Christians today who consider themselves orthodox move into heresy at just this point. If knowing God is inseparable from caring for the poor, what does God think about rich Christians who are living in countries that are 150 times as wealthy as the poorest one-fifth of the world's countries, *and* who share less than 3 percent of their abundance? Is that not defiance of explicit biblical teaching?

When pastors review their sermons, when congregations review their educational curricula and total congregational spending, when families review their lifestyles and their giving, can they honestly affirm that seeking to empower the poor is one of their top priorities? Is it as important to them as it is to God?

These are the questions we all have to answer, listening to the voice and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

It's not up to me or anyone else to judge you and your expression of concern for the poor – I hope you don't think that's what I'm doing here. Only God can tell us, individually and specifically, how we are to respond to His word today.

I *can* tell us how *not* to respond. According to Scripture, if we really want to make God mad, here's how we'll do it: Bury our heads in the sand and try to convince ourselves that God doesn't care if *we* care about the poor and hungry and destitute in our world.

The thing is, God knows your lifestyle and He knows mine. He knows what's important to us. He knows what we give our time to. He knows how we spend our money, and He knows that, where our treasure is, our hearts will be there also.

Do you need to open your heart to the poor and the hungry and the oppressed of the world? Don't try to avoid the issue. Don't pretend it doesn't matter, or try to push the responsibility off to others who you believe are wealthier than you are. God says to each of us, personally today, "Beware of neglecting the poor."

Someone once said "parents are only ever as happy as their least happy child." If you're a parent, you know that's true. When your child suffers, you suffer at least as much, and usually more.

If your child was suffering, you'd want others to do everything they could to help him or her, wouldn't you? If so, then you're much like our Heavenly Father.

Right now, His children are suffering all over the world. He's not asking you or me to solve the whole problem ourselves. He's simply asking that we do everything we can to help alleviate the suffering of His children.

What does that mean to you and me, specifically? What does that mean for our lifestyles, for our concepts of needs and wants, for our giving, for our prayers? Only He can answer that. Let's ask Him together.

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