

Wisdom For Life And Ministry

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.
(Proverbs 1:7 ESV)*

*Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof leads others astray.
(Proverbs 10:17 ESV)*

*‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.’
(Job 28:28 ESV)*

*The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for
she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold,
something greater than Solomon is here.
(Matthew 12:42 ESV)*

Poverty, Justice And Jesus

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Various Wisdom Readings

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Introduction:

Good morning church. I’d like to invite you to open your Bibles to Proverbs 10:4; that’s on page 534 in your pew Bibles. I mentioned when we began this series that the whole Book of Proverbs is presented as the inspired counsel of a mom and a dad to their royal son about to make his way in the wider world. The first 9 chapters of Proverbs represents their “cover letter” as it were, but after chapter 9 – beginning here in chapter 10 the format appears to change. From chapter 10 onwards the Book of Proverbs appears to be a somewhat random collection of wise sayings. So look at the Bible open in front of you. The ESV gives as a heading to chapter 10 “The Proverbs Of Solomon” – and then there are no further headings until the middle of chapter 22.

Flip forward and you’ll see.

All of chapters 10,11,12,13,14,15,16 – all the way through to chapter 22 are titled simply “The Proverbs of Solomon”. Loosely arranged wise sayings. That’s what we have here.

And then look at 22:17 – that’s the next time we get a heading. It says “Words of the Wise” – so these are loose sayings of other wise people.

Then look at chapter 25 – More Proverbs of Solomon. More loose sayings – more random Proverbs. Then in chapter 30 you get “The Words of Agur” – so there we have a fairly large collection of wise sayings from Agur son of Jakeh. Then finally in chapter 31 we have “The Words of King Lemuel” – so another fairly large collection of wise sayings from another person – King Lemuel.

I share all of that with you just so that you can understand how the Book of Proverbs is put together. There is a 9 chapter long cover letter from mom and dad – followed by a lengthy collection of loose sayings of a Proverbial nature. That was the graduation gift from the King and Queen to their Royal Son – as inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The implication of that outline is that after chapter 9 you generally have to work more topically through the book. There is no obvious pattern to the arrangement of these loose sayings. It isn’t as though all of the money verses are in one chapter and all of the marriage verses in another – rather they are scattered across the various collections and so you have to adopt a more topical approach – and so we will beginning this morning.

This morning we are going to talk about poverty.

Poverty was something that wise people thought about in the ancient world. If God is so good and since this planet DOES SEEM so lush and so fruitful then why is there so much poverty and destitution in the world? That is a good question and the Book of Proverbs gives it a great deal of attention.

We’ll talk about the various causes of poverty and the several ways that God’s people ought to respond.

That’s our outline for this morning.

We’ll talk first about the causes of poverty.

What Are The Causes Of Human Poverty?

The Bible presents a very balanced analysis of human poverty. In our culture people tend to adopt an either/or approach – we tend to think that poverty is EITHER the result of individual behaviours OR the result of systematic injustice. That tends to be one of the main dividing issues in our culture. Political conservatives put the emphasis on personal responsibility. Political liberals put the emphasis on systematic injustice. The Bible however consistently argues that is more realistically a matter of both/and.

We'll begin with what the Bible says about human responsibility.

Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at Proverbs 10:4-5.

⁴ A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.

⁵ He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame. (Proverbs 10:4–5 ESV)

So according to the Bible one of the primary causes of human poverty is foolish human behaviour.

1. Foolish behaviour

A slack hand causes poverty. Sleeping during the harvest season causes poverty.

There is a sense in which people are themselves responsible. Flip forward to Proverbs 26:13. This is from one of those OTHER random lists of Proverbial sayings – meaning NOT from Solomon but still chosen for his collection and thus endorsed by him and by the Holy Spirit. There we read:

¹³ The sluggard says, “There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!”

¹⁴ As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed.

¹⁵ The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth.

¹⁶ The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly. (Proverbs 26:13–16 ESV)

Are you hearing that?

The Bible says that SOME poverty is caused by sheer, determined human stupidity. We make up LAME EXCUSES for why today is not a good day to go to work.

There is a lion in the road!!

There's a storm coming!!

It might rain!!

I could hurt myself!!

People are mean to me!!

Right?

Foolish people SOMETIMES talk themselves out of doing the very things that would lift them out of poverty.

That's a fact – that's in the Bible. Laziness and lame excuses keep many people to be poor who ought not to be.

Turn back a few chapters to Proverbs 21:17. There Solomon says:

Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich. (Proverbs 21:17 ESV)

So there Solomon says that SOFT PEOPLE – PLEASURE LOVING PEOPLE – PEOPLE OBSESSED WITH GOOD FOOD AND FUN TIMES – SELF INDULGENT PEOPLE will not be rich.

One of the things I say to my kids all the time is that WORK COMES BEFORE PLAY!

We all like to play.

Daddy likes to play.

But WORK COMES BEFORE PLAY.

If you can't work – if you won't work – then you can't play. But if we let our kids fall in love with play and entertainment and fine things then they may never learn to do the hard things that produce the overflow and surplus that ENABLES PLAY.

The bottom line is this: an addiction to play and pleasure keeps many people poor who ought not to be.

There is an aspect of PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY when it comes to the question of human poverty - but of course, as any Bible reader knows, that isn't the end of the story.

The Bible also talks a great deal about certain factors APART from the individual. The Bible understands that our situation is generally the result of the sin done BY US – but also of the SIN DONE TO US. We are all born somewhere, into a particular situation OVER WHICH we have very little control and so the Bible talks about that. The Bible has a lot to say particularly about the effect of bad parenting upon the economic situation and life experiences of children.

2. Bad parenting

Look at Proverbs 13:22. There Solomon says:

A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous. (Proverbs 13:22 ESV)

He says the same thing again in Proverbs 20:7:

The righteous who walks in his integrity— blessed are his children after him!
(Proverbs 20:7 ESV)

Are you hearing that?

A good man – a good person – sets his family up for two generations, but a sinner hands whatever wealth his family has over to people better and wiser than himself.

That’s what the Bible says. And it’s hard to argue with that isn’t it? We are not MERELY the product of our own individual decisions. We are connected and therefore we often find ourselves at the mercy of decisions made by our parents and grandparents.

Listen – most of us in this room were born into really remarkable conditions. We had parents who loved us, fed us, educated us and gave us EVERY EARTHLY and often every HEAVENLY ADVANTAGE.

Right? Praise the Lord! We have been so well served!

But not everyone in this town has had those kind of advantages – and it affects them.

A recent study in the US indicated that by the age of 4 children born into professional families have heard 32 million more words SAID OR READ TO THEM than the children born to parents on welfare. That affects the shape and capacity of their BRAINS. Similarly parents with advanced degrees were found to annually give 166,000 verbal encouragements as opposed to 26,000 verbal encouragements given by parents on welfare.¹

I quoted two weeks ago from the Financial Post where journalist William Watson after reviewing the Canada census data on family poverty quipped:

“You want to raise your kid’s chances of being poor? Get divorced.”²

¹ Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children* as cited in *Helping Without Hurting In Church Benevolence* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015), 46.

² <https://business.financialpost.com/opinion/william-watson-surprise-child-poverty-in-canada-comes-from-divorce-not-capitalism>

Are you hearing that? All the data says – exactly what the Bible says! What we do as parents has an effect upon the minds, the spirits and the financial well-being of our children.

And so who we are – and the lives we are living – are to some degree determined by BOTH the sin done BY US AND the SIN DONE TO US.

You can't argue that if you are taking the Bible seriously.

It matters who you are and it matters who your parents are – and as we shall see now it also matters where you live and under what conditions you live.

3. Systematic injustice

Look at Proverbs 13:23:

The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice. (Proverbs 13:23 ESV)

Sometimes you can do everything right – and the system washes it all away. That is a fact – my politically conservative friends. The system does matter. Government does matter.

Now – true – the Bible places the emphasis on personal responsibility and familial responsibility – but the Bible also regularly address systematic injustices particularly as they bear on the access and opportunities of the poor. So for example Isaiah the prophet records God saying:

“Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land.” (Isaiah 5:8 ESV)

God HATES IT when the rich manipulate the system so as to SEIZE and MONOPOLIZE the means of production. That's in the Bible!

Now, the Bible isn't advocating for communism here, but it is advocating for reasonable regulation. One means of regulation that features prominently in the Bible has to do with land ownership. I'm speaking of course of the Year of Jubilee. In the Bible every 50th year all the land was supposed to revert to its ancestral owners. So if you were poor you could LEASE your land to a rich person, but the title of that land had to be returned to you or to your family every 50th year. That provision was intended to ensure that the poor always had access to the means of production. But as you may know, it was almost never honoured over the course of Israelite history. The rich took the land and they never gave it back.

And that's why – far too often – the poor stayed poor.

And that's what god judged the leaders for not maintaining a just and equitable economic system. According to the Bible – that matters. Government isn't the SUM of the solution but it is a LEGITIMATE PART of the solution.

Proverbs 16:11-12 says:

¹¹ A just balance and scales are the LORD's; all the weights in the bag are his work.
¹² It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness. (Proverbs 16:11–12 ESV)

It is the job of the government – to ensure economic fairness and justice. If the poor have access to resources and if the poor are given JUSTICE and protection by the government then generally speaking they will be able to lift themselves up out of poverty and improve their situation over time.

In well run countries that happens – in poorly run countries it does not happen.

Paul Collier in his book “The Bottom Billion” says that:

“Terrible governance and policies can destroy an economy with alarming speed.”³

³ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 65.

He goes on to provide a myriad of depressing examples but one example in particular caught my attention. He says:

“In 2004 a survey tracked money released by the Ministry of Finance in Chad intended for rural health clinics. The survey had the extremely modest purpose of finding out how much of the money actually reached the clinics – not whether the clinics spent it well, or whether the staff of the clinics knew what they were doing, just where the money went. Amazingly, less than 1 percent of it reached the clinics – 99 percent failed to reach the destination.”⁴

Again:

The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice. (Proverbs 13:23 ESV)

This planet CAN provide a good life for every single person on it – but by INJUSTICE so much of its fruit and produce are swept away.

You aren't thinking Biblically about the issue of poverty if you aren't willing to acknowledge that reality.

So poverty is a complex issue – according to the Bible. It is the result in part of foolish human behaviour; it is the result in part of really tragic parenting and it is the result in part of damnable systematic and governmental injustice.

That's what the Bible says, now what can be done about it?

How Should We As Christians Respond?

First of all I would suggest that we respond with humility.

1. With humility

What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? (1 Corinthians 4:7 ESV)

⁴ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 66.

When we think Biblically about the causes of poverty it should lead us immediately to a posture of humility.

Shouldn't it?

You didn't choose your parents. You didn't choose your country. You won the lottery – providentially speaking. If you came from a good family and you were born in this country – you won the lottery. So why would you BOAST as if you did something special?

Rather let us give thanks to God!

And let us respond with mercy when we encounter the poor either in this city or in other parts of the world.

2. With mercy

We don't know their circumstances. We don't know who their parents are or what injustices they've had to deal with. So let's give them a break – let's show some mercy – as indeed we have been shown mercy.

Of course that's the point of the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant isn't? The Master gave the man a big break – he forgave him an enormous debt – in the billions of dollars - but then the man went out and found another servant who owed him a few thousand dollars and he took that man and threw him into prison.

Do you remember how the story ends?

“Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’” (Matthew 18:32–33 ESV)

The point of that story is that people who have RECEIVED MERCY FROM GOD should be KNOWN for extending mercy to others.

So let's do that. Let's forgive debts; let's overlook mistakes, let's give second, third and fourth chances –even to people who don't deserve it – because that's what mercy is and we above all people ought to know that.

Then thirdly, let's respond to the poor with generosity – we are commanded to do that in both the Old and New Testaments.

3. With generosity

Proverbs 19:17 says:

Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed. (Proverbs 19:17 ESV)

Generosity makes SENSE within the economy of faith because you aren't even really giving it away you are just loaning it out and God will make sure that you get it back – with interest – one way or the other. Therefore those who have been given much should be glad and generous in their giving.

We see the same thing said even more forcefully in the New Testament.

Paul says to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.¹⁸ They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share,¹⁹ thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life. (1 Timothy 6:17–19 ESV)

So it's not the job of the pastor to make the rich in his church feel guilty – there is no sin in being rich. But it is the job of the pastor to tell you – if you are rich - not to trust in your wealth – not to

become arrogant thereby – and to charge you to be generous and to give liberally of your wealth and substance thus storing up for yourselves a good foundation for the future.

Generosity is required of the wealthy; Old Testament and New.

Fourthly we should respond to the challenge of human poverty in this world with wisdom.

4. With wisdom

I mentioned we began this series that one of the reasons we have for walking through the wisdom portion of the Bible is because of the desire we have to develop a culture of skilled helping. I read you that quote from Tremper Longman II who says that:

“The wise are those who know how to navigate life. They avoid pitfalls and maximize success. If an obstacle comes their way, they know the quickest way out of the mess. Thus they are in a position to give advice to others who are not as intelligent in life skills as they are. They can help those who falter.”⁵

Well that’s what we want to do!! We want to help people navigate WISELY through life. We want to help them avoid pitfalls and maximize success – and not just because Tremper Longman says it – but because Proverbs says it – the Bible says it. Proverbs 13:14 says:

The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death.
(Proverbs 13:14 ESV)

That’s what we want to do. Jesus criticised the Pharisees for being blind guides to the blind – but our eyes have been opened! By the grace of God – through the gift of the Holy Spirit – through the blessing of God’s Word – our eyes have been opened SO THAT WE CAN BE GUIDES. So that we can be what Jesus said we would be. He said:

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. (Matthew 5:14–15 ESV)

⁵ Tremper Longman III, *Job* in Baker Commentary On The Old Testament Wisdom And Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 115.

So we know things – things that leads to life and peace and health and well-being and we need to SHARE THOSE THINGS WITH THE LOST MEN AND WOMEN, BOYS AND GIRLS in our community.

We're not really loving people if we know good, true, beautiful things that we're not telling them about; that's what I'm saying

A few years ago Walter Williams wrote an incredibly influential article called "How Not To Be Poor". It was based on REAMS UPON REAMS of statistical data and this was his conclusion. He said:

"Avoiding long-term poverty is not rocket science. First, graduate from high school. Second, get married before you have children, and stay married. Third, work at any kind of job, even one that starts out paying the minimum wage. And, finally, avoid engaging in criminal behavior."⁶

Apparently if you do those four things, according to the data, you are almost certain to lift yourself out of material poverty and live a pretty decent life.

Well – brothers and sisters in Christ – didn't we already know that? Isn't that just the wisdom of the Bible repackaged as social science? The poor in this city ought to be hearing that kind of stuff from us!! We ought to be telling them about the Wisdom of Solomon – and the wisdom of the One who is greater than Solomon. We ought to be telling them about Jesus Christ.

5. With Jesus

Jesus is the ultimate answer to human poverty – do you believe that?

I believe that.

I believe that Jesus is the only one who can FIX the problem of human poverty because Jesus is the only one who can ADDRESS all the various CAUSES of human poverty.

⁶ Walter Williams in "How Not To Be Poor". <https://www.capitalismmagazine.com/2005/05/how-not-to-be-poor/>

Jesus can fix what's wrong with the human heart. He can take away our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh. He can put his Spirit within us and make us want to walk in the ways of life.

And Jesus can fix the problem of the broken family. He can fix the family you've got or he can give you one that's better. We've seen both miracles in this place – haven't we?

And Jesus can even fix the problem of a broken system. If you don't believe that let me ask you a question: is there a country right now on planet earth that you would like to live in that has never been – at some point in its history – deeply affected by the truths of the Gospel? Is there? I doubt that very much because everywhere the Gospel has been embraced – even for a season – the situation of the poor in that country has been marvellously improved – is that not true?

You know it's true if you know anything about history.

Wherever the Gospel of the Kingdom is preached – wherever Jesus Christ is known as Lord and Saviour – the values of justice and equity and fairness and mercy and generosity are demonstrated by his people and often enshrined in their canons of law.

That has been true – that is true and that will be TRUE even MORE at the end of the age when the Kingdom of God will be ALL IN ALL.

Tim Keller puts it this way:

“The kingdom is the renewal of the whole world through the entrance of supernatural forces. As things are brought back under Christ's rule and authority, they are restored to health, beauty, and freedom.”⁷

Let me read that last sentence again.

As THINGS are brought back under Christ's rule and authority they are restored to health, beauty and freedom.

⁷ Tim Keller as cited in *When Helping Hurts* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 32.

Things like individual human hearts. Things like terribly broken families. And even things like terribly backslidden nations. As SUCH THINGS are brought back under Christ's rule and authority they are restored to health, beauty and freedom – SO COME LORD JESUS!

Come into our hearts! Come into our families and come into our broken nation we ask now in Jesus' name; amen.

Amen. Pastor Jody will you come and lead us?