

LIVE JUSTLY WITH THE POOR

SERIES: CHOOSE WISELY



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Proverbs
Eighth Message
Corrie Gustafson
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Proverbs

In the summer of 1999, I spent a month in Israel. I went there to join a group of American students at Jerusalem University College to study the geography, history, and religions of the Holy Land. The University was just outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem, which gave us easy access to many of the historical sites.

On one of our first tours through the Old City, a brief encounter changed my life. I was walking in the back of our group so I could see the sights, shops, and people around me. Just as we came to the gate of the Old City, I saw a woman seated on the ground along the wall. She was dressed in a black niqab, which is a garment that some Muslim women wear that covers their entire body except for an open at the eyes. The woman was sitting in the dust with a very young infant wrapped in a blanket, resting in her lap. There was a small bowl of coins on the ground in front of her. As our group got closer, she made eye contact with me.

I confess, I stared at her initially because this was the first woman I'd ever seen in-person wearing a niqab. But then I kept staring at her because of the story this image told. Here she was sitting in the dirt, begging for money in the 110-degree heat, with a 1-to-2-month-old infant on her lap. I'd never seen such a desperate expression of poverty before—I grew up in suburban Ohio, and went to college in Santa Barbara. Even though I'd seen homelessness before, it was always in settings that were safer, cleaner, and more comfortable than hers seemed to be.

The image of this mother captivated me, and she saw that. As I got closer to her, she kept her eyes on mine and when I was just about next to her, she lifted her baby up to me. She didn't speak, and even if she had, it wasn't likely that she spoke English. But she repeatedly lifted her baby in the air toward me, her eyes pleading with me. She was asking me for some kind of help.

At the time, I was overwhelmed with emotion and questions. My heart was all stirred up with compassion and a desperate desire to help, but what was she asking of

me? Did she want me to take her baby? Did she want me to give her money for her baby? Did she somehow think that I, clearly American by dress, had the resources to help her? Should I give her money? But then I remembered the warning of our guides—to hide our money on our person and not reveal on the street where we kept it hidden. I kept walking and looking back, unsure of what to do. I wanted to do something, but I felt at a loss of how to help. The image of that mother begging me for help has stayed with me for almost 20 years.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus reminded his disciples that “the poor are always with you.”¹ His words remain true today. Poverty is both a timeless and a global issue. And so, as followers of Jesus, we should ask ourselves, what, if anything, are we to do about poverty? How are we to regard and treat the poor. This sermon is an attempt to answer those questions. The book of Proverbs is our base for wisdom on the topic.

The poor are mentioned over 30 times in Proverbs. This is not the “poor in spirit” that we hear about in the New Testament. Proverbs talks about people who are financially and materially poor.

If you've taken the time during our summer series in Proverbs to read the whole book, you've see that when it talks about poverty and wealth, there are two clear, overarching pieces of wisdom. The first piece of wisdom is that God's people should never to oppress the poor. The second, is that God's people are live justly with the poor. I'll file everything else I say today under this banner of justice.

What Proverbs has to say about the poor can be prophetic for us today. The individual proverbs call us to action, if we're paying attention. Sit with these words for a moment, “Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered.”² Proverbs urges us to be agents of God's justice and compassion for the poor in our broken, dehumanizing world. We are all implicated when our national, local, and family systems fail and oppress the vulnerable among us.

Are you moved by the poverty you see in our world? Do you wonder what you can do to make a difference in the lives of the poor locally and globally? I don't have the answer to the problem of global poverty. I don't have the smarts to tell you how to effectively take on the pervasive, systemic evils that create, enslave, and exploit the poor. I desperately wish I did. But I have a God who cares. We have a God who hears the cries of the poor and knows each of them by name. We serve a God who knows all the issues and all the evils, and who will ultimately crush the power of these evils and redeem the poor.

In the meantime, God wants us to do something about poverty. According to Proverbs, God wants each of us to live justly; to do every-day, accessible things that will lighten the burden of the poor. The first directive I have for you about how to live justly with the poor is this: honor their dignity, first and always.³

I want to read two verses to you, side-by-side. They'll serve as a sample of the many verses around this theme of dignity. "Whoever mocks the poor insults his Maker"⁴ and, "The rich and the poor meet together; the LORD is the Maker of them all."⁵ Obviously, the word dignity is not in these verses, but can you hear it as an underlying theme?

Honoring human dignity is where we start with the poor. We start with the perspective that *all* people are created by God, and created in God's image.⁶ These proverbs encourage us to respect all people, regardless of economic status, because economic status does not fundamentally define us; our Maker defines us. These proverbs remind us that in the eyes of God, we are all of equal worth.

I don't think that the opposite of treating a person with dignity is ignoring them. I think the opposite is treating a person like a project. Have you ever had a relationship where you felt the other person was always looking for ways to fix you? Like they were constantly evaluating your life and your problems. They are full of advice and solutions, as though your better life is just two steps around the corner? It's awful to feel like someone just sees you as a project. When they can't or don't care to empathize. When they don't seem to truly care about you—who you are, your story, your struggles, or the state of your heart.

Sometimes I think that we Christians go about our good works in ways that treat poor people like projects. We might have the right motives to help the poor, so

we get excited to do things like pass out hygiene kits to the homeless guy on the corner, or go on short-term mission trips to developing countries and build houses or dig wells. While these things might help the poor in some ways, our efforts might be done in a way that lacks a true connection with the person or people we are trying to help.

We may have passed out a hygiene kit, but did we take the time to make eye-contact, greet the person, ask their name? We may have gone on some exciting mission trips, but was there time and intentionality to make a human-to-human connection? To hear peoples' stories? To establish and maintain an on-going relationship, as well as give practical help? Or are we just the rich saviors swooping in to save the day?

Proverbs reminds us that God cares deeply for each human he created. God wants us to be agents of justice for the poor, but in ways that respect and honor their dignity. So what might that look like? One great example of honoring human dignity is in the ministry of Jesus, told in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 8. There Jesus is asked to come to the house of a local synagogue leader and heal his sick daughter. So Jesus sets off to do just that. But on the way to the leader's home, as Jesus is passing through the crowds, he feels someone touch his clothes and power going out from him.

Jesus was touched by a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years. Luke writes that she had spent all her money on doctors, but could find no cure for her condition. But she had heard about Jesus and his power to heal, so she takes a risk. This poor, unclean, outcast finds Jesus and touches him to be healed. This would have been a scandalous encounter in ancient society. She could have been justifiably and publicly shamed for her actions. But Jesus take a more compassionate route. He stopped and asked who touched him. He gave his attention to this financially ruined, physically broken woman. He listened to her story. And once he had heard her reason for touching him, he said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace."⁷

Jesus honored this poor woman's dignity through stopping, listening, by showing her compassion and by calling her *daughter*! So often when people try to help the poor and homeless they don't even take the time to ask their names. We don't know if Jesus knew this woman's name, but he went a step further by calling her "daughter."

How can we mimic Jesus in our regard for the poor? How might we do better at honoring the dignity of the poor people we know and encounter? This is something I encourage you to talk about with your friends, family, and small groups. There are many things we can do for the poor, but we may need to get back to fundamentals, to start by honoring the dignity of the individual, first and always.

The next theme I discovered in proverbs was the directive to be generous.⁸ When you hear me say the words “be generous” what is the first thought that comes into your head? How many of you were thinking about giving money? I think this is our automatic response as Christians. We’ve been trained to understand generosity only in terms of monetary giving. Some of us have a lot of expendable income so we can afford to be generous, but others of us have few or no extra funds. If the qualification of generosity is about money alone, then some of us are set up to fail. Well, I have good news, the book of Proverbs broadens and deepens the traditional, Christian understanding of generosity.

Here’s one example of how we see generosity used in Proverbs. “Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.”⁹ If you do a little comparison study with other translations, you’ll find the Hebrew word translated *generosity* in the ESV, translated in other versions as *gracious, merciful, kind, or compassionate*. The Hebrew verb here, “depicts a heartfelt response”; it’s when one person sees someone with a need, and they are moved in heart, and they realize they have something to give to meet the need they see.”¹⁰

I like the ESV’s use of the word generosity. I like it because it draws from the base of human dignity that we were just talking about. You see, we can know in our minds that we should help the poor, and when we see someone asking for money, we can “do the right thing” and give money. But the Hebrew verb here requires more of us. It’s not enough to have our care of the poor be a purely intellectual function. Fundamentally, righteous generosity is not satisfied when we impersonally fulfill a biblical obligation. God’s generosity asks *first* for our hearts.

Listen to this proverb. “It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.”¹¹ I love the phrase, “be of lowly spirit *with* the poor.” Generosity asks us to dismount from the high horses of wealth, education, status, privilege,

achievement, and convenience, and just be a *human* with another human for a while.

Generosity asks us to set-aside a cultural narrative and personal prejudices that say poor people are just lazy or weak or manipulating government aid programs, and open our eyes to the lowly state of these women and men created in the image of God. Generosity asks us to look and see their desperation. Their hunger for connection. To recognize the depression and exhaustion that comes from years of hardship.

Proverbs says that generosity first requires that we tap into our inner resources. God wants our hearts to be engaged. He wants us to be moved by the needs we see in the lives of the poor. To have such grace and compassion stir in our hearts, that they push us into action. Godly generosity toward the poor begins in the heart. It is fundamentally an expression of empathy and care from one human to another.

Knowing this, how does the generosity flowing in our hearts express itself in action? Yes, it can be giving money if that is truly helpful in the moment. But Proverbs offers a broader range of action. Many verses tell us that generosity can be expressed through the sharing of food, clothes, shelter, and other material things. I especially like the framework offered by this proverb: “Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor.”¹² We need to be people with bountiful eyes. That means that we are able to look at our lives and see the abundance and blessing we have, and then to ask, “How can I share my abundance with someone in need?”

I’ve seen generosity for the poor in action at PBC. I’ve seen some of you open up rooms in your homes to foster kids who have aged out of the system and can’t afford rent in the area. I’ve witnessed groups in our community faithfully prepare and serve meals to the men and women that show up every Friday night for R&R. I’ve seen some of you spend your free time advocating for vulnerable seniors who are at risk of losing their housing. I know some of you invite the poor into your homes to share a meal and fellowship and you expect nothing in return.

Look around this room. Look at your own life. Most of our lives are stuffed with some kind of bounty. We could live in a way that hoards it all for our own security or self-indulgence, or we could share our bounty with those in need. No matter our household income, I know we can all find practical ways to be generous.

The final theme I want to offer you from Proverbs is kind of a sub-theme. It's only mentioned three times in the book, but I think it can be radical in our transient, individualistic culture. Here it is: be steadfast.¹³ Specifically, this refers to being a steadfast friend of the poor.

Let's take a look at one of these proverbs. "All a poor man's brothers hate him; how much more do his friends go far from him! He pursues them with words, but does not have them."¹⁴ In Proverbs, each mention of friendship with the poor is an indictment against abandoning friends when they experience material poverty.

Some of you may be shocked at this idea of abandonment. You think would never do that to a friend! Well, some of us have experienced the difficulty of a relationship strained by the effects of poverty. This is what I mean: it's hard to see a friend struggling with a huge financial loss, regardless of whether it was due to their own choices or to circumstances beyond their control. It's hard to see their lives diminished in some ways. To see them struggling to make ends meet. To hear their stories of helplessness and desperation.

The longer poverty lasts, the more it strains a person physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Poverty can erode joy and positivity until our friend seems like an entirely different person. Their changed personality, attitude, and outlook can be hard to be around. Their desperation can make us uncomfortable. Their needs can cause inconvenience to our lives. Their unchanging story of hardship can grow tiresome. Eventually, we might wonder if it's healthy for us to endure this relationship.

Proverbs has deep sympathy for the poor; not just for the loss of their financial and material security, but also for their loss of relationship. The underlying message to us is to be steadfast friends with the poor. And it doesn't seem to matter whether their poverty is short or long-term.

Jesus was a great model of this. Not only did he stick with those who were poor until his death, he actually sought them out. Jesus asked some pretty poor guys to be his disciples. He drew poor men and women into his inner circle and kept them there for the duration. Jesus understood that being poor is not a detriment to discipleship. In fact, I wonder if it's an *advantage*, because the poor may better understand that we are not in control, and they may be quicker to trust God.

Some of you maybe be thinking, "Friendship? Really, Corrie? That's your answer to helping the poor?" If you are thinking that, then we have a very different understanding of friendship. To me, friendship is one of the most priceless gifts and tools on earth. It's not simply about finding people with whom you share hobbies and good conversation and fun. Friendship can be deeper and richer. It can be radically uplifting and healing. Friendship can be something we take just as seriously as we do family or marriage. We can make intentional decisions, even vows, to stick by our friends, no matter what they are facing.

Those of you who are married: how many of you included in your vows the traditional lines, "in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, till death do us part?" Those are beautiful vows. I'm not married, but I approach my friendships with the same convictions. For me there's a difference between casual friendships and committed friendships. When I'm in a committed friendship, then I've chosen to be with you in all your great celebrations and hardships. If I lost my job as a pastor tomorrow, I would be sad, but I would still have great purpose and important ministry to do. Steadfast friendship motivates and fulfills me. Inspired by God's abiding love for me in my brokenness, I believe I can and should offer the same to my friends. Now the wisdom of Proverbs encourages me to think and do the same with the poor.

Imagine again of the powerlessness and the desperation of the poor. Think of how scary and vulnerable it must feel to not have a secure home or regular meals. Think of the rejection and anonymity that can come from prolonged poverty. But now, imagine the impact of having steadfast friends. Friends who don't endure you as an obligation, but ones who endure with you, who abide with you through your hardships. Friends cannot often fix our financial problems or solve the systemic evils of global poverty, but their empathy can be like a warm sunrise in dark and desperate circumstances. To be seen, and known, and actively cared for, even when you've been worn down by desperation—this can rekindle hope.

Steadfast friendship is radical if we understand it like Jesus did. Remember his words on friendship? "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."¹⁵ If you cannot stand by your friends in their poverty, how can you possibly be willing to also lay down your life for them?

Friendship becomes something radical when it is intentional, committed, and steadfast. Friendship can't

cure poverty or its effects, but it can nurture the hearts of the poor, and that is no small thing!

Today we've gathered up more wisdom from Proverbs, this time asking the question, "what does it look like to live justly with the poor?" We know now that God has called us act justly by honoring the dignity of the poor, first and always. By generously sharing the bounty of both our hearts and our material goods. And by being steadfast friends of the poor.

I hope, and pray, and desperately want God to enable and inspire people to dismantle the systemic injustices and individual circumstances that lead to poverty. But just as eagerly, I hope and pray that God helps us see that there are every-day, accessible things that we can do to life up the poor.

May God inspire you to care for the poor, today and always.

Endnotes

- 1 Mark 14:7
- 2 Proverbs 21:13
- 3 For more verses about the dignity of the poor, see Proverbs 16:19; 17:5; 19:4; 19:22; 22:2; 22:22-23; 28:6; and 28:11.
- 4 Proverbs 17:5a
- 5 Proverbs 22:2
- 6 See Genesis 1:26-27
- 7 Luke 8:48
- 8 For more verses about generosity toward the poor, see Proverbs 14:20-21; 14:31; 19:17; 22:9; and 28:8.
- 9 Proverbs 14:31
- 10 Bruce K. Harris, R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer, Jr, Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament Vol. 1*, (Moody Publishers), 694-695, 302
- 11 Proverbs 16:19
- 12 Proverbs 22:9
- 13 For more verses about friendship with the poor, see Proverbs see 14:21-22 and 19:4.
- 14 Proverbs 19:7
- 15 John 15:13